

“Peacemaking, Advising and Assisting”: More US Combat Troops to Iraq

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It pays to assume that what is said about a historical situation will be different from a political one. The historical case demands consideration and contemplation. There is argument about causes, but not necessarily resolutions. The political animal demands something else. Making decisions is important, even if they are bad ones. Expediency is everything. And even if there is the sense of a sword slashing the water, or the vain attempt to step on the same part of a riverbed, it would not matter. The decision, for all its folly, is to be made.

The catastrophe of Iraq, even as it is being worn down by ISIS, is being treated with reverse logic. US soldiers are being sent in to back up forces precisely because they have shown mettle in the face of remarkable odds. President Barack Obama has already authorised 1,500 troops to join the current total of 1,400. They will be there to provide something rather asinine: “training missions” with Kurdish and Iraqi soldiers around the Erbil and Baghdad area. Several sites will be established to train nine Iraqi army and three Kurdish Peshmerga brigades. Some form of a trained national guard is contemplated.

In the words of Pentagon press secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby, they will serve in a “noncombat role, to expand our advise and assist missions, and initiate a comprehensive training effort for Iraqi forces.”

Such training missions smell like writing workshops for academics – you assume that by the time they get to their post, they know how to put pen to paper, if not find the pen. The Iraqi state had, after all, been addicted to war during the Saddam Hussein years even if the Rumsfeld plan in 2003 was to totally disarm the country. But no matter – there will be, at least conditionally, \$5.6 billion in the “Iraq train and equip” kitty to hold the troops over, since the Iraqi forces, it seems, need to be permanently tutored by foreign personnel to fight the enemy. The request is being slated for the House Appropriations Committee for Monday, and is additional to the already bloated \$58.6 billion request for overseas contingency operations (OCO) for the 2015 fiscal year

The strategy there is important. First, inflate the enemy, beef up prospects and emphasise what can be done. (Kirby suggested the Iraqi forces had “stiffened their spines.”) Second, emphasise the sheer bravery of those you sponsor. After all, you don’t want to be seen backing a sinking, and fast devaluating asset. All that blood can’t be expended for nothing, even if futility is an important rule of engagement in the Middle East.

To that end, the US is already knee-deep, sinking further in a part of the world it never really left. The boots that were meant to have exited from the theatre were only ever doing the

rounds, showing that the Iraqi-US pantomime was always just that. A retired Pentagon official who wasn't good enough to give his name suggested that, "No one really believes the president and his advisers - and they're some smart people - aren't already inserting Special Operators who are armed for combat, probably both in Iraq and Syria." [1]

When it comes to Obama's dealings with Congress, his own party are giving their warnings from behind pillars after their resounding beating in the mid-term elections. The US public, they suggest, are not exactly thrilled to receive another round of blood donations for Middle Eastern causes. The emboldened GOP, in contrast, want to bang the liberty tom-toms a bit more aggressively, and as history is not foremost in the minds of the party's chief planners, redeploying US troops is very much on the planning books.

Many GOP members wished that Obama had stayed the course and not withdrawn to begin with. Back in June, Senator John McCain suggested that the entire security team advising the president ought to have been sacked even as the stuffing was coming out of the Iraqi state. "It's a colossal failure of American security policy." [2] Such are the tribulations of empire.

Former Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta is also finding time to do the Fox News rounds and have a snipe at the Obama, arguing that Washington's credibility was suffering due to the sending of a "mixed message as to whether the United States will stand by its word." [3] Such former officials do get very busy when they need their clumsily worded books to sell, and Panetta is obviously fearing the publisher's whip over his *Worthy Fights*, which does its unworthy best to dump on the president.

His recipe for Iraq, it is worth noting, was not to have withdrawn troops in 2011. As for ISIS, the Obama administration should have seen it. Not doing so was "more than just an intelligence failure, it's a policy failure." Given that he was a former CIA director, he should know.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2825883/Obama-authorizes-1-500-troops-Iraq.html>

[2] <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/06/john-mccain-iraq-criticize-barack-obama-107780.html>

[3] <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/220104-panetta-criticizes-weak-response-to-putin>

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