



Push against Islamic State blurs spending message

By [Brian Hughes](#)

September 12, 2014

[President Obama](#)'s open-ended campaign to “hunt down” the [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria](#) “wherever they are” complicates a key part of his agenda: reducing the nation's [spending on military operations](#).

Both as a presidential candidate and commander in chief, the president has repeatedly argued that the nation is devoting too many resources to overseas operations, money that would be better spent domestically.

In going after the Islamic State, however, the president has abandoned talk of limiting such investments in favor of asking [lawmakers](#) for [what critics call a blank check](#) to fight counterterrorism battles.

“What we are seeing is a pretty significant change in the grand strategy of the Obama administration. When they came into power, the way they understood problems was through economic crisis and military overextension,” said Christopher Chivvis, of the nonpartisan RAND Corp.

“The question is how much much money it will cost,” Chivvis added. “Realistically speaking, the demands of the U.S. and allied militaries are growing in areas in the world where we were not expecting them to.”

That type of expansive military role is about the last thing the president wanted heading into his final two years in office. In his budget for the next fiscal year, Obama called for reducing the [U.S. Army](#) to its lowest level since before World War II.

Obama has mocked what he sees as a [GOP](#) obsession with building up a military to fight old battles.

“You mentioned the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916,” Obama told Republican challenger Mitt Romney [in a 2012 presidential debate](#) on foreign policy. “Well, governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military has changed. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines. And so the question is not a game of Battleship where we’re counting ships; it’s what are our capabilities.”

The president has also built the savings of winding down the wars in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#) into his annual budgets, a method critics have called an accounting “gimmick” but one the president says indicates a dramatic shift in U.S. priorities. That administrative practice will go unchanged.

But the [White House](#) is now trying to draw a clear distinction between the strikes against the Islamic State and extended ground wars like Iraq or Afghanistan.

For example, the Pentagon recently estimated that airstrikes in Iraq [cost taxpayers roughly \\$7.5 million](#) a day. In 2007, at the height of the Iraq War, the federal government was spending \$720 million a day in Iraq.

The White House is arguing that it already has many of the resources needed to expand bombings in Iraq and Syria without significant financial support from Congress.

Senior administration officials this week re-floated a \$5 billion counterterrorism fund that got little support on Capitol Hill when it was first unveiled in May. Congressional aides, though, say it's unclear exactly how much funding the administration needs to fight the Islamic State or whether they would eventually come back and ask for more money.

“We totally get that they might need flexibility,” said one senior House GOP aide. “But there's still a great deal of confusion about exactly where this money is going. And I'm not sure [the White House] even knows.”

The challenge for the White House — and crucial for Obama's political image — is not only keeping the cost of the Islamic State campaign in check, but convincing the American public there's an endgame.

“Obama laid out a strategy that doesn't sound particularly limited to me,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “I do think there's a bit of a disconnect between what he's saying he's going to do and what he's willing to do. This operation does not have to be expensive.”