



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

Background on the Middle East January 2014

Peace for the Middle East, and particularly between Israelis and Palestinians, who struggle to find the road of agreement, that they may willingly and courageously resume negotiations to end a conflict that has lasted all too long. Peace in Iraq, that every act of violence may end, and above all for dear Syria, for its people torn by conflict and for the many refugees who await help and comfort. How much blood has been shed! And how much suffering must there still be before a political solution to the crisis will be found?
--Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* Message, March 31, 2013

The Middle East remains a region mired in multiple crises, but there are also some opportunities for U.S. policy to make a positive contribution. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate and prospects for success of the Geneva II peace talks remain uncertain. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved and volatile, but the United States continues to push negotiations. Egyptians and Iraqis, especially Christians, suffer insecurity.

Syria: According to the UN, over 130,000 Syrians (mostly civilians) have been killed and over eight million are displaced from their homes, 6.5 million inside Syria and 2.3 million into neighboring countries, since the conflict began almost three years ago. Fighting continues throughout Syria and threatens to spill into surrounding countries where tensions remain high. The Syrian opposition remains a fractious group of political dissidents and militia leaders. Significant numbers are Islamic extremists, including many foreign fighters who have entered the fray. The government of Syria is bolstered by the engagement of Hezbollah, an Iranian supported Shiite movement whose presence threatens stability in Lebanon and increases the sectarian (Sunni-Shia) nature of the conflict. Humanitarian organizations have very little access to internally displaced persons and there is concern that the large number of refugees places an overwhelming burden on adjoining countries. CRS, through its local Church partners, is assisting vulnerable people in affected countries.

The U.S. Government continues to take a supportive, but cautious, stance towards the Syrian opposition. Since the beginning of the conflict, the U.S. has provided humanitarian assistance to displaced Syrians and limited support to rebels. The Administration pushed for a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of U.S. military force to punish the regime for using chemical weapons. That resolution was put on hold when Congressional support wavered and when the United States and Russia brokered an agreement to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons. As of this writing, the Geneva II peace talks are taking place--the outcome remains uncertain.

USCCB continues to urge the United States to work with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities. Led by Pope Francis, USCCB vigorously promoted the Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace in Syria on September 7, 2013 and worked successfully to oppose the Congressional resolution authorizing the use of force in Syria in response to heinous chemical weapons attacks.

Holy Land: Peace in the Holy Land remains elusive, but with the support of the United States, Israel and Palestine have entered into negotiations. The fragile talks are at times jeopardized by violent acts on both sides, including settler attacks and rockets fired from Gaza, and by Israeli settlement expansion. The goal is a just and lasting two-state solution: a secure and recognized Israel living in peace with a viable and independent 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 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 caused legitimate Israeli security concerns.

In late December 2008, Israel launched a major military response that resulted in high levels of civilian Palestinian casualties and significant destruction of property in Gaza. 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 anger and hopelessness. The humanitarian situation is difficult in West Bank but dire in Gaza. CRS is on the ground assisting in both Gaza and the West Bank.

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. In recent years, violence between Hamas and Israel escalated sharply, as both the volume and effectiveness of Gaza rocket attacks increased. In November 2012, 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.

USCCB continually urges the U.S. government to make Israeli-Palestinian peace a priority and applauds Secretary Kerry's ongoing efforts to advance peace talks. Additionally, USCCB contacted the Administration to express the local Church's concerns regarding the route of the security barrier in the Cremisan valley. The route would confiscate Palestinian agricultural lands, and separate a Salesian monastery from a nearby convent, isolating both from critical resources and contacts with the local population and their ministries.

In September 2013, USCCB, the Catholic University of America and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) held a conference on international religious freedom and human rights in the Holy Land. It included Muslim, Jewish and Christian speakers. The goal was to contribute to peace and foster respect among peoples of the region.

Egypt: The situation in Egypt is unstable amidst political unrest, human rights abuses, and violence, often aimed at the Christian community. Extremists have scapegoated Christians, blaming them for the current state of affairs, and viciously attacked Christian churches, institutions and communities, destroying property and terrorizing people. However, the Church in Egypt reports that many of their Muslim neighbors have come to their defense. USCCB continues to urge the U.S. government to work with the international community to support efforts by Egyptians to initiate dialogue and reconciliation, strengthen public order and the rule of law, and build an inclusive democracy, respectful of human rights and religious freedom. USCCB also advocates to preserve, and even increase, humanitarian and economic assistance to Egypt as a means of protecting poor and vulnerable Egyptians and refugee populations and combatting the increased desperation that exacerbates the current situation and risks fueling more violence. CRS works in Egypt to respond to critical human needs by helping people find work and provide for their families, educating refugee children, rehabilitating damaged Church schools, aiding young women vulnerable to sex trafficking, and fostering dialogue, tolerance and acceptance among religions.

Iraq: Despite the Administration's hope that Iraqis would move towards political reconciliation, two years after U.S. troops withdrew, the situation remains fragile and violent. Waves of sectarian killings and political exclusion hinder Iraq's development. Violence this past year reached such high levels that 2013 was the deadliest year in Iraq since 2008. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a group tied to al Qaeda, has grown in the past two years and further destabilizes Iraq. In recent weeks, widespread discontent among Sunnis has been particularly pronounced. These grievances sparked a new wave of violence in Anbar province in the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi that has been exploited by ISIS. Iraqi Christians continue to face a particularly grave situation as they suffer from religiously-motivated extremism and infighting among Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis. As with other countries in the region, Christian emigration is a challenge for the Church. The influx of Syrian refugees and the return of Iraqi refugees who had fled earlier to Syria have put a burden on Iraq's fledgling government.

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.

3211 Fourth St., NE. Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339 #csmg2014