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## Syria military action could lower temperature in U.S. budget battles

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By [Caren Bohan](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Possible U.S. military strikes against Syria could cool the temperature of Washington's autumn budget debates, perhaps lessening the odds of a shutdown of the federal government or a default on the country's debt. Americans are already fed up with partisan fights, according to polls, and their impatience with Congress is likely to grow if U.S. forces are engaged in military operations, particularly if they last more than a few weeks.

That could give Republicans and Democrats alike second thoughts - at least temporarily - about engaging in another bout of brinkmanship, especially one that threatens the government's fiscal stability.

Syria "could change the calculus" of the budget disputes, said Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute and a former Capitol Hill aide.

A senior Capitol Hill Republican aide said Syria's impact on the budget fights was "a wild card."

"I don't expect it to have an impact on the final outcome of the debt limit fight, but it might at least change the tenor of debate," he said.

"If we have U.S. military action in Syria, our guys will be less willing to say on the front pages of newspapers, 'Democrats are all horrible people.'"

Washington confronts two budget fights over the next two months. The first will come at the end of September, when Congress must pass legislation to continue funding the government or risk a shutdown.

The second battle is due in October, when the Treasury Department must get Congress' permission to raise the government's borrowing limit. Failure to raise the so-called debt ceiling could result in a market-rattling debt default.

Members of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives want to use both occasions to press President Barack Obama to make budget cuts, with some Tea Party-backed conservatives also demanding a delay in implementation of Obama's signature healthcare reform law, set to start on October 1.

'DYSFUNCTION FATIGUE'

After big clashes over the budget in the summer of 2011 and late 2012 with the "fiscal cliff," DeHaven noted that Americans had "dysfunction fatigue with Washington."

Conservative activists spent much of August trying to ratchet up pressure on Republican House Speaker John Boehner to use the threat of a government shutdown to demand a cutoff in funding for "Obamacare," the health insurance law.

Tea Party activist and former U.S. Senator Jim DeMint, for example, is touring the country urging Republicans to "stand and fight" on the healthcare program. In an interview with Reuters, he said the Republican leaders were "naive" if they believed they could avoid a showdown, although a senior Senate Republican aide said conservatives did not have the votes to succeed with the shutdown strategy.

Mindful of the political damage his party suffered after the government shutdowns in 1995 and 1996, Boehner is concerned that Republicans would get the blame for any showdown and suffer the fallout in the 2014 congressional elections.

When lawmakers return to Washington next week, they have only nine legislative days to pass a spending measure that would avoid a government shutdown, and Boehner is considering a short-term spending bill of 60 to 90 days.

If he can pass that bill and avoid the shutdown, it would leave the debt limit dispute as the focus of the autumn budget battles. U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew said on Monday that the government would come close to running out of money by mid-October, without a fresh increase in the debt limit.

"The big confrontation will be in October," said Steve Bell, a former top Senate budget aide who is now with the Bipartisan Policy Center think tank.

Bell said if the Syria intervention continued into October, it could increase Obama's leverage because of the tendency for military confrontations to temporarily boost presidents' approval ratings as Americans rally around the flag.

"Depending on the nature of the involvement and the length, it could give the president a little bit of an edge in these upcoming negotiations," Bell said.