

Kerry Demands Open-ended Mideast War Resolution

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In an extraordinary appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry outlined the Obama administration's demand for a congressional resolution to authorize military action in Iraq and Syria that would be unlimited in scope, time frame and methods.

Kerry argued for an open-ended resolution that would set no binding time limit on the war, nor any limit on the geographical area in which US operations could be conducted. He stressed as well that the resolution should not bar President Obama from ordering the use of US combat troops.

The three-and-a-half-hour hearing saw Senate Republicans, who will control the panel starting in January, criticizing the White House for not seeking broader authority and presenting a full-scale war plan, while the outgoing chairman, Democrat Robert Menendez, favored a more narrowly focused resolution. None of the Democratic senators expressed opposition to the current war in Iraq and Syria or to its escalation.

Kerry began the hearing claiming the resolution should be "limited and specific to the threat posed by" the Sunni fundamentalist ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) militia, which currently controls the eastern third of Syria and the western third of Iraq, including Mosul, a city of nearly two million, Iraq's third largest.

But when he turned to the details of the proposed Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the limitations evaporated. "We do not think an AUMF should include a geographical limitation," he said.

"We don't anticipate conducting operations in countries other than Iraq or Syria. But to the extent that [ISIS] poses a threat to American interests and personnel in other countries, we would not want an AUMF to constrain our ability to use appropriate force against [ISIS] in those locations if necessary. In our view, it would be a mistake to advertise to [ISIS] that there are safe havens for them outside of Iraq and Syria."

Such language would make the entire world a potential target of the war resolution, a fact on which several senators commented later in the hearing. Republican Rand Paul said, referring to the two holiest cities in Islam, "If Medina or Mecca pledges allegiance to the Islamic State, they are open to being bombed by the United States. You are sending a message to the Middle East that no city is off limits."

Kerry treated such concerns with contempt. "Nobody's talking about bombing everywhere," he said, telling Paul to "make a presumption in the sanity of the President of the United

States.”

While Paul, an ultra-right libertarian, occasionally postures as an opponent of US wars in the Middle East, he suggested at a previous Foreign Relations Committee hearing that Congress adopt a declaration of war against ISIS. If enacted, this would mark the first formal war declaration since World War II and provide the legal basis to outlaw antiwar opposition as “treason” or “aiding the enemy.”

Among the countries that could become battlefields with ISIS in the near future is Lebanon, where Sunni fundamentalists have been active in Tripoli and the Bekaa Valley. Two other Arab states, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, border on ISIS-controlled territory.

Last week, press reports suggested the Obama administration was moving towards imposing a limited no-fly zone along part of the Turkish-Syrian border, to be enforced by US warplanes based at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. This would make Incirlik and other territory in southern Turkey a likely target for combat between ISIS and US-NATO forces.

Kerry and the outgoing Democratic chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Robert Menendez, disagreed briefly on language Menendez was proposing that would bar “ground combat operations except as necessary for the protection or rescue of US soldiers or citizens, for intelligence operations, spotters to enable air strikes, operational planning, or other forms of advice and assistance.”

The administration did not plan to commit combat troops to the war with ISIS, Kerry claimed, but he went on to insist, “[T]hat does not mean we should preemptively bind the hands of the commander-in-chief—or our commanders in the field—in responding to scenarios and contingencies that are impossible to foresee.”

As for the length of the war, “we can be sure that this confrontation will not be over quickly,” Kerry said. “We understand, however, the desire of many to avoid a completely open-ended authorization. I note that Chairman Menendez has suggested a three-year limitation; we support that proposal, subject to provisions for extension that we would be happy to discuss.”

In other words, there would be no time limit to the war. Three years would take the fighting into the next administration, and the next president would have authority to extend the timeframe more or less indefinitely.

Republican members of the Senate committee criticized Kerry for not bringing with him an administration draft of proposed language for the AUMF. The White House has rebuffed such requests, preferring to operate with a completely free hand in the absence of any congressional resolution.

Moreover, with the Republicans taking control of the Senate in January as a result of the Democratic rout in the November 4 elections, the administration counts on a far more expansive war resolution than was likely when Obama first ordered air strikes on Syria in September.

The bellicose stance of the Republicans was expressed by Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, who will replace Menendez as chair of the Foreign Relations Committee. He disparaged placing any limitation on Obama’s power to order military action in Iraq and Syria, saying

sarcastically that such a resolution would be “really an ISIS protection plan... Because you can use all force against Al Qaida and others, but against ISIS you cannot. It’s kind of an interesting approach.”

There is another significant issue on which there was little discussion reported from the committee hearing, although Kerry made an indirect reference to it: whether the resolution would permit US military action against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Kerry urged the senators not to limit the war resolution to ISIS per se, but to permit US attacks on “associated forces.” This kind of language was used by the Bush administration to justify attacks on local Islamists in virtual every country in North Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, whether or not they were actually affiliated with Al Qaeda.

The CIA-backed Syrian opposition groups have repeatedly charged that the Assad regime is in a tacit alliance with ISIS, as both wage war against the “rebel” forces. By that definition, the Syrian Army and ISIS would be considered “associated forces” and the war resolution could be construed to authorize US air strikes or full-scale combat against the regime in Damascus.

One prominent Senate Democrat, Robert Casey of Pennsylvania, called for precisely such a maneuver in an op-ed piece published in the pro-war *Washington Post* on November 27, under the headline “The US Plan to Destroy the Islamic State Must Also Take Down Bashar al-Assad.”

Whatever the exact form of the resolution that eventually emerges from Congress, there is no question that American imperialism is moving steadily towards a full-scale war in Syria and Iraq, whose consequences—particularly in relation to Iran and Russia, the Syrian government’s main allies—would dwarf those of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

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