

Holy Wisdom

Peace: Showing that Others Matter!

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Publication of the Syrian Orthodox Church in America on United Nations Affairs. In fulfilling the UN Mission of SOCA, both Orthodoxy and Ecumenism are involved. SOCA is an NGO associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information. This publication is disseminated to the entire membership of the Church throughout the world on a quarterly basis. Please bring this information to the attention of your parishioners and all those under your care. The Earth is holy and a manifestation of God. Pray for peace and the UN.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: It is necessary through the collaboration of NGOs to raise awareness among communities as we promote peace. If you will, the need for community consciousness is a way we can connect parties and others. It is important at this time that all parties begin to realize that they are a part of a larger picture, that they are in it together and they have common concerns. If there is a conflict all parties have contributed to the conflict and they have the power to come together to develop a non-violent intervention to result into a resolution. It is time for us as people to acknowledge that there is something more that exceed our own individual positions and needs. The United Nations, religious institutions and NGO can be an avenue to promote community consciousness to encourage global consciousness, clear and realistic decisions as they promote non-violent solutions to conflicts!

Inside This Issue

| | |
|--|----|
| Our Work at the United Nations | 4 |
| Syria: Briefing on Beseiged Areas | 4 |
| Syria: Special Envoy to Brief on Political Talks | 4 |
| CRNGO Meeting 26 January..... | 7 |
| Minutes and Action for the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN (CRNGO) | 8 |
| Sports as a Development Tool | 11 |
| UNAI and SDSN Join Forces to Advance the Sustainable Development Goals | 11 |
| UN Conference on the Human Rights of Victims of Terrorism 11 Febraury 2016..... | 11 |
| SOCA UN/DPI Representative to Serve as NGO Conference Media Co-Chair for the Fifth Time | 13 |
| Focus on Faith Briefing: “Promoting Peace and Reconciliation to Counter Violent Extremism,” Thursday, February 4, 2016, UN Headquarters | 13 |
| Jimmy Pedros Judo Challenge..... | 14 |
| 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference Website and Registration | 15 |
| Ambassador Anthony DeLuca attended on site Security Council meeting on March 10, 2016 | 15 |
| United Nations Meeting at Baha’i Offices at 866 UN Plaza | 22 |
| Orientation Programme- DPI Associated NGO’s..... | 23 |
| UN DPI/NGO 66 th Conference, “Education for Global Citizenship: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Together, ” Gyeongju, Republic of Korea, May 30-June 1, 2016 | 24 |
| March 8, 2016 , “PLANET 50/50 BY 2030: STEP IT UP FOR GENDER EQUALITY,” The United Nations Observance of International Women’s Day 2016..... | 24 |
| Inside Look at Major UN Actions & Events | 25 |
| Human Rights and the Security Council - An Evolving Role..... | 25 |
| World Interfaith Harmony Week February 1-7, 2016..... | 25 |
| Syria: UN Humanitarian Head and Executive Director of the World Food Programme to Brief on Humanitarian Situation..... | 26 |
| Falling Flat in Syria: How Not to Fight Jihad..... | 26 |
| United Nations Academic Impact Jan-Feb Newsletter | 31 |
| UN Aims to Resettle 480,000 Syrian Refugees | 32 |
| Civil Society speaker selected for opening session pf 22 April Paris Agreement signing ceremony at UNHQ | 32 |
| Religious News from Around the World | 33 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Watch this video and 'wake up' from indifference to persecuted Christians | 33 |
| NRB applauds Secretary Kerry's recognition of ISIS genocide of Christians..... | 34 |
| Other Related News..... | 35 |
| Preventive Priorities Survey: 2016..... | 35 |
| TFF PressInfo 355: The deeper reason Syria negotiations are doomed | 37 |
| Source: | 39 |
| Religious Persecution in the Middle East..... | 39 |
| Suicide bomber targeting Christians kills 70 in Pakistan park | 53 |
| Easter message echoes poignantly true for Iraqi, Syrian refugees..... | 55 |
| Pakistani Christians Demand Protection..... | 62 |
| Growing Islamist drive highlights insecurity of African Christians..... | 64 |

Our Work at the United Nations

Syria: Briefing on Besieged Areas

Tomorrow afternoon (15 January), Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Kyung-Wha Kang will brief the Security Council on the dire humanitarian situation of the 394,000 people living in besieged areas in Syria. No outcome is expected.

France and the UK requested tomorrow's humanitarian briefing, supported by the US and the humanitarian leads, New Zealand and Spain, to follow-up the 11 January briefing on the situation in Madaya, a town besieged by government forces, and where the UN has credible reports of people dying from starvation and being killed by sniper fire or landmines while trying to flee.

Humanitarian convoys entered Madaya on 11 January and Council members will be interested in Kang's ability to share first-hand accounts of the plight of the besieged population as well as the type and amount of aid that has reached the town. Council members will also want OCHA's best possible assessment of the situation in other besieged areas where there are 181,200 people living under government siege, 200,000 besieged by ISIS, and 12,500 by rebel groups. Additionally, Council members will be interested in whether the government has indicated any further willingness to grant access to other besieged areas in eastern Ghouta, Darayya or Rif Damashq.

Some Council members view tomorrow's briefing as a way for Council members to exert pressure on the government to continue to allow humanitarian access to Madaya as well as other hard to reach and besieged areas. Following the 11 January meeting, in comments to the press, New Zealand and Spain said that access to Madaya had to be a start to broader humanitarian access in Syria and not a one-off event. They underscored that humanitarian access is an obligation under international humanitarian law and that sieges with the goal of starvation is a war crime. The P3 also condemned siege tactics by the government in press statements made in their national capacity.

The issue of besieged areas will be raised again on Monday (18 January) when Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura briefs Council members on his preparations for the political talks between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition in Geneva, announced for 25 January. De Mistura is expected to convey that the lifting of government sieges is one of the demands of the opposition to participate in talks.

Source: <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2016/01/syria-briefing-on-besieged-areas-in-syria.php#>

Syria: Special Envoy to Brief on Political Talks

On Monday (18 January), Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura will brief Security Council members in consultations, via video-teleconference, on the preparations for political talks between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition in Geneva, announced for 25 January.

On 18 December 2015, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254, setting out the sequence of events that the international community deems necessary to end the Syrian crisis: UN-mediated political talks, a national ceasefire, and a two-year timeline to achieve a Syrian political transition. The text, agreed by the P5 only hours before the adoption, did not address the role of President Bashar al-Assad. However, some Council members are of the view that the Russian and the US positions on Assad have

quietly moved closer together, in that Assad would have a role in the transition but would not stand for re-election. However, regional and national actors have yet to subscribe to this understanding.

Very little detail has emerged over the last month about what to expect in Geneva. As a result, some Council members expect many questions to be asked during Monday's consultations about the substance, format and participation of the Geneva talks. Council members also expect de Mistura to convey options for confidence-building measures and for ceasefire monitoring that were requested by the Council in resolution 2254. He will also update Council members on his rounds of consultations in Ankara, Damascus, Riyadh and Tehran, as well as his discussions with P5 ambassadors in Geneva, in preparation for the talks.

The talks are expected to be proximity talks that will focus on negotiating a ceasefire and the terms of a political transition. However, not all Council members are satisfied with the preparatory work to forge a unified opposition, facilitated by Saudi Arabia. There are likely to be questions about whether the opposition delegation will include members who are not a part of the Riyadh opposition platform. This was a prominent issue during the negotiation of resolution 2254, when Russia opposed any language that would be seen as Council recognition of the opposition bloc's High Negotiations Committee based in Riyadh. Russia has stated publicly that a group based in Riyadh cannot speak on behalf of the entire Syrian opposition and suggested that members of the Syrian opposition who have met in Cairo and Moscow should be included in the UN-facilitated talks. Egypt too has concerns that the opposition delegation may not be sufficiently representative. Council members may also ask about the work done to include women and civil society in the political process.

Many Council members are likely to have questions about the work being facilitated by Jordan to determine which actors in Syria should be identified as terrorist groups, in addition to those already designated by the Security Council, such as Al-Qaida, ISIS, and Al-Nusra Front. Such groups would be barred from participation in the Geneva talks and could be targeted by counter-terrorism operations. Agreement on such a list has implications for the Council's own work, as the International Syria Support Group has indicated that the Security Council should designate and impose sanctions on identified terrorist groups. However, at press time, it seems there was still no agreement on such a list.

Some members of the International Syria Support Group have insisted that Islamist opposition groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam should be included on the terrorist list, but this is unlikely as these groups are part of the Riyadh platform. Another grey area is how to deal with opposition groups which are not terrorist groups but may cooperate tactically with groups like Al-Nusra Front. There was also strong disagreement among members of the International Syria Support Group over which other parties to include, such as some Kurdish forces and the Iranian Al-Quds Force.

Regarding a ceasefire, it seems the option for ceasefire monitoring is not particularly controversial. Most Council members are aware that the UN is planning a "light touch" option based out of Damascus whereby national counterparts call in violations that could be investigated by a small group of UN personnel. If future security conditions permit, there might be a strengthened international role.

A more controversial issue on which many Council members will want de Mistura's views is what the negotiating parameters for a ceasefire might look like. This was another important issue during the negotiations of resolution 2254, when France placed a great deal of importance on the Council expressing support for a national ceasefire. The concern some Council members have is whether the UN

might place too much emphasis on the utility of local ceasefires, which have been criticised for a number of reasons: they are often seen as surrenders after siege and starvation tactics are imposed by the government on rebel-held areas; they benefit the government by allowing them to redirect their forces to achieve military objectives elsewhere; and they have often been accompanied by massive military build-ups, disappearances of rebel fighters and population exchanges.

Council members will also be curious to hear de Mistura's proposals for confidence-building measures. The government has demanded a list of names of the opposition delegation—however, that is unlikely to be shared until after invitations to the Geneva talks are sent and confirmations are received. The opposition has been vocal about its demands for the government to lift sieges, release detainees, and stop indiscriminate attacks—particularly aerial bombardment. Council members have mixed views about the opposition demands. Some Council members are cautious about treating obligations under international law as bargaining chips in a political process. Other members share that view, but also believe that if such demands are met as part of a larger political process it would ameliorate the dire humanitarian situation civilians are facing, and an enhanced protection environment would create a positive momentum for negotiations. A smaller set of Council members view these demands as unacceptable pre-conditions to the opposition's participation in the Geneva talks.

Finally, Council members will want de Mistura's assessment of the commitment of Iran and of Saudi Arabia to the political process following the Saudi execution of Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent attack on Saudi diplomatic premises in Iran.

Council members are unwilling to speculate on whether there has been enough progress for the talks to get underway on 25 January, only commenting that the UN is working as hard as it can to prepare for the talks and that there is a unanimity in the Council on the importance of getting a political process in place.

Source: <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2016/01/syria-special-envoy-to-brief-on-political-talks.php#>

PHILIPPINES: POLITICAL SECURITY, RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM & SECULARISM



VENUE:

Church Center for the UN
10th Floor Conference Room
777 United Nations Plaza
(Corner 44th St. and First Avenue)
Manhattan, New York City

DATE:

26 January 2015, Tuesday

TIME:

1:15 PM to 3:00 PM

CRNGO BUSINESS MEETING is from 2:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The Bureau will present a revision of the CRNGO By-Laws, program and communication plans, a new CRNGO logo, and other business, presided over by **Rev. Liberato “Levi” Bautista**, President, CRNGO, Assistant General Secretary for UN and International Affairs, Church and Society—The United Methodist Church, and Immediate Past President of CoNGO (Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations).

The **Committee of Religious NGOs at the U.N. (CRNGO)** is pleased to invite you to a **SUBSTANTIVE BRIEFING** featuring high level government officials of the Republic of the Philippines who will address intersections of politics and religion.

“Religious Extremism and Secularism: Common Issues”

ALBERTO A. BERNARDO, CPA, Esq., PhD

Deputy Executive Secretary, Office of the President of the Republic of the Philippines, and Head, Office of the President Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns.

Faith-Driven Responses to Shifting Political-Security Realities”

CARLOS G. SERAPIO, Esq.

Founder, Magnificat Movement, and Religious and Indigenous NGO Representative to the Office of the President--Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns, Republic of the Philippines.

MODERATOR:

Ambassador Leslie Gatan

Alternate UN Representative, United Religions Initiative.

Minutes and Action for the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN (CRNGO)

Dear Members of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN (CRNGO),

Below you will find the minutes from the most recent meeting of the CRNGO. But first, you will find a link and request regarding the new By-Laws of the CRNGO. Lastly, attached is (for the final time) the flier for the World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Warmly,

Daniel

BY-LAWS:

Please use this link to view and comment on the current draft of the by-laws for the CRNGO. Instructions for commenting are at the top of the document that will open when you click this link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eMBi45xFbGnSgQX8_eq35m_Py6nHZYTqKrEb84cidzo/edit?usp=sharing

MINUTES

The minutes have the action items at the top, and the full minutes below!

ACTION ITEMS

By-Laws

- Daniel will write by 29 January to the members of the committee with a link to the current draft of the by-laws for comment.
- There will be at least 30 days of open comment for members of the CRNGO on the new by-laws using the googledocs application (instructions on how to use this will be sent out).

Programming

- Programming for the year will be called: "Valuing the frontlines so no one is truly left behind: The moral, ethical and spiritual import of the Sustainable Development Goals."
- We will call on CRNGOs to volunteer religious traditions who will be featured to speak side-by-side with a member state. We will further suggest that speakers provide their written contributions to the CRNGO so that we can put together a manuscript contribution to the international community.
- This will also be posted on our website.

Communications:

- Request made to take photos and send them to Religiousngo@gmail.com for posting on the website (at, e.g. World Interfaith Harmony Week).
- Logos were voted on and it was clear that the logo attached herewith is the winner!

Upcoming Events:

- A request was made to disseminate information about the Feb 3 WIHW event to all our networks so we can demonstrate how important this is (flier attached)!

- If you have upcoming events, please let us (religiousngo@gmail.com) know and we can e-mail them out!

Comprehensive Minutes from Jan 26, 2016 CRNGO Meeting:

The substantive portion will be minuted with the written works of the speakers as well as the flier and the attached photo.

The business portion of the minutes reads as follows:

On 26 January, 2016 the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN (CRNGO) held its first business meeting of the year. The bulk of this meeting was dedicated to reporting on the work of the sub-committees of the Executive Bureau and the future direction of the CRNGO.

By-laws Sub-Committee:

The Bureau has worked to update and complete the by-laws from 2008 to be sufficient for today's CRNGO.

Daniel will write by 29 January to the members of the committee with a link to the current draft of the by-laws for comment.

There will be at least 30 days of open comment for members of the CRNGO on the new by-laws using the googledocs application (instructions on how to use this will be sent out).

At the next monthly meeting there will be a revision of the by-laws which possibly could be voted on - or, if there are many modifications, the by-laws will be open for another 30 days for comment.

Programming Sub-Committee:

The CRNGO agreed in December to focus on the moral and ethical import of the SDGs.

What we would like to do for the whole year is: "**Valuing the front lines so no one is truly left behind: The moral, ethical and spiritual import of the Sustainable Development Goals.**"

For the next monthly meetings we will have briefings where we will endeavor to bring a Member State, a UN staff, and then any one of the Member Organizations of the CRNGO to present on a certain dimension of the SDGs.

We will call on CRNGOs to volunteer religious traditions who will be featured to speak side-by-side with a member state. This was met with approval (SO DECIDED)

It would be especially wonderful if all the speakers would be willing to bring a written manuscript which could become part of a written contribution to the UN Community.

