



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

Background on the Middle East February 2013

Civil and political authorities before all others have a grave responsibility to work for peace. They are the first called to resolve the numerous conflicts causing bloodshed in our human family, beginning with that privileged region in God's plan, the Middle East.
--Pope Benedict XVI, January 7, 2013

Since the advent of the “Arab Spring” in February 2010, the Middle East has undergone radical changes, shifting many countries from despotic control to weak and sometimes chaotic democratic rule and sectarian stalemate. Significant challenges and pressing decisions await the Administration in its second term.

Syria

More than a year after protests and violent crackdowns began in Homs, Syria is sinking deeper into violent conflict despite efforts by the United States, the Arab League, and the United Nations to stop the bloodshed. The conflict has become a civil war. According to the United Nations, over 60,000 Syrians (mostly civilians) have been killed, and more than 600,000 have fled the country as refugees and many more are displaced from their homes within Syria.

Fighting has spread throughout Syria and as the conflict drags on, destabilization threatens to force neighboring countries, especially Turkey, to become militarily involved. Since Turkey is a NATO member, Western allies may be drawn in. Despite efforts to unify the Syrian opposition, it remains a fractious group of political dissidents, military defectors, and militia leaders. Whether they could build an inclusive future Syria remains uncertain although a new opposition coalition was formed in November. U.N. reports have pointed to war crimes by both sides.

The conflict is complicated by complex ethnic and religious divisions in Syrian society. Syria's ruling class, including President Bashar Al Assad and the Alawite sect of Islam, is an 11% minority in an overwhelmingly Sunni country (74%). Historically, the Sunni majority has not been inclusive, leading to Alawite concerns of a “tyranny of the majority.” Some note that the Alawite community will not allow Assad to step aside.

The 10-12% of Syrians who are Christians are often caught between both sides. As His Beatitude Ignace Yousef III Younan, Patriarch of Antioch for the Syriac Catholic Church, notes that the struggle in Syria is “confessional.”

The U.S. Government has taken a supportive, but cautious stance towards the Syrian opposition. Since the beginning of the conflict, the U.S. has provided humanitarian assistance to Syrians who have been displaced. Bishop Richard E. Pates, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, sent a letter to the National Security Advisor in April 2012, echoing Pope Benedict's call for a peaceful resolution, and asking that the U.S. continue to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons. The letter noted a particular concern for Christians. Bishop Gerald Kicanas, Chairman of the CRS Board, and Dr. Stephen Colecchi, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, visited Turkey in January and met with Syrian refugees, the Papal Nuncio and the U.S. Ambassador.

Iraq

A year after U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq, waves of sectarian killings, religiously motivated violence, and political corruption hinder the country's development. Iraqi Christians continue to be a target of religiously motivated violence and Iraq is plagued by infighting among Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. The influx of Syrian refugees and Iraqi refugees who had fled earlier to Syria has put a burden on Iraq's fledgling government. The U.S. Administration hoped that Iraqis would move towards political reconciliation, but ten years after U.S. intervention in Iraq, the situation remains fragile and violent with the Iraqi government paralyzed by sectarian conflict. As Bishop Shlemon Warduni of Baghdad reported to the bishops at their June 2012 meeting, the situation of Christians remains particularly grave.

Iran

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U.S.-Iran relations have been strained for decades, but recently tensions regarding Iran's nuclear program have brought sweeping international sanctions and talk of military intervention. Although Ayatollah Khamenei's denunciation of nuclear weapons was of interest to Western governments, most continue to harbor doubts about Iran's nuclear intentions.

In November 2011, a U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency report led to tougher economic sanctions on Iran. Iran refuses to halt enrichment, claiming that its processes will cease only after sanctions are lifted. Iran has even threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz through which a significant amount of the global oil supply is shipped. Sanctions have had a crippling effect on Iran's economy. Last October trade with Iran was further restricted.

Israel is particularly concerned about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs given Iranian President Ahmadinejad claim that he would wipe the Jewish state off the map if given the chance. Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has cautioned publicly that Israel would carry out a military strike against Iran if their nuclear weapons programs do not end. Many Israeli and American military personnel believe that a strike may not have the capability to disable the program completely and would invite Iranian retaliation, potentially drawing the United States into a war in Israel's defense.

In March 2012, Bishop Pates wrote Secretary of State Clinton urging "the Administration to continue to seek to resolve concerns over Iran's nuclear program in ways that reduce the threat of nuclear non-proliferation while maintaining stability in the Middle East" and supporting a resolution of "the conflict with Iran through diplomatic, rather than military, means." In December, Bishop Pates wrote another letter, this time to the National Security Advisor.

Holy Land

Peace in the Holy Land continues to be hampered by the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. Violence and political acrimony perpetrated by both sides increase tension and prevents a just and lasting two-state solution: a secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside an independent and viable Palestine.

In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip. The perception of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as plagued with cronyism led to the election of Hamas as the majority political party in 2006. Unlike Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah Party and the PA, Hamas refuses to recognize the state of Israel, to honor past political agreements, or to halt violent attacks along the Gaza border. The United States considers Hamas to be a terrorist organization.

In June 2007 Hamas took control of Gaza. In response President Abbas dissolved the Hamas-Fatah unity government and formed a new PA government. The PA remains in control of the West Bank and is implementing security, political and economic reforms; but indefensible rocket attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza contributed to legitimate Israeli security concerns. In late December 2008, Israel launched a major military response that resulted in high levels of civilian Palestinian casualties in Gaza and significant destruction of property. Israel's military response, its continuing blockade of Gaza, and in the West Bank, its expansion of settlements, maintenance of numerous check-points, and expanding construction of a separation barrier deep in Palestinian areas, strain the Palestinian economy, deepening poverty and raising Palestinian anger and hopelessness. The humanitarian situation is difficult in West Bank but dire in Gaza.

The actions of both Hamas and Israel increase the misery and tensions that breed violence and impede the creation of a viable Palestine and a secure Israel. Last year violence between Hamas and Israel escalated sharply, as both the volume and effectiveness of Gazan rocket attacks increased. On November 15, Hamas fired large long-range rockets on both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, killing three Israeli citizens and inciting fear. Israel responded with air-raids on Gaza, killing scores. A ceasefire was achieved, but the situation remains tense.

Combined with Netanyahu's "red line" promise to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and uncertainty over Egypt's new Islamic-oriented government, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict contributes to instability in a region that knows too much violence.

In January 2013, Cardinal Dolan, USCCB President, and Bishop Pates urged the President to make Israeli-Palestinian peace a priority. Bishop Pates also signed an ecumenical letter reinforcing this same message. Bishop Kicanas joined representatives of European and Canadian bishops' conferences in issuing a communique at the end of a visit to the Holy Land urging international leadership for peace. Last November, USCCB wrote the National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Clinton, calling for an end to violence and reaffirming a commitment to a two-state solution. In September Cardinal Dolan and Bishop Pates wrote a letter of solidarity to Patriarch Fouad Twal regarding an anti-Christian incident at a monastery in the Holy Land perpetrated by settlers.

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