

Religious leaders try to cope with Islamic State attacks

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(RNS) Religious leaders agree the Islamic State—also known as ISIL or ISIS—must be stopped. Their struggle is how best to do it.

“As mainstream religious leaders of different faiths get together, it strengthens the voice of moderation,” said Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the largest U.S. Muslim advocacy group.

A group of mainstream Muslim scholars sought to strip the Iraqi and Syrian militants of any legitimacy under the cover of Islam in an open letter in Arabic issued last week.

U.S. Christian leaders have also spoken out and say they hope to dissuade youth from joining the Islamic State ranks by developing an alternative world view that counters the group’s religious claims.

“To offer a different world view endorsed by religions, as well as governments, in the long term will go a long way to defeating its appeal to those who are looking to join them,” said Antonios S. Kireopoulos of the National Council of Churches. The council represents about 45 million Christians, from mainstream Protestants to “living peace” congregants.

Recent comments by Pope Francis about the conflict rocking the Middle East have left some religious leaders mixed about his intent.

The pontiff told reporters August 18 that in “cases where there is unjust aggression, I can only say it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor.” He followed up, saying, “I emphasize the word: ‘stop.’ I’m not saying drop bombs, make war, but stop the aggressor.”

Some Christian leaders and theologians said they viewed Francis' words as an endorsement of limited military action against the Islamic State.

At the very least, several leaders and scholars said, the pontiff did not rule out limited military force to defend innocent civilians in Iraq and Syria. The pope stressed any action should be an international effort.

"He clearly was invoking 'just war' tradition," said Gerard F. Powers, professor at Notre Dame University's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. The tradition holds that war can only be waged as a last resort, have serious prospects of success and not create greater evils.

James T. Bretzke, a moral theologian who teaches at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, said he thought the pope was clear.

"He said, in this case, we can use military force to resist an unjust aggressor," Bretzke said. "He didn't say wholesale war."

"The pope did not support war," countered Marie Dennis, co-president of Pax Christi International, a pacifist group that advocates diplomacy, humanitarian intervention, ceasefires, and negotiation to reach lasting solutions.

Like his predecessors, Pope Francis strongly opposed previous military interventions—including in Syria last year—because they didn't meet the strict standards of the church's "just war" tradition, church experts said.

What's different now is the pope—and other Vatican officials—are attempting to draw world attention to the plight of innocent civilians facing possible genocide, they said.

And while Pope Francis' apparent call for intervention is rare, it is not new, Powers said.

In 1993 Pope John Paul II asked the world community to stop ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian conflict. His appeal resulted in international intervention, Powers said.

"We would agree that this kind of, as he called it, unjust aggression needs to stop or needs to be stopped. How you go about that the best way? That's what we are all trying to figure out," Kireopoulos said.

Jews would see the pope's call as a "religious expression of the secular concept 'duty to protect,' also known as the obligation to defend innocent victims," said Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee's International Director of Interreligious Affairs.

Rosen said there are many interreligious efforts to condemn violence done in the name of religion.

"Of course there is little that religious leaders can do other than exercise whatever moral authority they have," said Rosen. "In other words, any 'coalition' is more for the sake of the good name of religion . . . than any ability to thwart religious extremism which portrays religious leadership that opposes it as Uncle Toms at best, if not collaborators with the Devil."