

U.S. deploying special operations forces to Syria

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October 30, 2015

As part of a major overhaul of the U.S. government's strategy against the Islamic State group, President Obama on Friday authorized the deployment of "fewer than 50" U.S. special operations troops to northern Syria, where they will work with local forces in the fight against the militants.

The deployment is one part of a five-part plan aimed at changing the direction of operations in Iraq and Syria, as the war against the Islamic State, often known as ISIL or ISIS, enters its second year. It will be accompanied by an increase in the number of airstrikes from both the U.S. and coalition allies.

"We are willing to adjust the program when things are succeeding and we're willing to change things when they are not succeeding," a senior defense official told reporters Friday after the announcement. "We're willing to adjust the program."

The five-point strategy outlined by the official focuses on:

- Assisting the government of Iraq to take back Ramadi, the Baiji oil refinery and setting the conditions for a takeback of Mosul.
- In Syria, enabling new and additional local forces to pressure, take and ultimately hold ISIL's declared stronghold of Raqqa.
- Securing the border between Syria and Turkey to reduce the flow of fighters, materiel and money.
- Degrading ISIL's lines of communication and supply in both Iraq and Syria.
- Reinforcing Jordan and Lebanon to prevent ISIL from gaining a foothold in those two nations.

The most eye-grabbing aspect of the updated strategy is the addition of special operators on the ground, in what is being described as an advisory role.

The decision to send spec-ops troops into Syria, even in an advisory capacity, is a reversal of Obama's statement in an address to the nation in Sept. 10, 2014, when he flatly declared: "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria."

Since then, administration officials consistently have said that all options are being considered in Syria, but already White House spokesman Josh Earnest had to defend the decision to reporters armed with Obama's previous statement.

The official said those forces, which are coming from the U.S., will be in place within a month. Their presence will be re-evaluated after a period of "weeks to months," the official said, but the implication is a U.S. presence on the ground is now a long-term reality.

The special operators will stick to northern Syria, and will not take part in raids as their counterparts in Iraq have, the official said, in part because U.S. forces have not worked as closely with the various Syrian rebel groups and do not have the same kind of relationships with those groups that they have with Iraqi security forces.

The official did leave open the possibility that U.S. forces could do joint raids in the future with Syrian rebel forces, and also reaffirmed that the Pentagon is willing to launch solo raids against high-value ISIL targets in both Syria and Iraq.

First combat death

The news comes the same month as an Oct. 22 raid in Iraq, in which dozens of US special operations forces, along with Kurdish peshmerga fighters, freed nearly 70 hostages who were about to be executed by the group.

Master Sgt. Joshua L. Wheeler, 39, was killed in the raid. He is the first U.S. service member killed by enemy fire in the war against the Islamic State group.

The safety of forces in Syria is the "primary concern" of the Pentagon, the official said, but that situation is complicated by the presence of Russian jets, which have been bombing throughout parts of Syria since arriving in mid September.

The Pentagon has alleged that those jets are targeting non-ISIL forces in an attempt to prop up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, Moscow's ally.

"The area where we're planning on placing this (special operations force) is not an area where they have struck, nor would they need to strike," the U.S. official said of the Russians. "It is not ISIL and it is not regime-controlled. So we do not anticipate any problems. We have not notified, and we do not feel a need to notify them, of their location."

However, if the safety of the special operations troops comes into question, "if that includes potentially talking to the Russians, we're open to it," the official said. "We have not, as of yet, communicated with the Russians and I do not know of a plan to do that."

Earnest declined to say how the U.S. would react if Russian warplanes struck U.S. troops on the ground in Syria, calling that a "hypothetical situation." He said the location where U.S. troops will deploy is not the site of heavy Russian airstrikes so there will be a "low likelihood that they will come into conflict."

The U.S. also will consult with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to create a special operations task force to help target Islamic State leaders and networks, an administration official said.

Air power Increase

In addition to feet on the ground, the Pentagon is aiming to “thicken” the air campaign against ISIL, which so far has cost an average of \$11 million a day since its launch last August.

To that end, the Defense Department has dispatched 12 A-10s from the 75th Fighter Squadron out of Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, and also plans to send a number of F-15s, to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey to replace six F-16s from Aviano Air Base, Italy, that had been flying combat missions against the militants since August.

The A-10s have already deployed; the F-15 deployment is still being finalized, the official said, but will contain “about” a dozen fighters, with a mix of F-15C and F-15E designs.

Assistance also could come from a growing presence of allied nations that could operate out of Incirlik, strategically located near the border with Syria.

“We’re talking to a number of coalition allies, including Arab allies, about potentially locating some assets at Incirlik,” the official said. “At this point, I don’t want to get ahead of any of those nations in terms of announcing any commitments.”

The defense official also denied this was an attempt to create a no-fly zone in the region, a hot topic among members of Congress.

Swift reaction

Reaction in Washington to the decision was rapid, with both analysts and lawmakers questioning whether this is a major step forward in the fight against ISIL or simply a realignment of resources in a stalled fight.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, quickly issued a statement that “a more serious effort against ISIS in Syria is long overdue.”

"Absent a larger coherent strategy, however, these steps may prove to be too little, too late," Thornberry said. "I do not see a strategy for success; rather, it seems the administration is trying to avoid a disaster while the president runs out the clock. "

House Majority Leader Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said Obama's decision to send special operations forces to Syria comes "after years of neglect of our Syria policy and a failed Syrian training program."

"Putting small numbers of troops in Syria is yet another tactical move in the absence of a comprehensive strategy for Iraq, Syria, and the broader Middle East that does nothing more than create the appearance of serious action," McCarthy said in a statement on Friday. "What the President has failed to address is a proper response to increased Russian-Iran cooperation in

Syria, including Russia's willingness to help Iran smuggle weapons to Iran's proxies in the civil war."

Emma Ashford, of the Washington-based CATO Institute, does not believe this small handful of special operators will change much on the ground in real terms.

Symbolically, she said, the long-term presence of boots on the ground represents a commitment from the administration — albeit one with little payout.

“It’s a bit strange that the White House, which has always been adamantly opposed to sending troops to Syria, would make this decision when there is so little to gain from doing so,” Ashford said. “This seems likely to end up being a classic case of unwise mission creep.”

Frederic Hof, a former senior adviser on Syria for the Obama administration who is now with the Atlantic Council, said that in order to destroy the Islamic State, Obama would need a ground combat force large, capable and motivated enough to seize and control significant amounts of territory.

In that context, "deploying a handful of special operations forces to Syria cannot make a decisive difference," Hof said.

Still, these special operators can be of real assistance to local anti-ISIL forces, and they represent "skin in the game" as the U.S. seeks to persuade regional powers to contribute ground combat forces to sweep ISIL from eastern Syria.

"Even as a Band-Aid, it has potential uses," Hof said of the spec-ops deployment.

Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, said the administration was essentially prodded into action by two embarrassments: Russia's advance into the regional power vacuum and scandalous claims that the U.S. Central Command ginned up positive intelligence reports on its progress against the Islamic State.

Friday's announcement looked like "a publicity stunt," Landis said.

He also doubted that a handful of special operations forces could make a difference when there is no alternative to the Assad government "to rule a massive area the size of Great Britain" and "America has no credible partners in the region."