

By Dan De Luce

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WASHINGTON — US troops will still be in combat and taking on Islamist militants in Iraq even as the American military moves to an "advise and assist" role with a smaller force, officials said Thursday.

The withdrawal of the last US combat brigade on Thursday was hailed as a symbolic moment for the controversial American presence in Iraq, more than seven years since the invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

But while the remaining 50,000 troops will no longer have a formal combat mission after September 1, they will be well-armed and possibly coming under fire as they join in manhunts for Al-Qaeda figures or other extremists.

"I don't think anybody has declared the end of the war as far as I know," Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell told MSNBC.

"Counter-terrorism will still be part of their mission," said Morrell, referring to the fight against militant networks.

The 50,000-strong force will operate in six "advise and assist brigades," taking part in operations at the request of Baghdad authorities and playing a supporting role to Iraqi units.

The US troops "will continue to conduct partnered counter-terrorism operations" in an effort "to help Iraqi security forces maintain pressure on the extremist networks and protect the citizens of Iraq," Major Christopher Perrine told AFP.

The brigades are equipped with robots, unmanned aircraft and dog teams to help track militants and roadside bombs, along with experts in intelligence and logistics, he said.

Recent bombings have underscored the threat still posed by Al-Qaeda and other militants in Iraq, even though the Qaeda network has suffered severe setbacks with the deaths of senior leaders and a shortage of cash.

Al-Qaeda's structure in Iraq remains "pretty much intact," the head of US special operations command, Brigadier General Patrick Higgins, told the Washington Post this month.

Even as the Pentagon draws down the force in Iraq, US special operations command -- which focuses on counter-terrorist operations -- will stay at the same level of 4,500 troops.

Violence has spiked as the US draws down, with a suicide bomb Tuesday at an army recruitment center in Baghdad killing 59 people, the majority of them prospective soldiers, in the bloodiest attack in Iraq this year.

The shift in the US military role has been underway for months, with June 2009 serving as a turning point when Iraqi security forces took the lead in the country's major cities and towns.

"At that point, we were not unilaterally conducting any combat operations anymore," Morrell said.

"So when they have a bad guy they need to go after and they want our assistance doing it, there's a warrant, they ask for our assistance and we go after them together."

He added that US forces will have the right to defend themselves in any situation "should that become necessary."

The US military presence, while dramatically altered, may continue long after the end of 2011, when all American forces are supposed to depart under a security agreement.

Top military leaders in both countries acknowledge Iraq still may need help from the US armed forces after 2011.

"We're obviously open to that discussion," US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said last week. "But that initiative will have to come from the Iraqis."

Iraq's top military officer told AFP last week that American forces may be needed for another decade.

A future accord with Iraq might include continued air patrols with US F-16s, as officials admit Baghdad's air force is a long way from being able to fend off attacks from fighter jets.

To make up for a scaled back US military force, Washington meanwhile plans to rely on large numbers of private security contractors, US officials said Thursday.

The State Department said it will double the number of contractors it employs in Iraq to about 7,000.