This should also be put on the website.

Communications Sub-Committee:

Web site: Process has been stalled for a little bit. However, with the contributions from this meeting, there is now motivation to continue with the website.

Request made to take photos and send them to Religiousngo@gmail.com for posting on the website (at, e.g. World Interfaith Harmony Week).

E-mail list: let religiousngo@gmail.com know if something is going right/wrong with the e-mail list. **If you have upcoming events, please let us (religiousngo@gmail.com) know and we can e-mail them out!**

Logo: **Logos were voted on and it was clear that the logo attached herewith is the winner!**

Membership Sub-Committee:

We are working to grow the Membership! We have a list of NGOs registered to the UN, but we are looking for volunteers to help cull that list for those who we think might be interested in joining this group.

Treasury Sub-Committee:

It was reported that we have roughly \$2,400 in our bank account at the moment. We have paid off our last remaining debt.

A call for people to join the CRNGO was made (and the calendar of membership was clarified - September-August to match the GA cycle).

Upcoming events:

The CRNGO is co-sponsoring two events: one is the 2nd Annual Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs Symposium taking place on 1 February at the UN.

The other is the World Interfaith Harmony Week Celebration taking place on 3 February at the UN.

A request was made to disseminate information about the Feb 3 WIHW event to all our networks so we can demonstrate how important this is (flier attached)!

If you made it this far, please e-mail me and I will feel validated :)!

--

Secretary

Committee of Religious NGOs

Sports as a Development Tool

Tuesday, 16 February 2016

High-level meeting on “The value of hosting mega sport events as social, economic and environmental sustainable development tool” (co-organized by the Permanent Missions of Germany, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and Tunisia, and the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace)

Time: 10:00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.

Venue: Trusteeship Council Chamber

[All are invited. For further information, please contact Mr. Ahmed Mohamed J. Al-Thani, Permanent Mission of Qatar (e-mail ajalthani@mofa.gov.qa; tel. 1 (212) 486-9335, ext.887).]

UNAI and SDSN Join Forces to Advance the Sustainable Development Goals

To mobilize action in support of achieving the SDGs, United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) have announced a strategic collaboration to activate universities, research institutions and NGOs to advance teaching, applied research and problem solving around the Sustainable Development Goals.

Benefits:

- Sharing resources
- A forum for members to discuss specific issues of research and policy relevant to the UN’s objectives
- Accelerate the process to achieve the SDGs

About SDSN: The SDSN is an association of institutions whose aim is to mobilize global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical problem solving for sustainable development, including supporting the implementation of the SDGs at local, national, and global levels.

Join SDSN: <http://unsdsn.org/>

Read statement: <http://bit.ly/1PKtGvU>.

Follow SDSN: <https://www.facebook.com/UNSDSN> Twitter: @UNSDSN

UN Conference on the Human Rights of Victims of Terrorism 11 Febraury 2016



United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre

Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) Office



INVITATION

WATCH IT LIVE AT: <http://webtv.un.org>

UN Conference on the Human Rights of **Victims** of Terrorism

Thursday, 11 February 2016 10:00 am to 6:00 pm
Conference Room 3, Conference Building
United Nations Headquarters, New York

IMPORTANT

Please register at http://bit.ly/RSVPVictims_Terrorism by noon on Friday 5 February 2016.

PROGRAMME OF THE CONFERENCE

- 10:00** Welcoming Remarks and Opening Session
- 11:00** **SESSION I: The obligation on public authorities to use reasonable care in preventing and responding to acts of terrorism**
How can States take appropriate steps to safeguard the lives of its individuals within their jurisdiction based on recognised international, regional and national standards in preventing and responding to acts of terrorism?
- 12:00** **SESSION II: The rights of victims of terrorism within the criminal justice process**
How can the rights of victims within the criminal justice process be strengthened and improved, whilst ensuring a fair and public hearing before an independent and impartial civilian court for suspected terrorists?
- 13:00** LUNCH
- 15:00** **SESSION III: Reparation for acts of terrorism**
How has The United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law been implemented so far? How have these measures helped support victims of terrorism?
- 16:00** **SESSION IV: The role of victims in preventing violent extremism**
What role can victims play in countering the narratives of violent extremist groups and in addressing their messages of hate?
- 17:00** Closing Remarks

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy recognises the importance of supporting, and showing solidarity, with victims of terrorism. It also acknowledges that victims play an important role in preventing the spread of terrorism and that they bring a vital voice to the counter-narrative debate. By gathering experts from civil society, academia as well as regional and international organisations, this Conference will examine how States can strengthen their national legislation, procedures and practices, based on the report on the "Framework Principles for Securing the Human rights of Victim of Terrorism" (A/HRC/20/14) by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

The Conference is organised by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) under the auspices of the CTITF Working Group on Supporting and Highlighting Victims of Terrorism.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

www.un.org/victimsofterrorism or send us an e-mail: uncct@un.org

SOCA UN/DPI Representative to Serve as NGO Conference Media Co-Chair for the Fifth Time



Anne Marie Riccitelli, Litt. D., UN/DPI SOCA Representative, is serving as Media Co-Chair of the 66th annual United Nations Department of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organization Conference to be held in the City of Gyeongju, Republic of Korea from May 30-June 1, 2016. The Conference title is “Education for Global Citizenship: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Together.” The Conference will take place in the first year of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by United Nations (UN) Member States in September 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure human rights and prosperous and fulfilling lives for all, as part of a new sustainable development agenda to be achieved by 2030. Dr. Riccitelli brings to the Media Co-Chair position four terms in this position for the UN/DPI Conferences of 2007 (NY), 2008 (Paris), 2009 (Mexico City) and 2010 (Melbourne). Dr. Riccitelli has over thirty years’ experience in media relations, having worked in editorial at Hearst Magazines (Harper’s Bazaar), and as a spokesperson for ABC-TV (24 years) and TimeWarner. She was appointed SOCA Representative to UN/DPI in 2005.

Focus on Faith Briefing: “Promoting Peace and Reconciliation to Counter Violent Extremism,” Thursday, February 4, 2016, UN Headquarters

The NGO Relations and Advocacy Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information started the **Focus on Faith Series** as part of the weekly briefings for the NGO community at the UN in 2008. This series within the DPI NGO briefings was created out of demand from the NGO Community, as many NGOs affiliated with the UN over the years have created committees and sub-committees of faith-based NGOs, religious tolerance and dialogue and interfaith groups. The primary focus of the series is to explore the work of Faith-Based Organizations and how their work ties with the mission of the UN. Moderator Jeffrey Brez stressed the need for the UN webcast viewers to submit questions live to the speakers as a way of involving a larger audience. Father Roger Landry, a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts (USA), is attaché at the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN. He called attention to the fact that “In the 20th Century there were more mass murders in all history committed not by religious fanatics, but by secularisms.” Matthew Hodes, Director of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, a special initiative of the Secretary General, cited “Faith-based initiatives, such as the Sant’Egidio Society, which worked to broker peace and end the civil war in Mozambique.” Edward J. Flynn, Senior Human Rights Officer at the Security Council’s Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate at UN Headquarters in New York, suggested that “Preventing religious extremism required a broad based comprehensive approach in which intervention is based on religious

principles.” Azza Karam, PhD., Senior Advisor on Culture and Social Development at the UN Population Fund said: “Religion and culture are not two distinct things. Religion is part of heritage and culture.” She added: “Women of faith have a role to play in mediation.” Rev. Chloe Breyer, Director of The Interfaith Center of New York, said “Franciscans during the Crusades going to the top of Minarets to pray, are an example of religious extremism of that time.” Rev. Victor H. Kazanjian Jr., Executive Director of the United Nations Religions Initiative (URI), cited the “Millions of faith based workers who go largely unrecognized, the young people leading grass roots movements, the religious communities working together to reduce the potential for violence.” Attended and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA UN DPI Representative and Co-Chair of the Media Committee for the 66th UN DPI NGO Conference.

Jimmy Pedros Judo Challenge

Date: Saturday, February 13th, 2016

Location: Wakefield Memorial High School, 60 Farm Street, Wakefield, MA 01880

Joseph Cannizzo-Senior Elite 66kg Division -3rd Place

1st Place-Georgia 2nd Place-Canada 3rd Place-USA

SOCA United Nations Youth Representative Joseph Cannizzo participated in an Judo event which featured Elite level competitors from Russia, Italy, South Africa, Georgia, Canada and The United States. This was example of how sport can help achieve peace and cultural diversity. In the past, sport has allowed countries to compete against each other in a respectful, mutually appreciative platform all while providing entertainment and fun for everyone. (by J.C)



66th UN DPI/NGO Conference Website and Registration

Dear NGO Colleagues,

We are happy to inform you that the [Website for the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference](#) is now live! While it is in its preliminary stages, we invite you to visit it regularly for the most updated information on the Conference.

The URL for the website is: <http://outreach.un.org/ngorelations/conference-2016/>

In addition, we are also very excited to inform you that **REGISTRATION** for the conference is open.

Please make sure that you read the registration instructions/procedures before you register.

If you have any questions or comments on the website or the registration process, please contact us at undpingo@un.org.

Please contribute to the conversation on all social media platforms, and follow us for updated information using the Conference hashtag **#UNNGO2016**

We look forward to working with you on this incredible conference, and hope to see you in Gyeongju this May!

Sincerely

Ambassador Anthony DeLuca attended on site Security Council meeting on March 10, 2016

Ambassador Anthony DeLuca attended on site Security Council meeting on March 10, 2016 dealing with United Nations peacekeeping operations Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and heard and evaluated the presentation of the Secretary General and each member of the Security Council plus Pakistan and India.

Herein are attached two significant statements of US Ambassador to UN, Samantha Power and an email of Ambassador DeLuca to Power regarding preventive measures specifically psychological screening.

Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a UN Security Council Meeting on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in UN Peacekeeping Operations, March 10, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General, for your briefing today, for the important report upon which it is based, and for your determined leadership in tackling what you have rightly called “a cancer in our system.” We know that you have faced considerable pushback against your efforts to bring to light these horrific abuses and to ensure that those responsible are held accountable. And we thank you for holding firm.

Let me begin by reading a quote: “The Security Council is deeply concerned with the allegations of sexual misconduct by United Nations peacekeeping personnel...The Security Council... recognizes the shared responsibility of the Secretary-General and all Member States to take every measure within their purview to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by all categories of personnel in United Nations peacekeeping missions to enforce United Nations standards of conduct in that regard. The Security Council reiterates the importance of ensuring that sexual exploitation and abuse are properly investigated and appropriately punished.”

Those words were spoken in this chamber nearly 11 years ago – in May 2005 – by the Security Council President at the time. She was speaking on behalf of the Council at its first-ever meeting on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by UN peacekeepers. Like today's meeting, that session had been convened following the release of a report commissioned by the Secretary-General at that time, Kofi Annan, in order to lay out a strategy for eliminating the scourge of such abuses in peacekeeping operations. The report, as many of you know, followed a series of disturbing allegations of SEA in 2004, not unlike the ones that have surfaced since last year.

Yet, as we all know, despite the commitment made by this Council over a decade ago to address this problem, the scourge of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers persists. According to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's report released last week, 69 allegations of SEA were levied against uniformed and civilian personnel serving in peacekeeping missions last year – a 20 percent increase in reported violations from the previous year. More than half of the allegations in peacekeeping operations involve rape or sexual abuse of children. And these are just the cases we know about; as Special Representative of the Secretary-General Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, who took over as head of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic last August, has said – the cases reported are likely just the “tip of the iceberg.”

We have long known that one of the most effective ways to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation is to send a clear message that perpetrators will be held accountable. So it is deeply alarming that, according to the Secretary-General's report, out of 69 allegations of SEA in 2015, in only 17 instances were investigations completed by January 31, 2016. Seventeen out of 69. And in only one of those cases did a country report to the UN that it had punished a perpetrator in response to a substantiated allegation. One out of 69. And the perpetrator in that case was found to have engaged in a sexually exploitive relationship; as punishment, he was suspended for nine whole days – nine days.

Now, some have argued that this discussion has no place in the UN Security Council, implying that they do not think sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers has an impact on international peace and security. They are mistaken. In addition to being a heinous abuse, SEA erodes the discipline of military and police units, and undermines the confidence of local communities in peacekeepers – both of which are critical to fulfilling UN Security Council mandates. More broadly, when those entrusted with being protectors become perpetrators, it undermines the credibility of peacekeeping missions everywhere, as well as the legitimacy of the UN writ large – and along with it, it undermines our ability to address effectively the serious threats of our time.

I have listened really hard to those who think that this Council has no role to play in overseeing discussions about what we do next on curbing sexual abuse and exploitations by peacekeepers. But I have to say, I honestly do not understand the argument – I don't. It is this Council that sends peacekeepers into conflict areas, because we believe their presence is essential to promoting international peace and security.

We deem it our responsibility as a Council to oversee every part of their missions – how many soldiers and police to send, what their mandate is, when they can use force. And we give them clear mandates to protect civilians. So let me pose the question this way to the skeptics:

When governments attack civilians, it is our job.

When armed groups, non-state actors, attack civilians, it is our job.

When terrorists attack civilians, it is our job.

So why in the world, when the UN's own peacekeepers are the ones attacking civilians – when peacekeepers commit the sickening crime of raping children – is it someone else's job? Explain that. Why is that the exception?

The Security Council cannot have responsibility for protecting civilians against all threats, from all forces, except those whom we directly oversee.

As we all know, a crucial part of accountability is transparency. The UN, its Member States, and the Security Council need to know when soldiers and police are accused of abusing the privilege of wearing the blue helmet. We need to know whether those allegations are being adequately investigated and, where appropriate, punished. And victims and their communities – imagine if it was a member of our family – they need to know that justice is being served. Yet the opaqueness of the existing system has made it virtually impossible for any of us to know these things. All too often, we don't know whether investigations have been opened. And even when we know investigations are ongoing, we don't know whether they are being carried out promptly, thoroughly, or impartially. Without basic facts, it is impossible to enforce a zero-tolerance policy. It's no coincidence that we've had a zero-tolerance policy for a long time, and yet, sexual abuse and exploitation allegations have risen – it's not a coincidence. There's not sufficient accountability to our own policy.

One of the most eloquent justices who ever served on the United States Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis, once said, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." Yet allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers too often are allowed to remain in the darkness, where the rot they cause continues to spread – to the detriment of the entire enterprise of peacekeeping.

That is why it is so important, Mr. Secretary-General, that your report for the first time brings to light the nationality of the personnel who face credible allegations of SEA. And it is why we commend the UN for starting to post on its website new allegations of SEA – including the date the report was received, information about the nationality of the accused, and whether the alleged victims are minors. It is through such reporting that we know that, in the first three months of this year alone, 26 additional allegations of SEA have been reported – a horrifying number.

We can and must do more to shine a bright light on this enduring problem. A place to start would be providing additional information on the status of investigations. For example, while we know that the majority of investigations into allegations of SEA from 2015 are "pending," we do not know when those investigations were opened. This data is crucial for gauging whether countries are acting in a timely manner.

Now, some countries have adamantly opposed this push for greater transparency, in particular the practice of identifying the nationality of peacekeepers credibly alleged to have committed such abuses. They claim that it unfairly singles out troop and police contributing countries that are putting

themselves at risk in some of the most difficult environments around the world – police and troop-contributing countries whose service we commend.

Let me be very, very clear: The vast majority of the 91,000 troops and 13,000 police in UN peacekeeping missions serve honorably and with courage, putting their lives on the line every day to protect people in countries very far from their own. They do not commit sexual abuse, nor do they turn a blind eye to it. And most troop-contributing countries are serious about holding to account soldiers and police from their forces who would perpetrate such abuses, recognizing that impunity for SEA undermines the effectiveness of their troop contingents as a whole, whether they are serving in a UN mission or any other mission.

