New Details on U.S. Strategy in Iraq and Syria
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The Department of Defense has issued an unusually detailed DoD budget request for Iraq and Syria entitled the *Justification for FY 2018 OVERSEAS CONTINGENCY OPERATIONS (OCO) COUNTER-ISIS TRAIN AND EQUIP FUND (CTEF)*. A full copy of this document is available on the CSIS web site at https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170601_Iraq_Syria_train_assist.pdf?5zvupDtqtLvj_6Wvoh0NxhfOyGYNRdu.

The key portions of this budget request deserve careful attention. As is noted in an article by Joe Gould in *Defense News*, it seems to reflect key elements of the DoD strategy review of the wars in Iraq and Syria—which has not yet been released—and provides some important insights into U.S. planning for what will happen after a victory against ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa.

The request makes it clear that the United States is not cutting back on future commitments despite what is expected to be a significant level of victories in CY2017. The President’s FY2018 budget request totals $1.1769 billion, including $1.269 billion for Iraq train and equip (T&E) activities and $0.5 billion for Syria T&E activities. *(Excludes $289.5 million requested in the FY2017/2018 Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) for support to the Kurdish Peshmerga.)* This compares with $1.176 billion for Iraq T&E activities and $0.430 billion for Syria T&E activities.

The document conspicuously does not propose military personnel levels for either Syria or Iraq. The OSD Comptroller did however, propose a rise in average annual troop strength to 5,765 in the FY2017 revised request versus 3,500 in the original FY2017 request in the *Request for Additional FY2017 Appropriation*. The actual figures for Iraq alone were 3,180 in both FY2015 and FY2016.

**Iraq**

There are practical and political limits to what a budget request can cover. The section on Iraq does not address any form of new arrangements between Sunni and Shi’ites or the central government and the Kurds, but it does recognize that the defeat of ISIS in Mosul will not end ISIS or the terrorist threat, that sectarian and ethnic tension present critical issues, that Iraq's border with Syria will be unstable, that Russian and Iranian interference will be serious issues, that Central Government control over the security forces needs to be strengthened, and that achieving any lasting stability will take several years and require both DoD and State support.

- Implied U.S. train and equip (T&E) commitment for at least 3 years.
- U.S. advisors will remain deployed forward—near or in the combat forces they support.
- Will find and arm Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga seeking coordination between them and government forces. The level of cooperation between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and KRG is unprecedented, and the KRG has been a critical partner in counter-ISIS operations. The Peshmerga played a key role in isolating Mosul and enabling the ISF to stage for the Mosul offensive.
- Turkish interests in the Kurdish issue are not addressed.
- "The July 2016 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between DoD and the Ministry
of Peshmerga – which facilitated DoD support to approximately 36,000 Peshmerga – greatly enabled the Peshmerga’s success in Mosul and KRG cooperation with the GoI.

The cost estimate for FY 2018 assumes DoD and the Ministry of Peshmerga will extend the MoU, laying out the framework and parameters of sustainment support for Peshmerga forces involved in achieving key counter-ISIS objectives. Along with stipends, this MoU will also facilitate DoD provision of weapons, ammunition, food, fuel, mobility assets, and sustainment support to the Peshmerga. The DoD may also use these funds for other requirements that support the strategic objective of GoI-KRG cooperation.”

- Recognizes post Mosul/Raqqa/ISIS armed stability missions. "Other violent and radical groups are prepared to fill the void created by the decline of ISIS and exploit perceived Sunni and Kurdish grievances with the central government in Iraq. Many of these groups will manipulate religious, tribal, or local identities to exploit them for their advantage. This U.S. support is critical not only in dealing ISIS a lasting defeat in Iraq, but also in enabling the ISF to posture for the post-ISIS challenges, such as enabling the rule of law, establishing border security, securing critical infrastructure, and addressing future extremist threats."

- "The spread of violent extremism and terrorism by ISIS will continue to pose significant challenges to the future of Iraq as well as to U.S. national security. ISIS remnants and thousands of their followers remain and are committed to their cause."

- "As the GoI stabilizes territory liberated from ISIS, the ISF will require capabilities that fill the gap between demonstrating a show of force, include the use of deadly force in fighting ISIS, and stabilizing Iraq. With the ISF and other security elements operating in close contact with non-combatants in liberated areas, it is essential to control the level of violence and prevent collateral casualties and damage while conducting counter-ISIS operations. Non-lethal weapons are intended for use in situations where the use of lethal force would be unacceptable."

- "require continued DoD support for repairing and replacing ISF equipment lost in battle, advising and assisting ISF units, providing key enabler support to ISF operations, assisting the GoI in reestablishing its border with Syria, and building partner capacity (BPC) to develop ISF capabilities for full spectrum combat operations, to include wide area security and counterinsurgency."

- "Beyond FY 2018, DoD costs are estimated to decrease as Iraqi sustainment capabilities continue to improve, or FMS/FMF funded programs are implemented and/or expanded to meet this enduring requirement. This outcome is contingent on continued funding for the Department of State. Moreover, the program is intended to complement existing mechanisms for maintenance and sustainment funded by the GoI to help develop a sustainable supply and maintenance program focused on U.S.-provided ITEF equipment by training ISF maintainers."

