

Trump May Send Up To 50,000 Troops To Syria

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It appears that Mike Cernovich, who earlier this week wrote that Trump's national security advisor, Gen. H.R. McMaster, was planning on sending as many as 150,000 troops to Syria, may have been right again. According to [Bloomberg commentator Eli Lake](#), who has now made a habit of confirming Cernovich "conspiracy theories" (he did so [previously with the Susan Rice scoop](#)), Trump may be on the verge of escalating the proxy war in Syria by sending anywhere between 10,000 and 50,000 troops on the ground, and – if Cernovich is indeed correct – as much as three times more.

Per [Lake](#), after U-turning on attacking Syria last week and on a variety of economic policies yesterday, the Donald Trump's "biggest foreign policy surprise may be yet to come." Specifically, he says that McMaster, has been quietly pressing his colleagues to question the underlying assumptions of a draft war plan against the Islamic State that would maintain only a light U.S. ground troop presence in Syria. "McMaster's critics inside the administration say he wants to send tens of thousands of ground troops to the Euphrates River Valley. His supporters insist he is only trying to facilitate a better inter-agency process to develop Trump's new strategy to defeat the self-described caliphate that controls territory in Iraq and Syria."

To be sure, there have been ground troops, typically special forces, in Syria since 2014, when Barack Obama famously flipfopped on his own promise of "no more boots on the ground", first in Iraq and then the broader region. However, the U.S. presence on the ground has been much smaller and quieter than more traditional military campaigns, particularly for Syria. As Lake puts it,

"It's the difference between boots on the ground and slippers on the ground."

Well, the boots are coming, even if that means Trump gets to flip on yet another promise: Trump [told Fox Business](#) this week that that would not be his approach to fighting the Syrian regime:

"We're not going into Syria," he said.

According to Gen. McMaster "we are", and it's only a matter of time.

As Lake explains, McMaster himself has found resistance to a more robust ground troop presence in Syria. In two meetings since the end of February of Trump's national security cabinet, known as the principals' committee, Trump's top advisers have failed to reach

consensus on the Islamic State strategy. The White House and administration officials say Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford and General Joseph Votel, who is in charge of U.S. Central Command, oppose sending more conventional forces into Syria.

An interesting aside: according to a Lake source, Stephen Bannon had “derided” McMaster to his colleagues as trying to start a new Iraq War. Bannon’s opposition to yet another US conflict – one which would have the clear goal of replacing the Assad regime – may explain why the former Breitbart head is on his way out.

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So where in the process is the McMaster “ground war” plan currently? Lake reports that it is still in its early stages.

Because Trump’s national security cabinet has not reached consensus, the Islamic State war plan is now being debated at the policy coordinating committee, the inter-agency group hosted at the State Department of subject matter experts that prepares issues for the principals’ committee and deputies’ committee, after which a question reaches the president’s desk for a decision.

Of course, following the recent cleansing of the NSC as per McMaster himself, which kicked out such skeptics as Bannon, whatever the new national security advisor wants, is what he will get.

And what he wants, based on the preliminary information, is a land war.

Inside the Pentagon, military leaders favor a more robust version of Obama’s strategy against the Islamic State. This has been a combination of airstrikes and special operations forces that train and support local forces... McMaster however is skeptical of this approach. To start, it relies primarily on Syrian Kurdish militias to conquer and hold Arab-majority territory. Jack Keane, a retired four-star Army general who is close to McMaster, acknowledged to me this week that the Kurdish forces have been willing to fight the Islamic State, whereas Arab militias have primarily fought against the Assad regime.

Keane told Lake he favored a plan to begin a military operation along the Euphrates River Valley.

“A better option is to start the operation in the southeast along the Euphrates River Valley, establish a U.S. base of operations, work with our Sunni Arab coalition partners, who have made repeated offers to help us against the regime and also ISIS. We have turned those down during the Obama administration.”

That particular plan would require an initial force of 10,000 troops:

Keane added that U.S. conventional forces would be the anchor of that initial push, which he said would most likely require around 10,000 U.S. conventional forces, with an expectation that Arab allies in the region would provide more troops to the U.S.-led effort.

With time, however, the number will grow dramatically:

White House and administration officials familiar with the current debate tell me there is no consensus on how many troops to send to Syria and Iraq. Two

sources told me one plan would envision sending up to 50,000 troops. Blogger and conspiracy theorist [Mike Cernovich wrote on April 9](#) that McMaster wanted 150,000 ground troops for Syria, but U.S. officials I spoke with said that number was wildly inflated and no such plan has been under consideration.

While McMaster has not disclosed in public whether he supports a ground troop offensive, on [Sunday in an interview](#) with Fox News, McMaster gave some insights into his thinking on the broader strategy against the Islamic State.

“We are conducting very effective operations alongside our partners in Syria and in Iraq to defeat ISIS, to destroy ISIS and reestablish control of that territory, control of those populations, protect those populations, allow refugees to come back, begin reconstruction,” he said.

According to Lake, “that’s significant” as Obama never said the goal of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and Syria was to defeat the Islamic State, let alone to protect the population from the group and begin reconstruction.

Those aims are much closer to the goals of George W. Bush’s surge strategy for Iraq at the end of his second term, under which U.S. conventional forces embedded with the Iraqi army would “clear, hold and build” areas that once belonged to al Qaeda’s franchise.

There is another reason why McMaster is for US ground presence in Syria.

As a young colonel serving in Iraq, he was one of the first military officers to form a successful alliance with local forces, in Tal Afair, to defeat the predecessor to the Islamic State, al Qaeda in Iraq. During the Iraq War, McMaster became one of the closest advisers to David Petraeus, the four-star general who led the counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq that defeated al Qaeda in Iraq — and brought about a temporary, uneasy peace there. That peace unraveled after Obama withdrew all U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. Obama himself never apologized for that decision, even though he had to send special operations forces back to Iraq in the summer of 2014 after the Islamic State captured Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city. He argued that U.S. forces in Iraq would have been caught up inside a civil war had they stayed.

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The cadre of former military advisers to Petraeus took a different view. They argued that America’s abandonment of Iraq gave the Shiite majority there a license to pursue a sectarian agenda that provided a political and military opening for the Islamic State. An active U.S. presence in Iraq would have restrained those sectarian forces. One of those advisers was H.R. McMaster.

What was unsaid in Lake’s piece, is that the real aim of any US ground assault would be to remove the Assad regime and “destabilize” the Middle-Eastern region, something both [Rex Tillerson](#) and [Sean Spicer](#) hinted at over the past week. That, in itself, would be considered a clear act of war, even if there is no formal declaration by Congress. It would also prompt a ground troop response by not only Assad but also Russia.

As Lake concludes,

“it’s now up to Trump to decide whether to test the Petraeus camp’s theory or try to defeat the Islamic State with a light footprint in Syria. Put another way, Trump must decide whether he wants to wage Bush’s war or continue Obama’s.”

The real conclusion, however, is different: it is now up to Goldman to decide whether to advise Trump to risk starting World War III in Syria by sending some 50,000 “boots on the ground” to start, a number which will only grow in direct proportion with the casualties that emerge as this proxy world war enters its final, most destructive phase.

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