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Obama, key lawmakers are open to launching airstrikes on Iraq

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"I don't rule out anything, because we do have a stake in making sure that these jihadists are not getting a permanent foothold in either Iraq or Syria," Obama told reporters in the Oval Office as he met with Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

His comments came as several news outlets reported that Iraq's leaders, watching impotently as an al-Qaida-inspired group seized two of the country's most important cities, were making fresh pleas for help from Washington. Officials in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, which came to office thanks to the U.S.-driven ouster of Saddam Hussein, have been asking for help for more than a year to combat the insurgents, many of them battle-hardened fighters who have proved themselves in the killing fields of the Syrian civil war.

Television images of the Islamists' shocking advance show that "Iraq's going to need more help," Obama said.

"It's going to need more help from us, and it's going to need more help from the international community. So my team is working around the clock to identify how we can provide the most effective assistance to them," the president said.



Al-Qaida-inspired insurgents gaining ground in Iraq. (AP Photo/ Karim Kadim)

Obama won the presidency in 2008 in part on his criticisms of the war in Iraq, and he repeatedly claimed in the 2012 campaign that the Iraq war was over after the withdrawal of American forces in 2011. The country, which experienced frequent terrorist attacks during the American tenure there, has continued to suffer waves of deadly attacks since the departure of troops.

On Capitol Hill on Wednesday, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee emerged from a classified briefing with defense and intelligence officials on Thursday expressing shock about how quickly Iraqi forces crumbled under the insurgency. They also expressed openness to a U.S. military response but stopped short of calling for a boots-on-the-ground approach.

"This was a surprise to everybody," said West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joseph Manchin. "It's alarming how quickly things are changing over there minute by minute, hour by hour and day by day."

U.S. airstrikes, Manchin said, "might be the only way that we can go in and give some support so they can hold off until they can regroup and the Iraqi army can get itself together."

Michigan Democratic Sen. Carl Levin, the committee chairman, urged fellow lawmakers to use caution before calling for military action, but said he was considering U.S. options for a response.

"We have to be very careful and thoughtful before we do anything," Levin said. "We should look at all the options carefully and thoughtfully."

The dramatic events of the past few days have fueled fresh Republican criticisms of Obama's handling of Iraq. Many of the GOP's leading voices on foreign policy condemned the president for failing to secure an agreement with Iraq's leaders that would have permitted American combat troops to remain and shore up local security forces.

"It's not like we haven't seen this problem coming for over a year, and it's not like we haven't seen, over the last five or six months, these terrorists moving in, taking control of western Iraq," Republican House Speaker John

Boehner said earlier on Thursday at his weekly press conference. "Now they've taken control of Mosul. They're 100 miles from Baghdad. And what's the president doing? Taking a nap."



Soldiers in Mosul threw down their guns and stripped off their uniforms, allowing the city to fall to Sunni insurgents.

"I think what we should do is to provide the equipment and the technical assistance that the Iraqis have been asking for," said Boehner, who admitted that he didn't "know enough of the details about the airstrikes to comment whether we should or we shouldn't."

But "I would urge the president once again to get engaged before it's too late," Boehner said.

In the Oval Office, Obama said some of his key advisers were consulting with Iraqi officials on some "short-term, immediate things that will need to be done militarily."

"Our national security team is looking at all the options — but this should be also a wake-up call from the Iraqi government that there has to be a political component to this," he said, echoing past criticisms that al-Maliki's poor governing style had fractured Iraq's politics and its people.