

Commander of US Central Command makes secret visit to Syria

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Syria: On a secret trip to Syria, the new commander of US forces in the Middle East said he felt a moral obligation to enter a war zone to check on his troops and make his own assessment of progress in organizing local Arab and Kurd fighters for what has been a slow campaign to push the Islamic State group out of Syria.

"I have responsibility for this mission, and I have responsibility for the people that we put here," Army Gen. Joseph Votel said in an interview as dusk fell Saturday on the remote outpost where he had arrived 11 hours earlier. "So it's imperative for me to come and see what they're dealing with" to share the risk they are dealing with."

Votel, who has headed U.S. Central Command for just seven weeks, became the highest-ranking U.S. military officer known to have entered Syria since the U.S. began its campaign to counter the Islamic State group in 2014. The circumstance was exceptional because the U.S. has no combat units in Syria, no diplomatic relations with Syria and for much of the past two years has enveloped much of its Syria military mission in secrecy.

Votel said he brought reporters with him because, "We don't have anything to hide. I don't want people guessing about what we're doing here. The American people should have the right to see what we're doing here."

Votel flew into northern Syria from Iraq, where he had conferred on Friday with U.S. and Iraqi military commanders.

In Syria he met with U.S. military advisers working with Syrian Arab fighters and consulted with leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces, an umbrella group of Kurdish and Arab fighters supported by the U.S.

A small group of reporters accompanied Votel under ground rules that, for security reasons, prohibited disclosing his visit until after he had left Syria. After landing at a remote camp where American military advisers are training Syrian Arab troops in basic soldiering skills, Votel split off from the reporters who flew in with him; he then visited several other undisclosed locations in Syria before returning to the camp.

Syria is a raging war zone, torn by multiple conflicts that have created severe human suffering across much of the country. But on Saturday the U.S. advisers camp that Votel visited was quiet. Situated about 50 miles from the nearest fighting, it was remarkably quiet. The sharpest sound was a month-old puppy's yapping as he ran between visitors' legs. A light breeze nudged several bright-yellow flags of the Syrian Democratic Forces attached to small bushes and atop a post buried in an earthen berm beside a shooting range.

Aides said Votel's flight into Syria was the first made in daylight by U.S. forces, who have about 200 advisers on the ground. Military ground rules for the trip prohibited reporting the kind of aircraft Votel used, the exact location of where he landed and the names and images of the U.S. military advisers, who said they have been operating from the camp since January.

An Associated Press reporter and journalists from two other news organizations were the first Western media to visit the secretive operation.

The last known high-level U.S. official to visit Syria was Brett McGurk, Obama's envoy to the coalition fighting Islamic State militants. He spent two days in Syria in late January, including a tour of Kobani, the small town near the Turkish border where Kurdish fighters backed by U.S. airstrikes had expelled an entrenched group of Islamic State fighters a year earlier.

In the interview, Votel said his visit had hardened his belief that the U.S. is taking the right approach to developing local

forces to fight IS, an acronym for the Islamic State group.

"I left with increased confidence in their capabilities and our ability to support them," he said. "I think that model is working and working well."

The U.S. has struggled to find an effective ground force to take on IS in Syria, where President Barack Obama has ruled out a U.S. ground combat role. This presents a different problem than in Iraq, where the U.S. at least has a government to partner with.

The problem in Syria is complicated by the fractured nature of the opposition to the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The U.S. is trying to develop credible Arab fighters to retake Raqqa, the Islamic State group's self-declared capital, while Syrian Kurds have retaken territory from IS in other parts of northern Syria.

The U.S. is supporting what it calls the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is predominantly comprised of Syrian Kurds, numbering at least 25,000 fighters, with a smaller element of Syrian Arabs, numbering perhaps 5,000 to 6,000. The U.S. is trying to increase the Arab numbers.

Syrian Arab commanders who were made available for interviews at the U.S. camp Saturday said their forces are gaining battlefield momentum but also need a lot more help. They were quick to say the U.S.-led coalition should pitch in more.

Qarhaman Hasan, the deputy commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, said he has given the Americans a list of his most pressing needs. Atop his list: armored vehicles, heavy weapons like machine guns, as well as rocket launchers and mortars.

"We're creating an army," he said through an interpreter, and have had to rely on smuggling to get weapons.

"You can't run an army on smuggling," he said.

Tribal leaders said in interviews that they also want to see the U.S. do more, both militarily and with humanitarian aid.

"America has the capabilities," said Sheik Abu Khalid as he puffed on a cigarette under the shade of pomegranate and pine trees.

Talal Selo, spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces, was especially strong in his criticism of the U.S. for providing too little assistance and for giving the SDF "very useless" support. He said that if this continued, the Syrians opposing the Islamic State group will have to fight for another 50 years.

- AP