

The Washington Times

Clinton blasts ‘loose cannons’ Trump, Cruz over Islamic State plans, offers little

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March 23, 2016

Hillary Clinton on Wednesday launched a blistering assault against “loose cannons” Donald Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz, saying the Republicans are pushing foolish plans to defeat the Islamic State — but the former secretary of state offered little in the way of specifics and instead relied on generalities when laying out her own strategy to combat the terrorist group.

In a speech at Stanford University that came just a day after the Islamic State waged a deadly attack in Brussels, Mrs. Clinton said the U.S. must intensify its air campaign in Iraq and Syria, must go after the organization’s finances and infrastructure, strengthen cooperation with moderate Muslims and work with Silicon Valley to thwart Internet recruiting of terrorists.

But other than more bombing campaigns and ramped-up information sharing between the federal government and leading technology companies, Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic Party’s presidential front-runner, largely was silent on the details of a strategy to destroy the Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

Instead, she used her speech as something of a general election preview on foreign policy. With her Democratic primary fight against Sen. Bernard Sanders winding down, Mrs. Clinton tried to draw bright lines between her approach and the positions advocated by Mr. Trump and Mr. Cruz, each of whom are seeking the GOP presidential nod.

“It would be a serious mistake to stumble into another costly ground war in the Middle East,” she said, referencing comments by Mr. Trump and Mr. Cruz that ground troops in Iraq and Syria ultimately might be necessary to turn back the Islamic State.

“People and nations have to secure their own communities. We can — and, I argue, must — support them, but we can’t substitute for them,” she continued. “It would also be a serious mistake to begin carpet-bombing populated areas into oblivion. Proposing that doesn’t make you sound tough. It makes you sound like you’re in over your head. Slogans aren’t a strategy. Loose cannons tend to misfire. What America needs is strong, steady leadership to wage and win this struggle.”

Mr. Cruz of Texas has repeatedly said the U.S. should “carpet-bomb” Islamic State strongholds in Iraq and Syria, while Mr. Trump has stressed that the nation must secure its borders to keep out potential terrorists.

Mrs. Clinton’s address marked a turning point in the 2016 presidential race and offered further proof that she sees foreign policy as a key strength heading into the November general election.

But Republicans quickly shot back and said that Mrs. Clinton will forever be tied to President Obama’s foreign policy, specifically his mistakes in Libya and elsewhere that critics say have allowed the Islamic State to expand its reach across the Middle East and launch attacks against Europe and the U.S. homeland.

“From her failed Libya policy, to her support for the president’s hasty withdrawal from Iraq, to her failed online counterterrorism program at the State Department, Hillary Clinton has backed policies that have enabled ISIS to grow into a global threat,” Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus said in a statement just after the Stanford address.

Analysts say Mrs. Clinton, despite her years of foreign policy experience as a senator from New York and at the State Department, may face an uphill battle in the general election, especially if she faces off against Mr. Trump.

Despite his own missteps when discussing global affairs, Mr. Trump has taken advantage of Americans’ fears about terrorism and could paint Mrs. Clinton as a key piece of a failed foreign policy that’s led to the rise of the Islamic State threat around the world, according to A. Trevor Thrall, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“He’s totally ignorant, but I would say Donald Trump is much closer to the general mood of the public than Hillary is. He’s tapping into the insecurity people feel about terrorism,” he said. “For Hillary, it’s very tough to argue she wasn’t part of the problem, because she was part of the problem as secretary of state.”

As for her own plan, Mrs. Clinton said the U.S. must be “nimble and quick” in its response to the Islamic State. She said America must lead a global alliance that will wage a coordinated, continued attack on the group.

She did, however, seem to entirely rule out American boots on the ground in the Middle East.

Mrs. Clinton also said the U.S. and its partners must target the Islamic State’s “network of terror” and cut off the flow of money, arms and propaganda, and also proposed taking a “harder look” at security protocols at airports and other soft targets.

The former secretary also referenced the ongoing dispute between Apple and the FBI over access to the San Bernardino shooter’s cellphone, saying the government and private tech firms must

increase cooperation. She also said technology companies can play a role in helping to shut down Internet recruiting of terrorists.

“The tech community and the government need to stop seeing each other as adversaries and need to start working together to protect our safety and our privacy,” Mrs. Clinton said.