

Iraqi nationals raise questions about effects of US airstrikes

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(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

MURFREESBORO – After a vow out of the White House that limited air strikes will continue in Iraq, two local residents born in the war-ravaged country say more Western military intervention may only make things worse.

Nabaz Kadr, a graduate student studying engineering at Middle Tennessee State University who worked for the U.S. military as an interpreter in Iraq, has seen the effects of intervention firsthand, he said.

Kadr said he believes that directed airstrikes, such as the ones used around Mosul Dam in northern Iraq as U.S. citizens and personnel escaped militants, are preferable to large-scale operations.

“It was very limited but very effective,” Kadr said. Kirkuk, the city in which Kadr was born and raised, sits some 115 miles from Mosul Dam, an area rich in power and water where most airstrikes have occurred. His parents are still there, as are his brother and sister.

Northern Iraq is a recent target of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), a militant group that has begun referring to itself simply as the Islamic State. ISIS claims large swaths of Iraq and Syria, where the group is fighting against rebel groups who are opposing President Bashar al-Assad’s authoritarian regime.

The tactics ISIS uses in Iraq are disturbing, Kadr said. The group came under international criticism after people claiming to be with the group beheaded James Foley, an American journalist, on video. The executioner, thought to be a British national, said the killing was a response to U.S. airstrikes and said more hostages would die if they continued.

ISIS is also sometimes referred to as ISIL, which stands for the Islamic State and the Levant, a reference to a larger part of the Middle East including Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Cyprus.

“One thing we can all agree on is that a group like ISIL has no place in the 21st century,” said President Barack Obama Wednesday during a White House press conference. Obama said he would continue to order airstrikes despite ISIS’s demands.

Kadr’s experience working with the military in Iraq makes him reluctant to support sending troops into the nation, as a White House spokesperson reportedly said was a possibility last week. Just seeing soldiers in uniform can push desperate Iraqis across the line from farmer to fighter.

“I think troops would escalate things in this situation,” Kadr said.

The White House has since pledged not to put boots on the ground, but more operations are still a possibility, said Sean Foley, an associate history professor at MTSU who specializes in Middle Eastern and Islamic history. MTSU’s Foley is not related to James Foley.

“Administration officials have yet to specify what the final objectives are of the military operation or if it will be limited to Iraq, nor has the operation been formally named,” Sean Foley said in an email. “While many Iraqis certainly welcome military assistance against ISIS, it is still too early to gauge how they view, or will view, the current U.S. operation.”

One thing is for certain, Foley said: Iraq’s military is not strong enough to repel the militants.

“While it is unlikely that Baghdad or the major cities of southern Iraq will fall under the control of the ISIS, Iraq’s national military and political institutions are too weak and divided to retake the territories on their own now held by ISIS,” Sean Foley said. “The government of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, alienated much of the country’s Sunni Arab minority and politicized Iraq’s security forces.”

The airstrikes have already escalated tension, said Karim Salman, an engineering professor at MTSU with family in Baghdad. The strikes have been criticized for the number of casualties they have caused in Pakistan, and that could incite Iraqis who lose friends and family to take up arms, Salman added.

Cultural tensions also heighten the danger of outside engagement, Salman said. ISIS is predominantly made up of Sunnis, who make up 20 to 30 percent of the population in Iraq, according to the CIA Factbook. The majority of Iraqis are Shia. The two branches of Islam are at odds, a central part of the conflict in Iraq and Syria.

Shia militia that fought against U.S. forces in Iraq have been accused of brutalizing Sunnis, said Salman, a Sunni. This has made the population ripe for radicalization.

"When you have someone who loses their humanity because they have been oppressed, you can't control them," Salman said.

Both men said they agreed ISIS forces have engaged in brutal violence against innocent people, but Salman said it is important to keep in mind that there are other rebel groups fighting in the region that are not affiliated with ISIS.

Kadr also warned about oversimplifying to conflict.

"Not all Sunnis are with ISIS," Kadr said. "Let's not forget that. But they can't speak out against ISIS because that will get them hate from both sides."

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