Yet this fact, the fact that so many serve so honorably – the vast, vast majority – is all the more reason that troop-contributing countries and police contributing countries should want to bring these cases to light, to investigate them, to hold accountable those who have committed abuses. Those serving honorably are the ones who have the greatest incentive to prevent the sickening acts of a few from tarnishing the noble service of so many.

When peacekeepers commit sexual exploitation and abuse with impunity, the fault not only lies with the peacekeepers who commit these deplorable acts, or the commanders who look the other way, or the countries that fail to conduct proper investigations. The blame rests on all of us – including the countries that fail to adequately train peacekeepers to prevent and root out these problems; the Member States that fail to press troop and police contributing countries to hold perpetrators accountable; the UN institutions that fail to report on the magnitude of the problem or repatriate units when countries prove unable or unwilling to investigate credible allegations of abuse. This is an all-systems failure.

Let me just give one example. According to the UN, there were seven separate allegations of SEA committed by peacekeepers from the Democratic Republic of Congo in a single mission, MINUSCA, over the course of 2015; one allegation was reported in January, one in February, four in August, and one more in September. The majority of the alleged victims of these abuses were kids. As these allegations continued to add up, members of this Council – including the United States – pushed for repatriation of the unit. In the meantime, more and more victims continued to come forward. In January of this year – of 2016 – there were three more credible allegations of SEA against the same unit, followed by five more in February. Think about that: eight credible allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse reported against a single group of peacekeepers in just two months. And in seven of those instances, the alleged victims were children. How could we let that happen? All of us – how could we let that happen?

In late February, the entire contingent from DRC was repatriated – the first time the UN has ever repatriated an entire contingent for sexual exploitation and abuse. It was the right thing to do; it sends a clear message to all countries that there will be consequences for failing to address this serious problem. But it should never have taken so long. The Security Council was told the contingent would be repatriated. But this repatriation was delayed for operational reasons. That is unacceptable. The experience should force us all to ask: What if those soldiers had been sent home sooner? How many kids could have been spared suffering unspeakable violations that no child should ever have to endure, and that they will have to carry with them for the rest of their lives?

We have to do better by these victims. This means not only securing justice, but also ensuring they receive the care that they need and deserve in the aftermath of such crimes, both in the short-term and in the long-term. The Secretary-General has proposed a trust fund to support special services for victims, which would withhold payments from repatriated individuals and direct the funds to victims. We should move swiftly together to create this fund.

In closing, let me just share the story of one of those alleged victims, a 14-year-old girl who lives in Bambari, in the Central African Republic. She recently told a human rights organization that, in December 2015, she was walking along a path near a peacekeeper base when she was accosted by an armed soldier, whose uniform she recognized as the one worn by peacekeepers from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She said, “He slapped me in the face and made me continue to walk on the path...then he ripped off my clothes and used them to tie my hands behind my back. He threw me on the ground, placed his gun to the side and got on top of me to rape me. When he was done he just left. I had to put my clothes on and I went home.”

In 2005, the author of the Secretary-General’s first report on this problem, Prince Zeid – who, of course, is now the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights – warned the Council in this chamber, “Sexual exploitation and abuse would carry with it the most serious consequences for the future of peacekeeping if we were to prove ourselves incapable of solving this problem.” The same holds true to this day. And the profound consequences of failing to solve this – for peacekeeping missions, for the UN, and for so many individuals like that 14-year-old girl in Banbari – continue to add up. We knew how to fix the problem then. We know how to fix the problem now. We cannot wait any longer. The United States has tabled a Security Council resolution to take our responsibility addressing this grave issue. As an immediate step, we urge all Council members to support it. I thank you.

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Response by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a UN Security Council Meeting on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in UN Peacekeeping Operations, March 10, 2016

Thank you, and I know I had the floor at length earlier so I will try to be as brief as possible. But, like the Secretary-General, because of the gravity of what we’re discussing here and the insufficiency of what we have mustered as an international community up to this point, I think it’s worth coming back to some of the points of convergence around the table here – but also the few points of divergence, which I don’t think we should paper over.

First, just in response to something my Egyptian colleague mentioned – that is on the question of the number of cases – I actually just want to seek clarification because, at least as interpreted, there was a reference to initially several dozen cases and then only a handful of cases. And I want to just state for the record it is more than several dozen cases, certainly well more than a handful of cases. We have more than 69 allegations in the year 2015, we have 26 already in 2016 – that is people coming forward and reporting cases. But we have no idea how pervasive this problem is. We have no idea.

As everyone, I think, believes one case is one too many, but I think we need to be very, very careful given the details that exist in your report. We need to all at least mobilize around the extent of the

problem that has managed to be documented – at least. I suspect if there was better reporting in more places, unfortunately, you would likely see more allegations being brought forward. But that’s a supposition; let’s just at least have a shared understanding of the facts that have been presented by the Secretary-General.

Second, and a number of Council members made this point, we totally agree that there cannot be collective guilt or national stigmatization. I think that is extremely important – I think all of us tried to make that point in our statements. But that is why individual responsibility and individual accountability, individual punishment – if warranted – is so important. And it’s not happening, by and large – and I’ll come back to the Secretary-General’s statistics in a second, but the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again – or not do the same thing over and over again – and expect a different result. The system that has been in place has not had the desired effect, in two respects: the allegations keep being brought forward – and with a lot of documentation, photos of babies who have been born, DNA test that prove this and that. I mean, this is happening – this is a phenomenon. But moreover, where the individual perpetrators of these crimes are not being punished back in their home countries. Now Mr. Secretary-General, I really particularly appreciated your extemporaneous comments here at the end, and absolutely the UN and individuals who serve the UN have to do much more. But courts martial processes, courts – these are not something you have in this building. So we have to support you as Member States. You could do everything that you have set out to do in your report, which you do and the people who work for the UN must, but you need us. What you do is totally necessary and not at all sufficient. So we have got to make changes, we can’t just say the same things we’ve been saying for a decade and expect that the outcomes are going to be different, that there’s going to be less sexual abuse or more accountability in capitals.

Third – and I have six points, forgive – Egypt has said that the General Assembly is the competent body to deal with what my friend and colleague rightly denounced as these horrific crimes. We, the United States, we are part of the General Assembly. We would welcome constructive action by the General Assembly. But the General Assembly has had 11 years, since our last open Security Council meeting on this topic, to take more aggressive, constructive steps that might have made more of a dent in this problem. What we in the General Assembly have done has not yet worked. The facts are the facts. The allegations are the allegations. The record of inaction by and large in capitals is a record that shames us all, including those of us that have very strong bilateral relationships with a lot of the countries – we haven’t been as aggressive as we’ve needed to be. But what’s hard about hearing this jurisdictional argument again and again about how this belongs somewhere else is that in the C34, Egypt has consistently refused to support language welcoming or taking note of the Secretary-General’s report. So somewhere these steps have to be taken and the Security Council has waited a long time for those steps to be taken, and a long time for the kind of consensus we need in the C34 to give the Secretary-General the support he needs and to be more aggressive, commensurate to the gravity of this set of crimes. Which, again, if it were happening to our kids we would not be having jurisdictional fights like this. We would not – we wouldn’t think about “oh no, it doesn’t belong here, it doesn’t belong.” And yet, because it’s somebody else’s kids, we want to push this off somewhere else, where we know that in that body there will be a stalemate and gridlock and we will be in the same world we’ve been in, which is a world that is not working for these victims.

Fourth, several countries have, again, implied – and this is related – that the Security Council should stand down. And I just have to repeat, as a matter of logic – maybe I’m just, you know, not smart

enough to follow like all the jurisdictional hijinks that go on here at the UN. But, in areas where peacekeepers are deployed, we the Security Council are responsible and try to take action when armies rape women and kids. We the Security Council see ourselves as responsible when non-state actors and militia rape women and kids, or men for that matter. We see ourselves as responsible when terrorists – again, who pose a grave threat to international peace and security – rape women and kids. How is it possible that we can argue that when our own peacekeepers – the people we have sent into the field – rape women and children, that the Security Council doesn't have a responsibility? How do we say that? This is our problem. This is our responsibility.

The Secretary-General – fifth – described “cases closed.” And I just really want to implore you Mr. Secretary-General, again thanking you for your leadership and the personal responsibility you have taken, that we move beyond getting reports from the field that say “case closed” to a world of transparent and fulsome investigations. We don't know why these cases were closed. Was it because people waited a year to go back and actually try to talk to a victim? Was it because the evidence had perished? Was it because the peacekeepers who were alleged to have committed the crimes had been deployed out? Knowing what we know, and having tried to unpack a little of what happens in these investigations, I would be very, very careful about equating closed cases with just and fulsome investigations.

And finally, my last point, just reinforcing something the Secretary-General – I think everyone here – has said, which is about troop-contributing countries, police-contributing countries, the peacekeepers who are serving in – as Ismael said – some of the worst circumstances imaginable. Peacekeepers who will come back to their home countries, their families will barely know where they've been; places that none of their families, or their community, neighbors would have ever have visited; no parades, no celebration of the service that these men and women take overseas. It is an awesome sacrifice that troops, police, civilians who serve in these missions are making. The risks are off the charts. The United States is not a big troop and police contributor to UN peacekeeping, and I think that gives us a lot of humility, in fact, talking about what we're talking about here in this Council, and even more respect for those countries – and I look around the table, whether it's Egypt, or China, or Senegal, or Uruguay – who send thousands of peacekeepers into these environments. We just salute you. This is why President Obama has dedicated more than any American president in his time and his energy to try to support peacekeeping. It's so important, and it's so thankless. We need to do more to honor that service, and I do think that's a point of great convergence around this table. These peacekeepers are saving thousands – hundreds of thousands of lives, probably, every day if we think about what these situations would be like.

So we also have to be clear who the victims are as we talk about what is happening in the field. And the victims are not the UN troops and police, most of whom are serving – as everyone has said – with such distinction and with such bravery. The victims are the men, women, and far too often the children who are the victims of rape, sexual abuse, and other violations of human rights – committed by the very people who were sent to protect them. Those are the victims. We can't forget that fact as we have a debate about what to do. We can't forget who the victims are, and we can't forget how we would be acting if we actually knew those victims – if they weren't numbers, if they weren't abstractions, but if they were people we knew, people we were related to, people we care about. Thank you.

###

Dear Ambassador Power:

I have been working at UN in various capacities for 20 years.

I was at SC on 3/10 and praise all of your remarks.

However, all remarks of SC ambassadors and SG never get to the exact point; New Zealand got close and Excellency, in your frustration, got nearby.

The point is PREVENTION specifically SCREENING. UN has not demonstrated any device used to screen out sexual predators or disturbed personalities ab initio i.e from the beginning of the application procedure.

Psychological testing is almost 100 years old. Has it not reached the UN yet?

I presume countries submit their candidates to the UN which makes the final decision as to whether the person is admitted as a UN peacekeeper?

The UN can administer cheaply the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, MMPI. It is available on internet to authorized personnel and is computer scored and then a 4-5 page report generated. [This all prevents any doctoring around with material either by UN or specific countries.] It is available now in several languages and would be a worth while task for UN to translate the questions into all languages- not only for sake of UN but for all to further benefit from psychology globally.

The reports would be sent to a UN review committee of psychologists and a vote taken.

- a. Clearly Unacceptable
- b. Borderline
- c. Acceptable

This is not perfect but if churches had used some of this screening, they would not be 3 billion in debt and disgraced or as SG said about UN "shamed."

If I can be of help, let me know. Please continue your valiant work!

Respectfully,

Anthony J. DeLuca, Ph.D., Psy.D.

Fellow American Psychological Association (international psy)

Licenses: psychologist; psychoanalyst; mental health counselor; marriage & family therapist.

Nationally certified School Psychologist; National Register of Health Psychologists

[United Nations Meeting at Baha'i Offices at 866 UN Plaza](#)

By Jin Chacko

On March 28th I attended a meeting at the Baha'i offices at the UN Plaza. At the meeting there was a presentation given by Mr. Robert Cohen the director of Rain Barrel Communications. Mr. Cohen gave a presentation about a young girl living in Singapore and how more opportunities can be available like education for young girls around the world. Afterwards the President of the Religious NGO's Rev. Levi Bautista discussed the By-Laws of the Committee of Religious NGO's and had a vote from the attendees at the meeting to take in effect as soon as possible.

Orientation Programme- DPI Associated NGO's



Date: 3rd-4th March 2016

Spread over two days, this year the DPI Orientation Programme again provided new NGOs along with their Representatives an opportunity to learn and to network. Jeff Brez –Chief of NGO Relations, Advocacy & Special Events, Outreach Division, DPI led a welcoming introduction to all present. Then a number of inspiring keynote speakers provided helpful advice regarding the value of cooperating between DPI & NGOs as well as how the UN engages with them. Presenters included Maher Nasser – Director, Outreach Division, DPI, Bruce Knotts – Chair, NGO/DPI Executive Committee and Director of Unitarian Universalist Association, Alberto Padova – Acting Chief, NGO Branch, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. As well as a number of representatives from different UN departments and offices. NGOs were also advised how to make use of UN Departmental resources and keep in contact regarding their activities. A panel of Youth Representatives also made presentations of their own. They made sure to detail that even as Youth Representatives they could make a significant contribution and that every NGO should make it a priority to keep their two Youth Representative Positions filled. The second half of the Orientation was focused on two areas: Security, Legal Issues and Code of Conduct, and the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference in Gyeongju. After the Orientation's main presentations on March 3rd and March 4th had concluded, an event was held at the NGO/DPI Resource center so that attendees would have a chance to network.

Orientation attended and reported by Dominic Zmarlicki, UN SOCA Youth Rep

[UN DPI/NGO 66th Conference, “Education for Global Citizenship: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Together,” Gyeongju, Republic of Korea, May 30-June 1, 2016](#)

On Feb 18, 24, March 1,3, 8, 10, 16, 23, 30, Dr. Riccitelli attended the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference Planning meetings in her capacity as Co-Chair of the Media Subcommittee. She also held several Media Subcommittee meetings in her office in Union Square, Manhattan. Since a 14 hour time difference exists between New York and Korea, the meetings take place at the UN from 6-9 PM and now from 7-10 so that our Conference Co-chairs in Korea are able to join the meeting in New York via SKYPE.

The Media Committee has interviewed Dr. Scott Carlin, US Co-Chair; created an approved bio from the interview which is be used to generate stories in US print and broadcast media; has created a statement of purpose for the committee; and a Media strategy. On March 8 the Media Subcommittee met with UN DPI’s Chief of NGO Outreach and Advocacy Jeff Brez to discuss strategy and goals. All plans were approved by DPI. All materials are shared with our Korean counterparts.

Podcast interviews were completed on March 16th with Conference Co-Chair, Dr. Scott Carlin; NGO/DPI Executive Committee Chair, Bruce Knotts; Fannie Munlin, Co-Chair, Media Sub-Committee; Dr. Soon Heung Chang of Handong Global University, Co-Chair of National Organizing Committee for the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference (*see attached Outlook item with links to podcasts for Holy Wisdom*).

On April 10, the program, “New Jersey Now,” which airs at 12 noon on Channel 9, WWOR-TV, will feature interviews with Mr. Jeffrey Brez, UN DPI Chief of Outreach and Advocacy and Dr. Mary Norton of Felician University in Lodi, NJ, who is Co-Chair Conference Workshops Sub-Committee as well as Co-Chair Experts Sub-Committee. Host Jim McQueeney interviews them on the importance of the Conference and why people from the New Jersey area will travel to Korea for it.

