

President Trump to ask Pentagon to strike ISIS aggressively in Iraq, Syria

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Washington: US President Donald Trump, who is to make his first visit to the Pentagon as Commander in Chief on Friday, is expected to ask Defense Secretary James N Mattis for ways to accelerate the fight against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria.

Donald Trump walks to board Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House

According to reports, the White House is drafting a presidential directive that calls on the Defense Secretary to devise plans to more aggressively strike the ISIS.

The options probably will include steps the Obama administration considered but never acted on, an official privy to the development said.

Trump's visit to the Defense Department's headquarters will start the conversation over how to fulfill his inauguration address pledge to eradicate radical Islamic terrorism "completely from the face of the Earth".

Among the possible options are sending in more Apache helicopters and giving the US military broader authority to make routine combat decisions, according to current and former US officials familiar with the ongoing discussions.

The officials weren't authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity. As a candidate and now President, Trump has never articulated a detailed plan for defeating IS, and his thoughts on a strategy are murky.

He has railed against the trillions of dollars that America's post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost. But he suggested at one point that he would have "no choice" but to exponentially expand the Obama administration's limited footprint of American forces fighting the militants.

There are about 5,160 U.S. troops in Iraq now, about 100 fewer than the maximum cap. There are no more than 503 in Syria.

In a Republican primary debate last March, Trump raised the prospect of needing 20,000 to 30,000 troops to eradicate the ISIS.

One possible option in Syria is sending an Army brigade to help retake ISIS headquarters of Raqqa, according to the officials. Military planners have discussed that option during previous reviews, and can give it to Trump so he has the widest array of possible changes.

The idea always involved the US handing off authority to a local council or group to govern liberated areas, but military commanders never endorsed or recommended the proposal in the past.

More likely can be new ways to enhance the abilities of the US-backed Syrian Kurds, known as the YPG. They have been the most effective force against ISIS in northern and eastern Syria.

The Pentagon also will like more freedom to make daily decisions in how it fights the enemy. The Obama administration often forced military leaders to seek permission for tactical combat decisions, frustrating commanders.

In Syria, the Obama administration and the Russians backed two opposing sides in the nation's civil war. But that conflict has slowed since Russia helped Syria's government oust rebels from the city of Aleppo. Direct negotiations between the government and rebels took place this week for the first time in years. It's unclear, however, how much Washington and Moscow can cooperate.

- With AP Inputs