

53 National Religious Groups, Academics, and Ministers Urge Alternatives to U.S. Military Action in Iraq

August 27, 2014

Dear President Obama:

As religious communities, leaders, and academics, we write to express our deep concern over the recent escalation of U.S. military action in Iraq. While the dire plight of Iraqi civilians should compel the international community to respond in some way, U.S. military action is not the answer. Lethal weapons and airstrikes will not remove the threat to a just peace in Iraq. As difficult as it might be, in the face of this great challenge, we believe that the way to address the crisis is through long-term investments in supporting inclusive governance and diplomacy, nonviolent resistance, sustainable development, and community-level peace and reconciliation processes.

Pope Francis has affirmed that “peacemaking is more courageous than warfare,” and more recently said that “it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I underscore the verb ‘stop;’ I don’t say bomb, make war---stop him.” But how we ask?

In addition to the complex factors spilling over from the civil war in Syria and pressure from other neighbors, decades of U.S. political and military intervention, coupled with inadequate social reconciliation programs, have significantly contributed to the current crisis in Iraq. More bombing will ultimately mean more division, bloodshed, recruitment for extremist organizations, and a continual cycle of violent intervention.

The current state of crisis and the breakdown of state institutions in Libya provide another stark example of the failure of a militarized strategy. Like Libya, the air strikes in Iraq will ultimately fail to build and maintain sustainable peace in the long-term.

We understand and deeply share the desire to protect people, especially civilians. However, even when tactics of violent force yield a short term displacement of the adversary’s violence, such violence toward armed actors is often self-perpetuating, as the retributive violence that flares up in response will only propitiate more armed intervention in a tit-for-tat escalation without addressing the root causes of the conflict. We see this over and over again. It is not “necessary” to continue down this road of self-destruction, as Pope Francis called the hostilities of war the “suicide of humanity.”

There are better, more effective, more healthy and more humanizing ways to protect civilians and to engage this conflict. Using an alternative frame, here are some “just peace” ways the United States and others can not only help save lives in Iraq and the region, but also begin to transform the conflict and break the cycle of violent intervention. To begin, the United States should take the following steps:

- **Stop U.S. bombing in Iraq** to prevent bloodshed, instability and the accumulation of grievances that contribute to the global justification for the Islamic State’s existence

among its supporters.

- **Provide robust humanitarian assistance to those who are fleeing the violence.** Provide food and much needed supplies in coordination with the United Nations.
- **Engage with the UN, all Iraqi political and religious leaders, and others in the international community on diplomatic efforts** for a lasting political solution for Iraq. Ensure a significantly more inclusive Iraqi government along with substantive programs of social reconciliation to interrupt the flow and perhaps peel-back some of the persons joining the Islamic State. In the diplomatic strategy, particularly include those with influence on key actors in the Islamic State.
 - **Work for a political settlement to the crisis in Syria.** The conflicts in Iraq and Syria are intricately connected and should be addressed holistically. Return to the Geneva peace process for a negotiated settlement to the civil war in Syria and expand the agenda to include regional peace and stability. Ensure Iran's full participation in the process.
- **Support community-based nonviolent resistance strategies** to transform the conflict and meet the deeper need and grievances of all parties. For example, experts¹ have suggested strategies such as parallel institutions, dispersed disruptions, and economic non-cooperation.
- **Strengthen financial sanctions against armed actors in the region** by working through the UN Security Council. For example, disrupting the Islamic State's \$3 million/day oil revenue from the underground market would go a long way toward blunting violence.
- **Bring in and significantly invest in professionally trained unarmed civilian protection organizations** to assist and offer some buffer for displaced persons and refugees, both for this conflict in collaboration with Iraqi's and for future conflicts.
- **Call for and uphold an arms embargo on all parties to the conflict.** U.S. arms and military assistance to the government forces and ethnic militias in Iraq, in addition to arming Syrian rebel groups, have only fueled the carnage, in part due to weapons intended for one group being taken and used by others. All armed parties have been accused of committing gross violations of human rights. Along with Russia, work with key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait to take independent initiatives and meaningful steps towards an arms embargo on all parties in the conflict.
- **Support Iraqi civil society efforts to build peace, reconciliation, and accountability at the community level.** Deep sectarian and ethnic divisions have long been exacerbated by various factors, including the U.S. military intervention in 2003. Sustainable peace will require peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts from the ground up.

With hope, deep-felt prayers, and a splash of courage, we ask you to move us beyond the ways

¹ <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/06/how-nonviolent-action-could-thwart-isils-advance-iraq/87478/>

of war and into the frontier of just peace responses to violent conflict.

Sincerely,

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