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## **When President Obama calls out religious extremists, he needs to be specific**

Faithstreet (06.10.2014) <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2014/10/06/religious-liberty-president-obama-extremism-un-speech/34421> - A rising tide of religious intolerance is unleashing persecution and violence in the world. Terrorist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIS in Iraq and Syria are committing atrocities against religious minorities. In Burma, violence by extremist Buddhists against Muslims threatens the country's transition to democracy. In several predominantly Muslim countries, Christians face violence and are being driven from their homes, and sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia is intensifying. In Europe, Jews face intensifying harassment and violence in as fascist parties gain strength and anti-Jewish sentiment filters into the political mainstream.

The United States needs to do more to safeguard religious freedom in the world not only because it's a fundamental human right and a linchpin of successful democracies, but because doing so will strengthen its own national security. Appeals to religious hatred are designed to provoke violence, and all too often succeed. The denial of religious liberty is a harbinger of instability and conflict. Left unchecked, widespread religious persecution leads to security crises that often threaten the United States. Reconciliation and equal protection of the law for religious minorities should therefore be elements of U.S. national security and conflict-prevention strategies.

*President Obama called for the world to combat extremism, but he failed to lay out how human rights abuses by repressive governments has fueled extremism*

Although non-state actors perpetrate much of this violence, failures of governments can play an enormous role. Governments often create — or fail to address — the conditions that allow violence to flourish. There is, for example, a direct link between the success of ISIS and the Iraqi government's failure to rule inclusively and address the legitimate grievances of the Sunni population.

Likewise, the forces of hatred have thrived partly because of a failure of governments to protect human rights and the rule of law. ISIS gained strength in Syria by exploiting the instability and misery caused by the Assad regime's brutality and divide-and-conquer strategy. Meanwhile, abuses — systematic and horrific in some cases — by the Iraqi and Nigerian national security forces and their paramilitary supporters have fueled support for ISIS and Boko Haram as citizens view these terrorist groups as a less dangerous alternative and a vehicle for expressing dissent.

In several places suffering from religious persecution, the United States has invested money, prestige, and even lives in attempts to help cultivate democracy and stability. In

his recent speech at the United Nations, President Obama called for the world to combat extremism, but he unfortunately failed to lay out how human rights abuses by repressive governments — including many of those supporting the U.S. effort against ISIS — has fueled extremism. In fact, some of the countries in the coalition, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, provided support to extremist groups in Syria that have reportedly joined forces with ISIS.

The United States needs country-specific strategies to better integrate promotion of religious freedom and related human rights into its efforts to confront national security threats. Developing, and investing, in these strategies is a way to prevent situations from deteriorating to the point where the U.S. government would even contemplate military action and intervention.

Such strategies must promote rights-respecting counterterrorism efforts by foreign governments, prevent U.S. allies from funding religious extremism, and provide assistance that encourages security services to include religious minorities. U.S. policy should also promote accountability and counteract extremist propaganda. The U.S. government must ensure that the security forces it chooses to support are not themselves fanning religious hatred. And while efforts should focus on the front-end — preventing violence and discrimination against people of minority faiths — the U.S. should also assist and provide protection to refugees and asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution.

There's a position in the U.S. government that should play a lead role on this issue: the Ambassador at Large for International Freedom. In July, President Obama nominated Rabbi David Saperstein to fill this position. When the Senate reconvenes, it should quickly confirm his nomination.

Promoting religious freedom is a foundational American value, and failing to live up to this ideal is not an option, especially in light of the implications for the security of the United States. Safeguarding religious freedom isn't secondary to our national security interests, but vital to them.

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## **Religious freedom high on the agenda in Washington**

### ***Press release of International Religious Freedom Roundtable***

IRF Roundtable (14.07.2014) - The IRF Roundtable is an informal group of individuals from non-governmental organizations who gather regularly to discuss IRF issues on a non-attribution basis. It is simply a safe space where participants gather, speak freely in sharing ideas and information, and propose joint, multi-faith advocacy actions to address specific IRF issues and problems. The Roundtable is informal to the point of being routinely referred to as a "non-group," and this is an inclusive, participant-driven space that is open to anybody and everybody. Each individual participant has a standing invitation to serve on the steering committee; and an open and equal opportunity to place specific items on the agenda, speak at meetings, design and launch initiatives, self-select into coalitions of the willing and participate in joint advocacy actions. And we are truly multi-faith in nature. While there is very little the participants agree on theologically, they all agree on the importance of religious freedom, and they work together on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. Participants are under no obligation to take any action whatsoever. And each joint, multi-faith advocacy action is undertaken solely by, and on behalf of, the individual participants who self-selected into that specific coalition of the willing.

### ***White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships***

On July 8, IRF Roundtable held a very successful Special Roundtable and Interactive Discussion with Melissa Rogers, Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; and Brian Bachman, Acting Director of the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom. IRF Roundtable discussed practical ideas on how they can serve as a resource and inform their work, received their feedback, and heard their ideas on civil society and government collaboration. IRF Roundtable can now work to establish a regular mechanism for the sharing of information so that it may all increase the impact of its efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief at home and abroad.

### ***USCIRF Reauthorization***

Also on July 8, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 4653, the USCIRF Reauthorization Act of 2014, by voice vote. The bill, which was sponsored by Congressman Frank Wolf and attracted 41 cosponsors, has since been received in the Senate and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations. It reauthorizes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom as an independent federal government advisory body through 2019. It also requires the Secretary of State to receive assistance from USCIRF when establishing training for Foreign Service Officers regarding the role of religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy as well as the connection between religious freedom and security. The text of the bill can be read at <http://gallery.mailchimp.com/3fbaf5394ea6c973add28939e/files/86162323-4c52-4cbd-aea4-16783ce2198f.pdf>

### ***Vacancy of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Post***

On July 9, Senator Marco Rubio issued a letter to President Obama, expressing concern regarding threats to religious freedom throughout the world. Senator Rubio pointed to the vacancy of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom post at the Department of State, and to an April letter to the President that went unanswered and highlighted persecution being experienced by religious minorities throughout the globe. A copy of the letter is available at <http://gallery.mailchimp.com/3fbaf5394ea6c973add28939e/files/0a4c86fc-73a3-4207-9643-21c1e42d988e.pdf>

### ***Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act 2014***

On July 10, the Senate passed S. 653, the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act of 2014, by voice vote. The bill, which was sponsored by Senator Roy Blunt and attracted 22 cosponsors, including Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin, will now be sent to the House for consideration. It encourages the president to appoint a special envoy to promote religious freedom among religious minorities. This envoy would hold the rank of ambassador and work with the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom to monitor and combat acts of religious intolerance and incitement targeted against religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia regions. Additionally, the special envoy would work with foreign governments and multilateral organizations, and coordinate these efforts with the U.S. Secretary of State. A link to Senator Blunt's statement, and the text of the bill, can be found at <http://www.blunt.senate.gov/public/cache/files/8768b426-4a60-4ca6-9b38-521dd98a65a6/7-11-14%20S%20653%20Special%20Envoy%20Passed%20Senate%20Version.pdf> [here](#).

Greg Mitchell

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## **Senate passes Blunt's Bill to protect religious freedom in Middle East**

***Blunt applauds Senate's overwhelming passage of bipartisan legislation to help create a special envoy to promote religious freedom***

Roy Blunt's website (11.07.2014) /

<http://www.blunt.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/news?ID=d492e1bf-629b-4e5b-ab59-af26ada6de73>- U.S. Senator Roy Blunt (Mo.) applauded the U.S. Senate's bipartisan passage of the "Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act," which is co-sponsored by U.S. Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin (Mich.) and encourages the president to appoint a special envoy to promote religious freedom among religious minorities in the Middle East. To read the bill, go to <http://www.blunt.senate.gov/public/cache/files/8768b426-4a60-4ca6-9b38-521dd98a65a6/7-11-14%20S%20653%20Special%20Envoy%20Passed%20Senate%20Version.pdf>.

"As we continue to witness disturbing violence against religious minorities around the world, I'm pleased the Senate passed this bipartisan bill to show the U.S. takes religious freedom very seriously," said Blunt. "I hope the House will pass this updated bill quickly and the president will appoint a special envoy to promote religious freedom and call attention to all persecuted religious communities in the region."

Blunt's bill encourages the president to appoint a special envoy who would hold the rank of ambassador and work in coordination with the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom. Together, they would monitor and combat acts of religious intolerance and incitement targeted against religious minorities in these regions. In addition, the special envoy would work with foreign governments and relevant multilateral organizations, and coordinate these efforts with the U.S. Secretary of State.

