

Obama Asks For Fresh War Powers

BY DAVID ESPO AND NEDRA PICKLER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vowing that Islamic State forces are “going to lose,” President Barack Obama urged Congress on Wednesday to authorize military action against terrorists who are cutting a swath across the Middle East. Yet he ruled out large-scale U.S. ground combat operations reminiscent of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I’m convinced that the United States should not get dragged back into another prolonged ground war,” the president said at the White House as he set Congress on a path to its first war-powers vote in 13 years.

Despite his words of reassurance, initial reaction in Congress amounted to bipartisan skepticism, with much of the dissatisfaction centered on his attempt to find a political middle ground with respect to ground forces.

Republicans expressed unhappiness that he had chosen to exclude any long-term commitment of ground forces, while some Democrats voiced dismay that he had opened the door to deployment at all.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., also said Obama had ruled out air support for U.S.-trained rebels battling Syrian President Bashar Assad, adding, “That’s immoral.”

Under Obama’s proposal, the use of military force against Islamic State fighters would be authorized for three years, unbounded by national borders. The fight could be extended to any “closely related successor entity” to the Islamic State organization that has overrun parts of Iraq and Syria, imposed a stern form of Sharia law and killed several hostages it has taken, Americans among them.

“Make no mistake. This is a difficult mission,” Obama said in seeking action against a group that he said threatens America’s own security. He said it will take time to dislodge the terrorists, especially from urban areas. “But our coalition is on the offensive. ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose.” ISIL is one acronym for the Islamic State group.

The 2002 congressional authorization that preceded the American-led invasion of Iraq would be repealed under the White House proposal, a step some Republicans were unhappy to see. But a separate authorization that was approved by Congress after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks would remain in force, to the consternation of some Democrats.

At the heart of the debate, the struggle to define any role for American ground forces is likely to determine the outcome of the administration’s request for legislation. White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the proposal was intentionally ambiguous on that point to give the president flexibility, although the approach also was an attempt to bridge a deep divide in Congress.

While asking lawmakers to bar long-term, large-scale ground combat operations like those in Afghanistan and



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/TNS
U.S. President Barack Obama speaks on the legislation he sent to Congress today to authorize the use of military force (AUMF) against Islamic State in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, D.C.

Iraq, Obama said he wants the flexibility for ground combat operations “in other more limited circumstances.” Those include rescue missions, intelligence collection and the use of special operations forces in possible military action against Islamic State leaders.

While he proposed legislation to terminate in three years, Obama said, “It is not a timetable. It is not announcing that the mission is completed at any given period. What it is saying is that Congress should revisit the issue at the beginning of the next president’s term.”

Whatever the outcome, Obama’s request puts Congress on the path toward a vote that could reverberate unpredictably for years.

A post-9/11 request from then-President George W. Bush for authorization to use military force against Iraq was intensely controversial, and it played a role in Obama’s successful campaign for the White House in 2008.

His chief rival for the Democratic nomination, then-New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, voted in favor of the Bush proposal. Obama, who was not in Congress at the time of the vote, said later he would have opposed it, and he made it an issue in the presidential race.

Clinton, who served four years as Obama’s secretary of state and is now a likely candidate for president in 2016, had no immediate reaction to the new White House proposal.

Lawmakers were not as reticent, although outright supporters of the president’s plan were relatively scarce.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, expressed doubt it would “give our military commanders the flexibility and authorities they need to succeed and protect our people.”

He said changes are likely before the measure comes to a vote, although one House committee set an initial hearing for Thursday.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., like Boehner, said the proposal would receive serious consideration.

Democrats had a different reason to question the president’s proposal.

The House Democratic leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, issued a statement that refrained from endorsing Obama’s request. It said Congress should act judiciously and promptly to pass legislation “narrowly tailored” to the fight against Islamic State fighters. She has said previously she opposes deploying U.S. “boots on the ground.”

Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Senate’s longest-serving Democrat, cautioned that any legislation must be in a form that avoids “repeating the missteps of the past and that does not result in an open-ended authorization that becomes legal justification for future actions against unknown enemies, in unknown places, at unknown times.”

In a letter to lawmakers accompanying the three-page draft legislation, Obama referred to four American hostages who have died in Islamic State custody — at least three of them beheaded. He said the militant group, if left unchecked, “will pose a threat beyond the Middle East, including to the United States homeland.”

Among the four hostages was Kayla Mueller, a 26-year-old humanitarian worker whose death under unknown circumstances was confirmed Tuesday.

In the past, Obama has cited congressional authorizations from 2001 and 2002 to justify his decision to deploy more than 2,700 U.S. troops to train and assist Iraqi security forces and conduct airstrikes against targets in Iraq and Syria.

Obama said coalition airstrikes were disrupting terrorist supply lines, destroying their tanks, their barracks, their training grounds and the oil and gas facilities that support their operations.

Kyle Called Shooter ‘Straight-Up Nuts’

STEPHENVILLE, Texas (AP) — Shortly before he was shot to death by a troubled former Marine at a Texas gun range, legendary Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle texted a buddy, “This dude is straight-up nuts,” a defense attorney told jurors Wednesday.

A lawyer for Eddie Ray Routh said in opening statements of the man’s murder trial that Routh’s insanity was so evident that Kyle and his friend Chad Littlefield exchanged texts expressing alarm as the three rode together in February 2013 to a Texas shooting range.

“He’s (sitting) right behind me, watch my six,” Littlefield texted back, using a military reference for watching one’s back.

But a prosecutor said Routh still knew right from wrong, even with a history of mental illness.

The first day of the highly anticipated trial also included sometimes tearful testimony from Kyle’s widow, who spoke about her husband’s passion for helping veterans, gun safety and opposition to mixing alcohol with gun use.

Boehner Challenges Senate Democrats

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker John Boehner challenged Senate Democrats Wednesday to “get off their ass” and pass a bill to fund the Homeland Security Department and restrict President Barack Obama’s executive moves on immigration.

His comments seemed unlikely to change Senate Democrats’ behavior. But they underscored a worsening stalemate on Capitol Hill with funding for the Homeland Security Department set to expire Feb. 27. A day earlier, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell declared the Senate “stuck” on the issue and said the next move was in the House’s court.

Boehner rejected that, insisting the House has already done its job. He said Senate Democrats are at fault for blocking a House-passed bill that funds the department through the remainder of the budget year while also overturning Obama’s policies limiting deportations for millions here illegally. Democrats oppose the immigration language.

“The House has done its job, why don’t you go ask the Senate Democrats when they’re going to get off their ass and do something other than to vote no?” Boehner told reporters after meeting with GOP lawmakers. “The issue here is not Senate Republicans. The issue here is Senate Democrats.”

Parking Spat Sparks N. Carolina Killings

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) — Police are trying to determine whether hate played any role in the killing of three Muslims, a crime they said was sparked by a neighbor’s long-simmering anger over parking and noise inside their condominium complex.

Craig Stephen Hicks, 46, describes himself as a “gun toting” atheist. Neighbors say he always seemed angry and confrontational. His ex-wife said he was obsessed with the shooting-rampage movie “Falling Down,” and showed “no compassion at all” for other people.

His current wife, Karen Hicks, said he “champions the rights of others” and said the killings “had nothing do with religion or the victims’ faith.” Later Wednesday, she issued another statement, saying she’s divorcing him.

Hicks appeared in court Wednesday on charges of first-degree murder in the deaths Tuesday of Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23, his wife Yusor Mohammad, 21, and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19.

Chicago Board Approves Land Transfer

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s proposal to use parkland as a site for Barack Obama’s presidential library received a boost with approval from the Chicago Park District.

