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US: Major Policy Shift in Syria (I)

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At last President Obama has defined his second-term Mideast strategy. The red line has been crossed - the United States is set to deploy troops on the ground in Syria for the first time to advise and assist rebel forces combating ISIS, the White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on October 30.

The U.S. would be deploying «less than 50» Special Operations forces, who will be sent to Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria. The American troops will help local Kurdish and Arab forces fighting ISIS with logistics and are planning to bolster their efforts. The White House insisted this was not a case of mission creep. «The mission has not changed», said Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary. «These forces», he added, «do not have a combat mission».

Even so, the deployment is the most significant escalation of the American military campaign against ISIS to date. The first group of Special Operations forces headed into northern Syria will come from the United States and could be on the ground within the month, according to a senior defense official. Once the troops get there, they will be mainly based at an unofficial headquarters facility where representatives of Syrian Arabs, Kurds and other groups are located. The location was not disclosed due to security concerns. The troops will remain there for anywhere from weeks to months at a time, the official said.

More troops could be sent. These troops are not expected to go into combat, however, they have the right of self-defense and could seek permission if needed to go into the field. There will be additional Special Operations forces available for raids against targets in both Syria and Iraq when high-value ISIS targets are identified. In addition to the Special Operations deployment, Mr. Obama authorized deploying A-10 and F-15 warplanes to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. The A-10s are capable of providing close in-air support to fighters on the ground. The F-15s can carry out a range of air-to-ground combat missions.

The U.S. is also eying the establishment of a Special Forces task force in Iraq to boost U.S. efforts to target ISIS and its leaders, the administration official said. President Barack Obama has authorized enhancing military aid to Jordan and Lebanon to help counter ISIS. The U.S. has also bolstered its aid to local forces, air-dropping weapons, ammunition and other supplies to rebel forces inside Syria. The number of U.S. military forces in Iraq has swelled to more than 3,500 since Obama first announced the deployment of up to 300 American military advisers to Iraq in June 2014.

The Pentagon wants to build a firewall behind forces allied with the United States — both the Kurds and the Syrian-Arab coalition backed by Mr. Obama — to allow these fighters to hold territory they have seized. Part of the way to do that, one Defense Department official said, is to ensure that equipment is delivered and that subsequent supplies will reach these forces quickly.

At the moment, officials said there was no plan to send the American troops beyond a makeshift opposition group headquarters in northern Syria. They will not patrol or travel with opposition groups. Officials, though, also said that could change as the situation warrants.

The affirmation that the soldiers will not engage in combat does not match with what US Defense Chief says. Before this statement US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter had told the Senate Armed Services Committee on October 24 that the Pentagon would be stepping up attacks against ISIS — including through «direct action on the ground» in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary announced that «he U.S. will begin «direct action on the ground» against ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria, aiming to intensify pressure on the militants as progress against them remains elusive. «We won't hold back from supporting capable partners in opportunistic attacks against ISIL, or conducting such missions directly whether by strikes from the air or direct action on the ground», he noted.

How can troops conduct «direct action on the ground» without being engaged in combat is everybody's guess! These are evidently confusing statements. Perhaps, Mr. Carter and Mr. Ernst

know better.

On November 4, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. and its regional allies agreed to increase shipments of weapons and other supplies to help moderate Syrian rebels hold their ground and challenge the intervention of Russia and Iran on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The deliveries from the Central Intelligence Agency, Saudi Arabia and other allied intelligence services deepen the fight between the forces battling in Syria, despite President Barack Obama's public pledge to not let the conflict become a U.S.-Russia proxy war. The WSJ article says that in the past month of intensifying Russian airstrikes, the CIA and its partners have increased the flow of military supplies to rebels in northern Syria, including of U.S.-made TOW antitank missiles, these officials said. Those supplies will continue to increase in coming weeks, replenishing stocks depleted by the regime's expanded military offensive. The director of national intelligence, James Clapper, warned this week that the intervention in Syria today risked becoming for Russia what the intervention in Afghanistan became for the former Soviet Union in the 1980s».I wonder whether he has a strategy for an off-ramp and whether or not he will avoid another Afghanistan quagmire», Mr. Clapper said.

This statement misses out the fact that it's the US, not Russia, who announces the decision to send troops to Syria risking what the Vietnam intervention became for the United States in 1961-1974. It started with sending special operations advisors.

Summing it all up one can clearly see that the U.S. military presence in the region is on the rise. Step by step the country is gradually getting the country embroiled into an open-ended conflict. This is the first time the US has openly sent forces into Syria, expanding the geographic reach of its military operations in the region. With US presence in Iraq maintained and the just taken decision to keep the troops in Afghanistan beyond next year the next President of the United States will inherit at least three military conflicts!