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Analysts: US Special Forces Operators in Syria Not a Cure

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The Obama administration's decision last week to send "fewer than 50" Special Forces operators into Syria to advise anti-ISIL militant groups is unlikely to have a major impact on that country's civil war, experts warn.

A senior pentagon official told reporters Oct. 30 that those forces, which are coming from the US, 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 US presence on the ground is now a long-term reality.

The SOF operators will stick in northern Syria, and will not take part in raids like their counterparts in Iraq have done, the official said, in part because US forces have not worked as closely with the various Syrian rebel groups and do not have a relationship akin to that with the Iraqi security forces.

The official did leave open the possibility that US 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.

Emma Ashford, of the Washington-based CATO Institute, does not believe this small handful of operators will change much on the ground. Symbolically, she said, the long-term presence of US 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."

To destroy the Islamic State group, the president would need a ground combat force large, capable and motivated enough to seize and control significant amounts of territory -- and "deploying a handful of special operations forces to Syria cannot make a decisive difference," said Frederic Hof, a former senior adviser on Syria for the Obama administration, now with the Atlantic Council.

Yet these special operators can be of real assistance to local anti-ISIL forces, and they represent Washington's "skin in the game" if it tries 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.

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 US Central Command ginned up positive intelligence reports on its progress against the Islamic State.

Friday's announcement looked like "a publicity stunt," Landis said. It is improbable that a handful of special operations forces would make a difference, he said, when there is no alternative to the Assad government "to rule a massive area the size of Great Britain" while "America has no credible partners in the region."