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Officials: US to keep higher level of troops in Afghanistan

By LOLITA C. BALDOR

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The Obama administration is abandoning plans to cut the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to 5,500 by year's end, bowing to military leaders who want to keep more troops, including many into the 2016 fighting season, U.S. officials say.

While no final decision on numbers has been made, the officials said the administration is poised to slow withdrawal plans and probably will allow many of the 9,800 American troops to remain well into next year.

There also are discussions about keeping a steady number of counterterrorism troops into 2015, including options under which some would remain in the country or be nearby beyond 2016.

Currently, about 2,000 U.S. troops are conducting counterterrorism missions, and military leaders have argued that they will need to continue pursuing the remnants of al-Qaida and to monitor Islamic State militants looking to recruit in Afghanistan.

Officials say President Barack Obama probably will use a Washington visit by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani this month as the time to announce his decision on a new withdrawal timeline.

U.S. officials familiar with the debate said it's not clear yet whether the White House will agree to a small, symbolic decrease by the end of this year or insist on a larger cut. They note that there is some stiff opposition to any change, largely from national security adviser Susan Rice.

In recent weeks, Pentagon leaders, including Defense Secretary Ash Carter, have acknowledged the discussions about slowing the pace of troop withdrawal. But they increasingly are confident that the military will get its way and keep a robust force in Afghanistan beyond year's end.

The administration, however, has shown no inclination so far for going beyond 2016; that's a hard line drawn by the president when he announced the withdrawal plan.

The 2016 deadline is considered a politically crucial national security goal for Obama, who promised to get all troops out by the end of his presidency, ending America's longest war.

Obama, who also pledged to end the war in Iraq, has had to send troops back there to help Iraqi forces fight Islamic State militants. So his promise to withdraw troops from Afghanistan has taken on more political importance.

Military leaders want to keep what they consider a "modest" number of troops in Afghanistan longer in order to protect America's investment and provide as much training and advice as possible to Afghan forces. Maintaining a more stable number of troops, military leaders have argued, would allow better support of the Afghans during this summer's fighting season and better prepare them for 2016 battles.

Members of Congress, including Republican Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also have expressed concerns about a sharp drawdown this year. During a hearing last month, McCain said a lack of presence in Afghanistan would create a vacuum and "allow terrorists to foment the same disaster in Afghanistan as we have seen in Iraq — growing instability, terrorist safe havens and direct threats to the United States."

The original plan Obama announced last year would reduce the number of U.S. troops to 5,500 by the end of 2015, and take all but a routine, embassy-based security force out by the end of 2016. The embassy security mission varies widely around the world, but could total 1,000 troops.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly before final decisions have been made.

When Carter was in Kabul for meetings with his military leaders in February, he told reporters that the new thinking on troop levels was fueled by the improving relations between the U.S. and Afghan governments.

The unity government of Ghani and the chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, offers new promise for a more effective partnership with Washington in stabilizing the country, Carter said during the visit. U.S. officials grew impatient with former president, Hamid Karzai, who sometimes publicly criticized the U.S. military and took a dimmer view of partnering with it.

Carter said the new, more hopeful outlook is an important reason for the administration's decision to consider slowing the troop withdrawal.

Ghani and other Afghan leaders have made it clear that they would like as many U.S. troops to remain for as long as possible.