

## Obama's no 'strategy yet' comment on ISIS in Syria sparks a political uproar

By Tom Cohen , CNN

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**Washington (CNN)** -- When is a strategy not a strategy? When it's a political football.

President Barack Obama has ignited fresh conservative criticism by saying "we don't have a strategy yet" for airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria.

Republicans immediately jumped on the President's comment during a news conference Thursday by saying it proved their longstanding complaint that his foreign policy failed to seriously respond to the terrorist threat from Sunni jihadists in the Syrian civil war.

"I'm not sure the severity of the problem has really sunk in to the administration just yet," said GOP Rep. Mike Rogers of Michigan, who chairs the House intelligence committee.



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Referring to the ISIS lightning sweep across northern Iraq this summer, Rogers said "we knew it



*Pentagon grilled about ISIS plan*

was a problem before June" and noted that "even the President said he was talking about this to Iraqi officials over a year ago."

"When a terrorist organization acts like an army, they present military targets the way any other army would do," he said, arguing the United States should have been going after such ISIS targets earlier "to degrade and disrupt the momentum of this very dangerous

organization."

### Waffling allegation

Retired Army Gen. George Joulwan, the former NATO supreme allied commander, told CNN on Friday that while he believed Obama's approach amounted to a bit of "waffling," launching airstrikes in Syria requires lots of preparation.

ISIS is not a state but an organization fighting the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, whom the United States also wants out of power, Joulwan noted. That creates complications, as does what he called Syria's "very sophisticated air defense system."

"I think we need to have clarity here of what that mission is, what it is before you start sending an

airstrikes or troops," he said. "What is the clarity here of what the end state is that we want to achieve? We didn't do that in Iraq or Afghanistan or in Vietnam. We've got to do it if we're going to get involved again."

The White House made the same point, with spokesman Josh Earnest attributing any uproar over Obama's phrasing to spin rather than substance.

Former CIA chief: Matter of time before ISIS tries to attack West

## Obama strategy

He told CNN that Obama "was asked a specific question about what approach he was going to pursue when it came to possible military action in Syria" against ISIS.

"That was the specific question he was asked, and the President was explicit, that he is still waiting for plans that are being developed by the Pentagon for military options that he has for going into Syria," Earnest said, adding that "the President has been very clear for months about what our comprehensive strategy is for confronting" the ISIS threat in Iraq.



ISIS vs. al Qaeda: How they're different

He listed steps that have become a mantra of sorts in responding to persistent questioning by reporters in recent weeks about a strategy for confronting ISIS in Iraq and Syria:



Does Pres. Obama have a strategy for ISIS?

- A unified Iraqi government "that can unite that country to meet the threat that's facing their country right



White House clarifies Obama remark

now";

- Strengthening the U.S. relationship with Iraqi and Kurdish security forces "to make sure that they have the equipment and training that they need to take the fight to" ISIS on the ground;
- Getting regional governments to join in taking on ISIS;
- Forging an international coalition to join in taking on

ISIS, something Obama failed to do when he contemplated but eventually decided against attacking Syria last year over its chemical weapons; and,

- The use of military force, such as the airstrikes launched in Iraq against ISIS to protect American personnel and minority groups under threat.

"The President is clear that the strategy is one that's not going to solve the problem overnight, but

he's also clear about the fact that our strategy can't only be the American military," Earnest said. "If we've learned anything over the last 10 or 12 years ... it's that a strategy that only includes military force will not be an enduring solution to this problem."

Who is the ISIS?

### **Partners needed**

Democratic Rep. Adam Smith of Washington concurred, telling CNN that Obama's "no strategy" comment specifically referred to airstrikes in Syria that awaited final planning.

"I think the real issue there is finding a partner to work with," he said, adding that "we need to find partners that we can work with in Syria to help us contain ISIS."

At the same time, "we certainly don't want to come in a way that is supportive of the brutal and illegitimate Assad regime in Syria," Smith said. "So it is a difficult problem to figure out the best strategy. I agree, they have safe haven there in parts of Syria and that will have to be part of the strategy for containing" ISIS.

5 key questions in the fight against ISIS

### **Past arguments**

Republicans led by hawkish conservatives such as Sen. John McCain of Arizona have called for years for greater U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict.

They complained when Obama rejected arming the Syrian opposition against al-Assad's government as far back as three years ago. Even the President's former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, advocated more help in 2011 and 2012 for rebel factions considered moderate.

However, opponents of such a move warned the Syrian opposition was too splintered and ideologically diverse to arm it.

The rise of ISIS from former al Qaeda affiliates gives fodder to the stances of both sides.

Obama critics say backing moderate Syrian factions could have prevented the extremists from gaining traction and helped the opposition topple al-Assad, as desired. Supporters say U.S. weapons would now be in the hands of ISIS if they had been sent to Syria when the war began.

Now the United States is sending weapons and other aid to some Syrian opposition groups.

Opinion: How U.S. can help Syria drive out ISIS

### **Leading from behind**

The Syria issue touches on broader aspects of Obama's foreign policy and ideological differences with conservatives.

Obama campaigned on ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he forged a foreign policy based on easing the global reliance on the United States to always lead the intervention charge.

His shift came as America emerged from recession and confronted budget austerity issues that

brought spending cuts across the board, including to the military.

Obama and Democrats want reduced spending spread equally as part of recalibrating government priorities.

Republicans, especially conservatives, seek to maintain and wield U.S. military might and influence while cutting spending elsewhere to shrink the overall size of government.

The debate underpins much of the political strategy and maneuvering in Washington, especially with congressional elections looming in November.

What can the U.S. do against ISIS in Syria -- and could it work?

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