



Are Rick Perry, Rand Paul and Barack Obama on the same page on Iraq?

By Lauren Carroll

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Many see the recent squabble between Rand Paul and Rick Perry over the United States' involvement in other countries -- and especially in Iraq -- as an early skirmish in the race for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination.

The Kentucky senator is urging minimal U.S. involvement in the escalating conflict in Iraq, while the Texas governor is advocating a more interventionist approach. Their back-and-forth started with a *Wall Street Journal* column by Paul on June 19, followed by Perry's column in the *Washington Post* on July 11, Paul's retort in *Politico* on July 14, and a subsequent anti-Paul outcry by more hawkish Republicans.

Whether the United States should intervene in other nations' conflicts, and whether the Iraq War was worthwhile, is "the critical, defining foreign policy divide within the Republican Party," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

One of Paul's comments caught our eye.

"Some of Perry's solutions for the current chaos in Iraq aren't much different from what I've proposed," Paul said. "His solutions also aren't much different from President Barack Obama's... . Because interestingly enough, there aren't that many good choices right now in dealing with this situation in Iraq."

How could Perry, Paul and Obama all have similar solutions? We took a closer look at their comments on Iraq over the past couple of months, since the conflict worsened after the takeover of several major cities by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, a militant Islamic group.

We found that Paul has a point. Despite the three politicians' obvious differences in worldview, their solutions to the current crisis in Iraq share some similarities. A general similarity in foreign-policy approaches is a bit subjective for our Truth-O-Meter, so we won't be providing a rating. But we will lay out and analyze their views below.

Their solutions

Paul, writing in the *Journal*, said the United States should not play a combat role in the escalating situation in Iraq, arguing that it's not worth risking American lives by re-engaging in a conflict that proved highly unpopular in the United States. Perry, for his part, said the United States has a responsibility to intervene, characterizing Paul as an isolationist who doesn't recognize that ISIS poses a national security threat to the United States. Paul retorted that Perry did not accurately portray his views.

Paul's office pointed us to evidence showing his, Perry's and Obama's positions. Perry's office did not respond to our requests for comment.

Our research produced three ideas on which Perry, Paul and Obama broadly agree: sending military advisers to protect U.S. personnel and advise Iraqi Security Forces, increasing intelligence efforts and keeping open the option of using airstrikes.

Obama

Not surprisingly, Obama has expressed the most specific ideas, because he is the one responsible for taking action.

- **Troops:** In his initial remarks on Iraq on June 19, Obama said, "American combat troops are not going to be fighting in Iraq again." He added, however, that he would send military advisers to counsel Iraqi security forces and protect American personnel. So far, he has committed 750 troops for this purpose.
- **Intelligence:** In the June 19 remarks, he said that the administration had already increased American surveillance and intelligence-sharing with the Iraqi government.
- **Airstrikes:** Armed American drones have already started flying over Iraq, though the administration's decision to use airstrikes is still up in the air, according to news reports.
- **Other:** The White House has emphasized throughout the past month that they want Iraqi leaders to take the lead on any military or government action.

Paul

Paul has shown cautious support for Obama's actions so far.

- **Troops:** Although Paul has emphasized his absolute belief that there should be no boots on the ground in Iraq, he said on NBC's *Meet the Press* June 22 that he did not take issue with Obama's decision to send in military advisers.
- **Intelligence:** In the Politico article, Paul said he supports continuing to provide the Iraqi government intelligence, as well as arms.
- **Airstrikes:** In his articles and television appearances, Paul said he has not ruled out airstrikes as a possible course of action.

- **Other:** He said in his *Wall Street Journal* column that he "insists" that Obama get congressional approval for any military decisions he makes.

Perry

Of the three, Perry has offered the least amount of public comment on U.S. policy in Iraq.

- **Troops:** So far, he has been careful not to say that he would send combat troops to Iraq. However, he has not ruled it out.

- **Intelligence and airstrikes:** In his *Washington Post* column, he said, "The president can and must do more with our military and intelligence communities to help cripple the Islamic State. Meaningful assistance can include intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance sharing and - airstrikes."

- **Other:** In a June interview with CNN, Perry said that if he were making the decisions, he would execute any "covert and overt" operations he had at his disposal. He declined to give further details, saying, "We don't have to actually signal all the things we're going to do," because it would tip off the enemy.

Where the three politicians clearly differ -- and where they offer specific grievances -- is in hindsight.

Paul said he believes it was a mistake to invade Iraq in the first place, and he criticized Perry for saying that American troops should go back. Perry, on the other hand, has said Obama missed a window of opportunity to create stability in Iraq. In a 2012 presidential primary debate, Perry said, "I would send troops back into Iraq." He does not appear to have repeated (or revoked) this comment since then.

Still, on the question of what America should do now, Perry and Paul do align somewhat -- and neither strays far from what Obama has proposed and already enacted.

Matthew Baum, a professor of global communication and public policy at Harvard University, said it's not inconceivable that two politicians with vast philosophical differences could come to an agreement on a best course of action in Iraq, given the limited nature of sending military advisers, increasing intelligence-sharing and possibly using airstrikes.

Indeed, the policies offered by Paul and Perry are not specific enough to tell voters much about the candidates, said Charles Stevenson, a foreign-policy professor at Johns Hopkins University. He said it seems that Perry and Paul are using the situation in Iraq as an opportunity to frame their foreign policy philosophies and opinions rather than offer concrete policy solutions.

"Each side is trying to figure out what they can say today that will not blow up in their face later, and yet will allow them to be different than the other guy," Stevenson said.