
PENTAGON CHIEF ESPER VISITS IRAQ AMID US PULLOUT FROM SYRIA

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US defence chief Mark Esper arrived in Baghdad on Wednesday amid questions about how long American forces withdrawing from northeast Syria will stay in Iraq.

Esper was expected to meet his Iraqi counterpart as well as Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and discuss the US troop drawdown from Syria and the role Iraq will play in it.

On Tuesday, Iraq's military contradicted the Pentagon's announcement that all of the nearly 1,000 troops withdrawing from northern Syria are expected to move to western Iraq to continue the campaign against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or ISIS) and "to help defend Iraq".

"All US forces that withdrew from Syria received approval to enter the Kurdish region so that they may be transported outside Iraq. There is no permission granted for these forces to stay inside Iraq," an Iraqi military statement said.

Esper said on Tuesday that Washington plans to eventually bring US troops withdrawing from Syria back to the United States. He did not provide any timelines.

"The aim isn't to stay in Iraq interminably. The aim is to pull our soldiers out and eventually get them back home," Esper said.

Al Jazeera's Imran Khan, reporting from Baghdad, said that the problem stemmed from "the language that the US used".

"The US said that the forces will come back to Ain al-Assad in western Iraq, and mount operations against Syria and ISIL from there. And that seems to have angered the Iraqis.

"The prime minister ... will meet Esper, and we are hoping for some more clarity on exactly what these deals mean," he said.

US President Donald Trump has been widely criticised for abandoning the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia - which spearheaded the American-led ground war against ISIL - by pulling out American forces and allowing Turkey to launch a cross-border military operation against the group in northeast Syria.

Late on Tuesday, Russia and Turkey announced a deal to allow the YPG to evacuate 30km (19 miles) away from the border with Turkey, and then Moscow and Ankara will then launch joint military patrols in a "safe zone".

Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Turkey will then be sent home.

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