

NATO says plans underway to expand mission in Iraq



Brussels, April 5 (RHC)-- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says the military alliance has decided to expand its mission in Iraq by training personnel for the Iraqi army and security forces.

Stoltenberg made the announcement in Brussels during a press conference after a meeting of NATO foreign ministers where the alliance's response to the coronavirus outbreak as well as the situation in Iraq were discussed.

“We agreed to expand our mission in Iraq by training non-commissioned officers, mine experts and federal police cadres within the framework of its program,” he said. NATO’s decision comes as the U.S. has deployed new Patriot missile systems to Iraq amid calls for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from the Arab country.

The U.S. deployment of the missile systems last week at the Iraqi bases hosting American troops came apparently as a precaution against possible rocket attacks. A member of the Iraqi parliament's security and defense committee has strongly condemned the move as a breach of the Arab country’s sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-led military has started pulling out of several bases in Iraq, redeploying its forces to other positions in the Arab country. The coalition has already said that the transfer of U.S.-led military forces had nothing to do with the missile attacks against Iraqi bases hosting the coalition forces, or the outbreak of COVID-19 – the disease caused by the highly contagious new coronavirus, in Iraq.

Iraqi lawmakers unanimously approved a bill on January 5, demanding the withdrawal of all foreign military forces led by the United States from the country following the assassination of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Hashd al-Sha'abi, and their companions in a U.S. airstrike authorized by President Donald Trump near Baghdad International Airport two days earlier.

Later on January 9, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, the former Iraqi prime minister, called on the United States to dispatch a delegation to Baghdad tasked with formulating a mechanism for the move. The 78-year-old politician said Iraq rejects any violation of its sovereignty, particularly the U.S. military's violation of Iraqi airspace in the assassination airstrike.

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