

Remarks by the President on Request to Congress for Authorization of Force Against ISIL

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February 11, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 11, 2015

Roosevelt Room

3:37 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon. Today, as part of an international coalition of some 60 nations -- including Arab countries -- our men and women in uniform continue the fight against ISIL in Iraq and in Syria.

More than 2,000 coalition airstrikes have pounded these terrorists. We're disrupting their command and control and supply lines, making it harder for them to move. We're destroying their fighting positions, their tanks, their vehicles, their barracks, their training camps, and the oil and gas facilities and infrastructure that fund their operations. We're taking out their commanders, their fighters, and their leaders.

In Iraq, local forces have largely held the line and in some places have pushed ISIL back. In Syria, ISIL failed in its major push to take the town of Kobani, losing countless fighters in the process -- fighters who will never again threaten innocent civilians. And we've seen reports of sinking morale among ISIL fighters as they realize the futility of their cause.

Now, make no mistake -- this is a difficult mission, and it will remain difficult for some time. It's going to take time to dislodge these terrorists, especially from urban areas. But our coalition is on the offensive, ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose. Its barbaric murders of so many people, including American hostages, are a desperate and revolting attempt to strike fear in the hearts of people it can never possibly win over by its ideas or its ideology -- because it offers nothing but misery and death and destruction. And with vile groups like this, there is only one option: With our allies and partners, we are going to degrade and ultimately destroy this terrorist group.

And when I announced our strategy against ISIL in September, I said that we are strongest as a nation when the President and Congress work together. Today, my administration submitted a draft resolution to Congress to authorize the use of force against ISIL. I want to be very clear about what it does and what it does not do.

This resolution reflects our core objective to destroy ISIL. It supports the comprehensive strategy that we have been pursuing with our allies and partners: A systemic and sustained campaign of airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Support and training for local forces on the ground, including the moderate Syrian opposition. Preventing ISIL attacks, in the region and beyond, including by foreign terrorist fighters who try to threaten our countries. Regional and international support for an inclusive Iraqi government that unites the Iraqi people and strengthens Iraqi forces against ISIL.

Humanitarian assistance for the innocent civilians of Iraq and Syria, who are suffering so terribly under ISIL's reign of horror.

I want to thank Vice President Biden, Secretaries Kerry and Hagel, and General Marty Dempsey for their leadership in advancing our strategy. Even as we meet this challenge in Iraq and Syria, we all agree that one of our weapons against terrorists like ISIL -- a critical part of our strategy -- is the values we live here at home. One of the best antidotes to the hateful ideologies that try to recruit and radicalize people to violent extremism is our own example as diverse and tolerant societies that welcome the contributions of all people, including people of all faiths.

The resolution we've submitted today does not call for the deployment of U.S. ground combat forces to Iraq or Syria. It is not the authorization of another ground war, like Afghanistan or Iraq. The 2,600 American troops in Iraq today largely serve on bases -- and, yes, they face the risks that come with service in any dangerous environment. But they do not have a combat mission. They are focused on training Iraqi forces, including Kurdish forces.

As I've said before, I'm convinced that the United States should not get dragged back into another prolonged ground war in the Middle East. That's not in our national security interest and it's not necessary for us to defeat ISIL. Local forces on the ground who know their countries best are best positioned to take the ground fight to ISIL -- and that's what they're doing.

At the same time, this resolution strikes the necessary balance by giving us the flexibility we need for unforeseen circumstances. For example, if we had actionable intelligence about a gathering of ISIL leaders, and our partners didn't have the capacity to get them, I would be prepared to order our Special Forces to take action, because I will not allow these terrorists to have a safe haven. So we need flexibility, but we also have to be careful and deliberate. And there is no heavier decision than asking our men and women in uniform to risk their lives on our behalf. As Commander in Chief, I will only send our troops into harm's way when it is absolutely necessary for our national security.

Finally, this resolution repeals the 2002 authorization of force for the invasion of Iraq and limits this new authorization to three years. I do not believe America's interests are served by endless war, or by remaining on a perpetual war footing. As a nation, we need to ask the difficult and necessary questions about when, why and how we use military force. After all, it is our troops who bear the costs of our decisions, and we owe them a clear strategy and the support they need to get the job done. So this resolution will give our armed forces and our coalition the continuity we need for the next three years.

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. It's conceivable that the mission is completed earlier. It's conceivable that after deliberation, debate and evaluation, that there are additional tasks to be carried out in this area. And the people's representatives, with a new President, should be able to have that discussion.

In closing, I want to say that in crafting this resolution we have consulted with, and listened to, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. We have made a sincere effort to address difficult issues that we've discussed together. In the days and weeks ahead, we'll continue to work closely with leaders and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle. I believe this resolution can grow even stronger with the thoughtful and dignified debate that this moment demands. I'm optimistic that it can win strong bipartisan support, and that we can show our troops and the world that Americans are united in this mission.

Today, our men and women in uniform continue the fight against ISIL, and we salute them for their courageous service. We pray for their safety. We stand with their families who miss them and who are sacrificing here at home. But know this: Our coalition is strong, our cause is just, and our mission will succeed. And long after the terrorists we face today are destroyed and forgotten, America will continue to stand free and tall and strong.

May God bless our troops, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much, everybody.

END

3:45 P.M. EST