Top US General Calls for "Advisers" in Iraq Combat Zone

Washington's top uniformed commander has called for US military "advisers" to be deployed in Iraq's predominantly Sunni Anbar province, where the Islamist insurgents of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have captured some 80 percent of the territory.

The proposal put forward Thursday by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey would mean sending American troops into combat, despite the repeated assurances from President Barack Obama and other administration officials that the new US war in the Middle East will involve no American "boots on the ground."

Dempsey, who according to recent media reports played a key role in persuading Obama to launch the war in Iraq and Syria, had previously stated that he would not hesitate in recommending that US special operations troops be sent into action alongside Iraqi government forces if he felt they were needed, regardless of Obama's assurances to the contrary.

He now seems to be doing just that. Appearing at a joint Pentagon press conference with US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Dempsey was asked about the mass killings of Sunni tribe members in western Anbar province at the hands of ISIS. Some 400 members of the Abu Nimer tribe had reportedly been slaughtered by ISIS over the previous 48 hours. Apparently fearing a revolt against their control of the Iraqi city of Hit, the Islamists rounded up former Iraqi police officers and others believed to have ties to the government.

The tribe had been involved in the so-called "Awakening" or "Sons of Iraq" movement that was initiated in 2005-2006 by the US military occupation. It paid salaries to Sunni tribe members to patrol their neighborhoods and combat Al Qaeda-linked insurgents in Anbar, which was the scene of some of the bloodiest combat in the nearly nine-year US war.

The Shia sectarian government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which was installed by Washington, stopped payments to the militias and ordered that they be disbanded.

This was part of a general crackdown on the Sunni population that led to a low-level insurgency in Anbar. This revolt in turn created the conditions for ISIS to seize up to one third of Iraq's territory from US-trained Iraqi forces, which collapsed in face of the Islamist fighters.

Asked about the recent mass killings, Dempsey responded: "That's what we're dealing with. That's why we're engaging the Sunni tribes. Yes, these things are happening. Yes, it's difficult. Yes, we're dealing with it."

The general's proposal appeared to be directed at reviving the "Awakening" movement under the direction of US "advisers."

In explaining the recent massacre, the senior US commander said that Iraqi forces in Anbar "are in defensive positions and would be unlikely to be able to resound to a request for assistance for the Abu Nimer tribe." He added that he was "not aware" of any request for US air strikes in the area.

"What I can say is that's why we need to expand the train-advise-and-assist mission into Al Anbar Province," he declared. "But the precondition for that is that the government of Iraq is willing to arm the tribes."

Currently, these "train-advise-and-assist" operations are restricted to the Iraqi capital of Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government capital of Erbil, both removed from any direct combat. This is what the US military aims to change. There are 12 US advisory teams, seven deployed in a joint operations center in Baghdad and five at a similar facility in Erbil.

"There's three components to the train-advise-assist mission," Dempsey said. "Initially, the Iraqi security forces, and I include in that the Peshmerga, so north and south, mostly oriented around Baghdad and Erbil, and then there's the issue of the tribes and trying to find a way to engage and power–or enable them.

"And that's what we're now beginning to explore. We've got a program in place where we're beginning to restore some offensive capability and mindset to the Iraqi security forces. We need to think about how to do that with the tribes."

The third component he listed was the creation of a "national guard," a proposal that would essentially create militias under the control of provincial governors. Many have warned that setting up such forces will only accelerate Iraq's disintegration along sectarian lines and result in a further descent into civil war.

These sectarian dangers emerged starkly in the announcement of a major victory for the Iraqi regime against ISIS in the predominantly Sunni Euphrates river town of Jurf al-Sakhar, just 20 miles north of the Shia holy city of Karbala.

The *Washington Post* reported that the force that drove ISIS out of the town was composed of about 10,000 Shiite militiamen and was led by Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Brigade, whose forces were involved in the death squad killings of Sunnis during the sectarian bloodbath that erupted under the US occupation. Photographs posted online showed Amiri consulting on the battlefield with Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Quds Force.

To conquer the town, the Shia militias drove out all 80,000 of its inhabitants. Air strikes and artillery fire demolished virtually every building. The militias took the position that anyone remaining in the town was an ISIS combatant.

"We considered every family that stayed Al Qaeda or Daesh [ISIS]," Hassan Shakir Oda, a member of the provincial council and the Badr Brigade, told the *Post.* "If anyone against Daesh had stayed, Daesh would have killed them."

The town, according to the report, was left "deserted and uninhabitable," the result of a

deliberate act of "ethnic cleansing" aimed at driving Sunnis out of areas near Shia population centers. Given the nature of such operations, which the Badr Brigade's leadership indicated it intends to extend into Anbar, the attempt to mobilize Sunni tribes to fight for the US and the Iraqi government will likely prove difficult.

There are reportedly sharp differences within the Obama administration over how to conduct US operations across the border in Syria, where the military intervention has been confined to air strikes conducted largely around the Kurdish city of Kobani on the Turkish border.

Dempsey acknowledged that the proposal to vet and train thousands of "moderate" Syrian rebels–for which the US Congress appropriated $500 million before going on recess in August–has not even begun to be implemented. None of the forces currently operating in Syria, which are predominantly Sunni Islamist militias, are considered reliable.

Defense Secretary Hagel confirmed press reports that he had sent a memo, described as highly critical of the US policy on Syria, to National Security Adviser Susan Rice. It reportedly criticized US policy for failing to clarify how Washington will deal with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, against which the US was on the brink of going to war a year ago on the manufactured pretext that Assad's forces had used chemical weapons.

In the present intervention, American officials have stressed that they are concentrating on an "Iraq first" policy. The Obama administration has further announced that any Syrian forces trained by the Pentagon would be prepared to defend areas under their control from ISIS and, presumably, Syrian government troops, rather than go on the offensive.

However, powerful sections of the US ruling establishment, as well as Washington's main regional allies in the war–Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies (the same regimes that provided arms and funding for ISIS and other Islamist militias)–are pressing for the war to be more immediately directed at regime-change in Damascus.

Speaking in Paris Friday after a meeting with President Francois Hollande, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan criticized the US intervention for concentrating overwhelmingly on the fighting in Kobani on the Turkish border. Erdogan's regime is more opposed to the Kurds establishing an autonomous zone there than it is to the ISIS presence. "Why Kobani and not otherwise towns like Idlib, Hama or Homs?" he asked, suggesting that the war should be redirected against the Assad regime.

Hagel also announced at the Pentagon press conference that the 1st Infantry Division's headquarters battalion was arriving in Baghdad on Friday. Some 500 troops are being deployed to provide command-and-control for the growing number of US soldiers being sent into the new Middle East war. The infrastructure is being put in place for a far wider, and far bloodier, intervention.

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