Attended and reported by Dr. A. M. Riccitelli, SOCA Representative to UN/DPI.

[March 8, 2016 , “PLANET 50/50 BY 2030: STEP IT UP FOR GENDER EQUALITY,” The United Nations Observance of International Women’s Day 2016](#)

Part 1: “What Does Planet 50/50 Mean for You?”

On the first International Women’s Day of the new Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, Moderator Ms. Pamela Falk of CBS News; H.E. Mogens Lykketoft, President 70th Session of the General Assembly; H.E. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations; Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women and others reflected on what a gender equal planet means to them and how to achieve it by 2030 through combining the work of the United Nations, governments, civil society and the private sector. The 10-11:15 AM session closed with the hymn, “How Can I Keep from Singing,” sung by soprano Renee Fleming accompanied by violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery. Part 2: “The Push for Parity,” 11:15 AM – 12:45 PM

Moderated by Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women; with speakers including Ms. Christina Gallach, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information; Mr. Peter Thomas Drennan, Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security; and others probed the progress made in achieving gender equality in the United Nations System. They examined the conceptual and practical challenges remaining to the status of women and the mainstreaming of gender perspectives. The closing musical performance was “One Woman Anthem,” sung by Broadway musical performers.

Attended and reported by Dr. A.M. Riccitelli, SOCA Representative to UN/DPI.

Inside Look at Major UN Actions & Events

Human Rights and the Security Council - An Evolving Role

Security Council Report has published a research report, Human Rights and the Security Council—An Evolving Role.

Human Rights and the Security Council—An Evolving Role examines the relationship between peace and security and human rights, and the role human rights have played in the thinking and action of the Security Council when it has been addressing conflicts worldwide. The report also examines the relationship between the Security Council and the parts of the UN system specifically focused on human rights, in particular the Human Rights Council and the High Commissioner for Human Rights. As in all of Security Council Report's publications, we assess the effectiveness of the UN's top political organ in making an impact on the ground. One conclusion of the report is that human rights improvements are never just the success of one actor, and that the different actors can reinforce each other's contribution. We hope that this report will feed into key discussions currently underway, and will help generate a greater and more effective interaction between the different political and institutional actors, to the benefit of peace, security and human rights in countries threatened or affected by conflict.

Download a [PDF](#) of the complete report.

World Interfaith Harmony Week February 1-7, 2016

The World Interfaith Harmony Week was first proposed at the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2010 by H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan. Just under a month later, on October 20, 2010, it was unanimously adopted by the UN and henceforth the first week of February will be observed as a World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Coming soon on February 3rd at the United Nations:

[Interfaith Harmony: Implementing the Transformative Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals Honoring the 2016 World Interfaith Harmony Week](#)

From 3:00pm until 6:00pm

At United Nations Headquarters - Conference Room 1. New York, NY 10017

Please join us for an afternoon of thoughtful presentations, music and ceremony.

World Interfaith Harmony Week, established by U.N. General Assembly Resolution 65/5, offers the opportunity to highlight the vital role of communities of faith working with the United Nations to guide our world toward a more compassionate, sustainable future. Religious leaders will join distinguished governmental and U.N. speakers to demonstrate support for the Sustainable Development Goals. The focus will be on the importance of interfaith solidarity in accomplishing the Goals, as well as innovative

approaches that develop a spirit of partnership among religious communities and with the United Nations.

Sponsored by:

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and The Committee of Religious NGOs

[Syria: UN Humanitarian Head and Executive Director of the World Food Programme to Brief on Humanitarian Situation](#)

Tomorrow afternoon (27 January), Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien and the Executive Director of the World Food Programme, Ertharin Cousin, will brief the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Both briefers will participate in the informal consultations with Council members that follow the public briefing. No outcome is expected.

Tomorrow's briefing will be the third this month on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The previous meetings on 11 and 15 January were convened to help to ensure that the Syrian government fulfilled its 7 January agreement to grant humanitarian access to Madaya, a town besieged by government forces. The situation in Madaya was a matter of particular concern this month after alarming images of starving residents appeared in the media. The UN has credible reports of people dying from starvation and being killed by sniper fire or landmines while trying to flee the town. Linked to the situation in Madaya and other besieged areas are the intra-Syrian talks announced for 29 January, and the Syrian opposition delegation's demands for the government to lift sieges, release detainees and stop indiscriminate attacks—particularly aerial bombardment. Tomorrow's briefing is expected to reinforce many Council members' concerns about the dire situation of the 394,000 people living in besieged areas in Syria. Council members expect that O'Brien will address the broader humanitarian situation described in the most recent report (S/2016/60), while Cousin will focus her comments on access to food, malnutrition and starvation in Syria.

Source: <http://scrandwhatsinblue.cmail20.com/t/r-l-vdrnc-yklkuldrrjk-u/>

[Falling Flat in Syria: How Not to Fight Jihad](#)

By Irwin Arief on Feb 20, 2016 09:03 pm

Islamic State fighters in a still photo taken by Karl Ludwig Poggemann from an Islamic State video posted on youtube. CREATIVE COMMONS

Sun Tzu's classic work on the art of war advises would-be warriors to "know your enemy." What were Western powers and the United Nations thinking when they first pondered ways to stop Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from beating, torturing, bombing and even gassing his own people after the first hesitant protests against his rigid rule?

A dense [chronicle](#) of the Syrian jihad just released by a veteran Syria hand, [Charles R. Lister](#), argues that the current chaos in Syria has resulted from the international community's tepid response to the immediate enemy, Assad's tyranny, a misjudgment that paved the way for the greater enemy, the rise of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Rather than stand up to him boldly, Western powers let Assad off with a scolding, hoping that Syrian dissidents would somehow on their own replace him with a leader more to their liking. When the

fighting worsened, the UN pursued a cease-fire and political settlement that failed because all sides believed they could come out better on the battlefield than at the negotiating table. Syria descended into a heartbreaking five-year-long civil war that Assad has handily survived, badder than ever.

Worse, global concern has shifted to a second insurgency that emerged from the chaos, seeking not domestic governance reforms and human rights but a new world order dominated by a particularly harsh brand of Islamist rule. Dueling jihadist movements, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, are driving it, seeking to outdo each other in fealty to their extremist visions.

The resulting disorder is pulling more parties into the struggle. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, the militant group and political party, are backing the government campaign to defeat the numerous armed Syrian opposition groups that are hoping to drive out Assad's heartless regime. The United States, Europe, Turkey and the Kurds, backed by several Arab Gulf states, are focusing their firepower on the Islamic State, putting aside, for now, the plight of the nationalist opposition.

The UN-embraced "responsibility to protect" doctrine would seem to demand international intervention when a sovereign nation abuses its own citizens. But all the parties have swept it under the carpet. Frustrated domestic insurgents have responded to the lack of international love by becoming more extreme, pushing them closer to the Islamist camp.

The total mess has made Syria "the center of the world for jihadist militancy," and it will probably remain so for quite a while, writes Lister, the author of "The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency" and until recently a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center.

"Jihadists of all kinds look set to play a prominent role in Syria's future for some time to come," he warns. In Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria and Iraq, "jihadists have consistently survived and persevered."

The conflict has created an astronomical impact. A [recent report](#) by the Syrian Center for Policy Research found that 470,000 people have been killed either directly or indirectly by the fighting. A stunning 11.5 percent of the entire population has been either killed or wounded. Life expectancy plummeted to 55.4 years in 2015 from 70 in 2010. Syria's economy is in shreds, and more than 11 million people have been forced to flee their homes, [the UN estimates](#).

What lessons does Lister draw from the horror? To him it appears to be mostly a missed opportunity for concerted international action. That such violence and extremist ideology now dominate both the transnational Islamist and nationally oriented insurgencies "is proof only of the failure of the international community to back a moderate Syrian nationalistic opposition that only wanted better things for their homeland," Lister writes.

Charles Lister, author of "The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency."

The current Western obsession with the jihadists, ignoring the domestic dissidents' cause and the Assad regime's abuses, "has distracted attention from the very root causes of the conflict in Syria that IS [the Islamic State] and other jihadists so deeply depend upon to survive," he says. "Death by chemical weapons, barrel bombs, torture, starvation or drowning on Europe's shores — all are exploited by jihadists as evidence of Western indifference to Muslim suffering."

Many analysts would dismiss Lister's lesson as oversimplification. The extraordinary proliferation of domestic opposition groups, Syria's rapidly changing political landscape and, above all, the paucity of potential leaders capable of forging a united front under an internationally acceptable ideological banner have convinced most outsiders that such an intervention could never succeed.

But Lister's book transcends this objection by providing an extraordinarily insightful chronicle of the Syrian debacle. The sheer volume of his research, interviews, field visits and intimate familiarity with the various Syrian players leave no stone unturned.

Perhaps most fascinating is his comprehensive account of the origins of the Islamic State, a movement that he traces back to the 1999 founding of an Islamist group called Jama'at al-Tawhid wal Jihad by a Sunni organizer named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The tale provides strong support for those of us who think that the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq was one of the worst foreign policy blunders of modern times.

Zarqawi distinguished himself by playing a crucial role in provoking the civil war that began in Iraq in the summer of 2003, hoping it would both push out the American occupiers and restore Sunni supremacy in Baghdad. While he ended up being killed by the US military before the insurgency's goals could be achieved, his memory and influence live on in the Islamic State, which now spans Iraq and Syria and, sadly, at UN headquarters in New York. He helped to break the back of the American commitment to transforming Iraq and he changed forever how many parts of the world view the UN.

Zarqawi apparently despised the UN as much as he hated the American occupation. On Aug. 7, 2003, less than five months after US troops went into Iraq, Zarqawi's group claimed the first car-bombing of the insurgency. Twelve days later, it carried out the infamous suicide truck-bombing of the Baghdad headquarters of the brand-new UN assistance mission in Iraq. That attack killed at least 22 people, most of them UN officials, including Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the UN special envoy for Iraq. Shortly afterward, Zarqawi hit the UN with a second bombing attack.

Destruction in the Syrian city of Homs, attributed to raids by the Assad government. FREEDOM HOUSE/CREATIVE COMMONS

From that time on, UN leaders in troubled places around the world have been left to wonder whether they were being considered as beloved agents of a neutral helping hand or as a detested biased extension of Washington and its Western allies.

Zarqawi was later quoted as insisting that UN workers were "the protectors of Jews" and of the American invaders. Vieira de Mello, he said, had been specifically targeted for helping to guide tiny and predominantly Catholic East Timor to independence from Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population.

Zarqawi's group had first showed its face in Iraq in 2002, changed its name in 2004 to Al Qaeda in Iraq and in 2006 became the Islamic State in Iraq. In 2013, under new leadership, it re-emerged as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS (also known as ISIL for Iraq and the Levant, or the Arabic acronym, Daesh).

Though Assad had publicly offered Washington his support in battling Islamist militants after the 9/11 terror attacks, he also gave his security forces a green light to help jihadists sneak across the Syrian border into Iraq, where they learned the jihadist fundamentals while fighting the US military. At the same time, many Iraqi Baathists, frozen out of the government by the Americans, fled to Syria. This cross-border porosity laid the groundwork for the rise of Islamist extremism in Syria, starting in 2011.

Early 2012 saw the emergence in Syria of the Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra (or Al Nusra Front) even as the more moderate domestic insurgent groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army floundered in trying to bring down the Assad regime.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi of ISIS.

The intervention of Iran and Hezbollah on the side of the government in late 2012 cemented the notion that the insurgency was now sectarian in nature — Sunni insurgents versus a Shia regime — rather than a pursuit of political freedom and democratic reforms. By spring 2013, the Islamic State in Iraq had pushed into Syria and announced ambitions to absorb Al Qaeda and take over leadership of the Syrian jihad. It again changed names, this time to ISIS/ISIL.

By the end of the year, Lister writes, as many as 11,000 foreign Sunni fighters had entered Syria to wage jihad, stoking tensions between ISIS and Nusra Front while further distracting Syria and the international community from the domestic insurgency.

A Syrian government sarin gas attack in a Damascus suburb in August 2013 killed more than 1,400 people but did little to spark a Western response. That further accelerated the flow of foreign fighters into the country and left the domestic opposition increasingly frustrated over the lack of outside support for its cause.

Even when hesitant US arms shipments began to be sent to some Syrian rebel groups, ISIS diverted world attention by capturing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in June 2014. ISIS soon declared a "caliphate" stretching across wide swaths of Syria and Iraq. The videotaped beheading of an American, James Foley, followed, the first of a cascade of barbaric executions. An ISIS spokesman referred to President Obama as a "mule of the Jews" and Secretary of State John Kerry as "the uncircumcised old geezer." The spokesman urged believers to carry out attacks against "disbelievers" around the globe and even offered suggestions.

"Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him," the spokesman said. "If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car or business. Or destroy his crops [or] spit in his face."

And that is where we find ourselves today.

["The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency,"](#) by Charles R. Lister; 9780190462475 or 9781849045902

Related posts:

1. [As Syrian Peace Talks Take Shape, How Will Women Take Part?](#)
2. [The Noose Tightens on Money Flows to Jihadists in Iraq and Syria](#)
3. [How Do Early-Modern Christian Conflicts Differ From Muslim Ones Now?](#)

[Read this article on PassBlue.com](#)



Lessons Learned from 70 Years of UN Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping



Impact (UNAI) and the International Studies Association (ISA) entitled "The United Nations Confronting War and Violence: Lessons after 70 Years."

The three hour discussion examined the lessons learned from seventy years of UN conflict resolution and what role academia, research institutions and data collection can play in strengthening peacemaking, peacebuilding and peacekeeping.

Panelists included Paul Diehl, President of the International Studies Association, Jean Krasno, Lecturer at the City University of New York, Cyril Obi, Program Director at the Social Science Research Center, Hardeep Puri, Secretary-General of the Independent Commission on Multilateralism and Vice President of the International Peace Institute, Former Deputy Executive Director at UNICEF Rima Salah and Arturo Sotomayor of the University of Texas, Austin.

Rima Salah, who recently served as a member of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, noted that a key finding of the panel was the need for the United Nations to be more inclusive in its approach to peacebuilding because

On Tuesday, 26 January more than 200 people attended an event co-hosted by United Nations Academic

lasting and sustainable peace was more likely to be accomplished if all relevant stakeholders were included in the process.

Jean Krasno spoke about the increased vulnerability of women in conflict and crisis situations and the importance of taking these needs into consideration when creating policies, but also the need for more inclusion for women across the societal spectrum, from political to economic, social, cultural and peacekeeping roles.

Paul Diehl of ISA said that people often think there is very little overlap between academics and practitioners, but the day's discussion showed that there were many areas which could benefit from collaboration across disciplines.

The panel discussion, including the Q&A session, is available online at <http://bit.ly/1Vurzwm>.

Is a More Equitable Society a More Peaceful Society? UNAI-sponsored Conference Examines the Links between Poverty and Conflict



On 11 and 12 January 2016 more than two dozen scholars from universities, think tanks and non-governmental organizations gathered at the United Nations

headquarters for a two-day conference examining the role poverty and inequality play in fostering conflict.

UN Aims to Resettle 480,000 Syrian Refugees

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees began a high-level ministerial conference in Geneva Wednesday to discuss ways to resettle around 480,000 Syrian refugees [over the next three years \(Reuters\)](#). UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, speaking at the opening of the conference, said the effort required an [“exponential increase in global solidarity” \(NYT\)](#). The conference comes shortly after Oxfam, a nongovernmental group, released a report that found that twenty-eight of the world’s wealthiest countries have resettled just 1.39 percent of Syria’s refugee population, accounting for less than [a third of their commitments \(Guardian\)](#). The Syrian conflict, which began five years ago, has produced nearly five million refugees so far, the vast majority of whom have wound up in neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

ANALYSIS

“Secretary of State John Kerry announced in September that the U.S. plans to accept 100,000 refugees from around the world annually by 2017, up from 85,000 in 2016. While that is a jump in admissions, it [pales in comparison](#) with other moments in U.S. history. Take 1980, for example, when admissions reached more than 200,000. At that time, the Refugee Act of 1980 standardized ‘resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the United States,’” writes Priscilla Alvarez for the *Atlantic*.

“For Turkey, managing the presence of now two million refugees has not been an easy task—even for a country with significant administrative and economic capacity. The greatest and possibly the toughest problem has to do with the long run. What is still lacking is a [comprehensive governmental policy](#) towards integration. Burden-sharing is also critical in terms of legitimizing the expenses of the government in the eyes of the Turkish public by showing that caring for the refugees is an international responsibility,” write Elizabeth Ferris and Kemal Kirisci in this Brookings paper.

“Private sponsorship of refugees by individuals, local groups, or faith-based organizations, for example, can bring down costs to the state and accelerate integration outcomes, and has the potential to involve brand-new actors (and sources of finance) in the international protection regime. The innovative use of existing legislation geared towards the mobility of member state nationals under regional cooperation frameworks, meanwhile, offers an alternative approach in countries where [traditional protection might be politically sensitive](#),” write Elizabeth Collett, Paul Clewett, and Susan Fratzke in this report for the Migration Policy Institute.

Civil Society speaker selected for opening session of 22 April Paris Agreement signing ceremony at UNHQ

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has invited all world leaders to a signing ceremony on 22 April for the historic climate agreement that was reached in Paris in December last year. The signing

event will take place at UN Headquarters in New York on the first day the agreement will be open for signature, which coincides with the UN observance of International Mother Earth Day. At the request of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, UN-NGLS facilitated an open, transparent and participatory process for civil society to apply for a speaking role in the opening session of the signing ceremony.

For this key speaking role, the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General has now selected:

For this key speaking role, the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General has now selected:

Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim

[Association des Femmes Peules Autochtones du Tchad \(AFPAT\)](#)

Chad

Ms. Ibrahim's bio is available [here](#).

More information about the process is available [here](#).

For information about the Paris Agreement signing ceremony, please visit: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climatechange/>

Religious News from Around the World

[Watch this video and 'wake up' from indifference to persecuted Christians](#)

Santander, Spain, Jan 21, 2016 / 06:04 am ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- A video that shares the testimonies of people who have personally suffered the persecution of Christians in the Middle East is calling on their fellow Christians in the West to “wake up” to the grave crisis facing their brethren.

The most important thing that Christians can do for their brethren in Iraq and Syria is to build a courageously Christians society in their own countries, an exiled Iraqi bishop says in his interview.

The two objectives of the short video are to “help people become more aware of the persecution that is taking place in the East” and to “encourage Christians to begin to live a more profound faith with courage,” Sr. Megan María Conway, SHM, told CNA.

[The video, “Wake Up!” is produced by the EUK Mamie Foundation](#), a new evangelization effort of the Home of the Mother, an international public association of the faithful which was approved by the Vatican in 2010.

One of the testimonies is from Father Douglas Bazi, an Iraqi priest who in 2006 was kidnapped and tortured by Muslim extremists. He is currently rector of the St. Elijah parish and refugee camp in Erbil, where tens of thousands of residents of Mosul fled after it was captured by the Islamic State in June 2014.

“First of all, I ask you to wake up,” Fr. Bazi says to the video's viewers. “If you are going to just be silent, it is the same thing as agreeing with those who are persecuting us. So don't be silent. If you can, don't just watch. Take action. And – wake up.”

Archbishop Amel Shamon Nona of the Chaldean Eparchy of Saint Thomas the Apostle of Sydney – and who was the Chaldean bishop of Mosul until January 2015 – stated that “the whole Western world is in danger, because many suicide bombers, many militants, Islamic State militants, have come to us from Europe, America, and Australia.”

An Argentine religious priest who serves at the Baghdad cathedral, Fr. Luis Montes, said that the Islamic State “has reached this level of madness, this craziness, because (they’ve) let hatred enter into their hearts.”

The video also presents the testimony of Miereille Al Farah, a Syrian Catholic woman who works as a marketing director in Damascus. She comments that “there is a certain rejection of what we are, I don’t like to say it, but a certain hatred...We were born Christians, but we’ve also chosen this faith and it’s the only true Way, as Jesus says: ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’.”

Nevertheless, Fr. Montes said, “the Christians in Iraq are an incredible example of forgiveness. People who forgive, who forgive with all their hearts.”

“We have to fight against this hatred by doing good. With the charity that Jesus taught us, that led him to give his life for us, the same charity that inspires these martyrs,” the priest adds.

“We have martyrs, I don’t like to say this, but if we’re going to have more martyrs than the people who have faith in Europe, I think we have a problem,” Fr. Bazi then warns.

Archbishop Nona says that “you can help us by building a more active and courageous Christian society, which is active, brave. You have to evangelize your society again with courage, without any fear of saying, ‘we’re Christians’. This is the help you can give us.”

Source: http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/watch-this-video-and-wake-up-from-indifference-to-persecuted-christians-95935/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=email

[NRB applauds Secretary Kerry’s recognition of ISIS genocide of Christians](#)

MANASSAS, Va. – National Religious Broadcasters thanks U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for concluding that the barbarism being perpetrated against Christians in the Middle East by ISIS is, in fact, “genocide.”

“I applaud and welcome Secretary Kerry’s announcement this morning that ISIS is perpetrating genocide against Christians and other minorities,” stated Dr. Jerry A. Johnson, President & CEO of NRB. “Now the United States is morally compelled to act in defense of our brothers and sisters whose lives and cultural heritage are being viciously assaulted simply because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

NRB has and will continue to urge for U.S. government and faith leaders to acknowledge the reality of, and to pursue a call to action against, the persecution of Christians overseas, particularly in ISIS-occupied regions.

Notably, Proclaim 16, the NRB International Christian Media Convention, held a [special session](#) on this genocide featuring Canon Andrew White, Vicar Emeritus of St. George’s Church in Baghdad, who spoke from firsthand experience about the terrors of ISIS.

More information about the background for this genocide declaration is available [here](#).

About NRB

The National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) is a non-partisan, international association of Christian communicators whose member organizations represent millions of listeners, viewers, and readers. Our mission is to advance biblical truth; to promote media excellence; and to defend free speech. In addition to promoting standards of excellence, integrity, and accountability, NRB provides networking, educational, ministry, and fellowship opportunities for its members. Learn more at www.nrb.org.

About the Convention

The annual NRB International Christian Media Convention is the largest nationally and internationally recognized event dedicated solely to assist those in the field of Christian communications. The dynamic Exposition consists of around 200 companies and is an active marketplace for those seeking tools and services to expand their organizations. The next Convention will be held at the Orlando World Marriott in Orlando, FL, February 27-March 2, 2017. For more information, go to www.nrbconvention.org.

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Source: <http://pressreleases.religionnews.com/2016/03/17/nrb-applauds-secretary-kerrys-recognition-isis-genocide-christians/>

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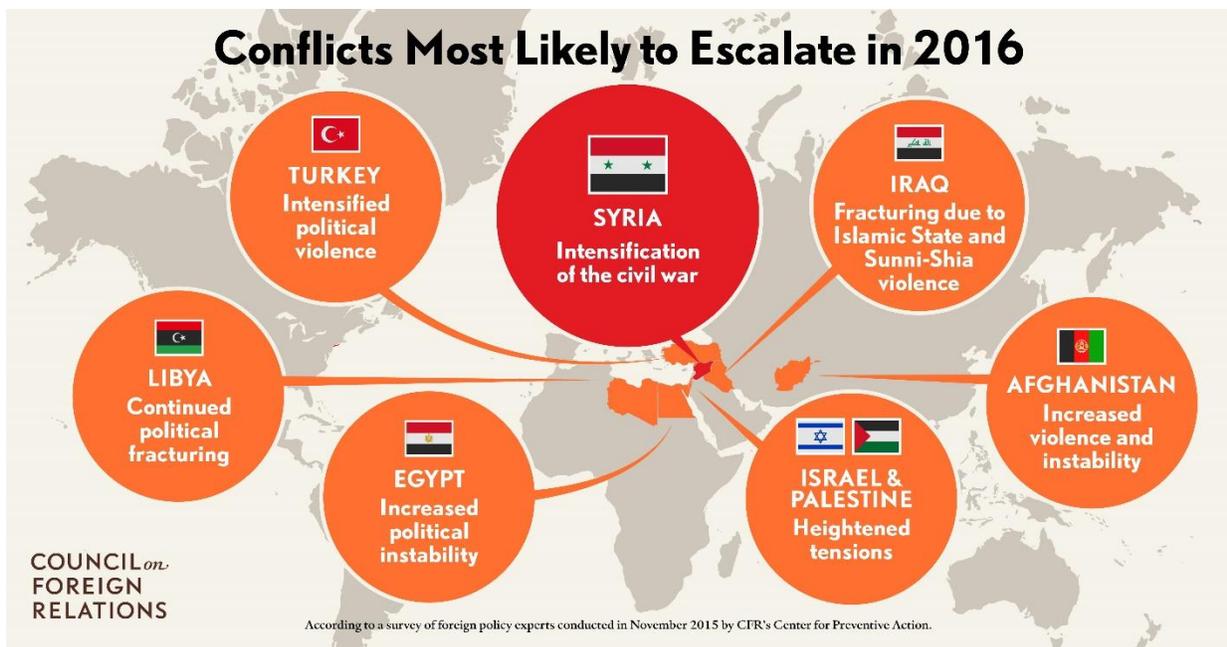
Preventive Priorities Survey: 2016

Preventing further intensification of Syria's civil war should be the top priority for U.S. policymakers in 2016, according to leading experts who took part in the Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) eighth annual Preventive Priorities Survey. Syria's civil war has replaced the conflict in Iraq as the number one concern among respondents.

The Preventive Priorities Survey seeks to evaluate conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring or escalating and their impact on U.S. national interests. This fall, CFR's [Center for Preventive Action](#) (CPA) solicited suggestions from the general public on potential conflicts that could erupt or escalate next year. CPA narrowed down the nearly one thousand suggestions to thirty, and invited government officials, academics, and foreign policy experts to rank them. CPA then categorized the scenarios into three tiers, in order of priority for U.S. leaders—high, moderate, and low.

"Our annual survey aims to highlight potential areas of instability and help U.S. policymakers anticipate contingencies that could be harmful to national interests. By prioritizing conflicts based on their overall risk to the United States, the survey helps to focus their attention and resources for specific conflict prevention efforts in the year ahead," said [Paul Stares](#), General John W. Vessey senior fellow for conflict prevention and CPA director.

Of the eleven contingencies classified as high priorities, eight are related to events unfolding or ongoing in the Middle East. One of the eleven—intensification of the civil war in Syria—was rated as both highly probable and highly consequential. Participants considered Syria more important to U.S. interests than they did last year, when the conflict was ranked as a having only a moderate impact on U.S. interests.



Respondents also increased the priority level of the continued political fracturing of Libya, intensified political violence in Turkey, and increased political instability in Egypt. All three rose from moderate priorities in the 2015 survey to high priorities in the 2016 survey.

Among the new contingencies introduced in this year's survey are political instability in European Union (EU) countries caused by the influx of refugees and migrants and increased tensions between Russia and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states.

Top U.S. conflict prevention priorities in 2016 include

- the intensification of the civil war in Syria;
- a mass casualty attack on the U.S. homeland or a treaty ally;
- a highly disruptive cyberattack on critical U.S. infrastructure;
- a severe crisis with or in North Korea;
- political instability in EU countries stemming from the influx of refugees and migrants;
- continued political fracturing of Libya;
- heightened tensions between Israelis and Palestinians;
- intensified political violence in Turkey;
- increased political instability in Egypt;
- increased violence and instability in Afghanistan; and
- continued fracturing of Iraq due to territorial gains by the self-proclaimed Islamic State and ongoing Sunni-Shia sectarian violence.

Three contingencies included in last year's survey were deemed less likely to occur in 2016: armed confrontation in the South China Sea, renewed fighting in eastern Ukraine, and political instability in Nigeria due to Boko Haram activity.

View the full results and the seven prior surveys at www.cfr.org/preventive_priorities_survey. CPA's [Global Conflict Tracker](#) plots ongoing conflicts on an interactive map paired with background information, CFR analysis, and news updates.

The Preventive Priorities Survey was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

CFR's [Center for Preventive Action](#) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. [Follow CPA on Facebook](#) and Twitter at [@CFR_CPA](#).

Source: http://www.cfr.org/conflict-assessment/preventive-priorities-survey-2016/p37364?cid=nlc-religion-religion_and_foreign_policy_bulletin-resources_for_the_faith_community-link15-20160121&sp_mid=50519184&sp_rid=aWduYXRpdXN1QGFvbC5jb20S1

TFF PressInfo 355: The deeper reason Syria negotiations are doomed

By Jan Oberg

Negotiations were supposed to start in Geneva today, January 25. The media is full of analyses of why it won't happen and how virtually everybody disagrees with everybody else about who should be there and who should not. That's all surface, however.

Objectively speaking is it of course hugely difficult. No one would envy chief UN envoy, Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura. That said, a totally different perspective may be helpful:

It has to do with a simple distinction that few still in the international community are able to make – that between the *conflict* and the *violence* in the conflict zone. Almost all *conflicts* can be mitigated or solved – but the more *violence* infused into the conflict (and the longer it lasts), the more difficult it will be to find a solution – because on top of the original conflict you build anger, sorrow, wish for revenge, traumas and justifications for counter-violence.

It's a simple as that.

Everybody confuses the two – the underlying *conflict* that should have been addressed from Day One and the *violent means* that should not have been delivered from outside in the shape of arms, ammunition and bombings.

However, the world's decision-makers continue – seemingly unable to learn – to put *weapons before peace*.

The Syrian *conflict* had to do with peaceful demonstrations, an authoritarian human rights violating national leadership, an environmental crisis that had made people migrate into cities; it had to do with an immensely complex history, society with many groups and factions – and with the interests of neighbouring countries. And it came in the wake of failed wars and weaponization/wars of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

And *all conflicts* have to do with grievances, incomptable goals and wishes, fears, trauma, economic and other structures as shaped through history – and they have to do with the West’s historical influence – most violent and detrimental – in the region.

All of it is left aside. The focus is on nine other amateurish, superficial matters – see below.

So, yes, turmoil all over the place – but also something somebody somewhere should have learned something from. They did not. They put *the outdated military “security and stability” before peace* – and lost it all.

The Western world – read US/NATO, Russia joining later – un/anti-intellectually brought it all on the old hopelessly false and counterproductive formula’s 9 elements:

1. The conflict is about two parties, in this case al-Assad against the rest – however, no conflict in the real world is has only two parties.
2. All the good guys are on one side, all the bad ones on the other – however, it’s never that black/white anywhere.
3. Conflict-resolution is about siding with one against the other – however, no textbook in conflict-resolution would tell you that.
4. Siding means giving the good guys weapons – however, we know from everywhere else that among the good guys are some not-so-good guys.
5. Conflicts are about individuals (in this case al-Assad) and if only such top trouble-makers are marginalised or killed, things will be fine – however, we have seen what that meant in Iraq and Libya, etc.
6. When we have poured in weapons (and arms producers, govenments and dealers have profitted) and other support such as money to all sides (proxy war), they will be more willing to go and sit at a negotiation table and make peace – however, we know it works the opposite way: weapons attract bad people, harden their minds and make some ‘heroes’ and all of them less prone to peace. Hoping to ‘win’ on the battle field is one reason for not coming to negotiations.
7. Since we have given them weapons and money, they will accept us (foreigners) as ‘mediators’ and we happen to know what is best for them – however, a number of conflict parties will shape their own agenda and take no orders. And only the people in the conflict knows what is best for them and only when they are true stakeholders will a peace agreement be sustainable.
8. Since people with arms have power they must be at the negotiation table – however, we know that the most important (and suffering) people in any conflict are those who are ordinary citizens, never touched a weapons and hate, about equally much, the regime and the armed opposition – i.e. 98-99% of the people in any conflict region (i.e. if they have not already run away from the hell we have helped to create).
9. After all this we can invite a UN envoy to pick up the pieces – however, we know that the major countries have done their utmost the last 25 years to undermine the authority, mandate, budget and quality of the UN and its leadership and there is no mention of what would have been the most relevant

to do in a mature non-nationalist global society: to have used UN peace-keeper and -makers in large numbers from Day One to work with the conflict, not to work against the violence.

The introduction of weapons into conflicts is the single most important factor in making peace impossible. However, we know from SIPRI that the arms trade is booming.

Behind every refugee stands an arms trader and war-maker.

Don't believe government leaders and ministers when – later – they appoint themselves as peacemakers/mediators and lament the fact that local parties don't want to come to their peace talks in Geneva. (And by the way, even the shape of the table there is counterproductive as any conflict-professional (and psychologist) would tell you).



The table in Geneva - Photo Salvatore Di Nolfi, Scanpix

The 9 points explains why today's Geneva negotiations are doomed to fail. NATO/EU countries and Russia are the main reasons they will. Like two years ago.

Governments are still so much more professional and resourceful when it comes to wars and militarism than they are when it comes to conflict-resolution and peace. The main reason everywhere is the vested elite interests in MIMAC, the Military-Industrial-Media-Academic Complex – a cancer that kills hundreds of thousands of people, create refugees and work against both democracy and peace. As well as negotiated solutions.

Source: <http://blog.transnational.org/2016/01/tff-pressinfo-355-the-real-reason-syria-negotiations-are-doomed/>

Religious Persecution in the Middle East

FASKIANOS: Good afternoon from New York, and welcome to the Council on Foreign Relations Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call Series. I'm Irina Faskianos, vice president for the National Program and Outreach here at CFR. As a reminder, today's call is on the record and the audio will be available, as well as the transcript, on our website, CFR.org.

We're delighted to have Andrew Doran with us to talk about religious persecution in the Middle East. Mr. Doran is a senior advisor to In Defense of Christians, an organization that builds awareness and mobilizes individuals around the world to support Christians facing persecution in the Middle East. He served on the executive secretariat of the U.S. national commission for UNESCO at the U.S. State Department. He's an attorney and U.S. armed forces veteran, who frequently writes about U.S. foreign

policy with a focus on the rights of religious minorities, especially the ancient Christian communities of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.

Andrew, thank you very much for being with us today. I thought it would be great if you could start by giving us an overview of the historical cultural backdrop of Christianity in the Middle East, and how it's evolved, and how that has brought us to the situation facing Christians and other religious minorities in the region today.

DORAN: Thank you, Irina. And thank you very much for having me here. It's a real pleasure. I think that question of Christianity in the Middle East and its origins is something that has taken a lot of people by surprise in America—not just in the West, really more in the United States—because there wasn't a great deal of awareness of Christianity in the Middle East, I would say, until 2013, 2014. And then it was very much, who are these Christians who are being chased out of their homes by fundamentalists and extremists? And so that really prompts us to look at this maybe historically. And what I'd like to do is to put it in a little bit of a context.

Westerners typically think of Christianity in the two spheres of Christians, which would be the Greek and Latin spheres. And that approximates the Orthodox and the Catholic, and the Byzantine and the Western, East-West. And the truth is, there's a lot more to it than that. There's another dimension, and that's this dimension of Middle East Christian—Middle East Christianity, which developed quite independent and different, although it was largely influenced by the Greeks. And so we're talking about the region of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, the Near East, Anatolia, this region. But there were numbers—there were significant numbers of Christians dating back to the 1st century, 2nd century, 3rd century, when they converted to Christianity.

This is a part of the world that had been occupied. And the Christians became very used to occupying forces coming and going. And the most prominent, the more permanent among those, is the Arab Muslims, who, you might say, conquer, you know, Egypt and Mesopotamia and Syria, but the truth is they were very often welcomed by the Christians, because this provided them with a degree of independence and religious freedom that they hadn't necessarily had under the Byzantine Empire. And so that's an important point I think worth noting, that very often the Christians were prepared to welcome their Muslims—their Muslim rulers as liberators.

But they developed very different ecclesiastical models than those of the West and of the Byzantine and Russian Orthodox world. And I think that's an important point there, because there's not the Caesaropapist papist model of the church being subservient to the state, and there's not the Western model of separation of church and state. In the Middle East, you have varying kind of spheres, but the primary focus on the religious and ethnic, to the exclusion of focusing on the political. And I think that's a point that we're going to come back to later on.

But one of the—one of the elements I think that goes along with that part of the conversation is that pacifism was something that was very prevalent in the first millennium of Christianity, and still is prevalent in the Middle East to this day. And it's—so we have a very passive citizenry. And they were—if you think of this in terms of rendering to Caesar, rendering to God, the earliest Christians were typically content if they would be just left alone, not to get involved in the politics. And so that soothed the rulers, for the most part.

And it's worth mentioning that Christians played a very significant role in Islam's golden age of transcribing and translating many of the great classical works of Greek philosophy into Arabic. And these were, in turn, transmitted to Western Europe during Islam's golden age, when Islam and Christianity encountered each other in Iberia and across the Mediterranean and in Sicily. And that's a very significant historic event, and one that's very often overlooked by the West, the great contribution of Muslim scholarship to the development of the high Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the West.

But moving to the modern era, and this is where we begin this phase of demographic decline. It really starts in the 19th century, especially in the late 19th century with Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian communities fleeing persecution at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, who were instituting policies that really culminate in the 1915 Armenian-Greek-Assyrian genocide. And these were—these were largely influenced by racist and racialist ideas that had done—had really come from Europe, that are originated in the West and had been incorporated into policy and then systematic persecution. And it wasn't limited to Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. There was great suffering in the Levant in Syria, and a number of famines and a number of people dying of starvation.

So in this case, this is when we start seeing the first mass waves of emigration from the Middle East by Christians, coming to Europe and coming to North American and South America. And at the same time, what we're seeing into the 20th century, the great powers of Europe are really withdrawing after Russia, which has a very close connection to a lot of the Orthodox communities of the Middle East. Most of the Christians of the Middle East are Orthodox Christians. And so there is something of a bond there with the Russians that the Americans and really the British do not have. There's not that close cultural bond. It's much closer to the Russians.

The French historically—they did a significant role in the establishment of Lebanon, for example—had a close Catholic connection between the Maronite Roman Catholic rites of the Catholic Church. And so we'll see this later on. This doesn't exist in the United States. And this is part of the reason that I would argue Middle East Christians have had difficulty getting their voice heard in American foreign policy circles, because there isn't that close connection with mainline Protestant or evangelical Christians. And so this has put them at something of a disadvantage. They're also competing against very real policy interests of the United States, such as securing energy from the Gulf states, which has been part of U.S. policy for more than half a century, certainly a foreign policy priority. So they're going up against some very strong, powerful, competing interests.

That is somewhat related to the rise of extremism and fundamentalism in the Middle East. And so what we have seen more recently in recent—certainly the 15 years has been something approaching systematic—systematic removal would be a little bit too strong, but certainly Christians being driven out of their homes and persecuted, murdered. But this also—it must be said that this suffering has taken place in the context of enormous loss of human life in Muslim communities in the Middle East. And so all of this is happening certainly at the same time. And these issues are related. And they are in many ways responses to the conduct of the U.S. foreign policy in the region.

So one significant event that's coming up that I think speaks to the world religious leaders is this week the pope, Pope Francis, is meeting with the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. And this is the first-ever meeting—historic meeting, it's slated to take place in Cuba. And it is worth noting, I think, that the Russians—that the Russian Orthodox Church does have significant influence in the foreign policy of the Russian government. There is certainly a realpolitik component to that, but Putin does listen to what the

Russian Orthodox leadership has to say, because it's a vital constituency domestically for him. And the Russian Orthodox leadership has been for several years now pressing him to protect the Christians of the Middle East.

This puts, again, this community at odds with the West because of problems in Ukraine, Russia's incursion into Ukraine. And so it's very difficult for Middle East Christians to form another bond, I would say, with Europeans and Westerners at a time that it's vitally needed. They don't have a great deal of confidence, in my experience speaking with Middle East Christians in America, in America's capacity for getting its foreign policy right, especially with respect to protecting Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.

So I think I'm just about at my time there, Irina. And with that, if you have any questions, or if those joining the call have any questions. I'd be happy to answer them.

FASKIANOS: Thank you, Andrew. We would love to open it up now to questions and comments from the group for what Andrew's laid out and to drill down even further.

OPERATOR: At this time, we'll open the floor for questions.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

We'll pause just a moment. The first question will come from Todd Scribner, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Please go ahead.

SCRIBNER: Hello. Yeah, thanks for your presentation. It's very helpful. I did have a question, and that is you mention that a lot of evangelical and mainline Protestant communities here in the U.S. don't have very close ties to Christian communities in the Middle East historically, and this has had implications for our foreign policy questions and our relations with them, you know, from the U.S. perspective. But a lot of evangelicals do have very close ties to Israel, sort of theologically and politically. And I'm wondering if there is any complications for well-being of Christians in that region that has resulted from kind of the Evangelical-Israel nexus that has played into kind of the politics in that area over the last, you know, few decades?

DORAN: Thank you. I think that's an excellent question. In my experience, speaking with Middle East Christians whether in the Middle East or in the United States, there tends to be—they're really all over the spectrum between support for the Palestinians and support for Israel. And so I haven't seen anything like a unified—what you might call a unified attitude or approach or sentiment to it. But I think there are certainly some complications there.

But you know, I've seen just over the last year, looking at a number of very strong Israel supporters in the United States among the American evangelical community, an increasingly willingness to be outspoken in defense of the rights of Christians—particularly Christians, but also other religious minorities. And I think that's a very positive step. I think that there has been a tendency to view the Middle East in very Manichean terms. And I think lost in that—in the absence of nuance there, we've lost an opportunity, and we've alienated a number of I think natural allies in the region.

And that's certainly been unfortunate. But I am hopeful that in the years ahead that evangelical leaders will take it upon themselves to travel throughout the Middle East, encounter these Middle East Christian communities where they are, and meet them where they are with a sense of compassion and

understanding, and look for a path forward where no one group is going to be supported to the exclusion of another.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question or comment?

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Salam al-Marayati with Muslim Public Affairs Council. Please go ahead.

AL-MARAYATI: Thank you. I think there's a number of questions, obviously, that arise from your presentation. Probably the time allotted doesn't do justice to the topic, because it is a topic that has obviously profound implications on Christian-Muslim relations globally, you know, as we step forward. A couple questions I have, is what is the proportion of Muslims who are persecuted by Muslim extremists versus Christians who are persecuted by Muslim extremists? And secondly, in terms of the genocide of Armenians and Greeks and Assyrians, did that not happen when the Islamic state was actually dismantled, and there was actually—it was the nationalists who were involved in that persecution? Because if you take the time premise that it was done under an Islamic government, the Ottomans had been governing for centuries. And so it would behoove us to at least look into what the relations or status of Christians were throughout that time as well as, you know, of course, the time of Umar, when he first—the second caliph in Islam, when he went to Jerusalem and he made it a point not to pray in the church, so that Muslims wouldn't think that that was their religious obligation, to go and take over churches.

DORAN: Salam, thank you very much. Those are excellent questions. I've tried to, you know, in covering 2,000 years in 10 minutes or so—I think I did injustice to a number of different issues there. And you raised two that I think are quite excellent.

With respect to the question of proportion, I don't know that that's been documented, but I think any glance at the evidence would—at the numbers, at the death toll, at the number of casualties—civilian casualties that have been suffered, let's say, since 2003 alone, we are talking about a terribly disproportionate amount of suffering at the hands of Muslims by Muslim extremists. And I don't even know that Muslim extremist is the right word. I do subscribe to the theory that they're not—these are not true Muslims, when we're talking about ISIS and ISIL.

And with respect to your question about the Ottoman Turks, that's an excellent point. And I did try to allude to the fact that the Ottoman government had been, I think, strongly influenced by racist and racialist ideologies of the last 19th and early 20th century. But I didn't do—I wasn't clear that that was—and you make an excellent point—that this was something that was done not by religious leadership, quite independent of it. But this was more of a nationalist movement. And that is absolutely an excellent point. And so quite right. Yeah, and I think that—because it does merit greater discussion.

When I do hear people talk about the question of Muslims killing Muslims, it is certainly problematic, because you hear people take this sort of—it's almost like a tribal, civilizational approach to the question of violence. Well, those are Muslims killing Muslims, we're concerned about the Christians. That's a very dangerous approach to take. And it's certainly only exacerbates relations between the West and the Middle East.

AL-MARAYATI: Thank you. Yeah, and I don't want it to be about, you know, who's suffering more, Muslim or Christian. But I do appreciate your answers. Thank you.

DORAN: Thank you, Salam.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Jim Antal with Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. Please go ahead.

ANTAL: Hello. Thank you for your presentation, and also your great answers to these questions so far. I have the opportunity to be traveling to Cairo, Lebanon, Oman, and then Palestine and Jerusalem in a few weeks with the head of our denomination, John Dorhauer, and also the head of the Disciples, Sharon Watkins, and several other mainline leaders here United States. And we're going to be meeting with our partners over there in those contexts. And I'm wondering if you had the opportunity to be with us, what would be the first or second or third questions that you would be asking our partners pertinent to these concerns?

DORAN: That's an excellent question. I've had the good fortune of being able to travel to the places you mentioned and throughout the Middle East, and have had a number of opportunities to meet with both Christian and Muslim religious and secular leaders. And I've found that the situation, of course, is going to vary very differently from Egypt to Iraq to Syria to the holy land to those Christians who remain in southeastern Turkey, to Iraq, and whether you're in Kurdistan or other parts of Iraq. The situation can vary.

I think the first question, of course, if I understand the mission correctly, it would pertain to humanitarian needs and what could be done to help. I think some other questions could include what can be done to sustain your community here over the long term, and what can be done to promote tolerance and to promote pluralism. And very often, the answers to those questions can vary within different communities and different nations.

ANTAL: Thank you.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question comes from Ghalib Begg with Michigan Muslim Community Council. Please go ahead.

BEGG: Hi. Thank you for taking my call. My question is, isn't there a direct relationship between the war and what's going on in terms of persecution of the Christians? You know, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it seems like the Christian community—and they lived in the Muslim world, the Arab world, for 1,400 years, and I'm sure it wasn't an ideal situation but that's how the Middle East is.

I would like, listening to some of the Republican leaders that are catering to the right-wing religious right, it seems like they want to promote more war versus peace. So wouldn't it behoove the religious leaders, particularly the Christian leaders, and especially in the light of the conference in Morocco where the 300 Islamic leaders came together to protect the non-Muslim minorities, to do a similar thing here in the West, and also join the peace movement—or anti-war movement, which would result in protection of also Christian and other minorities in the Middle East?

DORAN: Thank you, Ghalib. It's an excellent point. I think it's very difficult to make the case that there is not a very direct connection to what is going on and what has happened over the past 13 years, and to

suppose that it can't be directly related to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That was a profoundly destabilizing event in the region. And I think one thing that might be said, and I think this would be my contention—my contention would be that Iraq is not an authentic nation-state, certainly not one that could—I think it will be very difficult for it to sustain pluralistic democracy.

I think without a highly evolved sense of common interest and the common good—I don't want to say that it was inevitable that a pluralistic, democratic Iraq could evolve out of the post-World War I—out of Sykes-Picot, essentially. I am very skeptical Sykes-Picot and the possibilities of Western-constructed nation-state in the Middle East. But I think it was almost impossible for a pluralistic, democratic Iraq to emerge out of violence, out of war, in other words by force. And my hope is that this is a lesson that has been learned by policymakers.

I think that there were very legitimate—there were people who authentically believed that democracy could be brought through force to the Middle East. And my hope is that that is—that's something that's being rethought by the policymakers in both parties. I suppose time is going to tell. But the saber-rattling that we hear among candidates I think is very out-of-step with where the American people are with respect to war, and further war in the Middle East. I could be mistaken about that, but that would be my sense, and certainly my hope.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Michelle Bentsman with Harvard Divinity School. Please go ahead.

BENTSMAN: Hi. Thanks for your presentation. It seems to me that the primary recourse for the population has been to leave the Middle East and seek refuge elsewhere. And I'm wondering what options exist for them to stay safe and at home in the Middle East?

DORAN: That's an excellent question, Michelle. And thank you. And here, again, I think it's varies from region to region, country to country and, in some cases, city to city and village to village. In my previous answer, I alluded to much of the Sykes-Picot construct falling apart in Iraq and Syria. If we look at maps of Iraq and Syria, they don't really reflect the reality on the ground. Much of it is—it's a very fluid situation. It can change from village to village or province to province.

And so in that sort of a situation—your question is, what can Christians be doing, what are alternatives to leaving? In Syria, we're seeing a number of Christians displaced internally. There are large numbers in Homs and Aleppo, but a number of them have been displaced internally. Many have left Al-Hasakah province, many have gone to Europe. Would they return to Nineveh province in Iraq and Al-Hasakah province in Syria? I think that's a legitimate possibility, but there would have to be a very stable political solution.

In Lebanon, there's a much more stable political solution, but a number of people are still leaving. And there's been this thought I think that Lebanon might slip into violence. And it was talked about in 2012 and 2013. And years continue to go by, and Lebanon continues to remain secure politically and militarily. And I think that's a very good sign for the future of pluralism and perhaps even democracy in the Middle East. Whether or not Christians remain the Middle East is going to be very closely tied to the political stability that is offered by governments. And in Egypt right now, the situation may be a little bit

more tenuous than it appears, but there are millions of Christians in Egypt, and there is a commitment there.

And I think more broadly across the Middle East, most of the people who are there, or many of them, wish to remain. And so, if it incumbent on our government to take steps to become a little bit more involved—certainly more involved than it has been in the past—to see that the rights of minorities are protected. And I would say, in the face of the fact that many of these nation-states are collapsing, I think most obvious response would be to carve out havens for groups who have been vulnerable and see about—until such time as these nation-states can be reconstituted, if they can be. Until that time, I think that there should be—that the international community should be more active, and America should be active leading the way, for the establishment of havens and protected zones, not just for Christians but for all vulnerable groups across the Middle East.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from John Chane with Episcopal Church, Please go ahead.

CHANE: Thank you very much. Andrew, appreciate this presentation, and I hope that in some way it can continue. It's something that really is not discussed at the level that at least we're discussing it even today.

I have a question—kind of an overview question of how—what is the status, as you see that status, of Christians in Saudi Arabia today, given the role that Saudi continues to wish to play in the region, which is highly destabilized? That's the first piece.

The second piece is, I have been to Iran, I think, on seven occasions, really at the request of academics and clerics in Qom. And as people of the book, the Shia scholars are very fascinated and really working very hard, not only to address common theologies but also addressing this kind of an issue—not easy there, but this kind of an issue. And I traveled to Najaf, Iraq, this weekend for a week of meetings called by clerics and scholars at the seminary there and beyond to discuss not only the role of cooperation between Sunni and Shia within their own lives, given the region's instability, but also addressing the same issue that you are addressing right now. So it's fascinating to see that this is happening. But again, I look at Saudi Arabia as a key player, at least from a foreign policy point of view, and I really don't understand in any great detail the status of Christians in that—in that kingdom right now.

DORAN: John, thank you very much for your question. I've had the opportunity to travel fairly widely throughout the Middle East and even the Gulf States. I have not been to Saudi Arabia, so I can't speak with firsthand knowledge about this.

My understanding is that the overwhelming majority of Christians in Saudi Arabia, who are few, are expats. Most of them are, I think we would just say, the servant class—Filipinos. I have had the chance to meet with and speak with Filipinos who, when they're describing practicing their faith in Saudi Arabia, it sounds very similar to underground churches around the world where religious freedom really doesn't exist. And that America has not been in a position to demand more of its putative allies with respect to the promotion of human rights is certainly disappointing.

With respect to your other question about engagement with Iran and common theology, I think that's an absolutely fascinating area. And other scholars I've talked to, in addition to yourself, and other professors I know who've had the opportunity to engage the Shia community do talk about the possibility of common ground for reason and theology and engagement. And my hope for the United States would be that it could play a less-interested role in the Middle East in terms of the recent Sunni-Shia tensions and violence and play the role of mediator, because it's going to be very important in the years ahead to help bring stability to the region, to bring peace between this increasingly fractious Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East.

CHANE: Thank you.

DORAN: Thank you.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal with the National Council of Synagogues. Please go ahead.

ROSENTHAL: Thank you for your presentation.

The Copts are perhaps the oldest Christian group in the Middle East, the Copts of Egypt, and they have been subjected to some awful persecution and massacres over these past years. Some years ago, when we wanted to raise our voices in protest, we were urged by some of the Coptic leaders not to do so because that would only worsen their situation. How do you react to that?

DORAN: That's an excellent question, Rabbi, and thank you.

This is—this is something that I've heard from a number of Coptic Christians who have come down, I think, on both sides of this. And I think—one trend that I've seen is that Christians in Egypt and Coptic Christians who have emigrated to the West seem to have a different answer. One story that I've heard repeated was on Anwar Sadat's visit, I think in 1976, to the United States there was a protest by Coptic Christians. And Sadat was humiliated, returned home, and a number of churches were closed or, you know, permits not—permits for bathrooms and things like that, which were always tight—have always been tightly—very tightly controlled by the Egyptian government, were not—were not approved.

And so—and I think at no time more than the summer of 2013 has this very question that you raised come up, because Pope Tawadros took a very active role in bringing down the Muslim Brotherhood, standing there in solidarity with the millions who had taken to the streets, and the military and the judiciary and Al-Azhar University, which represents—they're a very significant force within Sunni Islam, and particularly in Egypt. And that bold statement by the Coptic pope certainly had repercussions for the Christians later that summer, when a number of churches were burned and there was great violence done to Christians and Christian property. I don't think that the Coptic pope would—well, I can't presume to know what he would say, but he isn't—from what I've read, I don't think that he would back away from the stand that he took and that millions of Coptic Christians and others took. At the same time, that came at a terrible price, and a number of Coptic Christians did leave Egypt in the aftermath.

But you raise an excellent point, and I don't know if this is something that has reached anything like a consensus in the Coptic community, whether or not to remain passive in silence or whether or not to be

a lot more socially and politically active. It's a—it's a great question. I think it's probably something that's going to be grappled with for years to come.

ROSENTHAL: Thank you.

DORAN: Thank you, Rabbi.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Egon Cholakian with Harvard University. Please go ahead.

CHOLAKIAN: Andrew, excellent presentation, and it's a hot potato of a subject. I applaud you for your courage. Also for the CFR. Bully for both of you.

About five minutes before the call commenced, I sat down with a pencil and paper and I thought, I wonder just how many jurisdictions, how many countries can I just personally, without looking on the Web or otherwise, can I identify where there's a confrontation between the Muslims and the Christians. And within five—four or five minutes, I counted right here 15 different countries worldwide. And that doesn't take any—as I said, any research to figure that out, so I'm sure—(inaudible)—a broad base—South Asia, Africa, you name it—and it's interesting. And so I started realizing that, OK, you're taking your scope of interest at this point as the Middle East and Christian activity. So it's broader-based, but notwithstanding, I'll try and keep it within the scope of your jurisdiction.

Then I started looking at the identity of the—of the orchestrated assaults against the Christians. They're very, very visible. They're very intense. I looked at the Church of the Nativity back in Bethlehem: 38 days in the church, all but destroying. A major episode, but it got the applause of the Muslim community. It wasn't just a few people. It was a tremendous applause from their community, and broad-based applause.

I go back to the Munich Olympics. Granted, it was Jewish; notwithstanding, had a tremendous impact on the Christian community. Again, it was broad-based—heavily orchestrated, broad-based applause from their community and approval rates, on and on and on.

My question to you is simply this. With a diet such as these highly conspicuous, broad-based, highly orchestrated events against Christians and so forth, what do you think that does to play out into the contemporary situation in the Western world—North American and in Western Europe—with respect to the Muslim immigrants? Do you not think that this bears on the American and the West, you know, when they look at this diet that is imposed on, what we've witnessed over decades and decades? Do you think that's not playing out at this point?

DORAN: Egon, thank you very much for your question and for your kind words.

That's a very difficult question and I don't think one that can be—that can be tackled with ease. I do get the sense from Muslims in the Middle East that there is a great deal of frustration. I recently had a conversation with the Somali Muslim who's living in America, and we spoke for some time at length, and what I was really trying—he's someone who falls into the demographic of one of the Westerners who might, out of anger, leave the West and go join the Islamic State. I'm happy to say that this is not

someone who did that or who was inclined to do that, but he was able to explain kind of where the anger—the source and the origins of the anger.

And so maybe I'm being a little bit too emotionally detached and removed here, but I did want to try to understand. And he said—he said, it's not the values of the West. That's not true. And it's not—it's not even the permissiveness of the culture. What really is at the heart of this is the fact that the West and the United States has gone into the Middle East and killed so many Muslims. And so I just—I've thought about that since that conversation, and I wonder if that's true. And I think it really may be. I think—in other words, I think there's a sense of helplessness among so many millions of Muslims. And I think we would—we should remember that, for the 1 billion plus Muslims—in excess of 1 billion around the world—who had to witness terrible violence, Muslims at the hands of Muslims, but Muslims who've also been killed by the United States and their allies in recent years—that there—that there is—the violence that has come from that has been minimal. We are talking about—now we're getting into the tens of thousands that are participating in violence and probably millions who are supportive, but that is a minority. And I guess—I guess I would say it is important for us to try to understand to what extent we have contributed to this.

Now, having said that—and I think this is probably where you're going—there does come a point where the countries in the West have to take—have to take some responsibility for being prudent about who is being permitted in and who is not. I don't think that—and this is—this is something that I—that I must mention—I don't think that Muslims feel—very often, as Muslims have told me, they don't feel—they're not particularly keen to be lectured by Americans or Westerners, Europeans, about the violence going on in the Middle East, because they will look at the violence that Europe and America has done to Jews, to Native Americans, to blacks, and to other groups, and say, look at—look at what you've done; how dare you presume, you know, after a few decades of clean record, to lecture us? We've never had anything on the scale of what the West has done to vulnerable groups. And I—and I think that that is a point well-taken.

Another point that might be made is that the—and many have made this—that the Middle East is, one hopes, moving toward a Westphalian moment. I don't happen to buy that thesis, but a lot of the violence throughout the Middle East does resemble the violence in 16th and 17th century Europe and the wars of religion. And I know that there are many who think that it's just a question of time before the extremists burn out and they burn out their—burn out others in the region on violence, and that the next step will be something like a Westphalian moment. One can hope that something like that does happen, because the violence has been—it's been terrible on the people living there.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next comment or question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question comes from Leo Thorne with American Baptist Churches USA. Please go ahead.

THORNE: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Doran. I think you gave us a good broad-stroke beginning, and you raised a number of issues, and the questions are really coming focused on that. And this issue of persecutions of Christians is a really significant issue, and I'm glad we are discussing this today.

I have two questions. One of the points that came out in the Morocco meeting in January had to do with the full rights of all citizens in Muslim-majority states. Is this a good road to travel? And I know all roads

will help when you're talking about persecution of Christians and anyone, and I know there is no silver bullet. But the specific question is, where should we be really placing our energy in this matter, this very difficult matter?

And then a second question is the role of the media. Do you think that the media's role in sort of exacerbating and fueling the kinds of ways in which they publicized persecution of Christians, that this is really being helpful? And how could we stem that media tide? Because I've been to Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and I'm glad you said that there are millions of Christians there, and many of them don't want to leave. They want to stay and work. And there's some good work being done, but that's hardly being talked about. So how is the media really affecting our work here?

DORAN: That's an excellent question, Leo, and thank you so much.

I think—to answer your first question, I think a movement toward recognition of full rights of citizens is a very important concept. I think that assumes, of course, that one would—that a citizen looks at rights as enumerated or bestowed by the state as the principle origin and source of those rights, or that that state is even a legitimate authority. And I think that's where one could run into some problems. But I think, you know, the notion of common rights that we can determine on the basis of common reason, common experience, common humanity, natural law, something along those lines, I think that's an—that's an excellent step. That's very much a step in the right direction. And one does hear Christians in the Middle East and other religious minorities speaking of equal rights rather than—using the term “equal rights” rather than “religious freedom.” And I do wonder, for a variety of reasons, if that might not be a good path forward.

With respect to the media, it certainly is frustrating. There was a professor in Mosul, a Muslim professor, who laid down his life speaking out against the atrocities that were taking place. And I'm ashamed to say I don't know his name off the top of my head, and it's a pity that more don't know that story, that there are many heroic stories that will not ever be told. And there are a number of Christians, when you travel throughout the Middle East, who are serving their Muslim brothers and sisters within their communities. The Sisters of Maadi in Cairo, in the Maadi neighborhood of Cairo, serve 100,000—at their—at their health clinic, about 100,000 patients a year, 90 percent of whom are Muslim. And these are Coptic Catholic nuns, and they're really doing amazing work. And there are examples of this throughout. There are—there are Lebanese—the Good Shepherd Sisters in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon brought in—they took in thousands of Syrian refugees who fled. And there was a story there of a Christian—former Christian soldier from the civil war who was living in the village who was then overseeing a refugee camp against some of the same people he had fought against in the Bekaa Valley a generation before. There are many beautiful stories like this, and the media does not seize upon that. They—and instead, what we see are these—some of these just horrific images of the captives being executed, either on the shores of the Mediterranean or in Syria or Iraq, and it really is troubling. And those images are meant to terrorize. The purpose of terror is to terrorize, as that famous tautology of Lenin reminds us. But it is also quite effective in terrorizing. But it's a shame that the media isn't presenting the Middle East for what it is, which is a much more complicated, nuanced, and really beautiful place, and that violence is unfortunately the exception.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question or comment.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Richard Yellin with Hillel Student Organizations of Israel.