- "Within DoD support to the ISF, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will require further DoD assistance to enable the lasting defeat of ISIS and set the conditions for continued cooperation between the KRG and GoI. Finally, a key component of support will be a continued partnership with the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service (CTS) as it transitions from its current role as an elite conventional force to a more traditional special
operations role."

- Calls for restructuring and rebuilding of Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service—which has suffered 40% losses—under new Ministry to 20,000 men with hold, counterterrorism, border security, and police ties.

- "Without the necessary support to ISF counter-ISIS operations, the ISF will be challenged to address terrorist threats, maintain sufficient border security, protect the population, and provide for the Iraqi national defense. This deficiency could result in an environment that fuels Iraqi instability, exacerbates sectarian divisions, contributes to extremism, and allows outside actors to destabilize the country."

- "Without this funding, there could be greater opportunities for other states, including the Russian Federation and Iran, to expand their influence in Iraq. By increasing the capacity and capabilities of the ISF, the GoI will be capable enough to maintain security and set the conditions for long-term stability, self-defense, and governance. Assisting the GoI in the development of a sustainable counter-ISIS defense force is a means of defeating ISIS, while providing lasting improvements to the security and stability of Iraq and thereby, the region."

- "Assistance to the GoI and support to the ISF will also provide a political and physical counterweight to Iranian and Russian influence, and reassure Iraqi Sunnis of their importance to the fight against ISIS, while gaining GoI acceptance. The FY 2018 budget request will provide security solutions in support of improved governance in Iraq and implement steps for the framework needed to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS and deny other terrorists safe haven in Iraq."

Syria

The document focuses more exclusively on aid, does not address any form of conflict resolution or peace settlement, and does not discuss the need to deal with the conflicting interests of Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, or Turkey; does not address the impact of Assad's gains; the role of Russian forces; the fact that the Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) is largely Syrian Kurds; Turkish claims that these Kurds are link to the PKK and terrorism; or the fact the vast majority of Arab rebels are not part of the VDO and are increasingly tied to Islamist extremist factions with links to Al Qa'ida.

It does, however, cover several key aspects of the U.S. military mission in Syria:

- U.S. advisors will remain deployed forward—near or in the combat forces they support.

- "One element of the DoD strategy to defeat ISIS is to train, equip, sustain, and enable the Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) including the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC). There are approximately 25,000 VSO with an additional 5,000 in growth projected, for a total FY 2018 end strength of approximately 30,000."

- "These forces are holding areas liberated in FY 2017 and continue to seize and clear additional territory from ISIS. To accomplish U.S. military objectives, the VSO combat losses must be replaced and new VSO must be appropriately equipped with weapons, ammunition, vehicles, equipment and sustainment to maintain operational momentum and security."

- "The relationship between VSO and U.S. forces is transactional and relies heavily on
DoD’s ability to provide weapons, ammunition, and equipment. DoD supports the VSO development into a legitimate and effective force by creating increased capability to effectively defeat ISIS in the Combined Joint Operations Area (CJOA).

- "The DoD must recruit, vet, train, and equip additional Syrians comprised of related tribes of different sects and ethnic groups of the population to enable them to engage ISIS throughout the battlespace. Success in these efforts helps set the conditions to prevent ISIS from re-taking territory in Syria."

- As noted earlier, funding is raised from $430 million in FY2017 to $500 million in FY2018.

- "The VSO’s combat effectiveness, movement, and operational tempo are directly linked to U.S. trainers and enablers that advise, assist, and accompany the partner forces. This transactional relationship is reliant upon the DoD’s ability to provide weapons, ammunition, and equipment required for planned objectives. The DoD equips the VSO for immediate counter-ISIS objectives, which mitigates risk that VSO use materiel support for actions beyond U.S. intentions."

- Arms supplied to the VSO will be relatively light. "Weapons and ammunition estimates are based on operational requirements coupled with lead time for items. Estimates are based on both training and equipping the VSO forces to include resupply during operational mission support. Combat loss estimates are included in quantities required. Estimates are based upon training and equipping the VSO forces to include resupply during operational mission support. Ammunition resupply during tactical missions is essential to defeat ISIS."

- "Lethal equipment sets may include AK-47s, PKM medium machine guns, and DShK heavy machine guns, as well as mortar systems. This request includes first station destination costs where equipment is palletized for lift into theater....The majority of vehicles are variants that are widely available in the local market. This availability ensures that most can be maintained or repaired from commercial sources inside Syria and from spare parts delivered to the VSO."

- "The FY 2018 Syria Train and Equip Program request furthers critical efforts accomplished since FY 2015 and is a key component of the strategy to counter ISIS operations in both Syria and abroad. The request provides resourcing to retain the flexibility to support VSO in a very dynamic evolving Unconventional Warfare environment. If the funding for the VSO forces is not provided, U.S. security and stability goals and momentum against ISIS in Syria and the surrounding areas will slow and falter."

- "There will be a loss of credibility and reluctance of opposition forces and neighboring nations to rely on or trust the United States to meet commitments. It is critical to build on the successes that capable and aggressive VSO forces have already demonstrated to counter ISIS. If not countered, ISIS will continue to recruit extremist elements, including foreign fighters, and export terror to peaceful nations outside of Syria, to include the United States."

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