"It is in the interest of the United States to promote freedom of worship and the rights of religious minorities around the world, and especially in nations where those freedoms are under threat, such as Iraq, where Christians and other religious minorities have faced severe persecution," said Levin. "Such violence is a threat to regional stability in a part of the world where U.S. interests are great. Moreover, our support for these universal human values affirms the principles upon which our own nation was founded."

Blunt recently spoke on the U.S. Senate floor to urge U.S. officials to aggressively protect the rights of religious minorities throughout the world, specifically calling for the release of Meriam Ibrahim and her family in Sudan, as well as Pastor Saeed Abedini in Iran.

Please go to

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHh-kR4ZTOQ&feature=youtu.be> to watch his remarks.

### ***Additional Background Information***

Blunt and Levin originally introduced legislation to protect religious minorities in the Middle East in June 2011. Blunt also introduced an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in November 2013 to appoint a special envoy in the Near East and South Central Asia. In December 2013, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee overwhelmingly passed Blunt's bipartisan legislation. U.S. Representative Frank Wolf (Va.) introduced a companion bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Blunt's bill is co-sponsored by U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal (Conn.), John Boozman

(Ark.), Dan Coats (Ind.), Susan Collins (Maine), John Cornyn (Texas), Mike Crapo (Idaho), Ted Cruz (Texas), Mike Enzi (Wyo.), Mike Johanns (Neb.), Tim Kaine (Va.), Mark Kirk (Ill.), Jerry Moran (Kan.), Rob Portman (Ohio), Mark Pryor (Ark.), Pat Roberts (Kan.), Marco Rubio (Fla.), Tim Scott (S.C.), Jeff Sessions (Ala.), Debbie Stabenow (Mich.), Pat Toomey (Pa.), and Roger Wicker (Miss.).

In October 2013, Blunt joined U.S. Senators Bob Corker (Tenn.) and Lamar Alexander (Tenn.) in a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry ([http://www.blunt.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/dca41b4d-2c86-46d2-8b6c-84b9eedb56d0/10-21-13%20Egyptian%20Christians.pdf](http://www.blunt.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/dca41b4d-2c86-46d2-8b6c-84b9eedb56d0/10-21-13%20Egyptian%20Christians.pdf)) noting recent reports of more frequent, targeted attacks against Coptic churches and individuals in Egypt "warrants a clear U.S. response." In August 2013, Blunt reiterated his calls for Congress to pass bipartisan legislation aimed at promoting and protecting religious freedoms throughout the region.

Blunt serves on both the defense authorizing and appropriations committees, and he is a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs.

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## **Supreme Court rules against Obama in contraception case**

By Bill Mears and Tom Cohen

CNN (30.06.2014) - Some corporations have religious rights, a deeply divided Supreme Court decided Monday in ruling that certain for-profit companies cannot be required to pay for specific types of contraceptives for their employees.

The 5-4 decision based on ideological lines ended the high court's term with a legal and political setback for a controversial part of President Barack Obama's healthcare reform law.

It also set off a frenzied partisan debate that will continue through the November congressional elections and beyond over religious and reproductive rights.

All five conservative justices appointed by Republican presidents ruled in favor of closely held for-profit businesses -- those with at least 50% of stock held by five or fewer people, such as family-owned businesses -- in which the owners have clear religious beliefs.

### ***Contraceptives or abortion?***

Both corporations -- Conestoga Wood Specialties of Pennsylvania and Hobby Lobby, an Oklahoma-based arts-and-crafts retail giant -- emphasize their conscientious desire to operate in harmony with biblical principles while competing in a secular marketplace.

They argued the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, violates the First Amendment and other federal laws protecting religious freedom because it requires them to provide coverage for contraceptives like the "morning-after pill," which the companies consider tantamount to abortion.

"The companies in the cases before us are closely held corporations, each owned and controlled by members of a single family, and no one has disputed the sincerity of their religious beliefs," Justice Samuel Alito wrote in the majority opinion.

The four liberal justices appointed by Democratic presidents, including the high court's three women, opposed the ruling as a possible gateway to further religious-based challenges that limit individual choice and rights.

