



Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Secretary of State Kerry
Department of State
District of Columbia 20500
Aug. 29, 2013

Dear Secretary Kerry,

As the national conference of men's religious institutes in the Catholic Church, we recognize the challenge of the present moment in Syria. Yet, **we see a great opportunity for the U.S. to interrupt the interactions of hostility by taking the initiative to re-imagine accountability primarily in the form of increasing mutual understanding, empathy and peacemaking.**

We encourage you to consider these options:

- 1) **Diplomatic Focus:** Now more than ever is it time to re-invigorate the plans for a peace conference. Because "red-lines" are crossed, we must signal to the world the urgency and our willingness to lead the effort for a peace conference. Thus, work closely and consistently with Russia, the UN, and other key regional actors, including Iran to make this happen. We particularly encourage negotiations with Assad without setting preconditions for negotiations to take place, such as political prisoner releases or Assad agreeing to step down ahead of time. These objectives can still occur, but there is too much death and suffering from over 1.2 million refugees, mostly women and children, to continue the status quo and to stall on negotiations. Key civil society actors, especially from the Local Coordinating Committees, Democratic Civil Alliance, and religious communities should be included in the negotiations. Determining broader accountability mechanisms for all war crimes should be included as part of this process.
- 2) **Resist the Temptation of fueling the fire with more violence:** In the spirit of Martin Luther King on this 50th anniversary and even more recently of Antoinette Tuff, interrupt the interactions of hostility. The notion that a military strike as a form of punishment will deter or help the situation is gravely mistaken and extremely dangerous. It will only increase the hostility, the anger, the death, and the violence. Assad will not "learn" a lesson this way. He will only harden and increase hostilities. The armed resistance will also take any military strike by the U.S. as a sign to increase their hostilities.
- 3) **Explore restorative justice responses:** The way to teach Assad, others in his regime, or anyone else involved in such hostile violence a lesson about their behavior is to set up processes of real accountability that lean toward mutual understanding, empathy, human needs, and shared plans for restitution, protection, and healing. For example, regarding the most recent atrocity and UN investigation one might imagine setting up initial dialogue or peacemaking circles with

trained facilitators. Participants could include family members of those killed, members of the Assad government, of the armed resistance, of local community organizers, etc. Out of such circles, plans for healing and broader accountability might be developed. These might take place outside of Syria if need be. There may be local versions of restorative practices that could be drawn on. If available, supporting local civil society members in facilitating these practices may be a better option. These small-scale efforts today would provide the groundwork for larger-scale efforts later after the violence subsides. Groups such as Catholic Relief Services and Cure Violence are already engaged in similar initiatives with Syrians. The ICC may also be a useful resource, *when* enhanced by restorative justice measures.

- 4) **Disrupt the supply of arms:** Press Saudi and Qatar to participate in drawing down their supply of weapons to the armed resistance. This will help collaboration with Russia and Iran to simultaneously draw down arms provisions to Assad. If Russia does not cooperate, it may be time to withdraw some economic cooperation with Russia. Further, empirical research is clear that violent revolution not only cultivates other habits of violence and is less effective in achieving short-term political goals, but also very rarely leads to a durable democracy.¹ Thus, it is a *false premise to simply think that by increasing such violence to “punish,” or to gain military equity or advantage, negotiations will likely lead to a durable democracy, much less a just peace.*
- 5) **Create Peace Zones:** Support deploying unarmed civilian peacekeeping forces to areas with Syrians committed to or on the verge of peace. These might be NGO’s, UN, or IGO’s. These will help shift the dynamic in a concrete way on the ground, particularly when complemented with other elements such as the suggestions above.

We hope you will consider these seriously and make choices to live out more transformative forms of engaging conflict. You’re in our prayers.

With Hope,



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¹ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, “Why Civilian Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” Columbia University Press, 2011. Maria now works in the US Dept. of State’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization.