

Baptists Offer Divergent Responses to Obama's ISIS Speech

Baptists and other Christians responded in varying ways to President Barack Obama's prime-time speech about proposals to confront a growing terrorist threat in the Middle East.

Although previously authorizing limited military strikes and humanitarian efforts, Obama now proposes even more strikes and military efforts.

The group often referred to as the Islamic State, ISIS or ISIL, has been conquering parts of Iraq and Syria. Christians and other religious minorities have been particularly targeted by the violent group.

Even before Obama's speech, EthicsDaily.com executive editor Robert Parham [urged](#) Christians to consider the president's proposal in light of historic just war principles. Parham summarized the eight tenets of the just war perspective in a July EthicsDaily.com [editorial](#) about how to respond to ISIS.

"Use moral filter of just war rules in debate over expanding war," Parham [tweeted](#) as Obama's speech ended.

"We really need faith leaders to offer moral critique in war debate, not leave debate to partisan politicians, snarky pundits," he [added](#).

After Obama's speech, the Southern Baptist Convention's Baptist Press reposted a [piece](#) from earlier in the month with Southern Baptist leaders invoking just war principles to advocate for military intervention against ISIS.

However, those quoted urged going even further than Obama's proposal for more airstrikes.

"Full application of just war principles does not only warrant airstrikes but a far more vigorous level of engagement as well," argued Daniel Heimbach, senior

professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The reality we must not ignore is how responding to ISIS with too little will make matters a lot worse, and responding to ISIS too late will make success less likely and a lot more costly.”

Heimbach’s enthusiasm for intervention echoes his similar advocacy for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He [claimed](#) that war also met just war principles, although Parham [documented](#) otherwise.

Heimbach and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Al Mohler even [claimed](#) the U.S.’s use of torture during the Bush administration could be justified by just war principles.

Prior to the 2003 invasion, many Southern Baptist leaders [claimed](#) the war would open evangelistic opportunities in the Middle Eastern nation.

Instead, the war [decimated](#) the historic Christian community, with ISIS [threatening](#) to drive out the last remnants. ISIS’s [rise](#) came out of rubble of the failed 2003 invasion.

Despite Heimbach’s past interpretative problems, even some critics of the 2003 invasion of Iraq have referred to just war principles to support air strikes against ISIS.

Although the Vatican opposed Bush’s war plans, Pope Francis and other Catholic leaders are cautiously [supporting](#) limited efforts to stop ISIS.

Many Christian leaders responding to Obama’s speech took a different focus. Rather than dealing with the substance of the proposed military actions, some conservative Christians instead attacked Obama’s claims about ISIS and Islam.

“ISIL is not ‘Islamic,’” Obama [stated](#) early in his speech. “No religion condones the killing of innocents. And the vast majority of ISIL’s victims have been Muslim.”

On Thursday morning, Mohler used his daily podcast to take aim at Obama's line.

"[Obama] was making an argument that is not only unhelpful, it is fundamentally untruthful," Mohler [claimed](#). "It is absolutely dangerous for the president of the United States to make such a statement."

Mohler noted that Bush made similar claims about Islam being peaceful, but added that Bush also was incorrect.

Mohler suggested an Islamic worldview—as opposed to a distortion of Islam—sparks terrorist attacks against the U.S.

Other politically active conservative Christians, many of whom have been pushing for military action against ISIS, joined Mohler in attacking Obama for not condemning Islam.

These partisan voices spent more time criticizing Obama's religious claim than addressing his policy proposal.

Tony Perkins, who leads the conservative Family Research Council, suggested Obama's refusal to attack Islam would help terrorism spread.

"The president's refusal to acknowledge that ISIS is motivated by its form of Islamic ideology is very dangerous," Perkins [argued](#). "Political correctness remains the handmaiden of terrorism."

Alan Noble, an assistant professor at Oklahoma Baptist University, penned a critique of those attacking Obama's declaration that ISIS is not Islamic.

He argued that such statements by Obama—and similar ones by then-President George W. Bush—are important "public relations" efforts in "the war on terror."

"[Obama's] simply choosing a definition of Islam that he knows will reduce terrorist recruitment and damage ISIL's rhetoric," Noble [argued](#). "There is nothing that ISIL would like more than to see Western powers, particularly the

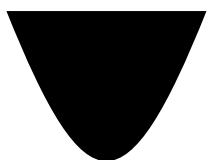
U.S., openly declare war on Islam.”

Other Christian voices go even further than Noble’s “pragmatic” approach to affirm Obama’s interpretation that terrorism runs counter to the teaching of Islam.

In the 13 years since 9/11 and various U.S. military actions in the Middle East, the debate over the nature of Islam continues to re-emerge among Baptists and other Christians.

The 2010 EthicsDaily.com documentary, “[Different Books, Common Word: Baptists and Muslims](#),” showed various voices within both faith communities working together for the common good.

As the U.S. moves forward with additional military actions in Iraq and Syria, Christians can be expected to offer additional moral assessments on issues of war, violence and religion.



[Brian Kaylor](#) is a contributing editor for [EthicsDaily.com](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@BrianKaylor](#).