
LIBERALS LOOK TO EXTEND IRAQ MISSION

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The current mission, launched last year, saw the government withdraw Canadian fighter jets from the U.S.-led bombing campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, but triple the number of special forces soldiers in northern Iraq.

It also added a helicopter detachment to transport and resupply those soldiers as well as a 50-person intelligence unit, and kept two surveillance planes and a refuelling aircraft in the region.

The mission was set to expire next week, but sources tell The Canadian Press that the government is looking at an extension of several months without any changes.

They say Canada remains committed to helping Iraq get back on its feet, but the country's exact needs won't be known until ISIL is defeated in Mosul.

That battle is expected to take several more weeks, if not months, as Iraqi forces engage in bloody house-to-house fighting to push the extremist group from the country's second-largest city.

Military commanders have warned that victory in Mosul won't mark the end of ISIL in Iraq, as most expect it to abandon conventional military tactics in favour of terror tactics, like suicide bombings.

That will require different training and support from the international community, which to this point has been largely focused on helping Iraqi and Kurdish forces fight ISIL as a regular military force.

There are also concerns about Iraq's political future, with several potential conflicts bubbling just beneath the surface as the threat posed by ISIL appears to be receding.

Those include competing territorial claims between the Kurds in northern Iraq and the central government in Baghdad, and long-standing divisions between the country's Sunni and Shia populations.

Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan alluded to the situation on Tuesday when asked about the future of Canada's mission in Iraq.

"What we're doing now is making sure that we're talking to our coalition partners, looking at the situation on the ground," he said.

"It is very fluid, and we just want to make sure that we have the right resources. * So we will continue to look at any type of adjustments so that we are a responsible coalition partner."

Another question mark is what U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration plan to do in Iraq over the long term.

Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland will be in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday, where U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will host his first anti-ISIL meeting.

Eliminating ISIL has been one of the few centrepieces of Trump's foreign policy, but the president and his team have been largely silent on details or what comes after.

Any signals that Tillerson gives are likely to feed into the discussions and planning currently underway in National Defence as well as Global Affairs on Canada's future role in Iraq.

Kaynak/Source: