



# Dempsey raises specter of more US troops in fight

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WASHINGTON — Less than a week after the Obama administration announced that it would double the U.S. troop presence in Iraq, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told Congress Thursday that U.S. troops might eventually accompany Iraqi troops to the front lines in their battle to reclaim ground from the Islamic State.

Army Gen. Martin Dempsey's comments, made during testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, further fueled fears that the U.S. mission in Iraq is creeping toward a combat role for American troops, a prospect President Barack Obama repeatedly has ruled out.

There are currently 1,400 U.S. troops in Baghdad and northern Iraq, relatively calm parts of the country. But some of 1,500 additional troops who are to arrive by year's end will be deployed in areas of fierce combat, including Anbar province, 80 percent of which is controlled by the Islamic State.

Dempsey said Thursday that it would take 80,000 Iraqi troops to reclaim the areas of country that the Islamic State controls, which, in addition to most of Anbar, includes the Syrian-Iraqi border and the city of Mosul, northern Iraq's largest.

"I'm not predicting they'll need to be accompanied by U.S. forces, but we're certainly considering it," Dempsey said.

Last month, Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes rejected U.S. combat forces in Iraq, even if Dempsey recommended it.

"The president's view is that we do not need to do this with U.S. combat forces on the ground," Rhodes told the "Frontline" news program on PBS. "I can't anticipate every hypothetical scenario, but in terms of the strategy itself, the president is very confident and comfortable with a limiting principle as it relates to combat forces on the ground."

Pentagon officials, seeking to avoid wading into a political debate about the U.S. effort in Iraq, stressed that such a plan was months if not years away, and that any U.S. troops would not be "trigger pullers" but advisers offering their Iraqi counterparts ideas on how to best coordinate air support.

“We are not going on the offense,” said Air Force Col. Ed Thomas, Dempsey’s spokesman. “If (the Iraqi security forces) were to go after a complex objective such as Mosul, our small numbers of advisers could accompany them more closely. But we haven’t needed that yet.”

Dempsey first suggested that U.S. advisers might accompany Iraqi troops six weeks ago before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Dempsey and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel sought throughout the three-hour hearing Thursday to assure the House Armed Services Committee that the additional \$5.6 billion the Pentagon had requested for the dispatch of additional troops would fund an effective campaign.

They noted that since the U.S. air campaign began Aug. 8, the Islamic State has not been able to expand at the pace it once did, and that the United States and its coalition members had avoided civilian casualties. But they said that ending the Islamic State’s grip on Sunni Muslim areas of Iraq could not be solved by U.S. involvement alone. The effort would require the Iraqi government to win the support of Sunnis who currently are neutral in the battle or have sided with the Islamic State.

“We, the United States, cannot assure a stable Iraq. The Iraqi people will have to do that,” Hagel told the committee.

The most hostile questioning came from Republican members of the committee who were openly skeptical that the U.S. could accomplish its goal of destroying the Islamic State without a larger ground presence. Others said they were frustrated that there appeared to be no clear point at which the United States could leave.

“My fundamental question is: How can you successfully execute the mission you’ve been given – to ‘degrade and ultimately destroy’ ISIL – when some of your best options are taken off the table?” asked Chairman Buck McKeon, R-Calif., using an acronym for the Islamic State.

As Dempsey and Hagel testified, the Islamic State issued an [audio recording of its leader](#), Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, welcoming new adherents to his movement and mocking the U.S. effort, saying that the deployment of 1,500 new American troops to Iraq showed that U.S. airstrikes had failed to dislodge the extremists.

Baghdadi made no mention of attacking the United States in the 16-minute audio. Still, Dempsey called the Islamic State an “imminent threat” to the United States, noting that some of its followers carry European and American passports that would allow them to attack the West. Yet Dempsey also said the United States would be willing to abandon the effort if the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government did not include Sunnis.

That comment drew criticism from outside analysts. “This is completely contradictory,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research institute in Washington. “If it is an imminent threat, then it shouldn’t matter the composition of the Iraqi government.”

Dempsey estimated there are as many as 18,000 Islamic State fighters, two-thirds of whom are in Syria. But Dempsey said the U.S. strategy remains to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq first.