The Paris Attacks Shouldn't Cause Us to Escalate the War Against ISIS

Learn from our interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Brad Stapleton

November 17, 2015

Last Friday's terrorist attacks in Paris have dramatically increased the pressure on President Barack Obama's administration to intensify the ongoing military campaign against ISIS. Somewhat predictably, Republican candidates have launched a barrage of vague calls for the United States to do more in Syria. Within the Democratic Party, too, support for more forceful action is growing. On Saturday, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) argued that "limited air strikes and support for Iraqi forces and the Syrian opposition are not sufficient to protect our country and our allies."

Unfortunately, just how military escalation will render western nations significantly more secure is largely omitted from the calls for more action.

The notion that the United States can protect itself by defeating ISIS is illusory. To be sure, any substantial contingent of U.S. ground troops could probably recapture territory under their control without much difficulty. It would be virtually impossible, however, to kill or capture every Islamic State fighter in Iraq and Syria. And the sad reality is that even with U.S. assistance, central governments in Baghdad and Damascus are unlikely to be able to establish firm, prolonged control over all their nominal territory. For that reason, any military victory over ISIS would be temporary at best.

That is a lesson that we should have extrapolated from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. military was able to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq fairly easily. Yet the U.S.-sponsored successors to those odious regimes have been incapable of establishing enduring stability and security in either country—despite the fact that the United States has spent over $85 billion since 2004 training and equipping their security forces.

Moreover, although the United States has succeeded in decimating al Qaeda's leadership and destroying terrorist training camps, the U.S. invasions perversely helped to spawn new terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS. Another major U.S. military intervention in the Middle East would fuel terrorism by bolstering the narrative that the United States is at war with Islam.

After all, the Islamic State's initial focus was on establishing a caliphate in the Middle East. Following the commencement of U.S. air strikes, however, the group has gradually focused more on attacking targets in the West. To some extent then, the U.S.-led air campaign against the Islamic State probably instigated the Paris attacks.

Even if a U.S.-led coalition were able to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, this would not eliminate the threat of terrorism within the West. Although the media has highlighted the Paris attackers' links to ISIS in Syria, they were essentially "home-grown" terrorists. As Francois Hollande acknowledged in a major speech to a joint session of parliament at Versailles on Monday, "We know, and it's cruel to say that these are French who killed, on Friday, more French."

Although the military defeat of ISIS might quash a major source of inspiration and support for would-be terrorists within Western countries, it would not eliminate the threat. As long as the socio-economic marginalization of Muslims continues throughout the West (particularly in Europe), and radical Islam presents an apparent means of empowerment, terrorism will persist. Rather than attempting to defeat the Islamic State militarily, Western countries should therefore focus on mitigating the threat of terrorism through improved intelligence and law enforcement.

Already, it is becoming clear that the Paris attackers had been on security services' radar. That fact suggests that further improving domestic surveillance and multi-national intelligence sharing could help forestall such attacks. Of course, those efforts will inevitably impinge, to some extent, on civil liberties, which are fundamental to Western civilization. For that reason, Western citizens will have to accept some risk of additional terrorist attacks as a price of their freedoms. Fortunately, that risk remains, even after the Paris attacks, incredibly small and thus manageable.

Brad Stapleton is a visiting research fellow in defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute.