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Rand Paul's approach to the Syria refugee crisis has libertarians grumbling

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Rand Paul was already in trouble in a Republican primary dominated by the bombast of Donald Trump and the evangelical appeal of Ben Carson.

Then the Paris attacks happened — and his relatively dovish approach to national security suddenly looked wildly out of step with GOP voters.

And now he has a third problem: His base of support — libertarian voters — isn't happy with his response to an terrorist assault that killed more than 130 people in France, and upending presidential politics in the United States.

Paul hasn't walked away from his signature opposition to electronic surveillance, calling attempts to blame Edward Snowden's NSA leaks for the attacks "bullshit." Nor has he vowed to "bomb the hell out of ISIS" or send in 10,000 ground troops, as Trump and Lindsey Graham have, respectively. But his eagerness to seize on the Syrian refugee controversy — floating a dead-on-arrival bill to deny visas to anyone from a countries with an active "jihadist movement" — is rubbing many libertarians, who tend to favor open borders, the wrong way.

"He has been more focused on the refugee stuff and I don't think that appeals to what might be his libertarian base," said David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian-leaning CATO Institute. "I think that's a very nationalist reaction that's different from the aspects of libertarianism that he and I share."

Paul's job, already made difficult by lackluster polling and anemic fundraising, has only gotten harder: To stay viable, he has to stay true to his libertarian roots while appealing to the larger Republican electorate, including GOP hawks suspicious of his anti-surveillance and non-interventionist instincts.

On Thursday, Paul suffered a setback as his amendment blocking housing benefits for refugees of 34 countries — including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran — didn't come up for a vote. Paul had been highlighting that move as a major pillar of his solution to preventing a Paris-style attack on American soil.

"My amendment was blocked by both parties and as a consequence Congress has now left town on the Senate side without addressing my amendment or going forward with the bill," Paul groused on a conference call with reporters late Thursday.

A day earlier, Paul traded blows with Marco Rubio after the Florida senator hit his colleague for not voting to extend the PATRIOT Act's bulk data collection programs unless there were significant changes to the program. Paul, in response, shot back that Rubio "will argue to continue giving up your liberty for security until we have no liberty."

But even Paul's attempts to remain consistent seem to have fallen flat with libertarians, who are demoralized by the change in the political atmosphere after Paris.

"In times of overseas crises, the GOP still moves swiftly and overwhelming to hawkishness abroad," said John Vaught LaBeaume, an aide to Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson's 2012 presidential campaign, adding, "though after years of U.S. troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, in 2015 I think you will find a noticeable minority that's not hawkish."

"It's a lot easier just to call for bigger, call to bomb," complained Matthew Fay, a defense analyst at the libertarian-leaning Niskanen Center. "These things are a lot easier to do and more appealing on the campaign trail so even if they're not the definitive issues, which they rarely ever are, it's a much easier sell going that way than trying to do something more nuanced."

On Monday, the Niskanen Center published a post titled "Six Reasons To Welcome Syrian Refugees After Paris," a day before Paul introduced his visa bill.

"I think he has staked out a position that is definitely at odds with the broader libertarian coalition," said David Bier, the author of the Niskanen post and the director of immigration policy for the think tank. "His position is that essentially the actions of a few individuals within the societies renders all of the persons in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries guilty by default."

Part of Paul's problem, some Republicans say, is that he has been neither steadfast enough to lock down his base nor nimble enough to transcend them.

"The challenge here for him is: This is something that's faced him that he should have had an answer to well in advance. And the fact that he is struggling with it means that he hasn't been able to get a conclusion to it on his own," said David Winston, a Republican pollster who advised Newt Gingrich.

"I think he's chosen an area where he has a comfort level where he's offering something that is solid, that does make sense, but it isn't enough," said former Minnesota senator Norm Coleman, who has advised Paul on foreign policy and stressed his respect for the Kentucky senator.

Paul insists he will be vindicated, eventually, as long as he sticks by his guns. "You know, this is who I am and what I stand for," he said Thursday.

"Only a matter of time before they adopt Senator Paul's positions," his campaign manager Chip Englander said in an email. "Similar to what Trump, Walker, Cruz, and Rubio have done on other foreign policy issues."

But Paul, who had just \$2 million the bank as of October and barely made the cutoff for the most recent primetime debate, may not have much time left — and it's hard to see how he differentiates himself from the pack by imitating it.

"I understand why he's also doing that," Boaz said of Paul's messaging bills on the refugee issue. "I'm just not sure any of those things will find him a footing. They will not distinguish him from any of the other 10 candidates."

"There are other individuals in the race who have been as vocal in opposition to immigration from Muslim countries and it's not a particularly distinguishing feature of his campaign," noted Bier of the Niskanen Center. "And every time he's tried to move in this direction he's gone down in the polls."

"He can only go so far," Coleman said. "The question that has to be asked is 'Can you go far enough?'"