

## Address root causes of violence in Syria and Iraq

*March 16, 2015*

Dear President Obama,

This week marks two significant anniversaries that should cause us to reflect on events that have contributed to the current crisis in the Middle East. As U.S. churches and Christian organizations with long and deep ties to the churches and faith communities of the Middle East, we are especially concerned about the possible repercussions of continued, and possibly renewed, U.S. military intervention in the region. The voices we hear tell us that the violence and death must end, on all sides; it must not be stoked with the recourse to lethal action.

On March 19, 2003 the U.S. invaded Iraq. Before the invasion many warned of the dangers of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction—a claim later proven to be false. Similarly, Iraqi church leaders expressed a concern shared by many Iraqis that a military invasion would open the way for extremist manifestations of political religion. They were prescient. The U.S. invasion and its accompanying policies set in motion a spiral of violence and sectarianism from which Iraq has yet to recover, and which has only gotten worse.

March 15, 2011 marks the date of the beginning of the uprising in Syria. Protests and demonstrations, which began on a smaller scale in January 2011, were largely nonviolent, but four years ago this week, the civil unrest began to transform into a complex conflict involving multiple opposition groups, as well as regional and global powers. Syrians were particularly anxious that their country would not become as unstable and insecure as Iraq had become over the previous decade, but in many ways, the war in Syria has been even more devastating: civilians continue to bear the brunt of the violence, in what the United Nations has now termed “the worst humanitarian crisis of our time.”

The two contexts cannot be considered separately, with many of the militants responsible for sustaining Syria's violence originating from Iraq's sectarian conflict. We witness with horror and condemn the acts of violence carried out against civilians of the two countries and beyond—Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and others. We assert that further reliance on militarization in these contexts will only exacerbate tensions, fail to address the conflicts in meaningful and healthy ways, and increase the human suffering.

We therefore urge you to:

- **Immediately prioritize diplomatic and political solutions** that address the political and social grievances at the root of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. This will necessitate working with all actors involved in the conflicts, including Iran.
- **Dedicate ample funds to the urgent humanitarian needs** in the region, as well as funding for longer-term development projects. Ensure that humanitarian assistance is

delivered in accordance with international humanitarian principles. Currently, despite sizeable humanitarian contributions, the U.S. is spending at least 4 times as much on military actions against the Islamic State group as it is on humanitarian needs, which continue to increase with no end in sight.

- **Commit to address the increasingly challenging refugee crisis** with governments in the Middle East and around the world. Refugees continue to seek safety and security outside of Syria. Neighboring countries have received them, but experience deep stresses on their capacity to do more. The potential for spillover of the conflict increases as these strains grow.
- **Enforce the strongest possible human rights conditionality** for all assistance and work diligently for a complete arms embargo in coordination with Iran, Russia, and others to de-escalate the conflict. Serious concerns have been raised by human rights groups and civilians in the region about human rights violations being committed by armed actors in Iraq and in Syria that receive support from the U.S.
- **Support civil society groups and religious leaders working to build relationships of peace and reconciliation** across political, sectarian and religious divides. Such assistance can help to bolster structures of communal solidarity and nonviolent engagement that mitigate against sectarian threats, defuse violence now, and lessen the possibility of violence in the future.

Twelve years since the invasion of Iraq, and four years since the beginning of violent conflict in Syria, we are sickened by the atrocities that have garnered extensive media attention. Through our partnerships in the Middle East we also are painfully aware of the magnitude of human suffering that the ongoing crises cause daily. We urge you to move away from further militarization of the conflicts and to work urgently to address the root causes of violence.

Sincerely,

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