

HOLY DISCONTENTMENT:

Advocacy and Action for Syria



"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am." – Isaiah 58:6-9

When we read the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, there is an overwhelming proclamation: discontentment with the public life coupled with an alternative reality. This alternative reality is God's vision for the earth. The quoted passage from Isaiah continues in verse 12 to show us an example of God's reality: *"The Lord will guide you continually ... your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt ... you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in."*

As Christians, we also see this work of holy discontentment in the life and story of Jesus Christ. A review of the New Testament reveals that Jesus talked most about the kingdom, or reign, of God. This reign of God is breaking into our reality. The beautiful thing about Christ's story is that we are invited to participate in it. We are

called to usher in this reign of God, to participate with God in repairing the breach, in sharing our bread with the hungry, and lifting up our voices on behalf of the oppressed. Sometimes that means that we, as God's people, are called to speak truth to power in love, to live into, and call on the powers and principalities at hand, in order to influence change.

The conflict in Syria and resultant refugee and displacement crisis engender holy discontentment for all who long for peace and safety, not only for ourselves, but for all God's people. Through this resource on the conflict and its effects, members of the Faith Forum on Middle East Policy, hope that we, as Christians can channel their holy discontentment in service of peace in Syria and safe resettlement of those fleeing violence.



BACKGROUND

The Syrian conflict has now lasted more than five years, and, despite attempts at negotiations, is likely to continue for some time to come. Few conflicts are as simple as they may appear to outsiders, but the Syrian conflict has become particularly complex, and even once an agreement is reached, full implementation is likely to take several years.

Wide attention to Syria began in March 2011, during the “Arab Spring” when Syrian security forces opened fire on protesters, killing four. These protesters generally shared the goals for which the Arab Spring is remembered: democracy, civil liberties, and economic opportunity after decades of political repression and corruption. In June of 2011, the conflict transitioned to a civil war as some among the Syrian Security Forces joined the protesters rather than continue to follow orders to use force they considered excessive.

During the next two years, attempts at unifying the opposition managed to create two rebel coalitions: the Syrian National

Coalition, which seeks a relatively secular democratic state, and the larger Islamic Front, which seeks the creation of an Islamist state. Further efforts at unification are complicated by Syria’s extremely multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeup, including significant Arab, Kurdish, Sunni, Shi’a, Christian, and Druze populations, as well as the presence of combatants from more than 80 foreign countries.

At the same time, a fourth faction was quietly gaining strength. The “Islamic State” (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh), now the most well-known faction in Syria, began several years earlier, and includes in its membership and leadership many former members of the Iraqi military and intelligence who were displaced by the U.S. led de-Baathification efforts during the US–Iraq War. Under the guidance of these former military and intelligence officers, IS began by developing an extensive intelligence network through the region, which eventually allowed the organization to rapidly seize territory.¹



In the embattled city of Aleppo, the water infrastructure has been all but destroyed, making everyday life extremely difficult. In response, many churches have dug or re-opened wells on their properties in order to provide water for life tasks to the surrounding community—Christians, Muslims, and those of other religions alike. Some have even been able to gain access to water purification equipment so that the water is also potable. At one church, the pastor shared how the water lines begin at 4 a.m. and don’t dissipate until after 10 p.m. The well pumps run on generators, since the power grid has also been all but destroyed in the fighting.

One morning this pastor went out to the generator not knowing where he was going to find fuel to power it for the day’s water work. Fuel is very expensive and also hard to come by on many days. To his great surprise, he found that the generator had already been filled for the day. Later he learned that it had been the owner of the petrol station across from the church—a Muslim man—who had filled it. When he went to thank the man and pay for the fuel he received this response:

“I have been watching you. And every day I have seen you and the church providing water free of charge to the entire community, Muslim and Christian alike. You have shown us what the love of God looks like. This is my way of saying thank you.”

¹ Christopher Reuter, “The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of the Islamic State,” *Der Spiegel*, April 18, 2015, spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html

Further complicating the conflict is the number of international actors involved, including the U.S., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. These international actors, some of whom are using the conflict in Syria as a proxy war, further complicate attempts at resolution by sustaining the capability of Syrian factions to continue to wage war. Growing cooperation between international actors, particularly the United States and Russia, may facilitate resolution provided both powers remain committed to avoiding their own proxy war.

The human cost of the last five years of conflict is staggering. Estimates for the loss of life range from slightly more than 200,000 to nearly half a million. More than 13 million people have lost access to their means of financial support, and some 45 percent of

the population has been displaced by the conflict, including more than six million Internally Displaced Persons within Syria, and more than four million who have left Syria as refugees.² Indeed, it is now nearly impossible to turn on the news without hearing something about the resulting crisis as Syrians seek refuge wherever they can find it.

The damage done in Syria has assured that the country cannot be simply rebuilt, but must be redeveloped. As a result of both internal and external migration, the Syrian countryside, in particular, has become depopulated. This began before the conflict, as a combination of drought and high fuel prices destabilized farmers, who began moving to the cities. As the conflict has intensified, the migration to cities has increased. Before the conflict, approximately

55 percent of Syrians lived in cities. That number is now closer to 80 percent, despite the current population of cities being nearly half what it was before.³ Many cities, including Aleppo, have been nearly entirely destroyed.

As a result, even when the violence stops, many will not have homes to which they can return. Globally, the average stay in a refugee camp is 17 years.⁴ In the absence of other options, it is our responsibility as Christians to provide welcome and resettlement. As the Hebrew Scriptures say, ***“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Lev. 19:34)*** In our globally interconnected world, geographic distance is no excuse for turning our backs on those in need.



² Syrian Centre for Policy Research, “Confronting Fragmentation,” Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2016, scpr-syria.org/download/1269/?v=1480

³ Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, “Syrian Peace Facilitator Discussion,” *Oxfam America*, July 7, 2016

⁴ “Refugee Camps Are the ‘Cities of Tomorrow,’ Says Aid Expert,” *Dezeen*, November 23, 2015, dezeen.com/2015/11/23/refugee-camps-cities-of-tomorrow-killian-kleinschmidt-interview-humanitarian-aid-expert/

RESPONSE

As Christians and citizens and residents of the United States, it is our responsibility to contact our elected representatives to ensure our government's involvement in the region serves to further a just peace. A just peace is, and must be, more than simply an indefinite pause in violence, can neither be created nor sustained through strength of arms, must ensure the dignity and rights of all, and must be widely representative of, and supported by, the will of the Syrian people.

The United Nations-organized peace talks, which include representatives from the government, numerous rebel factions, as well as civil society and women's groups, are a positive first step, but lasting peace will require the cooperation of unrepresented groups, including IS and Jabhat Fateh al Sham (formerly Jabhat al Nusra). While these groups have justifiably received ample negative media attention, their members are also children of God, and continued demonization of these groups, or of any other party to the conflict is ultimately an impediment to true, lasting, and just peace. Indeed, their continued exclusion from the peace process guarantees their continued dependence on violence. Outside actors, including the United States, can play an important supportive role, but must be careful not to dominate the process. Thus, neither the United States, nor any other outside actor should attempt to impose any preconditions on the

negotiations, and all actors must work toward a complete cessation of hostilities. The international community can contribute by ceasing the provision of arms, munitions, and military training to all parties of the conflict, providing funding and other non-military support only to those individuals and organizations committed to nonviolence and peacebuilding, and supporting a neutral monitoring regime for cease-fires and an eventual peace agreement.

In the immediate future, we must continue to call for significant expansion of funding for humanitarian aid, as well as guarantees of freedom of access and movement for humanitarian workers. There are many faith-based organizations already working on the ground in Syria and in neighboring countries who can make use of expanded financial support from you or your congregation. Many of these organizations already have staff working on the ground providing not only material assistance, but also trauma-healing, training in nonviolent means of change, and support for inter-religious and inter-community dialogue. These efforts are underfunded. Please see the following page for a list of organizations working on the ground in Syria. Your support for one or more of these groups will directly ease the suffering of those still in Syria and the immediate region, and can help lay the infrastructure for the redevelopment of Syria once a peace agreement is in place.



A LITANY FOR PEACE IN SYRIA

Leader: *Lord of Justice and Prince of Peace, we pray for your children in Syria and beyond.*

People: *for the healing of those trapped by war.*

Leader: *for those seeking refuge and passage*

People: *and for those blinded by ideologies of violence.*

Leader: *May we remember that as "there is neither Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female for all are one in Christ Jesus." So also in you, there is neither Arab nor Kurd, Yazidi nor Alawite, combatant nor besieged.*

People: *We pray for all your children, recognizing that those who carry out violence are harmed as well.*

Leader: *We ask for your healing of all wounds, physical and psychological; emotional and moral.*

All: *Lord of Justice and Prince of Peace, we pray for your children. Amen.*

If your congregation does not have the resources on its own, consider reaching out to these congregations to see how you can work in partnership with them or with other congregations, or even to invite an already resettled refugee to come speak to your congregation.

This process generally begins with screening by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, unless the person in question already has family within the United States. After the UN Screening, applicants for resettlement are screened by the Departments of State and Homeland Security. All told, the process takes an average of 12 to 18 months. We must ask our lawmakers not to place additional hurdles in front of those fleeing violence, but instead to work for a more efficient resettlement process.

WELCOMING REFUGEES

NOT WELCOMING REFUGEES

NOT COMMITTING

RECOMMENDED ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING ASSISTANCE IN SYRIA

United Methodist Committee
on Relief: umcor.org/

Health and Human Services
Office of Refugee Resettlement
List of Resettlement Agencies:
[acf.hhs.gov/orr/state-programs-annual-overview](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/state-programs-annual-overview)

SAMPLE LETTERS

Dear Congressperson/Senator _____ ,

As a Christian and as one of your constituents, I am writing to urge you to ask the State Department not to seek to impose preconditions on Syrian peace negotiations sponsored by the United Nations, and to oppose such imposition by other parties. A durable peace in Syria will depend on accords being reached by the broadest possible representation of the Syrian people acting independently of the interests and pressures of foreign powers. Further, I ask you to support expansion of funding for humanitarian aid within Syria, as well as the expansion of access for humanitarian aid workers already on the ground. Relief to those trapped by violence is a moral imperative. Finally, I ask you to welcome and support an increase in the number of refugees resettling in the United States through a more efficient yet still secure screening process. The Refugee Resettlement process is already safe and rigorous; those fleeing violence do not need any more hurdles placed in their path.

Grace and Peace,

Dear Governor _____ ,

As a Christian and a resident of [YOUR STATE HERE], I am writing to urge you to welcome refugees from Syria to our state. Most refugees being resettled in the United States have already faced a year or more of scrutiny and screening, in addition to the events which caused them to flee home in the first place. Even for the many who want to return home, it may be years before that becomes possible. We have a moral obligation to care for those in need, and hope you will ensure that we are able to provide a warm and gracious welcome to those coming to [YOUR STATE HERE].

Grace and Peace,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Vaughan served as a Summer Fellow in the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., in 2016. Rob has previously served as a PC(USA) Young Adult Volunteer in Northern Ireland (2009–2010) and Kenya (2012–2013), and earned his Master of Divinity from Union Presbyterian Seminary in 2014. He is currently pursuing a master's degree at The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, where he focuses on religious peacebuilding. Rob is a Candidate for Ordination in the PC(USA), under care of the Presbytery of the James, and a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, VA.

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