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# Obama's Red Line: No Ground Troops

The White House looks to run out the clock without sending ground troops back into Iraq.

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The general Republican question for President Obama when it comes to the self-described Islamic State in Iraq is simple: Where's the strategy?

Obama should have left behind some combat troops rather than bringing them all home. He should have reacted more aggressively to the extremist group, and much earlier. He should even ""in the view of a few""send thousands of troops back now, or risk "losing" Iraq.

"We need a strategy," former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said Sunday on CBS's *Face the Nation*. "We don't have a strategy right now."

But anyone who doesn't understand Obama's Iraq strategy simply hasn't been listening closely.

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On using U.S. combat troops? In a detailed interview with *The Atlantic* (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/obama-interview-iran-isis-israel/393782/>), Obama made his view clear. "If they are not willing to fight for the secur-

ity of their country, we cannot do that for them,” he said, but added that he’s committed to training Iraqis over a “multi-year” period.

How many, exactly, is “multi?” State Department official and ISIS expert Brett McGurk [laid that out on NPR \(http://www.npr.org/2015/05/22/408680100/state-department-envoy-defends-administration-s-efforts-against-isis\)](http://www.npr.org/2015/05/22/408680100/state-department-envoy-defends-administration-s-efforts-against-isis): “It’s a three-year campaign to degrade the organization.”

Three years marked from mid-2014, of course, falls after Jan. 20, 2017, the date Obama leaves office.

Translation: The strategy is to avoid sending ground troops for the remainder of his term. So stop asking.

This is a legacy issue for Obama, an actual red line. Iraq is already in the win column and only becomes a loss if he listens to Republican advice and orders combat troops to return, the White House thinking goes.

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Obama has already sent 3,100 troops to train and advise the Iraqi military, to keep the U.S. embassy secure, and to coordinate ongoing U.S. airstrikes, and the White House says it is not opposed to sending more troops to advance those goals. “What’s been off the table has been combat,” a senior administration official said privately. “That’s the limiting principle. That’s been clear.”

The U.S. contingent has already trained 9,000 Iraqi troops, and has another 4,000 in the pipeline, the official said. More police training is also in progress, as are stepped-up efforts to recruit more Iraqi soldiers. Tribal militias in Anbar province will also receive training, and the Iraqi government is being encouraged to coordinate with those and other militias in the joint fight against ISIS.

And while Iran remains a worry, particularly because of its nuclear ambitions, Tehran's concerns about what's going on in its neighbor to the west are understandable, the White House accepts" so long as it does not undermine the central Iraqi government or increase sectarian strife. Bottom line: The solution to stopping ISIS in the region must be based in Iraqi, not American actions.

"The surge worked, but it wasn't an enduring solution," the official said of President Bush's 30,000-troop increase in 2007. "If we just came in there and just cleared them out, we could probably do that, but the situation would return to what it was before."

**(RELATED: Jeb Bush's Four Different Answers to the Same Iraq Question (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/2016-elections/jeb-bush-iraq-invasion-20150514?mrefid=related>))**

This position finds critics beyond the field of Republicans who hope to succeed Obama. Emma Sky served in Iraq's post-invasion provisional government, then as a top political adviser to the U.S. military there, and is the author of *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*.

"Although President Obama has stated that the U.S. goal is to defeat ISIS, the current strategy will not achieve this," Sky said, adding that Obama did not learn the right lessons from the Iraq war, and that Iraqis not only want but need American leadership. "President Obama is aware of the limitations of external actors in foreign lands" but underestimates where it is that we can have influence."

The chances of Obama coming around to that point of view, though, are slim. Ending the U.S. occupation there was a driving force behind his candidacy in 2007" his clearest and most advantageous area of contrast from then-Sen. Hillary Clinton.

While Clinton had voted to authorize President Bush's invasion, Obama, then an Illinois state legislator, had vocally opposed it. That view helped elect him to the U.S. Senate in 2004, and was key to his subsequent presidential campaign. "I will end this war in Iraq responsibly," he said at the 2008 Democratic convention in Denver.

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Obama brought the 150,000 troops in Iraq home by the end of 2011, as called for in the treaty signed by Bush in late 2008. Four years later, that achievement ranks alongside the Affordable Care Act and bringing the economy back from the recession on Obama's list of promises made and kept.

"Six years ago, nearly 180,000 American troops served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, fewer than 15,000 remain," Obama said in his State of the Union speech this year.

At a Feb. 6 town hall in Indianapolis about "middle-class economics," Obama noted in a response to a question about veterans' care: "We've now ended both the Iraq War and the Afghan War."

At a Democratic Party fundraiser in Portland, Oregon last month, as he spoke wistfully about trading in his title of "president" for one of "citizen" in another year and a half, Obama reminded donors: "We have ended two wars."

And last month at Arlington National Cemetery, Obama said: "Today is the first Memorial Day in 14 years that the United States is not engaged in a major ground war."

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Polling still shows the Iraq war to be deeply unpopular nationally. And although ISIS's videotaped beheadings and other atrocities have started to lessen public opposition to sending combat troops back to Iraq, overall public opinion is still in Obama's camp.

Republican voters, on the other hand, appear far more ready to accept a redeployment to fight ISIS. And GOP presidential candidates are, to varying degrees, matching that attitude.

Jeb Bush in a March visit to New Hampshire suggested “some small force level” of U.S. troops might be called for, but during his CBS interview he said ISIS could be defeated without putting “combat troops in harm’s way.”

Sen. Marco Rubio and others have suggested putting U.S. troops near the front lines to better target airstrikes, while both Sen. Lindsey Graham and former Sen. Rick Santorum have called for sending 10,000 U.S. troops to help fight ISIS.

Santorum, in fact, said that if ISIS leaders wanted a “seventh century” society, the United States should accommodate them: “We load up our bombers and we bomb them back to the seventh century,” he said at an Oklahoma candidates’ forum last month.

Under the Obama administration’s three-year timeline for “degrading” ISIS, of course, the GOP candidates have a straightforward path to making their visions a reality.

“In 2017, there will be a new commander in chief and someone else who will have a responsibility to evaluate the situation on the ground and determine what steps are necessary to continue to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL,” White House press secretary Josh Earnest said, using the administration’s acronym for the Islamic State. “That’s something that we’ll leave to the next president.”