



Why the Islamic State war authorization might be dead

By Susan Ferrechio

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With Congress focused on how to respond to the troubled talks over a nuclear deal with Iran, lawmakers have all but stopped talking about a measure to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State.

Nearly two months after President Obama sent Congress a formal request to proceed with military airstrikes and troop training in Iran and Syria, there has been no action on Capitol Hill and nothing is planned for when lawmakers return in mid-April.

Some lawmakers had been clamoring for the House and Senate to debate such a measure, arguing that Obama is overstepping his authority to conduct what many believe is an all-out war against the Islamic State terrorists.

But the divide between Republicans and Democrats over the size and scope of an authorizing bill has prevented lawmakers from either approving Obama's request or making changes to it.

"I don't think they are giving up yet, but I wouldn't be shocked if it just languishes," said Ben Friedman, a defense and homeland security expert at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Republican aides confirm that there is little interest among GOP leaders and relevant committee chairs in taking up a measure that could divide the Congress and have little chance of passing. Taking such a path could discourage the U.S. military and send a signal of American disunity to the Islamic terrorists, aides said.

"No movement," a House GOP aide told the *Washington Examiner* on Tuesday, when asked about the measure.

The divide between Republicans and Democrats on an authorization is significant.

No Democrat has formally lined up behind Obama's Feb. 11 request, with many demanding additional limitations on ground troops. Republicans, meanwhile, believe Obama's war authorization request — which puts a three-year cap on war powers and prohibits "enduring offensive ground combat operations" — is too restrictive and would place limits on our military that would make it difficult to defeat the terrorists.

Obama's request does not include permission to initiate a large-scale offensive with ground troops — though it does seek permission to conduct limited ground combat operations, including the use of special forces.

"We don't know of a single Democrat in Congress ... that supports that authorization for the use of military force," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, R-Tenn., said to Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey at a March hearing. "On the other hand, the authorization for the use of military force that has been sent up is one that is limited in some ways, both in duration and relative to the activities that the commander in chief, through you, can carry out."

Democratic and Republican aides cite a lack of interest from the Obama administration as another strong factor working against the authorization.

"I haven't seen a lot of engagement on this issue from the White House and I just don't feel the inertia to get this done," a Democratic aide told the *Washington Examiner*.

Some Republican objections to Obama's authorization request stem from the plan's silence on Syria's government.

Prominent players in the debate, including Corker and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, R-Ariz., say there is little interest in authorizing U.S. military forces to train troops that will ultimately be attacked by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Obama's plan limits U.S. military force to Islamic State-brand groups. That excludes Assad, who is struggling to hold on to power against a large number of Sunni groups, of which the Islamic State is the most powerful.

"Bashar al-Assad has butchered 200,000 people," McCain told the *Washington Examiner* recently, "and we are supposed to have a resolution that exempts him?"

Inaction from Congress essentially endorses ongoing U.S. military involvement in the region. The United States since August has been leading a coalition of countries in bombing strikes against Islamic State terrorists.

Several thousand U.S. troops have been deployed to the region, mostly to train Iraqi military.

Obama administration officials said they are operating under the 2001 Congressional authorization for military force in Afghanistan.

Lawmakers could still act, said Kate Martin, director of the Center for National Security Studies.

"Congress tries to duck these votes," Martin told the *Examiner*. "But sometimes what happens is some members decide it's the wrong thing to do and they insist on Congress actually stepping up to the plate. It's hard to know what is going to happen."

The push could come from Democrats, who have been among the most vocal opponents of the current use of force, which they feel is not sufficiently authorized by the 2001 agreement.

"If we do not act to authorize it, I think from a legal and precedential standpoint, it would be somewhat catastrophic," Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said at the March hearing.