



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 14, 2014

## Pressure Building for Sending U.S. Combat Troops Back to Iraq

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said he may recommend sending combat units into Iraq, while the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee declared at a committee hearing Thursday that any request for an Authorization for the Use of Military Force that would rule out the use of U.S. ground troops would be “dead on arrival.”



“I would offer a warning that should the AUMF proposed by the president contain such limitations, it [will be DOA in Congress](#),” said Buck McKeon, (R-Calif.) when General Martin Dempsey and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel appeared before the committee to report on the progress of the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. “I will not support sending our military into harm’s way with their arms tied behind their backs,” McKeon said.

President Obama, who began a bombing campaign against ISIS (also called ISIL) in Iraq in early August and in Syria in early September, has said he will seek congressional support in the form of a new AUMF to replace the one passed for the general war on terror in 2001 and another, passed, in 2002, that authorized the bombing and invasion of Iraq. The president, who last week doubled to 3,000 the number of U.S. military advisors in Iraq, has said repeatedly that American ground forces will not be sent back there to fight a war that Iraqis will have to win themselves, with the help of U.S. air support, weapons, and training. Despite that pledge, Dempsey told the committee he might recommend to the president the reintroduction of combat units to recapture key Iraqi territory from the ISIS forces, including the city of Mosul.

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“I’m not predicting at this point that I would recommend that those forces in Mosul and along the border would need to be accompanied by US forces, but we’re certainly considering it,” he said. It was not the first time, the nation’s top military officer said he might urge the commander in chief to relent in the ban on ground troops. Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in September, Dempsey spoke of the president’s plan to rely on Iraqi, Kurdish, and other forces in the region to do the fighting on the ground.

“My view at this point is that this coalition is the appropriate way forward. I believe that will prove true,” Dempsey said at the time. “But if it fails to be true, and if there are threats to the United States, then I, of course, would go back to the president and make a recommendation that may include the use



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of U.S. military ground forces.” The *Washington Post* had [reported a few days earlier](#) that Dempsey had already conveyed to the White House a recommendation by General Lloyd Austin, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, to send in what the *Post* described as a “modest contingent” of American troops, mainly Special Operations forces, to fight with Iraqi army units against the militants.

At Thursday’s hearing, McKeon cited statements by previous defense secretaries to support his argument that ground troops should not be ruled out. Both Robert Gates, who headed the Defense Department during parts of the Bush and Obama administrations, and Leon Panetta who succeeded him say the United States needs “boots on the ground if there’s to be any hope of success in the strategy,” McKeon said. “Yet, the president has doubled down on his policy of ‘no boots on the ground,’ despite any advice you give him.”

McKeon, a 12-term congressman, who has chaired the Armed Services Committee since 2011, chose not to seek reelection this year and will be gone when Congress reconvenes in January. But he is not the only one in Congress questioning the present strategy in opposing the jihadists fighting in Iraq and Syria.

“Where is this going?” Rep. Duncan Hunter [asked at Thursday’s hearing](#). “What is next, and what is the endgame? The Iranians are training more Iraqis than we are. They’re getting more influence in Iraq right now. You have no plan for Syria. You don’t know what you’re going to do with Assad.”

Replacing President Bashar al-Assad in a “regime change” for Syria has long been a U.S. goal, and Congress, in September, approved the Obama administration plan to arm “moderate” Syrian rebels who are believed to be fighting both ISIS and the Assad regime in Syria’s civil war. “You could change Assad today, and that’s not going to change all the dynamics quickly, certainly in Syria,” Hagel told Hunter, adding: “But who are you going to replace Assad with, and what kind of an army would take on ISIL?”

Hagel and Dempsey said any increase in U.S military presence in Iraq would be nowhere near the level of the 150,000 troops serving there at the height of the Iraq War. “I just don’t foresee a circumstance when it would be in our interest to take this fight on ourselves with a large military contingent,” Dempsey said.

American forces spent eight-and-a-half years in Iraq, training and fighting alongside of an Iraqi army that now numbers 245,000. Official estimates of ISIS fighters have grown from 9,000 to just under 30,000, suggesting the U.S. presence and its bombing campaign has boosted the militants’ recruitment efforts. Why Iraq needs further help fighting an enemy it outnumbers by roughly 8-1 remains as much a mystery as how that number of ISIS fighters in the Middle East is a threat to a nation with the military power of the United States.

Yet the call for more “boots on the ground” in Iraq is likely to increase in the new Congress, with Joni Ernst of Iowa, Cory Gardner of Colorado, and Tom Cotton of Arkansas among the Senate newcomers likely to swell the ranks of GOP “hawks” led by Arizona’s John McCain, the next chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

“Frankly, I know of no military expert who believes we are going to defeat ISIS with this present strategy,” [McCain said](#) at a conference of the Pacific Council on International Policy in Santa Monica last month. “We may be able to ‘contain,’ but to actually defeat ISIS is going to require more boots on the ground, more vigorous strikes, more special forces, further arming the Kurdish peshmerga forces and creating a no-fly zone and buffer zone in Syria.”



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