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Syria Debate Splinters GOP Though Bipartisan Resolution Remains the Goal

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While the Senate Foreign Relations Committee could get down to drafting a new bipartisan resolution on Syria on Wednesday, the House will kick off its own debate on whether to authorize military force amid clear divisions between Republican leaders and conservative activists.

During the opening round of the Senate panel's debate on Tuesday, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez, D-N.J., said he was working with ranking member Bob Corker, R-Tenn., on the text of a bipartisan resolution and that the committee could consider it as soon as Wednesday during a closed meeting with the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Menendez did not give details of what would be changed from the resolution sent to Congress by the White House, but he said it would provide the "maximum ability" for the administration to meet the goals it hopes to achieve in Syria while preventing an "open-ended engagement" or the use of American troops on the ground.

On the House side, even as Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., said they will vote to authorize a limited strike, a Boehner spokesman emphasized there remains a tough "uphill battle to pass a resolution" and underscored that the speaker expects the White House—not his leadership team—to lead the whipping effort for votes.

The mixed message came as influential conservative policy organizations were seeking to convince rank-and-file lawmakers to oppose President Obama's request for a military strike. One group, Heritage Action—the political arm of the Heritage Foundation—directly rebuffed Boehner and Cantor, arguing that a vital U.S. interest is not at stake in Syria. Declining to say whether the group would score lawmakers on the Syria resolution, Heritage Action spokesman Dan Holler argued that Congress faces more pressing domestic issues like the farm bill and the debt ceiling.

The continued reluctance, skepticism, or opposition of various segments of lawmakers was fully on display at Tuesday's Senate hearing as Secretary of State John Kerry, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey made the administration's case for retaliating against Syrian leaders for using chemical weapons in a brutal civil war. For now, it appears too early to predict the outcome of any vote, which could come next week.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who has said he thinks it would be a mistake to get involved in Syria, made his skepticism clear in questioning Kerry. Paul asked, if Congress votes down the war resolution—

though he said he didn't believe that will happen—would the administration not go forward with an action in Syria? "You're making a joke of us" if this is not real, Paul said.

Kerry responded that he doesn't know what the president's decision would be, that he intends to win this vote, but that he still would have constitutional authority to take action if he does not. "I don't believe he does," Paul responded.

Asked after the hearing if there would be a filibuster, Paul answered affirmatively, saying he believed 60 votes would be required to consider the resolution in the Senate. But pressed on whether he would filibuster on his own, as he did for 13 hours earlier this year on Obama's nominee for intelligence director, Paul cracked that he would have to check his shoes and decide if he could hold out that long without a bathroom break.

A number of liberal Democrats are openly advocating intervention, some on humanitarian grounds. Sens. Barbara Boxer of California and Ben Cardin of Maryland are among those who have joined with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., in saying they support a limited operation.

"I know there is tremendous reluctance to not get involved in another military action," Boxer said. "I will support this target effort, but not a blank check." Cardin said: "It's clear we have to respond, and a military response is justified."

Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., asked Kerry whether it would be wise for the United States to wait for analysis and data from the United Nations inspectors "to ensure a signal sent to international community as to the veracity." Kerry responded that it could take two to four weeks for the U.N. to finish its analysis, and that there is already a sufficient level of confirmation that a chemical attack took place. Kerry also said the U.N. mandate will only allow the inspectors to say a chemical weapons attack did take place: "They have no mandate to assign blame, who did it."

Sen. Christopher Coons, D-Del., told Kerry there is a "weariness of war" among his constituents, who worry that the United States could be drawn into a civil war "that we don't quite understand." But Coons added that after reviewing classified information provided to lawmakers Tuesday morning, he believes there has been a clear violation of a longstanding global standard of behavior, and "that we face a real risk here if we do not act."

Coons says he still ponders how exactly a war resolution should be written, though. And Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, D-Ill., expressed similar sentiments, telling Kerry he hoped the White House would cooperate in drafting resolution language, in bipartisan fashion, "that does not expand authorization beyond what is necessary."

Some foreign policy hawks in the Republican Party are also calling for the use of military force; some even say the goal should be to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. And they even seem irritated by the delay.

"If we reject this resolution, doesn't this send a seriously bad message ... encourage our enemies and discourage our friends?" asked Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., during the hearing. McCain also told Kerry that it's "ridiculous" to think that when you tell the enemy beforehand you're going to attack them that they are not going to disperse and move assets and make it harder.

In his own remarks Tuesday, Obama again stressed to reporters that the military action he envisions is based on the "high confidence" that Assad's regime used chemical weapons in an attack against his own people last month and that the U.S. action would be a "limited, proportional step." Obama added that he was confident that Congress will authorize action, "so long as we are accomplishing what needs to be accomplished—which is to send a clear message to Assad degrading his capabilities to use chemical weapons."

"This is not the time for armchair isolationism," Kerry said during the hearing, which was interrupted briefly by some mild protests, including by one demonstrator who shouted out that no one wants war as Capitol Police carried her out of the room.

Asked whether the cost of an operation in Syria contributed to the group's opposition, Heritage Action's Holler said it was one factor, but not the principal one. A mission in Syria could be used to roll back spending caps agreed to under the Budget Control Act of 2011, Holler said.

That did not sit well with all Republicans, though.

"It's pretty striking that Heritage has decided to go full libertarian under [Heritage Foundation President Jim] DeMint and abandon four decades of leading the Reagan 'peace-through-strength' caucus," a senior GOP aide said.

The libertarian Cato Institute also published papers critical of an attack on the Syrian regime, arguing that getting involved in Syria would "ensnare Americans in a completely unnecessary conflict."

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at Cato, pointed out that Boehner spent eight years of his congressional career under President George W. Bush, whose interventionist policies led to war in Iraq. Taking an aggressive stance on Syria, then, fits with that foreign policy point of view, Bandow argued.

Roughly four informal divisions exist in the House GOP conference, Bandow said. There is a small corps of members who will align themselves with Boehner and Cantor; there are hawks, like Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., who will support the strike; and there are libertarians, like Rep. Justin Amash, R-Mich., who will oppose the measure on philosophical grounds. But the largest contingent, Bandow argues, is a pragmatic group of members who two years ago were privately skeptical about Afghanistan but remained publicly supportive of the war.

"It's hard to predict," Bandow said. "The question is, 'To what extent can they be convinced that you can be half-pregnant in this case?'"

Boehner and Cantor both made their support known after they joined other lawmakers in a meeting with Obama and Vice President Joe Biden at the White House. Other lawmakers at the meeting included Pelosi, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and a number of committee leaders from both parties.

Boehner told reporters at the White House after the meeting, "Only the United States has the capability and the capacity to stop Assad and to warn others around the world that this type of behavior is not going to be tolerated."

"I appreciate the president reaching out to me and my colleagues in the Congress over the last couple of weeks. I also appreciate the president asking the Congress to support him in this action," Boehner said. "This is something that the United States, as a country, needs to do. I'm going to support the president's call for action. I believe that my colleagues should support this call for action.

Later, Boehner put the responsibility for drumming up support for the authorization resolution on the president. "Everyone understands that it is an uphill battle to pass a resolution, and the speaker expects the White House to provide answers to members' questions and take the lead on any whipping effort," Boehner spokesman Michael Steel said.

Cantor announced in a statement, "I intend to vote to provide the president of the United States the option to use military force in Syria."

"While the authorizing language will likely change, the underlying reality will not," Cantor said. "America has a compelling national security interest to prevent and respond to the use of weapons of mass destruction, especially by a terrorist state such as Syria, and to prevent further instability in a region of vital interest to the United States."

Pelosi, who already has backed military action—and has even said she does not believe congressional authorization was necessary—told reporters outside the White House that she believes rank-and-file lawmakers will follow their leaders in support "based on the evidence, the intelligence, the national interest that is at stake."

For his part, McConnell said the public would benefit from more information about the president's plans. Whether McConnell will take the same tack as Boehner remains unclear.

"You likely won't see the same swift push by Senate leaders as you saw today in the House," said a Senate GOP aide.

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