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Paris attacks: Would US troops in Syria play into Islamic State's hands?

Even though the Islamic State would be on the receiving end of a stepped-up campaign, that could serve the group's propaganda purposes.

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WASHINGTON — Even as raids are going on in Paris and details of the terrorist attacks are still emerging, robust calls for the US government to “do something” – to “take the fight” to the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) – have started streaming in.

GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum said he would launch “a major American offensive against ISIS right now.” Another Republican candidate, Ben Carson, posited that “boots on the ground would probably be important.”

President Obama pushed back against these calls this week, saying that “large numbers of US troops on the ground” would be “a mistake.”

But there is a danger that the United States could pursue an incremental plus-up in forces that could accidentally play into IS hands, some analysts warn. They caution, too, against anything approaching a long-term occupation, with some suggesting that a concentrated, briefer action could be effective.

In this regard, some lessons can be learned from internal Al Qaeda memos in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent US military intervention in the region. While Al Qaeda publicly railed against the “infidel crusaders” in their lands, behind the scenes something else was going on.

“We didn’t understand then that Al Qaeda was dearly hoping for a large military deployment so that it could bog us down and win this propaganda war,” William McCants, director of the Project on US Relations With the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution, told Vox News.

The impulse to do “something, anything is an understandable reaction” to the Paris attacks, says Emma Ashford, visiting fellow in foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington.

The fact that the US has “an excellent military” increases “the temptation to use it when we’ve got this great tool,” she adds. “It’s quick, it’s easy, and it looks like you’re doing something.”

Given this, “I’m glad to see that President Obama has said that he won’t be making this sort of knee-jerk large-scale reaction to the tragedy.”

Getting drawn into conflict may not appear to benefit IS – the group is on the receiving end of a stepped-up bombing campaign, after all – “but it does benefit their ideology,” Dr. Ashford says. “We could see more groups draw inspiration from that, knowing that the US can be baited into attacking them, even if their size is relatively small.”

It is a classic guerrilla warfare maneuver, she adds. “It’s how these fighters cause larger countries to overreact.”

At the same time, France is stepping up its bombing campaign inside Syria and is calling on other states to increase their contributions to the coalition, though it has not invoked NATO’s mutual defense pact, known as Article 5.

There also have been incremental increases in US contributions to the region over the past 2-1/2 years.

“The trouble is that all of these ‘limited military means’ tend to fail expensively, rather than cheaply,” says Stephen Biddle, professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University in Washington.

Pursuing “limited” military means “tends to be the worst of the military options, because where it leads us is mission creep. That’s what’s been going on in Syria and Iraq for a year,” he adds.

This means that “they do a little. It doesn’t work. Then they change policies, and do a little more. It’s been small incremental escalations since June 2014,” Dr. Biddle says, “which often happens when you try to occupy the middle ground.”

The problem, however, is not that the US might be drawn into using ground forces in the Middle East; it’s the length of time of the mission, argues retired Army Col. Peter Mansoor,

former executive officer for retired Gen. David Petraeus in Baghdad during the surge of US forces in 2007 and 2008.

Engaging in a long-term occupation would play right into the hands of IS, he says. “That’s what they want – for the US to get involved occupying parts of Syria and Iraq, which it can then use as propaganda to tell its adherents and sympathizers that the crusaders are back in the Middle East.”

Instead, the US should use ground forces “to destroy ISIS in a way that mirrors what we did in Afghanistan in 2001,” says Dr. Mansoor, who is now a professor of military history at Ohio State University in Columbus. That is to say, using US infantry soldiers, Marine expeditionary troops, and “lots” of Special Operations forces combined with “air power.”

“I think we could do this again if we had NATO backing and if France invokes Article 5,” he adds. The US would also need to “reknit” the Sunni Arab forces in western Iraq that stood up during the tribal awakening of the Iraq War, but then became disillusioned and marginalized under the Shiite leadership of the former president of Iraq.

Defeating IS would require “more than 20,000 [US] troops, but I don’t think it would be much more than that.” It would take “about 15 months,” Mansoor estimates.

After the fighting ends, US forces should quickly get out. “Arab forces could stabilize the places IS once occupied” after US forces defeat it, he adds.

“The lesson I learned from Iraq is that you cannot put governance in place when the security situation is out of control,” he says. At the same time, “almost everyone in the US would agree that the occupation of an Arab country just isn’t going to work, no matter how much we’d like to do things ourselves.”

Mr. Obama has said that he is open to thoughtful ideas, but has considered ground troops and, with input from his military commanders, rejected the idea.

“Folks want to pop off and have opinions about what they think they would do,” he said. “If they think that somehow their advisers are better than the chairman of my Joint Chiefs of Staff and the folks who are actually on the ground, I want to meet them. And we can have that debate.”

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter for his part met with military commanders Wednesday, according to Pentagon officials, “asking them to consider where the coalition effort in Iraq and Syria can be expanded.”