

U.S. ramps up efforts against Islamic State in Syria

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States escalated its fight against the Islamic State in Syria on Friday, pledging the first open deployment of military boots on the ground, even as U.S., Russian and other diplomats pressed a new peace effort that America hopes will hasten the departure of Bashar Assad.

Up to 50 special operations troops will be sent to assist Kurdish and Arab forces in northern Syria, American officials said. The move marks a significant departure for President Barack Obama, who for years has resisted putting ground forces in Syria even as he has gradually intensified the U.S. military response to what counterterrorism officials worry is a

growing Islamic State threat in Syria and Iraq.

The troop announcement came as diplomats in Vienna representing 17 countries and the European Union agreed to launch a broad new peace attempt to gradually end Syria's long civil war — a declaration that avoided any determination on when President Assad might leave. It is not clear how many rebel groups would agree to a plan that doesn't result in Assad's immediate departure.

Any cease-fire agreement that may come as a result of the peace effort would not include the Islamic State, which controls large parts of northern Syria and has its capital there.

But the participation by Russia and Iran in the attempt could mark a new and promising phase in the



Brendan Smialowski/Pool Photo via AP
U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, center, poses for a photo with local police before departing Vienna International Airport Friday in Vienna, Austria.

diplomacy since those countries have staunchly backed Assad.

The White House has long said that Assad's ouster is essential to its ultimate goal of defeating the Islamic State because the Syrian

president's brutal tactics against Sunni rebels have drawn Sunni radicals from all over the world into the militant group's ranks.

The Syrian civil war has killed more than 250,000 people and uprooted more than 11 million, sparking a refugee crisis throughout Europe.

Despite killing as many as 12,000 militants, the U.S. bombing campaign has not significantly weakened the Islamic State's capacity to hold territory, and the group's ranks have been replenished by foreign fighters and others.

Military experts say ground troops are essential for the fight. A U.S. program to train Syrians was abandoned as a failure, and the new deployment essentially would replace that program. Speaking to reporters flying with him on an overseas trip, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said this would probably not be the last significant adjustment to the anti-IS military campaign in Syria and Iraq. Friday's developments

came as missiles slammed into a crowded suburb of the Syrian capital. The attack killed at least 40 people, activists said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Local Coordination Committees group said government forces fired more than 11 missiles at a market in the suburb of Douma.

In Washington, officials said the new U.S. forces will work from headquarters locations and won't move to the front lines or be used to call in airstrikes. However, the U.S. has conducted special operations raids into Syria before now and will continue to do more unilateral raids. It helped Iraqi forces rescue hostages last week, and Master Sgt. Joshua Wheeler was killed, the first U.S. combat death in that country since 2011.

OBAMA: Edmiston in general prefers local control rather than federal oversight

Continued from 1A

agencies have people dedicate time to grant writing, he said, the process is time consuming and can be counterproductive for smaller agencies. He said the process should be simplified so smaller agencies can actually acquire those resources.

Obama also said investments in early childhood education pay off through reduced crime. Edmiston said addressing education and mental health needs would be extremely helpful for police, who must respond to situations that may have been avoidable.

On the topic of gun safety reforms, Edmiston said the president struck a chord with many officers in attendance.

"This was not a room full of people that were just shaking their head and agreeing with everything the president said. Having said that, when he talks about smart ways to try to limit the wrong people from having access to weapons, there was overwhelming applause in the room," he said.

In particular, Edmiston said most in attendance seemed to support Obama's suggestion that military-style assault weapons should not be sold to civilians.

"It's just a simple proposition — cops should not be out-armed by the criminals they're pursuing," Obama said.

Edmiston, however, said he believes the issue is more complex. He said he believes comprehensive reforms are necessary to reduce gun violence, but focusing solely on assault weapons without addressing family, education and mental health issues misses the broader point. He said he appreciated that the president brought up some of these other issues but that he did not believe an assault weapon ban alone would solve the problem.

"Trying to target one issue is almost like putting the entire issue into individual silos, and I think that's where the federal government itself has become ineffective because everybody's got their own little slice of the pie," he said. "I think it leads to additional inefficiencies if you're only focused on one issue."

Obama said the IACP supported a ban on the sale of assault weapons to civilians, as well as his plan to require national criminal background checks for the purchase of firearms.

Edmiston said, in general,



Photo courtesy Jason Edmiston
President Barack Obama greets people after speaking at the 122nd annual International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference Oct. 27 at McCormick Place in Chicago.

"It's just a simple proposition — cops should not be out-armed by the criminals they're pursuing,"
— President Barack Obama

he prefers local control rather than federal oversight because the situations officers face differ between Hermiston and Pendleton — let alone an urban metropolis such as Chicago. He said, however, at another session at the conference, a young police chief was speaking about the need for national use of force standards and Edmiston agreed.

Edmiston admitted, if national standards seem appropriate regarding use of force, they might be for background checks as well — if they were done correctly. The difficulty, he said, is that people lack trust in the government and question the motives of politicians.

Obama mentioned the fact that people think he plans "to take everybody's guns away."

"Nobody is doing that," Obama said. "We're talking about common-sense measures to make sure criminals don't get them; to make sure background checks work; to make sure that we're protecting ourselves."

Edmiston said if people on both sides of the issue come together, he believes steps can be taken to improve gun safety.

"I do think that there needs to be some comprehensive reform, or at least discussion asking the question: Why are these events taking place?" he said. "Is the weapon that is involved a factor? Yes. Is

the mental health status of the individual committing the act a factor? Yes. It is a very broad discussion that will need to take place, and there may need to be some compromise on both sides of the issue to try to find some common ground."

Edmiston, who signed up for the conference for executive training long before it was announced Obama would be there, said it was a "unique, probably once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to shake the hand of a sitting president — and that Obama's hands were quite soft.

Pendleton police chief Stuart Roberts and Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan did not respond to requests for comment about the president's proposals by press time.

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