
IRAQI LAWMAKERS URGE BAN ON U.S. CITIZENS, THREATENING ISIS FIGHT

31.01.2017

Time, 30 Jan 2017

Iraqi lawmakers voted Monday to approve a "reciprocity measure" that might see U.S. nationals banned from entering the country in retaliation against U.S. President Donald Trump's executive order on Iraqis in the U.S., a move that could hinder the fight against ISIS.

The Iraqi parliaments foreign committee earlier issued a statement calling on the Iraqi government to act after President Trump controversially ordered that citizens from Iraq and six other Muslim-majority countries be refused entry to the U.S. for at least 90 days. Iraq is on the front line of the war on terrorism, said the statement, released Sunday. It is unfair that the Iraqis are treated in this way.

On Monday, the parliament voted to ask the government to retaliate, Reuters reports. It's not clear yet whether a ban on U.S. nationals is a realistic possibility; Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has not yet issued a public reaction to the order.

If a retaliatory ban were to be enacted it could impact thousands of American aid workers, contractors and journalists currently working in Iraq, as well as more than 5,000 U.S. military personnel there to aid Iraqi forces in their effort to oust ISIS from Mosul and the country.

On the Ground with the Elite Iraqi Troops Fighting to Free Mosul from ISIS

This decision by the U.S. is arbitrary, said Intisar Al-Jabbouri, a Sunni MP from the Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq. The Iraqi government has the right to reciprocate.

The U.S. withdrew troops from Iraq in 2011, but since ISIS captured swaths of Iraqi territory in 2014, it has slowly sent advisers, trainers and special forces back to the country. Their guidance □ as well as weapons and funding – has been key to the fight against ISIS.

Iraqi forces are battling the militants of the so-called Islamic State in the neighborhoods of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and the largest urban center still under ISIS control. American military advisers are nearby, helping to direct the fight.

If Iraq were to ban U.S. citizens from traveling to Iraq it would have devastating consequences for our fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, said Chris Harmer, a senior analyst with the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War. That's just in the short term."

A federal judge issued an emergency order Saturday night temporarily barring the U.S. from deporting people from nations subject to President Donald Trump's travel ban.

Nevertheless the idea has caught on in certain, influential circles. Moqtada al-Sadr, a powerful Shiite cleric who led a violent insurgency in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, quickly issued a statement saying Americans should leave. It would be arrogant for you to enter freely to Iraq and other countries while barring them the entrance to your country, Sadr said on his website, addressing the U.S. And therefore you should get your nationals out.

Other Iraqi leaders may be keen to see the Americans leave in the hope that Iran may fill the void left behind, rather than that simple reciprocity for President Trump's ban on Iraqi nationals. Those

that are closely aligned with Iran might think this is a good idea – an opportunity to remove American influence from Iraq once and for all, said Renad Mansour, an Academy Fellow for the Middle East and North Africa at Chatham House.

Mansour says Sadr, as well as Iranian-backed leaders, may use Trump's ban for their own political gains and take the opportunity to stoke anti-American sentiment. "Now they can say, 'I told you so.'"

It's possible Trump's order could exacerbate cracks in the already fragile coalition in Iraq, in which groups who receive support from the U.S. fight in concert with those who are backed by Iran. Iranian generals have been spotted on the front lines in key battles against ISIS, both in Iraq and Syria. Shiite militias, many funded by Tehran, are ruthless fighters but have been accused of abuses against civilian populations, fueling sectarian tensions.

The Popular Mobilization Forces, a coalition of mostly Shiite militias, also issued a statement on Sunday urging al-Abadi to kick out U.S. nationals. It's going to be tricky for al-Abadi to deal with, said Mansour.

Despite the strong rhetoric and anti-American sentiment in response to Trump's decision, lawmaker Jabbouri says it would be difficult for Iraq to approve and implement such a ban given the essential role the U.S. plays in both its military and humanitarian efforts. There is a strategic need to keep American experts to ensure the sustainability of the coalition fight against ISIS, she says. But if the Iraqi parliament gets its way, it could provide an opening for Iran to extend its influence on the country. The U.S. scaling-back of operations has already left room for an increasing Iranian presence, Harmer says. Long term, it would complete the decline of U.S. strategic influence in Iraq and pave the way for Iran to increase their already significant influence over the Iraqi government." The effect, he says, would be "catastrophic."

Kaynak/Source: