



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 19, 2014

## Senate Votes to Arm Syrian Rebels; Paul Rips War Enablers

The sound and fury in Thursday's Senate debate signified grave doubts, but it ended in a lopsided 78-22 vote in favor of President Obama's plan to arm Syrian rebels for the fight against Islamic State terrorists. The House approved the plan by a 273-156 vote on Wednesday, and the measure, part of a trillion-dollar spending plan to keep the federal government operating through the end of the calendar year, is now on its way to the White House for the president's signature.



Like the House vote, the Senate approval did not follow strict party lines, as the “nay” votes came from nine Democrats and 12 Republicans. Independent Bernie Sanders of Vermont also voted against the measure. Four Senators viewed as potential 2016 presidential candidates were opposed, including Sanders, Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Republicans Rand Paul of Kentucky and Ted Cruz of Texas.

“I think it's inexcusable that the debate of whether we get involved in another country's civil war — that we would vote on this in a spending bill,” said Paul.

“This issue with what's going on in Syria should be a separate issue, should be debated separately,” said Senator Mark Begich (D-Alaska), who is up for reelection this year. “I do not support the arming of rebels in Syria,” he said.

Senator Mark Rubio of Florida, another potential GOP presidential hopeful, argued in support of the bill. “What happens in Syria is in our national interests,” Rubio said. “If we fail to approve this, the nations of that region will say America is not truly engaged.”

While opponents expressed concern that much of the weaponry might end up in the hands of the Islamic State that President Obama has pledged to “degrade and ultimately destroy,” some supporters of the measure acknowledged as much. Republican Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, voted for arming and training the rebels, though his comments in a Friday morning interview on MSNBC, indicated some of the aid might find its way to the terrorists known as the Islamic State of Iran and Syria.

“I would guess you're going to have to assume that some of those folks that we train will ultimately ... be flipped to another group — maybe ISIS or maybe somebody else,” Chambliss said. “It's the only option, very honestly,” he insisted. “I was a supporter of it, but I have to say, I'm a very cautiously optimistic supporter.”

Other senators were considerably more cautious than optimistic about the growing involvement of the United States in Middle East wars. Sanders, an independent considering a run for president as a Democrat, wondered why Saudi Arabia's military can't take on more of the burden. “What ISIS would like to see is this being portrayed as a war of the United States of America vs. the Mideast, Christians



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vs. Muslims. And that would be a disaster,” the Vermont senator said. “What we need is a real coalition led by Muslim countries, Sunni and Shiite, to step up to the plate and not expect that the United States and our taxpayers and our soldiers are going to do their work for them.”

Obama has pledged repeatedly that U.S. combat units will not be sent into the battle, and Secretary of State John Kerry has been visiting nations in the region and seeking their commitment of military forces to the campaign. The administration has been pounding Islamic State targets in Iraq with air strikes and the president said military advisors among the roughly 1,600 U.S. troops committed to Iraq will be in a support and advisory role to help Iraqi security forces fight in defense of their own country. The president repeated that pledge on Wednesday after Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he would recommend sending in U.S. ground troops if air strikes and regional ground forces are unable to defeat the Islamic State.

On Wednesday evening, Robert Gates, who served both Obama and president George W. Bush as secretary of defense, said in an interview with CBS News that U.S. ground forces would be necessary if the mission is to succeed in defeating the Islamic State. “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,” Gates said. “So there will be [U.S.] boots on the ground if there’s to be any hope of success in the strategy.”

Senator Paul disappointed some supporters of his oft-stated policy of non-intervention in foreign wars when he said recently that if he were president, he would “seek congressional authorization to destroy ISIS militarily.” While the Constitution gives exclusive authority to Congress to declare war if military action is to be initiated in a foreign land, President Obama has said he does not need congressional authorization for the military campaign he has outlined, and Congress has made it clear that any vote on authorization would have to wait until after the November elections. “Mr. President, what you’re doing is illegal and unconstitutional,” said Paul, who also chided his colleagues for avoiding a vote on war with ISIS.

“We hear: ‘We’ll do something in December.’ What happens between now and December? An election,” Paul said during the Senate debate. “The people of this body are petrified not of ISIS, but of the American voter.” Without mentioning names, the Kentucky Republican ripped supporters of the plan to arm Syrian rebels. “These barnacled enablers have never met a war they didn’t like,” Paul said, arguing that the distinction between radical and moderate Syrian rebels is unclear and the non-ISIS rebels are also hostile toward Israel. “Mark my words, if these people get a chance they will attack Israel next,” Paul predicted.

Michael Czin, press secretary for the Democratic National Committee, issued a statement criticizing Paul for what he called the senator’s wish to “retreat from the global community”: “It’s intellectually dishonest for Rand Paul to attack others for their specific proposals while Paul changes his position seemingly by the hour,” Czin said.

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