

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR®

US plans to 'further accelerate' ISIS fight: Momentum or mixed messages?

The US pledge to step up operations comes as the Iraqi military prepares to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul from ISIS fighters.

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January 22, 2016

The United States military has been “accelerating” its anti-Islamic State campaign for months. Now, it plans to “further accelerate” its operations, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said this week.

This pledge comes as the Iraqi military prepares to retake Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, from IS fighters. Secretary Carter will be hoping to replicate the success achieved by the joint US-Iraqi force that retook the Iraqi city of Ramadi last month, and to build on this momentum.

But the announcement also points to doubts that a coherent strategy for tackling IS will emerge from the perennially mixed messages coming from both sides of the political aisle in Washington.

That's because it reinforces the idea that neither the White House nor Republicans have a clear strategy, says Anthony Cordesman, a defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

“You have Republicans committed to taking a much stronger role, without explaining what that will be, and an administration that talks about removing troops and then puts in more forces,” Dr. Cordesman says.

It all adds to “the strange debate we’re having now.”

That debate intensified on Capitol Hill this week as Carter traveled to Europe to meet with French and Australian counterparts, among others, involved in the war against IS in the Middle East.

The “among others” notably does not include Arab partners, though Carter has said that they are the key to a successful campaign. Pentagon officials were quick to point out, however, that Carter briefly huddled Friday with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Even as allies discussed the way forward against IS, it's clear that the heart of the “further accelerated” version of the anti-IS campaign consists largely of more US troops, for training Iraqi forces and for conducting targeted strikes both from the air and on the ground. Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division headquarters and the 2nd Brigade Combat Team out of Fort Campbell, Ky. – a brigade can include anywhere between 3,500 to 5,000 forces – will head back to Iraq later this year.

This contingent also includes “special operations forces of the sort that we don’t talk about a lot, but that we’ve introduced in a number of different ways,” Carter told reporters traveling with him to Europe.

Already getting settled on the ground, too, is a special operations “expeditionary targeting force,” or ETF, Carter revealed during his flight to Paris Tuesday. He added that he couldn’t say much about it, but that it is going to be “a very powerful” and “incredibly flexible tool” capable of taking on a “great breadth of missions.”

It was, for example, an “ETF-like raid” conducted by US and Iraqi forces that freed 70 prisoners being held by IS back in October. “We got something out of that,” he said. “They were both learning experiences for us, too.”

“I would say the more we use it, the more we’ll learn about additional uses for it,” Carter added.

As the Iraqi military prepares to retake Mosul where IS fighters have booby-trapped streets and houses to make the urban warfare as difficult as possible, there is going to be a need not just for ground forces to seize territory, but for police that can keep security, Carter said, in what is likely to be a messy aftermath.

Carter added that troop numbers will increase, but that it is unclear by how many.

“I can’t give you a number, but I would say it will increase greatly as the momentum of the effort increases,” he said.

The idea of “momentum” is particularly important to an Obama administration that is endeavoring mightily to draw a “very clear line between no large-scale ground troops, but lots of other military involvement – on the training front, on the special operations front, on the air power front,” says Emma Ashford, visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute.

Coming off the Iraqi military’s recent efforts to clear Ramadi, for which US troops had fought and been killed during the Iraqi War, it’s “a good time for them to be saying these things,” Dr. Ashford says.