
US DEACTIVATES GROUND HQ IN IRAQ AS ISIS FIGHT WINDS DOWN

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By Richard Sisk

The U.S. marked a major milestone in the campaign against ISIS by folding the flag on the headquarters of the coalition's ground component in Iraq in a brief ceremony Monday in Baghdad.

Army Maj. Gen. Walter Piatt, commander of Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command (CJFLCC) and the 10th Mountain Division, and his senior enlisted adviser, Command Sgt. Maj. Samuel Roark, presided at the deactivation ceremony for CJFLCC.

"Casing the CJFLCC colors is a symbolic gesture, honoring the perseverance and sacrifice of our coalition partners," Piatt said in a statement.

"Thanks to our partnered success, we are able to continue to support the government of Iraq under the command of CJTF-OIR [Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve]," added Piatt, who has led the land component since March.

Since 2014, when ISIS fighters were at the gates of Baghdad, CJFLCC has supplied the coalition ground forces who partnered on the battlefield with the Iraqi Security Forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga in retaking Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul and other major cities and reducing ISIS to pockets of resistance.

The 10th Mountain troops of CJFLCC will now focus through CJTF-OIR on training and advising the ISF in the buildup of its capabilities to maintain security, with emphasis on the Iraq-Syria border region.

A coalition statement said the mission was shifting "from supporting and enabling combat operations to the training and development of self-sufficient Iraqi security-related capabilities."

The closing of the CJFLCC headquarters signaled the end of major combat operations ahead of next month's scheduled parliamentary elections in Iraq.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS in Iraq in December after clearing operations against ISIS in Anbar province near the Syrian border, but ISIS has maintained the ability to launch terror attacks.

In February, Iraqi government spokesman Saad al-Hadithi said that "the battle against Daesh [ISIS] has ended so the level of the American presence will be reduced."

But it was unclear whether the deactivation of the land component would immediately lead to withdrawals of elements of the estimated 5,000 U.S. troops in Iraq.

At the Pentagon Monday, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis would only say that the remaining coalition force in Iraq would be "fit for its current mission."

However, U.S. air forces in recent weeks have begun shifting out of Iraq to bolster the air campaign in Afghanistan.

In a briefing to the Pentagon last week from Baghdad, Army Col. Ryan Dillon, the CJTF-OIR spokesman, said of Iraq that "while hard work remains after the defeat of ISIS' tyrannical self-proclaimed caliphate, there are encouraging signs that life is returning to normal."

"In the past month, various groups across Iraq and Syria, including Assyrians, Yazidis and Kurds, celebrated Nowruz [the Persian new year] for the first time in years, free from ISIS," Dillon said.

"We will continue to conduct operations that limit ISIS freedom of maneuver and also constrain their ability to generate forces and degrade their command and control nodes until the terrorist organization is defeated," continued Dillon, who himself was leaving CJTF-OIR to take a position with U.S. Africa Command.

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