



Washington, London: A study in contrasts over Syria debate

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WASHINGTON — The British Parliament spent Thursday slugging it out over Syria. The U.S. Congress stayed away. For the fourth straight week.

If you want a rousing debate over whether the United States should launch a military strike against the Syrian regime, you'll have to head overseas or surf the Internet and find a British site.

“In Great Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron has called the House of Commons home from vacation to deliberate over the use of force in Syria,” said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, while “in Washington, D.C., crickets are chirping.”

Congressional leaders are being briefed, usually by phone, by Obama administration officials. Leaders are not ruling out summoning Congress back, but “it’s hard to say whether that could be necessary until we know what the White House is actually planning to do, if anything,” said Michael Steel, spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio.

But many rank-and-file members want to know more, lots more, and dozens say they’re ready to return to Washington.

“We stand ready to come back into session, consider the facts before us, and share the burden of decisions made regarding U.S. involvement in the quickly escalating Syrian conflict,” said a letter signed by 98 Republicans and 18 Democrats in the House of Representatives.

Some analysts suspect the real reason Congress is not in session to address the Syria question is that leaders, as well as the White House, fear political chaos. Debate could be intense and ugly, and a vote on whether to back military action is not, as intelligence officials might say, a slam dunk.

“The administration doesn’t want a vote. It would be messy,” said Ilya Shapiro, senior fellow in constitutional studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Both parties could endure very public schisms. A solid core of Republicans have signaled their distaste for military action. Rep. Lynn Jenkins, R-Kan., noted there is “no threat to our homeland,” a view echoed by others. Obama also faces trouble from his own party. “Frankly, I’m skeptical about getting involved in another action in the Middle East. I don’t think it’s turned out well,” said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest did not say Thursday whether Congress should return to Washington to debate or vote on any intervention in Syria, but he said repeatedly that the White House was seeking lawmakers’ consultation.

“I’m not ruling out future briefings that might include every member of Congress,” Earnest said.

And so, Thursday, London and Washington remained worlds apart.

At the Capitol, one could walk from the House of Representatives side to the Senate side, which takes about half an hour, and encounter only a half-dozen people, none of them members of Congress.

Parliament, on the other hand, was rocking. Members had been summoned for an emergency session to vote on military action, and Prime Minister Cameron explained the situation. Votes are expected soon.

In Washington, the longer Congress is gone, the harder it will be to call it back. Labor Day weekend is a popular time for campaigning. Two days after the holiday, the Jewish New Year begins at sunset, and the observance lasts for many until Friday night.

And then it’s the weekend, with lawmakers officially due back in Washington on Monday, Sept. 9, at least for a while. Eleven days later, the House is scheduled to leave for a nine-day September recess.