The University of Chicago’s bid for the library depends on using land in either Jackson Park or Washington Park on the city’s South Side.

The Chicago Park District voted unanimously Wednesday to transfer 20 acres in either park to the city for the library.

The proposed use of park land has generated opposition due to fears it could open the door for more land acquisitions that could chop away at park district land.

Congress Clears Keystone XL Pipeline Bill

BY DINA CAPPIELLO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Republican-controlled Congress cleared a bill Wednesday to construct the Keystone XL oil pipeline, setting up a confrontation with President Barack Obama, who has threatened to veto the measure.

The House passed the bill on a 270-152 vote, endorsing changes made by the Senate that stated climate change was real and not a hoax, and oil sands should no longer be exempt from a tax used to cleanup oil spills.

Only one Republican, Michigan Rep. Justin Amash, voted against the measure, while 29 Democrats backed it. But neither the House nor the Senate has enough votes to overcome a veto, the first of many skirmishes between the Democratic White House and Congress on energy and environmental policy.

Supporters were already strategizing on how to secure the pipeline’s approval using other legislative means.

“The evidence is in. The case ought to be closed,” said Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Sen. John Hoeven of North Dakota, the chief Republican sponsor of the bill, said in a statement “we will continue to press for approval by attaching an approval measure to another bill, perhaps an energy bill or must-pass appropriations legislation.”

Obama “needs to work with Congress in a bipartisan way and approve the Keystone XL pipeline project for the American people,” he said.

For Republicans, the bill’s passage capped weeks of debate on a top priority after they took control of Congress last month. Hours before the vote, they prodded Democrats who did not take their side. House Republicans, who have debated and passed numerous measures on the pipeline only to have them dead end in the Senate, claimed victory.

Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., said she was having a “holy cow” moment.

“This kind of support ... it doesn’t get any better than this,” she said.

Democrats, meanwhile, called the effort a waste of time but said the provisions on global warming and oils spills marked progress for Republicans on those issues.

Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Fla., said the bill was another example of Republicans prioritizing legislation to demonstrate a message, regardless of its chances of becoming law. The vote Wednesday marked the 11th attempt by Republicans to advance the pipeline.

“The last few years have been like a hamster on a wheel — spinning and spinning and not getting anywhere,” said Hastings, who at one point held up a toy that looked like the rodent.

First proposed in 2008, the pipeline has come to symbolize the differences between the parties on energy and environmental matters.

Republicans and the oil industry have argued the \$8 billion infrastructure project is about jobs and boosting energy security, by importing oil from a friendly neighbor and shipping it to domestic refineries subject to more stringent environmental regulations.

Democrats, and their environmental allies, have characterized it as a gift to the oil industry that would worsen global warming and subject parts of the country to the risks of an oil spill, with little economic benefit

because the oil and its refined product would be exported abroad.

The pipeline would connect Canada’s tar sands with Gulf coast refineries that specialize in processing heavy crudes.

A January 2014 analysis found that, with or without the pipeline, the tar sands would be developed, and thus the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from them would enter the atmosphere anyway. But the EPA said earlier this month that that analysis has to be revisited, because lower oil prices could make the pipeline more of a catalyst than the State Department initially predicted. A letter from Canada’s ambassador to the U.S. said the EPA’s assessment was flawed.

Hours before the pipeline vote, Sen. James Inhofe, chairman of the Senate

Environment and Public Works Committee, held the first of many hearings on the Obama administration’s plans to control for the first time the pollution blamed for global warming from the nation’s power plants.

And the House plans to unveil a large energy bill next week.

Democrats, too, want to move on.

“This Congress has much work to do on energy,” said Rep. Frank Pallone, D-N.J., the top Democrat on the House Energy committee. Pallone said it was time to stop wasting time on another doomed Keystone bill.

Amash, the lone Republican to vote against the bill, objected to the addition of a Senate bill on energy efficiency, arguing that it further empowered the Environmental Protection Agency.

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