
IRAQ LAWMAKERS SEEK TIMETABLE FOR WITHDRAWAL OF FOREIGN TROOPS

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Vote comes months after Abadi declared victory over Islamic State, and ahead of May parliamentary elections

Iraqs parliament on Thursday called for a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, putting pressure on the countrys leader ahead of May elections as he seeks to prevent a resurgence by Islamic State militants.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over the terror group three months ago, after U.S.-backed Iraqi forces ousted Islamic State from the last territory it controlled in the country. But since then, Islamic State militants have reverted to guerrilla warfare in northern Iraq, exposing persistent weaknesses within the security forces.

A majority of lawmakers who attended a parliament session on Thursday voted in favor of a motion obliging Mr. Abadi to draw up a clear timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops. The motion isnt binding but promises to become a campaign issue for Mr. Abadi, who is seeking a second term in parliamentary elections in May.

A spokesman for the prime minister couldnt immediately be reached for comment.

Both Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition agree foreign troops should ultimately leave question is how quickly.

The U.S., which has more than 5,000 troops in Iraq, wants to maintain a presence there until Iraqi security forces are strong enough to prevent Islamic State from re-emerging as a serious threat.

A precipitous withdrawal at this point could be catastrophic, Col. Seth Folsom, who commands a U.S. task force that supported operations against Islamic State in the western province of Anbar, said in the wake of the victory.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi attended a military parade in Baghdad in July after Islamic State was ousted from Mosul.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi attended a military parade in Baghdad in July after Islamic State was ousted from Mosul. PHOTO: IRAQI PRIME MINISTRY OFFICE/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

The Iraqi government has also said it wants the U.S.-led coalition that helped defeat Islamic State to stay on for now. Baghdad sees a continued role for the coalition in building up the capabilities of its security forces and helping with intelligence gathering as Islamic State goes back underground.

The number of U.S. troops has already begun to decline since victory was declared in December, a senior American official said last month.

When rotations end people leave and they're not replaced, he said. Whatever numbers remain here in the end will be based on the missions that the Iraqis want them to perform.

The U.S. is seeking to avoid a repeat of Iraq's recent history. In 2011, the U.S. withdrew its forces from Iraq eight years after invading the country, only to be pulled back onto the battlefield when Islamic State overran around one third of its territory in 2014 and Iraqi security forces partially collapsed.

But some factions say foreign troops are no longer welcome, including powerful Shiite Muslim militias backed by Iran. Some of those militias fought U.S. forces after the 2003 invasion and have threatened to attack U.S. forces if they remain.

Mr. Abadi's Shiite political rivals may use the continued presence of foreign troops to undermine him.

Shiite lawmaker Aliya Nusaif, who voted in favor of the motion, accused Mr. Abadi of obfuscating the true number of foreign troops and their bases. The Iraqi government got itself into this embarrassing situation, she said.

Kurdish lawmakers boycotted the parliament session for other reasons, leaving only Sunni and Shiite representatives to vote. Shiite lawmakers overwhelmingly supported the motion, but most Sunnis, whose areas were in many cases occupied by Islamic State, rejected it.

Mohammed Abd Rabba, a Sunni lawmaker from the city of Mosul ██████ Islamic State declared its self-proclaimed caliphate in 2014, and from which it was ousted last year ██████ it was too soon to talk about foreign troops withdrawing.

We do not have real strong military capabilities to face a potential powerful enemy like Daesh in the future so we need the international coalition with all its logistics, he said, using the Arabic acronym for Islamic State.

—Ali A. Nabhan contributed to this article.

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