

Some Iraqis want foreign troops to leave, but the U.S., Canada and their NATO allies don't appear to be going anywhere soon

[By David Pugliese, military affairs columnist, *Ottawa Citizen* \(Postmedia\), Jan 16, 2020](#)

Even as Iraqi politicians call for foreign troops, including Canada's military personnel, to leave their country, NATO nations are preparing for an expanded role in the Middle Eastern state.

U.S. officials are discussing with NATO the request by U.S. President Donald Trump for the alliance to do more in the region. Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan finished up a NATO meeting on January 14 in which Denmark announced it will take over command of the alliance's training mission in Iraq from Canada at the end of 2020. "We are committed to helping build a stable Iraq and preventing the re-emergence of Daesh," Sajjan said, referring to the extremist group also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL.

The NATO decision to continue in Iraq comes just days after the Iraqi parliament voted to boot foreign troops from the country.

Iraq's caretaker prime minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, has requested the Americans work out a roadmap for the withdrawal of the 5,200 U.S. soldiers in the country. That follows street protests in which Iraqis called on both Iran and the U.S. and its western allies to leave. The Iraqis are upset about being caught in the middle of fighting between U.S. forces and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq.

But what the Iraqis or their politicians want doesn't appear to be a factor in the U.S. or NATO decision-making. The U.S. government rejected outright any request for its soldiers to leave and refused to even discuss the issue. Instead U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the soldiers will continue to train Iraqi security forces to counter ISIL.

The Canadian Forces had temporarily suspended their training activities in Iraq as a result of an increase in tensions following the recent U.S. assassination of a top Iranian general in Baghdad.

Iraq's parliamentary vote, pushed by Shiite lawmakers who represent the majority of the population, is non-binding and it is now up to the Iraqi government to formally request a withdrawal of foreign troops. Kurdish and Sunni lawmakers want U.S. and NATO troops to stay to counter ISIL as well as Iranian influence in the country.

Asked whether Canada would abide by any Iraqi request for foreign troops to leave, the Prime Minister's Office responded with an internet link to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's recent news conference about Iran and its downing of a Ukrainian airliner. That news conference focused on Iran's acknowledgment it destroyed the plane, killing all on board including 57 Canadians. There was no discussion about the Iraqi parliament request.

But asked last week whether Canadian troops are still welcome in Iraq, Trudeau told reporters the Iraqi people and politicians recognize it is important to have international support in

countering ISIL/Daesh. "There are obviously questions that are being asked about what that will look like into the future but there is a recognition that there is a need to ensure stability and countering Daesh in Iraq," he explained.

The Canadian military has about 500 personnel in Iraq. Some are assigned to what the Canadian Forces call Operation Impact while others are part of a NATO training mission. The Canadian military personnel are training and advising Iraqi troops. They have been there since the fall of 2014, when then prime minister Stephen Harper committed Canadian fighter jets and special forces to the war against ISIL. Trudeau withdrew the jets but increased the number of Canadian military personnel on the ground.

Iraq has been in chaos since 2003, when the U.S. invaded claiming its then-leader Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. That U.S. claim turned out to be untrue and in the following years more than 200,000 Iraqi civilians were killed as various factions fought the Americans as well as each other.

Peggy Mason, president of the Rideau Institute, said the main underlying purpose for Canada's Iraq mission is so the federal government can ingratiate itself with the U.S. and avoid criticism that Canada is not doing enough on defence. But that position is no longer tenable, she noted, as tensions increase between Iran and the U.S.

"Our goals, what would constitute success, and how the military training fits with the broader need to vastly improve Iraqi governance in general have never been clearly enunciated by the Canadian government," explained Mason, a former disarmament ambassador in Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney's government. "Now that the Iraqi parliament has voted to oust foreign forces, it is time for our government to tell the Canadian public what we are doing in Iraq and why."

Canada's military involvement in Iraq is expected to cost taxpayers more than \$1 billion by the end of March, according to figures compiled by the Defence Department.

In response to the Iraqi parliament vote, Trump said he would punish Iraq, an American ally, with significant sanctions if foreign troops were given the boot. Trump also said he wants Iraq to repay the U.S. for its military presence in the country. In addition, the *Wall Street Journal* reported the U.S. government is threatening to cut off Iraq's New York bank account, where international oil sale revenue is kept, if it forces American troops out.

Trump is also setting the stage for an expanded NATO presence in Iraq. Trump noted he has even come up with a name for the new force, one he claimed NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg was very excited about. "NATO, and then you have ME, Middle East," Trump explained. "They would call it NATOME. I'm good at names."