

## ***U.S. Plans to Step Up Military Campaign Against ISIS***

By **Michael S. Schmidt** and **Eric Schmitt**

April 16, 2016

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — The Obama administration is preparing to broaden its military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria by increasing the number of Special Operations forces who advise Syrian rebels, and it is also considering the addition of Army attack helicopters to the fight against militants in Iraq.

The goal would be to accelerate what United States officials said on Saturday was momentum behind Iraqi security forces and American-backed rebels in Syria fighting the terrorist organization.

Inside Syria, the administration is prepared to add dozens of Special Operations forces to the 50 who now advise and assist Syrian rebels fighting the Islamic State, say three Defense Department and military officials. The additional trainers, who could total as many as 200, would be able to expand their instruction to Syrian Arab fighters, who are likely to play a pivotal role in capturing Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital in Syria, the officials said.

The administration's plans for Iraq are more complicated.

Pentagon officials would like to increase efforts to advise and train Iraqi security forces for the anticipated assault on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and the Islamic State's main stronghold in the country. The plan calls for shifting trainers who are already in the country to positions closer to Mosul, the officials said. They would also like to deploy Apache helicopter gunships — which are already in Iraq, but used only to protect American personnel — and order them to participate in the battle for Mosul.

But the government of Iraq's prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has been battling internal political turmoil. His challenges include political opponents, rampant corruption and an economy weakened by low oil prices.

The military options under consideration — which could be announced in the next several days — were described by five Defense Department and military officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because final decisions are pending in Washington and Baghdad. Administration officials said on Saturday that announcing or even proposing increased American assistance is a delicate diplomatic task that could further imperil Mr. Abadi's position.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter made clear on Saturday that the administration will increase its military efforts to defeat the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, but he did not discuss specifics.

“You should expect us, to see us, doing more,” he said at a news conference at the Al Dhafra air base as he opened travels in the Middle East. “It will be consistent with the same approach, but it’ll be across all the domains, right up to cyber.”

Mr. Carter described the administration’s approach as one that will use members of the American armed services to help accelerate the military campaign against the Islamic State, but will not replace Iraqi security forces or Syrian rebels.

There are roughly 5,000 American service members in Iraq, according to current Pentagon estimates, but the number often varies, sometimes daily, by hundreds.

Mr. Carter’s comments come at a time when Iraqi militias and military forces have been making notable progress on the battlefield against the Islamic State, including seizing parts of Hit, a city in Anbar Province, this month.

Last Wednesday, Col. Steven H. Warren, the military spokesman in Iraq, said that the initial phase of the American-led campaign against the Islamic State, with the intent of degrading or weakening the fighters, was complete, and that allied forces were in the second phase of the operation.

“During this phase, we will enable our partners to dismantle the enemy, fragment his forces, isolate his centers of gravity and liberate the terrain he holds,” he said.

But even as the campaign against the Islamic State is showing gains in Iraq and Syria, the group’s franchises in places like Libya, as well as its external operations in Europe, are increasingly lethal.

On Saturday, Mr. Carter met with American service members, including pilots, who are stationed at the Al Dhafra air base and are part of the air campaign over Iraq and Syria. He said that in the coming days he would be meeting with American commanders leading the efforts to defeat the Islamic State.

“We continue to look for, and identify ways of accelerating that, and as we find those we will do them,” Mr. Carter said, adding that the administration would seek the approval of Iraqi government there.

Mr. Carter said that gaining the support of President Obama to do more in Iraq has not been an obstacle.

“We’ve gotten approval from the White House every time the chairman and I have gone to ask for something that we’ve needed to accelerate going way back to last year,” Mr. Carter said, referring to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., who will also be traveling in the region in the coming days. “So that isn’t really the issue for us, the issue for us is yet identifying more ways to accelerate the campaign.”

Michael S. Schmidt reported from Abu Dhabi, and Eric Schmitt from Washington.