



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 18, 2014

Amid Doubt, House Votes to Arm and Train Syrian Rebels

In a bipartisan display of reluctant cooperation, the U.S. House of Representatives Wednesday voted 273 to 156 to approve President Obama's plan to train and equip allegedly moderate rebels in Syria in an effort to defeat the Islamic State jihadists that have overrun sections of Iraq and beheaded two American journalists.

Though both parties were divided on the issue, the lion's share of support came from Republican members. The GOP leadership backed the measure, with Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) taking the rare step of voting for it. Some of the "Aye" votes were cast by Democrats who opposed the authorization Congress approved 12 years ago for President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq that removed Saddam Hussein from power. Al-Qaeda terrorists moved in to fill that vacuum and after nearly nine years of sectarian fighting during the occupation by U.S. and coalition forces, the al-Qaeda offshoot, called alternately the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), has emerged to challenge government forces in both Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State has been called too extreme even for al-Qaeda, which has disavowed the organization.



Rep. Steve Israel of New York, who is chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and a close congressional ally of the president, voted for the authorization Wednesday, but said it needs to be revisited in the fall with language added to ensure that U.S. involvement in the region does not come to resemble the fighting in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 when U.S. forces were engaged in some of the deadliest and most costly battles of the nearly decade-long war that began in 2003 as "Operation Iraqi Freedom." Arming and training the Syrian fighters, which the president has estimated will cost \$500 million, was approved as an amendment to an overall spending bill to keep the government operating through the end of December.

"The one thing I know is that ISIL is a fundamental threat and it needs to be addressed," said Israel, who was part of the minority that opposed authorizing the Iraq invasion.

"It's the best choice of worse options," said James Moran, a Virginia Democrat who was also among those opposing the Iraq War under President Bush. "It's because there are no better alternatives and I



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don't think it's responsible to do nothing." South Dakota Republican Kristi Noem voted for authorization Wednesday, but said beforehand, "I'm not convinced this is the silver bullet. I think this is going to be a longer, more drawn-out process."

"We should have our eyes open wide enough to know we are being asked to do something more today than train 3- to 5,000 fighters in the Free Syrian Army," insisted Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) who voted against the measure. "We are not facing a limited engagement but a new war."

Obama has not asked Congress for approval to carry out the bombing missions U.S. air forces are involved in against the terrorists in Iraq and said in his address to the nation last week he will not hesitate to extend the air strikes into Syria if that is necessary to succeed in the mission, which he described as one to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL. The president has said he has the authority he needs to continue the U.S. air war, coordinated with the ground forces of the Iraqi government and those of other nations being asked to join a coalition of forces to defeat ISIL. White House officials have told reporters that the president is acting to protect Americans in his constitutional role as commander-in-chief of the nation's defense forces and has authority under the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress in 2001, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the AUMF passed the following year for the invasion of Iraq.

Those claims stretch the president's constitutional authority, however. Though the the president is the commander-in-chief, this power, as Alexander Hamilton explained in *The Federalist*, No. 69, amounts "to nothing more than the supreme command and direction of the military and naval forces, as first General and admiral of the Confederacy." On the other hand, "the declaring of war" and "the raising and regulating of fleets and armies," Hamilton continued, are powers that, "by the Constitution under consideration, appertain to the legislature."

Obama acknowledged in his September 10 address that there was no evidence of an ISIL plot against the U.S. homeland. The AUMF approved by Congress in 2001 authorized action against those allegedly responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and the U.S. military mission in Iraq ended at the end of 2011. Ironically, it was Obama who said he would be asking Congress to repeal the AUMF in a May 2013 address at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. The nation, the president said at that time, needs to "determine how we can continue to fight terrorism without keeping America on a perpetual wartime footing." He looked forward then to engaging Congress and the American people in efforts to refine, and ultimately repeal, the AUMF's mandate. And I will not sign laws designed to expand this mandate further."

Yet some Republicans appear ready to expand the mandate for him. In an [interview](#) with the *Washington Post* this week, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.) said the idea of drafting a new authorization for military action "has come up a lot," including "if more should be done, should it be authorized by Congress even if the president isn't asking for it?"

Many of the Republicans are worried that Obama's plans are "too limited," the *Post* reported, and might consider giving the president blanket military authority when the issue comes up again in a broader debate after the November elections.

On Tuesday, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee he would recommend sending U.S. ground forces into Iraq again if the U.S. air campaign, coordinated with ground forces of Iraq and other nations in the region is unsuccessful in defeating the militants. But in Florida Wednesday, Obama repeated his pledge that no U.S. combat units would again



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be sent to Iraq.

“One thing we have learned over the last decade is that America can make a decisive difference,” Obama said in a speech to troops at MacDill Air Force Base outside Tampa. “But American forces in Iraq will not have a combat mission. They will support Iraqi forces on the ground as they fight for their own country.”

The Senate is expected to vote Thursday on the latest plan for arming and training Syrian rebels to fight against ISIL forces, but many in the upper chamber also have their doubts about it.

“We have been at war in that part of that world for the past 13 years,” said West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin. “If money and military might could have made a difference, it would have by now.” Bob Corker of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, co-authored an earlier bill to help train and arm rebels in Syria, but noted that was for the fight against the Assad regime the rebels are trying to overthrow. The United States has for several years called for Bashar al-Assad to step down as the nation’s ruler to make way for a new government. Corker said the rebels the U.S. is aiding remain focused on fighting the Syrian government forces rather than ISIL.

“There’s a major disconnect,” the Tennessee Republican said.

The Assad government has offered to cooperate with U.S. and coalition forces in battling ISIS, but warned against unilateral U.S. air strikes. “Any strike which is not coordinated with the government will be considered as aggression,” Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said.

Some both within and outside Congress have argued that if the United States had armed the Syrian rebels sooner they would now be in a better position to take on the Islamic State. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has made that argument repeatedly and it has also been stated by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. But while she was still in office, Clinton [spoke in a 2012 interview](#) of the difficulties involved in arming the Syrian rebels:

First of all, we really don’t know who it is that would be armed. This is not Libya, where you had a base of operations in Benghazi, where you have people who were representing the entire opposition to Libya. You could get your arms around what it is you were being asked to do and with whom. We don’t have any clarity on that.

Yet in Libya rebels armed by the United States and aided by U.S. and NATO air strikes turned against the United States, attacking with heavy weaponry a U.S. outpost in Benghazi and killing the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans on September 11 and 12, 2012. Since then jihadists linked with al-Qaeda have spread their terror through Libya, with many going to Syria to join rebel forces there. So what is likely to happen to U.S. arms and equipment sent to Syria where there is less “clarity” and where a number of “moderate” rebels have already [defected to ISIL?](#)

In a televised interview with *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman last month, Obama himself dismissed as “fantasy” the idea of arming the Free Syrian Army against Assad, [saying](#):

It’s always been a fantasy, this idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists, and so forth, that that they were going to be able to battle a well-armed state, but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle hardened Hezbollah. That was never in the cards.

“Now Obama wants Congress to appropriate \$500 million to train and arm those doctors and



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pharmacists and send them into battle against an army of jihadist terrorists who just bit off one-third of Iraq,” wrote Pat Buchanan in a recent column. In an interview aired on *CBS News* Wednesday evening, Robert Gates, who served as defense secretary under both Presidents Bush and Obama, said he doubts U.S. ground forces will be kept out of Iraq as Obama has pledged.

The reality is, they’re not gonna be able to be successful against ISIS strictly from the air, or strictly depending on the Iraqi forces, or the Peshmerga, or the Sunni tribes acting on their own. So there will be boots on the ground if there’s to be any hope of success in the strategy.

If Gates is right — and Joint Chiefs Chairman Dempsey seems to think he might well be — then U.S. troops, including many who have endured and survived four or five deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, will be caught up in fighting and pursuing ISIL to, in Vice President Biden’s words, “the gates of hell.”

And beyond.

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