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The battle for the future of Iraq's Sunnis

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As Ramadi is declared recaptured from the Islamic State group and the battle for Mosul looms, the future of the Sunni areas in Iraq remains uncertain



In a surprise move, the United States has announced that it will deploy a new force of special operations troops to Iraq to combat the Islamic State (IS) terror group which has seized swathes of the country and neighbouring Syria.

US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter wrote in the US publication Politico last week that soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division would soon deploy to Iraq to join the fight against IS “with a clear campaign plan to deliver the barbaric organisation a lasting defeat.”

Though Carter did not give details about the deployment, he said the troop mission was to destroy the IS “parent tumour in Iraq and Syria by collapsing its two power centres in Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria.”

“Our campaign is to deliver IS a lasting defeat,” Carter wrote.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said “the government of Iraq was of course briefed in advance of secretary Carter’s announcement” and the two sides would work out details about the new deployment.

Joseph F Dunford Jr, the US top military officer, also said discussions between Washington and Baghdad had begun on how American forces would “integrate” with Iraqi military units to take back Mosul.

The move is a sharp departure from US President Barack Obama’s previous strategy that the US would not deploy “boots on the ground” in Iraq and Syria and would continue instead its current air campaign and military assistance to the Iraqi government.

Baghdad has not yet made it clear if it had agreed to let the US troops into Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi has repeatedly said foreign ground combat troops are not needed in Iraq. Leaders of the country’s Shia groups have warned that they will consider such a presence a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty.

If the statements by top American officials are any indication, the United States is now gearing up for war with IS, including in the battle for Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city which was captured by the terror group in spring 2014.

Analysts believe that the US-led coalition against IS needs to take back Mosul, a sprawling city of more than two million people, and the US military shift signals Washington’s readiness to engage IS strongholds with ground combat operations.

According to US reports, one key element in the expected revamped US campaign is the severing of IS supply lines between Mosul and Raqqa in Syria.

The US has reportedly established a covert military base in Qamishli in Kurdish-controlled north-eastern Syria, allegedly to step up operations with Kurdish militants in the region. The installation lies within a few miles of Iraq.

Since November, when Kurdish fighters backed by US fire power and advisers retook Sinjar, a key strategic town between the two IS strongholds, Sinjar and the adjacent border area have been under the control of Kurdish fighters from Iraq, Syria and the Turkish Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

Another key element of the new strategy is the deployment of US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) teams, which have been inserted on the ground in both Iraq and Syria.

On 8 January, Iraq's parliamentary speaker, Saleem Al-Jabouri, disclosed that US special forces, believed to be JSOC teams, had been carrying out raids on IS strongholds in northern Iraq ahead of an offensive planned later this year to retake Mosul.

In addition, the US teams have reportedly made contact with Sunni Arab tribal leaders in the area in preparation for a future assault on Mosul.

While some details of the US plan remain vague, it is clear that Washington has positioned itself to expand its military involvement in Iraq. Moreover, Washington seems to be readying itself to participate in the reshaping of Iraq in the post-IS era.

Last month, Iraqi security forces drove IS militants out of the city of Ramadi, dealing a major blow to the militant group in Iraq. With the liberation of Mosul, the bigger question of the future of the Sunni-dominated towns and cities within Iraq will be opened.

In order to defeat IS, Iraq needs to tackle a complex web of security, social and economic challenges. But victory over IS will depend on whether Iraq's fractious communities can agree on a new inclusive order.

Given its central role, the Shia-led government needs to ensure a working system that guarantees inclusion within a just state that will deal with all Iraqis as equal citizens.

The government must realise that the only way to accommodate Sunnis is to create a strong Iraq that will serve as a beacon of good governance and economic success.

But also it largely depends on the Arab Sunnis themselves and what system they would like to see in post-IS Iraq. The recapture of Mosul is likely to be the biggest test of the Sunni leadership and unity thus far.

While most Iraqi Sunnis are hopeful that a more inclusive system will emerge after the defeat of IS, divisions within the community have highlighted the challenges ahead.

Several meetings inside Iraq and abroad in recent weeks have failed to resolve disputes over community leadership and representation. Sunni groups in the government seem to prefer a compromise that will improve their status and achieve partnership.

Sunni tribes that have joined the government fight against IS and are vying for power in running their provincial affairs and in the national government prefer closer ties with the Baghdad government.

Still, many Sunni leaders have been contemplating a Sunni federal region within Iraq similar to that already enjoyed by the Kurds. Though the call for Sunni Arab autonomy has been circulating for a while, the idea has been gaining strength in recent months.

Other Sunni leaders have been suggesting that a Sunni autonomous region be created after the liberation of the Sunni-dominated provinces from IS.

In an interview with the Kurdish news outlet Rudaw last week, Osama Nujaifi, head of the largest Sunni faction in the parliament and former vice-president, suggested that semi-independent regions be formed by Iraq's provinces in order to solve the country's sectarian and ethnic divisions.

Sunni leaders in exile have been touring world and regional capitals, including Washington, and lobbying governments for diplomatic channels that will bypass the central government in Baghdad.

On Monday, the main Sunni bloc, the Alliance of the Iraqi Forces said it had appealed to the United Nations for international protection of Sunnis in Diyala after rise of sectarian tension in the province.

All these moves come as suggestions for the creation of an "independent Sunni state" as the solution to the current crisis in Iraq and have been taking on momentum for months.

American politicians, academics and analysts have been drumming up support for a proposal for an independent Sunni state that would link Sunni-dominated territories in Iraq and Syria on both sides of the border.

Their argument for a Sunni state is based on the assumption that the Sykes-Picot Agreement drawing up the borders of the Middle East by France and Britain a century ago is the main culprit in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts and that the countries cannot be put back together again after so much blood has been spilled.

The alternative, they believe, is that Iraq and Syria be Balkanised into autonomous regions

Last week, the president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish Region, Masoud Barzani, who has been advocating an independent Kurdistan from Iraq for years, acknowledged that his plan for secession relied largely on the idea that the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement no longer made sense.

Last week, Barzani called on global leaders to acknowledge that the Sykes-Picot Agreement had failed, and urged them to broker a new deal paving the way for a Kurdish state.

Barzani told the British Guardian newspaper that the international community had started to accept that Iraq and Syria in particular would never again be unified and that “compulsory co-existence” in the region had been proven wrong.

In the 18 months since IS captured vast amounts of territory in Iraq, Barzani’s administration has grabbed tens of thousands of square km of land which has drastically changed the map of northern Iraq.

The emergence of a mini Kurdish state in northern Iraq is another way of inciting Sunnis to break away from Iraq. There is no way that an Arab Sunni minority will stay in a lesser Iraq ruled by a Shia majority allied to Iran.