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**TROOPS IN IRAQ, SYRIA ASK CHAIRMAN'S SENIOR ENLISTED ADVISOR: 'WHAT'S NEXT?'**

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11.10.2017

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By Jim Garamone DoD News, Defense Media Activity

Defence.gov, 10 Oct 2017

Army Command Sgt. Maj. John Wayne Troxell reports that U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria are executing the strategy to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and they want to know what's next.

Joint Chiefs chairman talks with his senior enlisted advisor.

Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks with his senior enlisted advisor, Army Command Sgt. Maj. John W. Troxell, after a visit to Train, Advise, Assist Command in Afghanistan's Helmand province, June 28, 2017. Dunford traveled throughout the country meeting with U.S., coalition, and Afghan leaders. Troxell recently completed a trip to visit U.S. troops in Iraq, Syria and Jordan. DoD photo by Army Sgt. James K. McCann

Troxell, the senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited U.S. troops in Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

"I wanted to see how we understood it and how we were getting after it," Troxell said in an interview.

He said he also wanted to hear and bring back to the chairman and defense secretary concerns the troops had in terms of resources or authorities.

Fact-Finding Trip

This was the sergeant major's second fact-finding trip to Syria, and he has made many other trips into other regions on behalf of defense leaders.

"When we talk about gauging the pulse of the force, it's tough to do that from your office in the Pentagon," he said. "If I truly want to understand the challenges and the successes we are having in the main effort -- which is Raqqa -- then I better be prepared to go and check on the troops and see how we're doing and report that back to the chairman and the secretary."

Troxell went to Iraq first and met with U.S. leaders in the defeat-ISIS fight. "We have constant pressure on ISIS," he said. "ISIS, at the very minimum, is disrupted, but that doesn't mean they've been neutralized."

The ISIS of 2014 that took over vast areas in Iraq and Syria was a force that was very flexible, he said. The group could operate as a terrorist organization, an insurgent organization and as a convention military force.

ISIS: On the Run

But ISIS now is on the run, he said. Iraqi forces captured Hawija -- one of the last villages in Iraq that was controlled by ISIS.

The loss of territory -- especially the loss of Mosul -- caused ISIS to abandon its conventional tactics, Troxell said. ISIS fighters are still trying to conduct attacks via unmanned aerial vehicles, improvised explosive devices and small direct-fire attacks, he said, but the range and effectiveness is limited.

Troops in Iraq have one concern, Troxell said.

"What's next after the defeat of ISIS?" he said the troops asked.

Troops in the region see Iranian influence, Troxell said, and they see divisions between Arabs and Kurds. They see splits among tribes and sects. They want to know "what is our role going to be moving forward," the senior enlisted advisor said.

Visiting With U.S. Troops

Troxell said no one in Iraq told him that the mission is finished, or that it's time to go home. The troops, he said, understand this is a long game.

In Syria, Troxell got many of the same comments. There, he went into Raqqa and visited with U.S. service members supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDF is a multi-ethnic force -- roughly 40 percent Arab and 60 percent Kurd -- opposed to ISIS, and those forces are squeezing the last ISIS enclave in Raqqa.

The SDF now holds most of the city, said Troxell, noting that ISIS still has capability and resolve.

Troxell said that while he was in Raqqa, "every minute we were putting some kind of lethality on ISIS -- mortar, artillery, Hellfires or the SDF in direct combat."

'We Were Pounding ISIS'

"We were pounding ISIS. It was to the point where I wondered how they could survive the onslaught of what was coming on them," the sergeant major said.

Troxell said SDF commanders told ISIS fighters that they have two options: unconditional surrender or die.

"There is no negotiating with these guys; they are either going to surrender or they are going to get killed," the sergeant major said.

Some ISIS members are surrendering, he added.

Coalition leaders on the ground said they are confident in the direction the SDF is going, Troxell said. The American service members have been partnered with the SDF since it started, he said, and many are concerned what will happen to those forces once ISIS is eliminated in Syria.

## American NCOs Performing Well

Troxell said he was impressed by the shouldering of responsibility by U.S. noncommissioned officers in Iraq and Syria.

"Enlisted leaders [are] empowered and executing command duties on the ground," he said. "The fight in Raqqa is being led by enlisted personnel -- whether it is Marines firing artillery, soldiers firing mortars, or noncommissioned officers executing command-and-control of the fight. It was living proof to me in one of the most-dangerous places in the world, that we have the best enlisted force in the world and it is our greatest military advantage."

The train, advise, assist and accompany mission tied in with U.S. command-and-control abilities has been key to success for partner forces, Troxell said.

U.S. officers know they can trust their NCOs to make the right decisions, the sergeant major said, adding that U.S. NCOs have grown wiser through 16 years of war.

"We are not trying to replace officers," he said. "Rather, we are trying to make NCOs better advisors to officers and better executors of officers' vision and intent at all levels."

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