

## Syria decision the latest blow to Obama's Middle East legacy

**The administration's announcement troops would be deployed to fight Isis in Syria leaves officials at a loss to explain how it computes with earlier promises**

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October 30, 2015

The decision to deploy US troops to Syria is seen in Washington as one of profound political consequence – both for the credibility of Barack Obama's presidency and possibly for new peace talks aimed at ending the five-year war – but yet of limited military significance.

Administration officials were left squirming on Friday to explain how sending special forces to work alongside Syrian rebels fighting the Islamic State was compatible with Obama's earlier promises not to “put boots on the ground” in Syria or “engage in combat operations” against Isis.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest claimed there was still a difference of “night and day” compared with the Bush administration's invasions, but in the space of a few short weeks a central promise of Obama's presidential campaign has been undermined: first by conceding that he will not meet his pledge of removing troops from Afghanistan before he leaves office and now by acknowledging a long-term ground presence is necessary not just in Iraq, but Syria too.

Earnest would not say whether the deployments were permanent or would be bolstered, insisting: “I don't want to try to predict the future here.”

Yet arguably that was exactly what Obama claimed he could do when he ran for office promising to bring US troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

When the president first contemplated intervention in Syria two years ago, in an effort to deter President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, Obama went further still, making a clear-cut pledge not to escalate US involvement.

“Many of you have asked, won't this put us on a slippery slope to another war?” said Obama in an address to the nation in September 2013. “My answer is simple: I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan.”

That mission against Assad was ultimately dropped in the face of opposition from Congress, and the White House claims critics are taking the “boots on the ground” quote out of context by using it now.

But similar, if more nuanced, promises were made a year later when Obama announced airstrikes against Isis in Syria and Iraq but claimed the effort would “not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil”.

“These American forces will not have a combat mission,” he said in September 2014. “We will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq.”

The White House insists “combat” is still not a description of what its special forces will be doing in Syria and have done in Iraq.

“These forces do not have a combat mission,” said Earnest this Friday. “In 2003 President Bush launched a large-scale combat operation in Iraq. [This is] a very different mission: to build the capacity of local forces.”

Nonetheless, even the temporary missions and raids being carried out by US special forces in both countries look an awful lot like combat to most observers.

Basing them in Syria until further notice only increases the risk of the US being dragged into fighting not just Isis, but the Syrian government, or even Russian and Iranian forces operating in the country.

Liberal activists were in little doubt that Obama has failed to live up to his commitment to avoid getting dragged directly into the war.

“Putting boots on the ground in Syria is both a broken promise by the president and bad policy,” says Zack Malitz at Credo Action, a progressive campaign group.

“By breaking that promise today, President Obama is putting American lives at risk and drawing the United States further into a conflict that can not be resolved militarily.”

Yet analysts in Washington are also skeptical that such a small number of special forces and extra air power would make a difference to the entrenched conflict in Syria.

“It’s a little strange. All of things that they are announcing today, they are already doing in an ad hoc fashion, apart from the fact that the troops in Syria are going to be long term,” says Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute.

“It’s really hard to see how this tiny number of troops embedded on the ground is going to turn the tide in any way.”

Instead, the deployment looks more like an act of symbolism by the US on the eve of crucial peace talks in Vienna, which are led by secretary of state of John Kerry and joined for the first time by the foreign minister of Iran.

When asked by reporters, Kerry insisted it was a “coincidence” that the bolstered US presence was announced on the same day talks began with Iran.

A skeptical Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov reportedly grinned and joked in response: “We did not plant this question.”

