

EDITORIAL: 'Mission creep' looms over U.S. presence in Iraq

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By The Bee editorial board



The U.S. must focus on helping Iraqi forces fight insurgents in their country.

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Given the war drums beating louder in some quarters, President Barack Obama had a clear mission to say that U.S. troops will not be fighting in Iraq again.

He did so Thursday, declaring more than once: "American forces will not be returning to combat in Iraq."

While he announced that he is sending as many as 300 military advisers to train and shore up the beleaguered Iraqi army and held out the possibility of targeted strikes, he emphasized that there is no military solution to the chaos, certainly not one led by the U.S.

Sending tens of thousands of troops isn't the answer, he said, especially given the "blood and treasure" that America already has expended.

Instead, as the president said, the best hope for forestalling a civil war is progress toward a unity government in which all the major religious groups in Iraq share power.

While he stressed that it's not up to the U.S. to choose Iraq's leaders, he conspicuously did not give a ringing endorsement to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who justifiably is roundly criticized for favoring his fellow Shiites over the Sunnis and Kurds.

We hope these American advisers are more successful than the ones who trained the Iraqi military before the U.S. withdrew in December 2011. A big chunk of the army — divided by religion and bereft of leadership — collapsed and fled in the face of brutal fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which has ambitions to impose its brand of Sunni Islam on a broad swath of the Middle East.

We can only hope, too, that American soldiers do not get in harm's way. As the president acknowledged, there always is the risk of "mission creep" toward a bigger U.S. military role. Obama and his national security team must stay focused on the limited goal — to help Iraqi forces fight ISIS and to make sure this most extreme of al-Qaida offshoots does not gain a safe haven from which to launch attacks against Americans.

In all the arguing over the right policy in Iraq, the politicians have to remember that whatever grand strategy they come up with, it's brave young men and women who risk their lives. As commander in chief, Obama has to keep that in mind most of all.

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