### ***"Into a minefield"***

In dissent Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote the court had "ventured into a minefield," adding it would disadvantage those employees "who do not share their employer's religious beliefs."

The practical result will likely be an administrative fix by the Obama administration that subsidizes the contraceptives at issue, said CNN political analyst Gloria Borger.

"So in terms of a real gap in medical coverage for these women, should they want it, I think what you are going to see is the government sort of picking up where Hobby Lobby would leave off," Borger said.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest signaled as much, telling reporters the Obama administration will work with Congress to ensure women affected by the ruling will continue to have coverage for contraceptives.

Obama believes the decision "jeopardizes the health of women who are employed by these companies," Earnest said.

The decision comes two years after the justices narrowly preserved the health care reforms known as Obamacare and its key funding provision in another politically charged ruling.

This time, the issue revolved around a 1994 federal law known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which Alito's opinion said prevents the government from "taking any action that substantially burdens the exercise of religion unless that action constitutes the least restrictive means of serving a compelling government interest."

Alito wrote that the court's conservative majority rejected the argument by the Department of Health and Human Services that "the owners of the companies forfeited all RFRA protection when they decided to organize their businesses as corporations rather than sole proprietorships or general partnerships."

"The plain terms of RFRA make it perfectly clear that Congress did not discriminate in this way against men and women who wish to run their businesses as for-profit corporations in the manner required by their religious beliefs," he wrote.

### ***Complex mix***

Monday's case presented a complex mix of legal, regulatory, and constitutional concerns - over such hot-button issues as faith, abortion, corporate power, executive agency discretion, and congressional intent.

The political stakes were large, especially for the future effectiveness of the health law itself, which marked its fourth anniversary this spring.

The botched rollout of HealthCare.gov, the federal Obamacare website, was another political flashpoint along with other issues that many Republicans say proves the law is unworkable.

They have made Obamacare a key campaign issue in their fight to take control of the Senate while retaining their House majority.

"Today's decision is a victory for religious freedom and another defeat for an administration that has repeatedly crossed constitutional lines in pursuit of" big government, said House Speaker John Boehner, an Ohio Republican. "The President's health care law remains an unworkable mess and a drag on our economy."

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida, who heads the Democratic National Committee, framed the ruling as a campaign issue for November.

"It is no surprise that Republicans have sided against women on this issue as they have consistently opposed a woman's right to make her own health care decisions," she said, calling the ruling a "dangerous precedent."

Barbara Green, a founder of Hobby Lobby, called the ruling "a victory, not just for our family business, but for all who seek to live out their faith."

However, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said the decision "jeopardizes women's access to essential health care," adding that "your boss should never be able to make your health care decisions for you."

Read the ruling (.PDF) at  
[http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/06/30/13-354\\_olp1.pdf](http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/06/30/13-354_olp1.pdf)

### ***Contraception mandate***

The section of law in dispute requires some for-profit employers to offer insurance benefits for birth control and other reproductive health services without a co-pay.

A number of companies equate some of the covered drugs, such as the so-called morning-after pill, as causing abortion.

The specific question presented was whether these companies can refuse, on the sincere claim it would violate their owners' long-established moral beliefs.

Supporters of the law fear the high court setback on the contraception mandate now will lead to other healthcare challenges on religion grounds, such as do-not-resuscitate orders and vaccine coverage.

More broadly, many worry giving corporations religious freedom rights could affect laws on employment, safety, and civil rights.

### ***The abortion link***

The Hahn family, owners of Conestoga, and the Green family, owners of Hobby Lobby, said some of the mandated contraception prevent human embryos from being implanted in a woman's womb, which the plaintiffs equate with abortion.

That includes Plan B contraception, which some have called the "morning after" pill, and intrauterine devices or IUDs used by an estimated 2 million American women.

Monday's decision comes two years after the justices allowed the law's "individual mandate" to go into effect.

That provision requires most Americans to get health insurance or pay a financial penalty. It is seen as the key funding mechanism to ensure near-universal health coverage.

Under the Affordable Care Act, financial penalties of up to \$100 per day, per employee can be levied on firms that refuse to provide comprehensive health coverage. Hobby Lobby, which has about 13,000 workers, estimates the penalty could cost it \$475 million a year.

The church-state issue now in the spotlight involves rules negotiated between the Obama administration and various outside groups. Under the changes, churches and houses of worship are completely exempt from the contraception mandate.

