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Rand Paul's Mystery Iraq Stance

His GOP colleagues are pushing for air strikes, but the Kentucky senator has been dodging the issue. Why the 2016 hopeful has little to gain from publicly supporting an intervention.

By Tim Mak
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If Rand Paul were commander in chief today, what would he do about the Iraq? The Kentucky senator's foreign policy on the rapidly deteriorating country is still up in the air, and he doesn't seem eager to illuminate his thinking for the press.

Asked by reporters Tuesday morning whether he supported launching U.S. air strikes in Iraq, Paul said he had to get to the Senate floor to vote. Pressed on the issue Tuesday evening, he said, "We'll talk to you over time, but I'm not going to make any statement on this."

"He's trying to be very thoughtful on this," a Paul aide explained to The Daily Beast. "There are no easy solutions."

In recent days the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), a group disavowed by al Qaeda, has captured key cities in north and western Iraq, threatening the stability of the government in Baghdad and prompting the White House to consider military action.

While hawkish Republicans have pushed President Obama to launch air strikes, Paul has dodged the issue. Instead, the likely 2016 presidential candidate seems more concerned that the president get congressional authorization for any future military action.

Steering clear of the foreign policy specifics has allowed him to focus on executive power, a bread-and-butter issue for the libertarian-leaning senator.

"If the president thinks our military is needed in Iraq, he should come back to Congress and have a full debate and vote," Doug Stafford, a senior adviser to Paul, told The Daily Beast. "President Obama declared this war over and asked for the AUMF [Authorization for Use of Military Force] to end. Senator Paul agreed with that."

Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and a longtime observer of Paul's foreign policy views, said the senator has nothing to gain from supporting further American military intervention in Iraq.

"It's quite clear that there is no public sentiment in favor of deeper U.S. involvement, and so there's no particular reason for Rand Paul to make that case, even if that were his

inclination...Politically, it wouldn't benefit him," Preble said. "[Paul] appreciates that our attempts to build foreign countries like Iraq or Afghanistan...have been extremely costly, and they haven't delivered clear benefits to the United States. So I think his inclination is to avoid these kinds of conflicts as much as possible."

As the president mulls the possibility of air strikes, Paul's GOP Senate colleagues have generally agreed that further congressional authorization is unnecessary.

"I think [Obama] has authority to do it," New Hampshire Sen. Kelly Ayotte said Tuesday. Added South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham: "The president has plenty of authority to use air power. I just wish he would use some power."

The Obama administration could rely on a number of legal authorities as a basis for air strikes in Iraq, including the Authorization for the Use of Military Force that was the basis of the 2003 Iraq invasion or the AUMF directed against al Qaeda and related militant groups. But the invasion is over, Saddam Hussein is long gone, and the new threat in Iraq is ISIS.

Paul has dropped hints here and there about his Iraq stance. He told the *Des Moines Register* this month that he didn't oppose helping arm the Iraqi military and said he "would not rule out air strikes." In a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing last week, he said he was "not very excited about" the prospect of sending military service members back into Iraq.

But he stopped short of endorsing military intervention in Iraq or ruling it out, and his on-the-fence position hasn't been clarified.

Boarding a senators-only elevator Tuesday morning with fellow Republican Sen. John McCain, a hawk well known for his foreign policy views, Paul joked that he should just tell reporters he believes "whatever McCain says."

Unlike McCain, however, Paul's foreign policy thinking can be characterized as one of restraint. The framework for his views has been outlined in two speeches, one at the Heritage Foundation last February and a second last November at The Citadel, a military college.

"We owe it to you to follow our Constitution and for Congress to debate and authorize all wars," Paul said at The Citadel, explaining that his worldview is based on the "need to prevent conflicts, unless they are absolutely necessary."

"What the United States needs is a foreign policy that finds that middle path, a policy that is not rash or reckless," Paul told the Heritage Foundation audience. "A foreign policy that is reluctant, restrained by constitutional checks and balances but does not appease...A foreign policy that recognizes the danger of bombing countries on the pretext of what they might someday do."