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HOUSE REPUBLICANS SEEK WAYS TO BLOCK OBAMA'S IMMIGRATION ACTION

By Kristine Peterson
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House Republicans prepared Wednesday to reopen a fight with President Barack Obama over immigration as soon as next week as they looked for ways to block his unilateral action shielding millions of illegal immigrants from deportation.

Republicans eager to unravel Mr. Obama's executive action say they are looking to legislation needed to keep the Department of Homeland Security fully operating beyond Feb. 27, when its current funding expires. While GOP leaders haven't settled on their course, lawmakers and aides say they may attach a provision blocking the department, which oversees immigration activities, from using any funds or fees to implement any elements of Mr. Obama's action.

But GOP lawmakers acknowledged the challenges of trying to thwart Mr. Obama's immigration plan without threatening to undermine national security-funding at a time when terrorist attacks have provoked concern world-wide.

News that masked gunmen killed 12 people on Wednesday at the offices of a satirical weekly publication in France left some Republicans cautious about GOP plans to tie their immigration strategy to Homeland Security funding.

"If they want to target immigration to retaliate against the president, that's fine. But we have to make it clear with Homeland Security, at a time when we saw this massive attack in Paris, that we can't be cutting funding or programs which would protect Americans from a terrorist attack," said Rep. Peter King (R., N.Y.), a former House Homeland Security Committee chairman.

While GOP lawmakers have long been concerned about terrorism, the latest attack "makes it easier to demagogue our efforts to defund amnesty," said Rep. Mick Mulvaney (R., S.C.), using a term that critics often apply to efforts to give legal status or safe harbor to people who entered the U.S. illegally.

Democrats said Republicans risk signaling that they are willing to cut off funds needed to shore up the country's safety.

"This type of policy, where they want to threaten to shut down Homeland Security, would be bad politics for them," said Rep. Henry Cuellar (D., Texas), whose district is along the Southern border.

House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) said Wednesday that the Paris shootings were a reminder of the need to be vigilant against terrorists but didn't preclude Republicans from seeking to block the White House's immigration plans.

"I believe the president's executive actions with regard to immigration are outside of the Constitution," Mr. Boehner told reporters. "I believe we can deal with that issue

in the Department of Homeland Security bill without jeopardizing the security of this country.”

Last year, Congress passed legislation funding most of the federal government through September 2015, but extended funds only through late February for the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees immigration activities. GOP leaders split off that funding stream to give Republicans a vehicle for renewing the immigration fight this year, now that Republicans control both chambers of Congress.

Republicans face limits in what they can accomplish in the Senate on their own, where their 54-seat majority falls short of the 60 votes needed for most bills to clear procedural hurdles. And Mr. Obama would likely veto any measure scaling back his program of giving safe harbor to many illegal immigrants. The GOP doesn't have the supermajority needed to override a presidential veto in either chamber.

“There is a very strong sentiment here that the president consistently does things he doesn't have the legal authority to do, and that has to be confronted,” said Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart (R., Fla.) “And then there is the hard reality of the fact that to stop it, we're going to require 60 votes — i.e. some Democrats in the Senate — and a presidential signature.”

GOP leaders hope to vote on a bill as early as next week but haven't yet settled on a strategy for pushing back on Mr. Obama's immigration plan.

Rep. Matt Salmon (R., Ariz.) said he thought the most likely option was a proposal from Mr. Mulvaney that would block the Homeland Security Department from using any funds or fees to implement or enforce any elements of Mr. Obama's executive action.

In a closed-door meeting Wednesday, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) mentioned a similar measure from Rep. Martha Roby (R., Ala.), GOP aides said.

Republicans huddled in groups Wednesday to plot immigration strategy. Some said it would be a mistake to rush a vote before they were united around a plan. Rep. Paul Gosar (R. Ariz.) said the double-digit defections from Mr. Boehner in Tuesday's speaker election demonstrated that House Republicans needed time to coalesce. But GOP leaders also see advantages to making their first move early, well before Homeland Security funding expires, lawmakers and aides said.

Republicans are tackling the issue early “so that we don't get to the point we have on so many things where it becomes a crisis and a standoff,” Mr. Salmon said. House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R., Ky.) may introduce a funding bill as soon as Friday.