Other nonprofit, religiously affiliated groups, such as church-run hospitals, parochial schools and charities must either offer coverage or have a third-party insurer provide separate benefits without the employer's direct involvement. Lawsuits in those cases are pending in several federal appeals courts.

The cases are *Burwell (Sebelius) v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* (13-354); and *Conestoga Wood Specialties Corp. v. Burwell (Sebelius)* (13-356).

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## **What to expect if hobby lobby wins religious freedom case**

By Clare O'Connor

Forbes (24.06.2014) / <http://wwrn.org/articles/42794/?place=united-states> - Sometime before June 30 — as soon as today, possibly — the US Supreme Court will decide whether a corporation can have religious beliefs.

The Justices are set to rule on whether the Affordable Care Act is infringing on craft store chain Hobby Lobby's religious rights by forcing the company to provide full contraceptive coverage to its 13,000 workers as part of its health care plan.

Hobby Lobby's evangelical Christian owners, the billionaire Green family, take issue with four of the 20 FDA-approved methods of birth control mandated under Obamacare: morning-after pills Plan B and Ella as well as two kinds of inter-uterine devices (IUDs, or coils as your mother might have called them).

They believe these to be "potential life-terminating drugs", although current science does not support that these contraceptives are indeed "abortifacients."

(You can read more coverage of the Hobby Lobby case, including the Greens' perspective in their own words, [here](#) and [here](#).)

But there's far more at stake than the rights of women workers to contraception access, according to experts who've studied this case and its precedents.



"If the Supreme Court gives corporations rights under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, it could be a sea change," said Marci Hamilton, constitutional law expert and author of newly released book *God vs. the Gavel: The Perils of Extreme Religious Liberty*.

"Hobby Lobby is discriminating against employees who don't share their faith. This is another step towards filling the workplace with coreligionists."

Hers is a concern shared by Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

In a recent teleconference organized by women's health advocacy nonprofit Catholics for Choice, he described a hypothetical Hobby Lobby victory as "a Pandora's Box with some very ugly creatures flying out."

"Scientology-believing employers could insist on non-coverage of its nemesis, psychiatry," he said. "Jehovah's Witness-owned corporations could demand exclusion from surgical coverage, under the theory that so many of such procedures require the use of whole blood products forbidden by their faith."

He added that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act now being debated in the Supreme Court was never intended to be used by large companies like Hobby Lobby, which operates 500 stores. Rather, when it was introduced in the early 1990s, it was intended for niche instances like the rights of Muslim firefighters to wear beards or the use of sacramental wine for religious services in otherwise dry counties.

"If anyone had suggested that a national chain of for-profit craft stores employing over 10,000 people could use this statute to avoid coverage of contraceptives in an insurance plan, it would have been a shot heard round the world," Lynn said.

Catholics for Choice associate Meghan Smith described a Hobby Lobby victory as "tomorrow's civil rights disaster," adding that it could become commonplace for employees to fire workers for, say, being single and pregnant or using IVF, both of which are contentious in some religions.

"These cases are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the debate surrounding religious freedom in this country," she said. "We believe ensuring equal access to contraceptive coverage guarantees women's religious liberty rights."

Hamilton believes a Hobby Lobby victory could result in "an explosion" of similar court cases. "The demand for religious liberty is insatiable, especially for groups who are proselytizing," she said. "You'll have people saying, 'of course I can't have a divorced woman who got an abortion on staff.'"

She added that corporations could decide they're complicit in sin in providing a salary to support a family led by a gay couple. For-profit companies would be shielded in much the same way as Catholic charities are now, in that the law protects them if they refuse to facilitate adoptions for same-sex couples.

Both Hamilton and Lynn see a danger in allowing the Green family to violate the separation of church and state should they win their case.

"Hobby Lobby does not in any real sense engage in the exercise of religion as part of their functioning," said Lynn. "The garden gnome cross stitch kits are not religious icons." He added that David Green's personal evangelism doesn't make Hobby Lobby a religious organization.

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Hamilton's concern lies in the Supreme Court essentially conceding that the four forms of birth control in question cause abortions, which they do not according to all current science on the matter. She added that many women use these contraceptives for medical issues entirely separate from family planning.

"The Greens are arguing that their beliefs determine medical science," she said. "You cannot let them be the scientists."

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