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## **TURKEY SAYS IT DOES NOT AIM TO BE AN OCCUPIER IN IRAQ**

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Turkeys military presence in Iraq is intended for stability at a time when the country is deeply divided and Turkey does not aim to become an occupying force, Turkish deputy prime minister Numan Kurtulmus said on Wednesday.

Turkish forces are at Iraqs Bashiqa camp, at the request of Iraqi Kurdish President Masoud Barzani, to train the local forces, Kurtulmus said.

Turkey will not allow this to become a matter of debate, he told reporters.

Turkey and Iraq have summoned one others ambassadors in a mounting diplomatic stand-off after Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi warned Turkey that it risked triggering a regional war by keeping troops in Iraqi territory.

Iraqs Foreign Ministry summoned Turkeys ambassador to Baghdad to condemn allegedly provocative comments made by Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim on Tuesday about the planned operation to dislodge ISIS militants from the northern city of Mosul, said the ministrys spokesman, Ahmad Jamal.

Yildirim told ruling party legislators in parliament that the Iraqi operation could spark Shiite-Sunni sectarian tensions if the majority Sunni region around Mosul were to be placed under Shiite militia control after the offensive.

However, it is still unclear if the Shiite militias, the core of the Iraqi paramilitary forces battling ISIS, will take an essential part in the Mosul operation.

Relations between Iraq and Turkey have become strained since late last year when Turkey sent unauthorized troops to the region of Bashiqa, northeast of Mosul to train anti-ISIS fighters there. Baghdad considers this a blatant violation of Iraqs sovereignty and has demanded Turkish withdrawal, a call Ankara has ignored.

Yildirim comments on Tuesday echoed those of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan days earlier during a parliamentary session in which Turkish legislators extended the mandate of Turkish forces in Syria and Iraq for one more year. Erdogan expressed Ankaras willingness to join the imminent battle for Mosul.

In Iraq, the parliament on Tuesday adopted a resolution denouncing the extension of Turkish troops presence and asking the government to consider them as occupation forces. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi later told reporters the presence of Turkish troops is one of the challenges ahead of the Mosul operation, warning that Ankaras insistence could lead to a regional warfare.

In Ankara, the Iraqi envoy was summoned for a protest over the Iraqi parliament resolution. The Foreign Ministry said Turkey has for years suffered from terror threats arising from instability in Iraq and had strongly supported Iraqs territorial integrity, stability and security.

Mosul, Iraqs second-largest city located about 360 kilometers (225 miles) northwest of Baghdad, is the last remaining ISIS urban stronghold in Iraq. The government is now gearing up for a major offensive to retake Mosul from ISIS and has pledged to recapture the city this year.

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