



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

**Syria/Iraq
January 2016**

“We pray to the Lord that the agreement reached in the United Nations may succeed in halting as quickly as possible the clash of arms in Syria and in remedying the extremely grave humanitarian situation of its suffering people.”
--Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi Christmas Message, December 25, 2015

BACKGROUND

Much of the Middle East is in turmoil. The situation in Iraq and Syria continues to deteriorate while neighboring countries bear the burden of hosting huge numbers of refugees within their borders. The very birthplace of Christianity now faces the serious threat of losing its heritage because Christians are emigrating due to the systematic violence and instability. The many conflicts in Iraq and Syria have created an environment where far too many endure human rights abuses. Yazidis, Christians and other innocent victims of violence struggle to survive and live with dignity in dire conditions.

In Iraq and Syria, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) has rampaged, rapidly expanding its hold over territory in both countries, killing many, forcing women and girls into sexual servitude, causing thousands to flee or be forcibly converted, and seizing arms and resources to fund their violent struggle. In June 2014, the fall of Mosul, where Christians had lived for centuries, to ISIS was a major blow when the Iraqi army fled, leaving behind millions of dollars of U.S.-supplied equipment that is now being used by ISIS. Christian and other religious minorities and ethnic communities, such as the Yazidis, are especially threatened by the warped interpretation of Islam that ISIS imposes.

ISIS also attacked many Shiites and even Sunnis who have opposed ISIS rule. In addition to the religiously motivated violence, infighting among Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds and an entrenched patronage system that fuels corruption make for a dysfunctional political system. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appears to be rallying Shi'ite militias, some of whom have targeted Sunnis, exacerbating sectarian conflicts. The new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, faces major hurdles to stem the violence, counter corruption, and create a functional government that provides basic services and addresses the political exclusion of Sunnis that allowed for the rise of ISIS and for human rights abuses to occur. In December 2015, the Iraqi army retook Ramadi, the largest city in Al-Anbar governorate.

Syria's fate lies to a large extent in the hands of outside powers. The civil war in Syria has been going on for five years now. About 220,000 Syrians have died. One half of its population of about 22 million has been displaced and a flood of refugees (over 4 million), is overwhelming neighboring countries and Europe. What began as peaceful protests against Bashir Assad's government, which were brutally suppressed, has devolved into a conflict that pits Assad's Alawite sect (aligned with Shia fighters from Iran and Hezbollah) against Sunni opposition groups that are receiving support from the West (U.S.-led coalition), Turkey and the Gulf States. To complicate matters, ISIS has also taken large swaths of Syria and Iraq. Some legislators and NGOs are pushing for creation of a no-fly zone or safe zone to protect those fleeing from ISIS.

In September 2015, Russia, long a supporter of Assad, actively entered the fray. It is supplying weapons, troops, and airpower, ostensibly against ISIS, but also targeting the opposition. A key issue is the future

role for President Assad. Iran and Russia (to a lesser extent) back Assad while the opposition and the West want Assad to go. The U.S. is helping “vetted” opposition groups with arms and training and now with airstrikes. Since the opposition is not a cohesive force, the U.S. wants to avoid what happened in Iraq, but blames Assad for creating the conditions that have allowed ISIS to flourish.

In a welcome development, on December 18, 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously “endorsed a road map for a peace process in Syria, setting out an early-January timetable for United Nations-facilitated talks between the Government and opposition members, as well as the outlines of a nationwide ceasefire to begin as soon as the parties concerned had taken initial steps towards a political transition.”

“The Syrian people will decide the future of Syria,” the resolution stated. The goal is to establish “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” within six months and set a schedule and process for the drafting of a new constitution. The resolution supported free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution.

USCCB POSITION

Led by Pope Francis, USCCB and CRS continue to urge the United States to work with other governments towards certain goals, including: obtaining ceasefires, initiating serious negotiations, providing impartial humanitarian assistance, and encouraging building inclusive societies in Iraq and Syria that protect the rights of all citizens, including Christians and other minorities.

Our policy has also “recognize[d] that it may be necessary for the international community to use proportionate and discriminate force to stop ... unjust aggressors [in Syria and Iraq] and to protect religious minorities and civilians within the framework of ‘international and humanitarian law.’” While the continued use of military force may be necessary, it should not be the only tool used to overcome ISIS. The Holy See has repeatedly insisted that any military intervention be consistent with international and humanitarian law, respectful of fundamental human rights, and operate under the mandate of the United Nations Security Council.

USCCB urges the United States to adopt a more holistic intervention that can address the many facets of this conflict. It is critical to address political exclusion and economic desperation that are being manipulated by ISIS in its recruitment efforts, especially in Syria and Iraq. It is also critical to scale up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries and trusted NGOs, including our own CRS, which are struggling to aid displaced persons, and to accept for resettlement a fair share of some of the most vulnerable people where return is impossible.

Pope Francis has expressed support for the UN resolution on Syria and USCCB will continue to encourage the United States to support its full implementation.

In August 2014, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the Conference, called for a special national collection “to provide humanitarian relief and pastoral support for our affected brothers and sisters in the Middle East.” In the wake of the outpouring of refugees from the Middle East into Europe in September 2015, Archbishop Kurtz urged Catholics in the United States to welcome “these refugees, who are escaping desperate situations in order to survive” and encouraged the U.S. government “to assist more robustly the nations of Europe and the Middle East in protecting and supporting these refugees and in helping to end this horrific conflict, so refugees may return home in safety.”

ACTION REQUESTED:

Urge our nation to support the UN brokered peace process for Syria, to scale up humanitarian and development assistance to the region, and to accept for resettlement in our country the most vulnerable refugees.

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/index.cfm>. Contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), scolecchi@usccb.org.