

EDITORIAL: Obama is right to seek declaration of war



While the battle with the self-declared Islamic State militants has been underway for months, President Barack Obama has said a congressional resolution would "show our troops and the world that Americans are united in this mission."

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As murky and belated as his proposal is, President Barack Obama is right to ask Congress for formal authorization to wage war against the Islamic State.

Now, it's up to Congress to do its constitutional duty and seek answers to many questions that Americans have about the U.S. military getting deeper in the quagmire that is Iraq and Syria.

It would be better yet for the new Republican-controlled Congress to proceed with a minimum of partisan sniping and hold a "thoughtful and dignified debate," as the president said in a nationally televised statement Wednesday after sending the legislation to Capitol Hill.

While the battle with Islamic State militants has been underway for months, Obama said the resolution would "show our troops and the world that Americans are united in this mission."

And while Obama highlighted the coalition of Arab nations and Western allies at our side and local soldiers bearing the brunt of ground combat, this is an acknowledgment that the U.S. is taking the lead.

The three-page draft is deliberately vague on a core issue — deploying ground forces. The resolution rules out "enduring offensive combat operations" — the kinds of long-term, large-scale operations like those in Iraq, where Obama ended the war in 2011, and in Afghanistan, where he ended the combat mission in December. Still, he seeks the flexibility to use ground troops in limited circumstances — special operations missions against Islamic State

leaders, rescuing downed pilots and collecting intelligence.

Some Republican hawks say ground forces are necessary to defeat the Islamic State. Sen. John McCain of Arizona, new chairman of the Armed Services Committee, complained it was “bizarre” for Obama to ask lawmakers to limit his own powers as commander in chief.

Many Democrats, however, adamantly oppose more ground forces. House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said Wednesday that “in the country, there is no appetite for any boots on the ground, except in limited circumstances.”

What is beyond debate: Islamic State is a threat to stability in the Middle East, our allies and our national security. Its brutality toward civilians and hostages apparently knows no bounds, and it is inspiring terrorist attacks in Europe, though thankfully not yet in America.

Obama’s resolution would be the first vote under the War Powers Act since then-President George W. Bush won authorization to invade Iraq in 2002. Obama wants to repeal that authorization, but keep the one passed after the 2001 terror attacks that he has used in his war on terror, ordering drone strikes against suspected terrorists and airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and 3,000 military “advisers” back into Iraq.

This authorization would be in place for three years — the rest of his presidency and the first year of his successor’s. “I do not believe America’s interests are served by endless war,” Obama said.

One final note: The timing is awkward, coming the day after confirmation of the death of American humanitarian worker Kayla Mueller, who was abducted by Islamic State militants in Syria in August 2013.

We’d hate to think the White House is trying to capitalize on the national outpouring of outrage. Mueller’s life’s work was helping civilians caught in the crossfire — not war, officially authorized or not.

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