



McCain made secret trip to Syria

BY MALLORY SHELBOURNE - 02/22/17 04:45 PM EST

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Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) secretly visited the Kurdish-held region of Syria during a trip to the Middle East last weekend to meet with United States military officials, [The Wall Street Journal reported](#).

A spokeswoman for McCain later confirmed the trip in a statement to The Hill.

“Senator McCain traveled to northern Syria last week to visit U.S. forces deployed there and to discuss the counter-ISIL campaign and ongoing operations to retake Raqqa,” the spokeswoman said, using an alternate acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

“Senator McCain’s visit was a valuable opportunity to assess dynamic conditions on the ground in Syria and Iraq. President Trump has rightly ordered a review of the U.S. strategy and plans to defeat ISIL.”

McCain, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee and was an outspoken critic of the Obama administration’s Syria policy, traveled to the town of Kobane, which sits on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border.

The town in 2014 was under siege by ISIS forces, which were successfully pushed out of the city by the Syrian Kurds, also known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG).

McCain’s trip comes as the U.S. military analyzes various options to oust ISIS from its Syrian stronghold in Raqqa, which it has held since January of 2014.

Earlier this month, [The Washington Post reported](#) that the Obama administration had devised a plan to oust ISIS from Raqqa, which included arming Syrian Kurdish forces. Trump’s administration, when it came into

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power, believed the plan had “huge gaps in it,” according to a senior Trump official who spoke to the newspaper.

The Pentagon on Tuesday said that next week it would send the White House a strategy to defeat ISIS.

“It will address ISIS globally, and it is not just a [Department of Defense] plan,” said Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, the Pentagon spokesman. “We’re charged with leading the development of the plan, but it absolutely calls upon the capabilities of other departments.”

McCain, who supported arming moderate opposition groups in the early days of the Syrian civil war, previously visited Syria in 2013 to meet with members of the Free Syrian Army.

Lawmakers do not travel to Syria often, as the country has been embroiled in a civil war since 2011, with various rebel groups and Islamist groups fighting both the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and each other.

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), who was critical of United States policy to arm moderate opposition groups fighting in the civil war, said last month that she met with Assad during her own secret trip to the war-torn country.

Following his stop in Syria, McCain met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been pushing Trump not to arm the Syrian Kurdish forces. Sources in Erdogan’s circle told Reuters earlier this month that the president in a phone call told Trump not to arm the YPG.

Turkey has been embroiled in a years-long battle with Kurdish groups that it views as terrorists who are seeking independence from the Turkish state.

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