



Obama says Quran burning is recruitment bonanza for al Qa'eda

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WASHINGTON // Barack Obama yesterday urged a Florida pastor to cancel plans to burn hundreds of copies of the Quran tomorrow. The US president called the event a stunt and a recruitment bonanza for al Qa'eda, adding his voice to a growing chorus of condemnation from international leaders. Mr Obama joined the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, and Gen David Petraeus, the US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, in describing it as a direct threat to US soldiers.

The statements, all of which invoked America's history of religious tolerance, appeared to be directed as much at the global Muslim community as at Terry Jones, whose church in Gainesville, Florida, is staging "International Burn a Quran Day". But Mr Obama's remarks and the event itself could also reveal profound gaps between America and the Muslim world in the way free speech is understood. As American leaders distanced official US policy from Mr Jones and his flock of fewer than 50 adherents, many Muslims may wonder why the US president is unable to halt the provocative proceedings.

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington-based Muslim-rights advocacy group, said: "Because of the different political and legal systems around the world, people are going to have a hard time understanding this, but we're going to do the best we can to explain it. "What we hope is that people around the world realise that the government cannot stop this because of the first amendment [to the US constitution, guaranteeing free speech]," Mr Hooper said. "People may assume that the government can stop this event, but that's not the case because of the law."

Indeed, Asif Ali al Zardari, the president of Pakistan, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the president of Indonesia, appealed directly to the US president, asking him to stop the Quran-burning. Rehman Malik, Pakistan's interior minister, wrote to the head of Interpol, the international crime-fighting agency, to take action against the book-burning. The heads of state said the planned event at the Dove World Outreach Centre, which has already sparked dozens of protests worldwide, would mark a significant setback for Islamic relations with the West.

Imams at Al Azhar University in Cairo, one of the world's oldest institutions of religious scholarship and the seat of Sunni Islamic thought, said yesterday that Mr Jones's plans would be a disaster that could provoke angry feelings in the Muslim world.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference added in a statement that going through with the Quran-burning would constitute "an outrageous path of hatred". In his comments on ABC News yesterday morning, Mr Obama, who has never shied away from speaking openly about his own faith, also appealed to the pastor's spiritual sensibilities. "He says he's someone who is motivated by his faith," Mr Obama told viewers. "I hope he listens to those better angels and understands that this is a destructive act that he's engaging in." The US State Department asked diplomatic missions overseas to convene meetings to assess potential threats to Americans if Mr Jones and his followers go head with their plans.

Joseph Cumming, an evangelical minister and the director of the reconciliation programme at the Yale University Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, said while Mr Jones certainly feels his Quran-burning event is an expression of his faith – he is the author of a book called *Islam is of the Devil* – his convictions are grounded in a misunderstanding of biblical notions of free agency. "I think in many people's mind there is a confusion between what you have a right to do and what is the right thing to do," said Mr Cumming, who referred to the Book of Romans as one of the canonical sources of the Christian conception of free will. "The Christian understanding of freedom ... is not freedom to do whatever you want. It's freedom to do what you think is the right thing to do. And that's not quite the same thing."

Mr Cumming complained about the media's treatment of the Quran-burning, which he said lumped all American evangelical Christians together with Mr Jones. He added that the coverage had focused more on politicians' opposition to the Quran-burning rather than that of American religious leaders who voiced unanimous condemnation months before the politicians weighed in.

Leith Anderson, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, in a statement posted to the group's website on Wednesday, said: "To all followers of Islam: please do not judge all Christians by the behaviour of one extremist." The statement reminded the site's visitors that the group first asked for the event's cancellation in late July, long before the current media storm. "One person with 30 silent followers does not speak for 300 million Americans who will never burn a Quran," Mr Anderson said in the statement.

Some analysts said Mr Anderson's argument should sound familiar to many Muslims, even those who would see Mr Jones's book-burning as an extension of America's perceived war on Islam. Matt Cherry, a spokesman for the London-based International Humanist and Ethical Union, said: "I would hope that the majority of Muslims would realise that this action no more represents the majority of Christians or the majority of Americans than the terrorist acts of September 11 represent the majority of Muslims. It's really a tiny minority who are deliberately trying to provoke the other side."

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With additional reporting by the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse