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## U.S. WILL SEND 217 MORE TROOPS TO IRAQ TO HELP FIGHT ISIL

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20.04.2016

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USA Today, 19 April 2016

Riding on a string of successes against the Islamic State in Iraq, the Pentagon upped the stakes Monday by loosening restrictions on what U.S. troops can do there and sending 200 more servicemembers to support Iraqi forces as they try to recapture the city of Mosul.

The Pentagon will also provide \$415 million in aid for Kurdish fighters, called peshmerga, who will play a key role in the effort to retake Iraq's second-largest city. And it offered to assist Iraqi security forces with U.S. Apache attack helicopters, which excel at providing close fire support to help ground troops engaged in urban combat.

The moves come after President Obama said last week that the Islamic State is on the defensive. The Pentagon touted the recent killings of three of the Islamic State's top commanders in Iraq and Syria as part of a bigger airstrike campaign that won back more than 40% of the group's territory in Iraq.

Monday's new measures allow the U.S. military to assist Iraq's security forces as they enter a critical phase in the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS, while adhering to White House demands against sending conventional forces to directly fight the militants.

"It does not change the basic elements of the strategy, which is that this has to be a fight that is led by local forces with the support and assistance of the United States and our coalition partners," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said.

Under the loosened rules, U.S. advisers could get closer to the battlefield by being embedded with the Iraqi battalion headquarters. Before, they were limited to remain at higher brigade or division headquarters, which generally meant they were not close to the fighting.

American advisers, under this new authority, could remain with Iraqi units as they advance north and move farther from established bases.

Their role as advisers will not change.

"They're not engaged in direct on-the-ground combat," Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said Monday.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, called the troop increase too small to make a difference. "This is yet another example of the kind of grudging incrementalism that rarely wins wars, but could certainly lose one," he said in a statement.

The additional 217 troops announced Monday will raise the authorized level to 4,087 from 3,870, though the Pentagon acknowledged the number can go even higher when servicemembers are deployed on temporary assignments.

Retaking the sprawling city of Mosul is likely the biggest challenge Iraq's military has faced since much of its armed forces collapsed when the Islamic State advanced into Iraqi territory two years ago.

The money for the Kurds signals the U.S. confidence in the fighters, who continue to battle the Islamic State as Iraq has struggled to rebuild its military. The money will be disbursed in monthly increments, Davis said.

The semiautonomous Kurds have long been at odds with Iraq's central government over the disbursement of oil revenues, which have declined as oil prices fell. Davis said the money for the Kurds would still go through Iraq's central government.

The U.S. made a similar offer of Apache helicopters to Iraq last year during an operation to retake the city of Ramadi, but Iraq declined to use them.

A final assault to clear Mosul, a much larger city, is months away. As many as 1 million civilians remain in Mosul, and thousands of Islamic State fighters are there.

Before Monday's announcement, Pentagon officials said they have discussed with Iraq ways to accelerate the offensive to retake Mosul.

"I do expect that there'll be increased capabilities provided to the Iraqis to set the conditions for their operations in Mosul," Marine Gen. Joe Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last month.

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