

## **Iraq Despatch Splits Armenia**

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Parliament begins to ponder president's plan to send Armenians to Iraq.

The Armenian parliament will this month decide whether to approve a controversial proposal to send Armenians to Iraq, with a decision either way likely to anger one of its two big allies Russia and the United States.

On a recent official visit to Poland, Armenian president Robert Kocharian signalled his intention to send 50 military personnel – drivers, doctors, and auxiliary staff – to Iraq to join Polish forces in Iraq. On September 6, Kocharian and Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski signed an intergovernmental agreement, confirming the planned dispatch.

During his first press conference in Yerevan, the newly-appointed US ambassador to Armenia John Evans welcomed Armenia's willingness to participate in the coalition operation in Iraq.

"International forces in Iraq are facing difficulties, and Armenia's assistance in this question is very valuable," the ambassador said.

Later, US president George W Bush noted in his message to Robert Kocharian on the occasion of Armenia's Independence Day on September 21, "I am particularly grateful for the important counter-terrorism assistance that Armenia has rendered to the US."

Armenia has close ties with both Russia and the US – both of which have huge Armenian diasporas – but this appears to be one issue where a balancing act is impossible.

Last week, defence minister Serzh Sarkisian spoke up for the plan, "If we support the fight against international terrorism then we must not approach it as consumers and should contribute to a solution to the problem. After all, Iraq is very close to our borders, and this fact does not allow us to watch from the sidelines."

The Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* sharply condemned Sarkisian, reflecting feelings that one of Russia's closest military allies was selling out to the United States.

In Armenia, there is disquiet at senior levels about the plans and in an unprecedented breaking of ranks, Armenian deputy defence minister General Yury Khachaturov criticised the president. "I am not enthusiastic about this decision," he said. "I am generally not enthusiastic about the fact that troops were sent there in the first place and that the war started."

Avetik Ishkhanian, a human rights activist, who heads the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, was also critical.

"However much we want to establish close ties with the USA or NATO, they are not actually insisting on an Armenian military presence in Iraq," he said. "This is a provincial way of sucking up, which does not take into account the interests of Armenia and the diaspora."

Stepan Safarian, a political analyst with the Armenian Centre for National and International Studies, ACNIS, said that this was a row waiting to happen.

“From the first days of the war in Iraq, Armenia’s position was unclear,” Safarian said. “On the one hand, she was flirting with America, on the other, tried to keep Russia happy.”

An opinion poll conducted by the centre showed that out of 2,000 respondents, around 26 per cent viewed the coalition campaign in Iraq positively, while 33 per cent had a negative attitude, and 29 per cent were neutral.

When it came to sending Armenians to Iraq, another poll conducted by the Vox Populi centre with 664 respondents found that 60 per cent of those asked were against, 24 per cent said that they didn’t care, ten per cent could not answer, and only six per cent supported the step.

Safarian said that, with public opinion against it, the Armenian government might in the end decide to back down from sending a contingent of troops to Iraq.

Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian is arguing that if the military personnel do go it will be in a humanitarian role. “From the beginning, Armenia said that it objected to military presence in Iraq,” Oskanian told journalists. “We said that we would like to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq in the humanitarian sphere. The final decision has not been made. The parliament needs to approve it.”

Opponents of the troop despatch say that the presence of the Armenian forces in Iraq would endanger the 30,000 or so members of the Armenian community there. More than two dozen public organisations appealed to the government to suspend the deployment because “it is necessary to think about the safety [of the compatriots] before taking such a step”.

Garegin Hovsepian, representative for the Iraqi diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, said that Iraqis were responding with hostility to the planned deployment.

“The situation for the Iraqi Armenians is very tough,” the priest said. “It deteriorated after the announcement by the Armenian defence minister that fifty people would join the coalition forces in Iraq. Before this announcement, everything had been calm, and no one had harassed Armenians because of their nationality.”

“Before sending the Armenians in, it is necessary to consider security issues,” deputy chairman of the Iraqi Armenians Union Yervand Minasian told IWPR. “It would be a gross mistake to send representatives of Armenia to Iraq. In Iraq they will be perceived as invaders. This is dangerous, and it will badly damage the Armenian community in Iraq.”

Since last year’s invasion of Iraq, about 200 Iraqi Armenians have emigrated to Armenia and the number of those seeking refuge is increasing. Gagik Eganian, head of the department for migration and refugees, admits that the incomers are not receiving adequate help.

“Their settlement has to be paid for,” Eganian said. “And if there are several hundred of them, the state will not be able to do that simply because today it cannot provide for its own citizens. It is important that they will get residency. Nobody is going to send them back.”

With attention now focused on parliament, which has to give the green light to the decision on deployment, opposition deputies are openly critical of the plan, while members of the pro-presidential coalition in parliament are mostly keeping silent.

Deputy speaker of the national assembly, Vahan Hovanesian, who is a member of the Dashnaksutiun party, said before making the decision Armenia should discuss the issue with its CIS colleagues and France and Germany.

If parliament does approve the despatch of the military personnel, they are due to go to Iraq in early 2005.

However, the government could avoid embarrassment if, as has been hinted recently, Poland decides to withdraw its military contingent from Iraq by the end of the year.

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