

Baghdadis Say No to More Troops

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Most people interviewed in the capital are opposed to a further deployment of US troops, especially in built-up areas.

Faced with an escalating Sunni insurgency as well as confrontation with the followers of radical Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, the United States has announced plans to increase its troop strength in Iraq.

"We're at war. We have a lot at stake against these extremists in Iraq," said General Richard Myers, chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff at a recent hearing in Congress.

But residents of Baghdad interviewed by IWPR believe the plan will only cause greater instability. Most said that an increase in troop numbers on the streets would frighten civilians and make clashes more likely.

Myers said the Pentagon was considering requests by the US top Middle East commander for two additional brigades - about 14,000 soldiers - on top of the 135,000 already in the country.

Washington also has made clear that it will retain a military presence under US command in Iraq long after the June 30 devolution of power to an Iraqi government, and that it would also retain control of the Iraqi military. "It is with the understanding that they need our help, and for us to provide that help we have to be able to operate freely, which in some ways infringes on what some would call full sovereignty," said US Secretary of State Colin Powell in an April 26 interview with Reuters.

Most Iraqi politicians have remained silent on the matter.

But the Iraqi Islamic Party, which is predominantly Sunni and holds a seat on the Coalition-appointed Governing Council, has spoken out against a continued US military presence, describing it as provocative.

"The [number of troops] doesn't make any difference," Fuad al-Rawi, who is part of the party's political office, told IWPR. "It's an occupation, and we want the occupation ended by June 30. Any initiative that hinders the agreed timetable is unacceptable.

"US troops inside towns create provocations. People are sensitive to them, and this results in clashes."

Some Baghdadis interviewed by IWPR conceded that a continued US presence was a bulwark against a collapse of central authority, but they wanted to see as little visible presence as possible. Others simply want an immediate withdrawal.

"More troops will make for more clashes and more dead Iraqis," said Luai Hadi, 33, a Shia civil servant and student of business administration. "We have had enough of them."

Additional troops would "rub salt in our wounds", said Abd al-Karem Abd al-Jalil Mansour, 42, a Shia who runs a watch shop in a central Baghdad market district. "It will lead to more provocations, and will make everyone feel uneasy and unsafe."

Although Mansour does see a plus side – "thieves will be afraid to appear in the streets" – he hopes the troops will not stay on after sovereignty is restored to an Iraqi government on June 30. "To every occupation there is an end," he said.

"Any honest Iraqi who rejects the occupation will resent the new deployment," says Ibrahim Daoud al-Samarai, 44, a Sunni civil servant from Baghdad's al-Utaifia neighbourhood. "Iraqis have good minds and good training, and could take care of their own country if they were allowed to."

In the short run, he says, US troops should withdraw from Iraqi towns, planning for an eventual withdrawal after June 30. "That way the Iraqi individual will feel that the US fulfilled its pledge and the goal for which it came."

Essam Abdullah, a merchant, who preferred not to state his background, does not want an immediate pullout.

But Abdullah agrees the Americans should withdraw to the edges of towns. Tanks and Humvees on the streets "have their guns pointing towards us.... Their fingers are on the trigger at all times."

Hamed Shaab al-Juburi, 35, a Sunni taxi driver, likewise does not want the Americans to withdraw immediately, "or else chaos and lawlessness will engulf Iraq".

However, he calls upon the US to stop all combat operations against Iraqis.

"The Americans can't handle urban warfare. It leads to casualties among innocent civilians." Troubles with Fallujah insurgents or the Sadrists, he says, should be handled by "negotiation."

US forces "should go to their bases and stay there", said Abd al-Rahman al-Mohammedi, 25, a Shia barber. "They are heavily armed, and that makes you feel you are their enemy."

Omar Naama, 32, a Sunni assistant in a north Baghdad pharmacy, says the US troops came as "liberators," but says he sees no reason why they should stay in Iraqi towns now that the former regime is no more.

"Feelings of hatred and anger will increase if they remain in the towns," he said. He recommends that they redeploy to Iraq's borders, to protect against the infiltration of "terrorists".

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