

The Pentagon budgeted \$800 million to rebuild the country's armed forces last spring. But experts worry that without US boots on the ground in next-door Syria, Iraq could be forced to pick up the slack, taking on an expeditionary role fighting IS across the border.

"When you don't have intelligence on the ground and you lose some of the things that are leaving, it will become much more pinpricks from the outside," said Linda Robinson, a senior defense researcher at the RAND Corporation. "It will become a much more difficult fight to prosecute. It's first a question of the wolf at the door and then the wolf across the border."

As Iraq looks to beef up its counterinsurgency operations against IS, and US forces take on more of a training mission, Ambassador Fareed Yasseen said the US troop and equipment presence in Iraq remains to be seen.

"It will certainly mean more American troops if we get American equipment," Yasseen said. "It will probably mean less if we buy European or Russian equipment. The American equipment is pretty expensive, and we're cash-strapped."

The envoy's assessment aligns with incoming US Central Command chief, Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who told Congress in December that [Iraq will not be able to pay](#) to maintain US equipment.

Yasseen said Iraq will likely see an "internationalization of the Western military presence that's there in support of Iraqi military capabilities." That includes a [new NATO training operation](#) led by Canadian Gen. Dany Fortin. The US-led coalition fighting in Iraq told the Pentagon's inspector general last month that training of Iraqi forces "is of a basic nature" and does not fit US definitions of counterinsurgency instruction.

Though the president visited US troops at al-Asad air base in December, he did not meet with Iraqi officials.

"Every minute we try to spend putting the Humpty Dumpty back together again we are reducing our opportunity to solidify Iraq," Robinson said. "We have to look at all of the pieces on the chessboard and make the right decision."

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Michel Chossudovsky

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