YELLIN: Yeah, thank you very much, Andrew. I'm sitting here, it's 12:00 midnight, five minutes to midnight in Israel. I'm sitting on the border, a couple miles away from Tulkarm, and there are people being stabbed in Israel daily. And this is the only democratic country amongst 23 Arab countries in this particular area, 350 (million) Arab Muslims.

We have to get our language right, because we're not really speaking the right language. I think the word "religion" ought to be eliminated because it seems that we get upset much more quickly when ethnicity is at stake and not when religious grouping are at wars. It seemed forever until American Christians raised their voices when Christians were being massacred. Why did it take so long? And I think you explained that. When Jews are massacred, the Jewish people worldwide, as an ethnicity, seem to me to encircle the wagons almost the next day, immediately. Do you think there's any truth in this may be naïve observation?

DORAN: Richard, thank you for your question. I think it's an absolutely correct observation.

A friend of mine, who is a retired Foreign Service officer, was born in Budapest in 1944 to Jewish parents and her father perished in the Shoah—she later emigrated with her mother in '56 and became an American citizen, joined the Foreign Service, and had quite an amazing career—she began speaking about the challenges the Christian communities in the Middle East were facing at churches and elsewhere back in the late '90s. And Jeffrey Goldberg, writing for The Atlantic, has been for several years saying I simply don't understand why there is something approaching indifference coming from American religious leaders.

And I think this does get back to the question there is simply not the same cultural bond that exists among Jews and, in many ways, among Muslims. Christians simply do not have that same closeness. I think—I think that Orthodox Christians in the East do tend to have a closer sense of what's happening. I think the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox have a much closer—much, much closer cultural ties to the Christians of the Middle East, and that—and they're also much more aware of what's going on. I think it becomes more attenuated when you get into Europe, but they at least have something of a history and, you know, the bond I mentioned between the Maronites and the French. But by the time you get to the United States—and it is wonderful, by the way, to hear so many mainline Christians who I think are—not to knock anybody, but I think the mainline Christians are much further along understanding the complexity of the Middle East and engaging Christian and other communities there. But Evangelicals—the Evangelical community is only just at the very beginning of understanding that there are Christians in the Middle East and that this is an issue that needs to be—that these are—that these are human beings who really need to have their rights spoken for in the public square.

I'm not really sure how this—how this will play out, but I—but I do think that it's a point very well taken. And I think that, you know, speaking as someone who's a Catholic, Cardinal Wuerl has been excellent, Cardinal McCarrick has been excellent on this particular issue. But in general I don't know that the Catholic bishops in the United States have really done enough to raise awareness about this issue and to help mobilize their flocks for providing humanitarian support for the Christians in the Middle East. I think that that's something that could—that more could certainly be done. But I would also say that the Catholics are engaged and have—and have a reach in the Middle East that Evangelicals really don't. That

really is a pity, because if you're an Evangelical Christian in the Middle East—and there are certainly tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of Evangelical Christians in the Middle East—you have no voice here in America. And so I think we have seen, since the emergence of ISIS, something of a—of a I hope it's sea change on this issue, but time will—time will tell.

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. The next question will come from Majed Ashy with Merrimack College. Please go ahead.

ASHY: Yes, hello. Thank you very much for your presentation.

And I would like just to point out something you mentioned, which is the complexity of the Middle East. As you mentioned, the situation there is very complex. Christians have been a very integral part of the Middle East history. For example, the founder of the Baath Party in Syria and Iraq is a Christian, Michel Aflaq. And also, like a lot of the artists now in the Middle East, from Lebanon and Egypt, they are beloved and they are Christians, and people know they are Christians and love them. Also, like, politically, like for example, Saudi Arabia have been supporting Christians in Lebanon, the Christian party; also, like, supporting the—like, the Christians in Egypt in some way. So, like, even at the time of the Ottoman massacre of the Armenians, there was Egyptian writers who actually—like Herman Falouty, who wrote that if you think that God created Christians to be massacred, then you don't know God. So basically it is very complex. And I am very concerned about the narratives that are emerging of conflicts between Christians and Muslims that are, you know, supported by the massacres by ISIS and so on.

So I think, you know, my question to you is, do you think there is room to create, like, or to emphasize the narratives of cooperation between Muslims and Christians, and Muslims and Jews even? Thank you very much.

DORAN: Thank you very much, Majed. I think there's absolutely room for several such organizations like that, and it's important not to fall into the hands of the ISIS narrative that this is a Christian versus Muslim fight. And thank you for raising that question about the Ottomans again, because I realize that I did not fully answer Salam's—from the Muslim Public Affairs Council—his question earlier.

And there was one other point that I wanted to add, that the Ottomans in the 17th century, as a matter of policy, began integrating Christians into Sunni villages and Christians into Shia villages, and that in Lebanon to this day there are several villages with Christian and Shia, and then Christian with Sunni. And they didn't necessarily always make a point to integrate Sunni and Shia, but the idea there was the Christians had a—had a leavening effect, and the Ottomans recognized the value of Christians and the leavening effect that they did have and being, as you said, an integral part of Muslim cultures throughout the Middle East.

The point about Michel Aflaq, of course, is a very important one, the founder and architect of Baathist ideology. And I think it can also be said that this was a—Baathist ideology at the time, many regarding it as progressive and secular. And in practice, it incorporated so much of the brutal—the brutal tactics of the totalitarian regimes of Europe, both communist and fascist, and ended up being a means for brutally oppressing so many people. But, you know, because of its secular theories, was praised by a great many religious minorities, including Christians, across the Middle East.

And of course, I think we've seen how that's played out. But to answer your question, I think there's absolutely a time—and now would be absolutely the time for greater cooperation between Muslims and Christians in helping to shape a more accurate narrative of the nuances and complexity of the Middle East, and presenting that to the American public. And I think that would do a great deal to curb the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment that seems to be rising among the public.

FASKIANOS: Andrew, thank you very much. We're at the end of our time, unfortunately, and I apologize to those of you who—I know we have several questions still left, but we try to end on time. So, Andrew, we'll just have to have you back, but you really gave us a good analysis, and insights into the history and what is taking place today. So thank you very much.

DORAN: Thank you so much, Irina. It was a pleasure to be with you.

FASKIANOS: And I encourage you all to follow CFR's Religion and Foreign Policy Initiative on Twitter @CFR_Religion for announcements about upcoming events and information about the latest CFR resources. So thank you all again, and thank you to Andrew Doran.

(END)

[Suicide bomber targeting Christians kills 70 in Pakistan park](#)

LAHORE, Pakistan, March 28 (Reuters) – Pakistani authorities on Monday (March 28) hunted members of a Taliban faction which once declared loyalty to Islamic State after the group claimed responsibility for an Easter suicide bomb targeting Christians that killed at least 70 people.

The brutality of Sunday's attack by Jamaat-ur-Ahrar, the group's fifth bombing since December, reflects the movement's attempts to raise its profile among Pakistan's increasingly fractured Islamist militants.

At least 29 children enjoying an Easter weekend outing were among those killed when the suicide bomber struck in a busy park in the eastern city of Lahore, the power base of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Pakistan is a majority-Muslim state but has a Christian population of more than two million.

It was Pakistan's deadliest attack since the December 2014 massacre of 134 school children at a military-run academy in the city of Peshawar that prompted a big government crackdown on Islamist militancy.

Military spokesman Gen. Asim Bajwa said intelligence agencies, the army and paramilitary Rangers had launched several raids around Punjab following the attack.

"Number of suspect terrorists and facilitators arrested and huge cache of arms and ammunition recovered," he said in a tweet that gave no detail. He could not be reached for further comment.

Prime Minister Sharif toured hospitals full of victims, promising to bring justice.

"Our resolve as a nation and as a government is getting stronger and (the) coward enemy is trying for soft targets," Sharif said, according to a statement from his office, calling for stronger intelligence coordination.

Jamaat-ur-Ahrar claimed responsibility for the attack late on Sunday night and issued a direct challenge to the government.

“The target was Christians,” a faction spokesman, Ehsanullah Ehsan, said. “We want to send this message to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that we have entered Lahore.”

Lahore is the capital of Pakistan’s richest province, Punjab, and is seen as the country’s political and cultural heartland.

Markets, schools and courts in Lahore were closed on Monday as the city mourned.

Rescue services spokeswoman Deeba Shahnaz said at least 29 children, seven women and 34 men were killed and about 340 were wounded, with 25 in serious condition.

Jamaat-ur-Ahrar has claimed responsibility for several big attacks since it split from the main Pakistani Taliban in 2014.

While it mostly focuses attacks in its base of the northwestern Mohmand tribal area, it has previously carried out at least two major attacks in Lahore: one in 2015 that targeted two Christian churches and another at the Wagah border between India and Pakistan in late 2014.

Pakistan has been plagued by militant violence for the last 15 years, since it joined a U.S.-led campaign against Islamist militancy after the Sept. 11, 2001, al Qaeda attacks on the United States.

While the army, police, government and Western interests have been the prime targets of the Pakistani Taliban and their allies, Christians and other religious minorities have also been attacked.

Nearly 80 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack on a church in the northwestern city of Peshawar in 2013.

Security forces have killed and arrested hundreds of suspected militants under the crackdown launched after the 2014 Peshawar school massacre.

Militant violence had eased but the groups retain the ability to launch devastating attacks.

Most militants, like the Pakistani Taliban, are fighting to topple the government and introduce a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

However, the entrance of the separate Islamic State ideology from the Middle East – unlike the Taliban, Islamic State envisions a global caliphate and emphasises killing Christians and minority Shi’a Muslims – has also raised worries it could intensify sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Jamaat-ur-Ahrar in September 2014 swore allegiance to Islamic State, also known as Daesh.

“We respect them. If they ask us for help, we will look into it and decide,” spokesman Ehsan told Reuters of Islamic State, while rejecting the main Pakistani Taliban leadership.

By March 2015, however, the group was again swearing fealty to the main Taliban umbrella leadership. The reason for its return to the fold remains murky.

In the Pakistani capital of Islamabad earlier on Sunday, hundreds of hard-line Muslim activists clashed with police in a protest over the execution of a man they consider a hero for assassinating a governor over his criticism of harsh blasphemy laws.

Bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri shot dead Punjab governor Salman Taseer in 2011. Taseer, a prominent liberal politician, had spoken in support of a Christian woman sentenced to death under the law that mandates capital punishment for insulting Islam or the Prophet Mohammad. Qadri was executed last month.

There was no indication of a connection between the protest in Islamabad and the bomb in Lahore.

However, in March, Jamaat-ur-Ahrar spokesman Ehsan said another attack by the group – a suicide bombing that killed 10 at a court near Mohmand – was “especially done as vengeance for the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri”.

(Reporting by Asad Hashim; Writing by Robert Birsell and Kay Johnson.; Editing by Nick Macfie)

Source: [http://www.religionnews.com/2016/03/28/terrorists-christians-pakistan-islam-easter/?email=ignatiusu%40aol.com&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=The%20Slingshot%20Easter%20prayers%20Lahore%20attacks%20Mother%20Angelica%20Jedis&utm_content=The%20Slingshot%20Easter%20prayers%20Lahore%20attacks%20Mother%20Angelica%20Jedis+CID_c0c854003d0b4a9c258007e911c8bad7&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor&utm_term=Suicide%20bomber%20targeting%20Christians%20kills%2070%20in%20Pakistan%20park#h\[\]](http://www.religionnews.com/2016/03/28/terrorists-christians-pakistan-islam-easter/?email=ignatiusu%40aol.com&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=The%20Slingshot%20Easter%20prayers%20Lahore%20attacks%20Mother%20Angelica%20Jedis&utm_content=The%20Slingshot%20Easter%20prayers%20Lahore%20attacks%20Mother%20Angelica%20Jedis+CID_c0c854003d0b4a9c258007e911c8bad7&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor&utm_term=Suicide%20bomber%20targeting%20Christians%20kills%2070%20in%20Pakistan%20park#h[])

Easter message echoes poignantly true for Iraqi, Syrian refugees



Editor's note: GSR correspondent Chris Herlinger spent three weeks reporting in Lebanon and Jordan on the refugee crisis. While there, he also spoke with some refugees about the significance of the Lenten and Easter season. In this region, Eastern Catholics, some of whom, like Orthodox Christians, celebrate Easter on May 1 this year.

For many Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria now living in Jordan and Lebanon, this year's Easter will be celebrated in the heart — but not necessarily on the table.

On a warm spring day in their bare apartment in the Al-Hashni neighborhood of Amman, Jordan, Sabhan Jinan Maqadas Hasso and Lina Safaa Najeeb Alkes Asahq smiled as they recalled past Easter feasts in their hometown of Mosul, Iraq, when the centerpiece of the meal was a lamb stuffed with meat and rice.

Best not to dwell on the past, said Hasso and Asahq. The family fled war-torn Mosul in early 2015 for Amman. As the young couple and their three young children await word of their official application for asylum and the possibility of new life in Europe or elsewhere, Easter will be a simple affair. Their celebration will be focused on religious observances at a nearby Syrian Catholic Church.

"The most important thing is to celebrate the Mass," Asahq said. An Easter meal can await another year.

Maybe that is why the Lenten and Easter season — normally a time of reflection, repentance and, ultimately, rejoicing — is this year perhaps more about recovery from the trauma of war, fear and flight. So much overshadows the Middle East right now as Christians mark Easter, which for many Christians in Jordan is celebrated in accordance with the Orthodox calendar, on May 1 this year. In Lebanon, the Orthodox churches mark Easter that day, as well. But the so-called "Occidental" churches will celebrate Easter, as many in the United States and other countries do, this coming Sunday, March 27.

A five-minute drive from Hasso and Asahq's small walkup apartment is the home of Wilsin Salim Dawood Agla and Lina Behnam Majeed Hanusi and their young daughter. Like the other couple, they are Christians from Mosul, Iraq. Though new to Amman, they, like Asahq and Hasso, left Iraq because of threats from the so-called Islamic State group (ISIS), aerial bombardments and other acts of violence that made living an unwelcome test and endurance.



From left to right, Wilsin Salim Dawood Agla, Lina Behnam Majeed Hanusi, their young daughter, Sr. Nesreen Dababneh, a Jordanian nun who works at a Caritas clinic, and Caritas home visit coordinator Ramez Awwad at the family's home in Amman, Jordan. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Life in their first-floor apartment — a plain, unadorned living area, bathroom and small kitchen — now centers on waiting to hear of their refugee status. (If they are granted official refugee status, the family can go to another country. They would like to go to Australia, where they hear refugees can get started more easily in a new life). For now, the family is dependent on food packages and other humanitarian assistance provided by Caritas and other church groups.

The mood is uncertain. Yet Hanusi in particular takes comfort from attending Mass daily and in the assurance, she said confidently, that God has not forgotten her family — and never will. "God will not abandon us," Hanusi said. "God will not leave us. We are sure he will help us get out of this situation."

The memories of the last months — of leaving under threat, the uncertainty about their home, friends and family are still fresh. The family, including a 3-year-old daughter, has only been in Amman two months.

"We feel sadness, we can't describe how hard it was, the days we spent," Hanusi said. "But we still have faith in God."

They have put aside thoughts of any fine Easter meal — Mass will be the centerpiece of their Easter together, and that is enough, Hanusi said. "We can live Easter in our hearts. There are no limits in our hearts. Attending Easter Mass, that will be Easter. We will thank God for everything this Easter."

Sr. Nesreen Dababneh, a Jordanian nun who works at a Caritas clinic for refugees in the neighborhood, calls this kind of faith "touchable" because it is deeply felt, an example of incarnation.

"Easter is the most appropriate feast for this time of year," she said, because it is Easter, not Christmas, that tries to make sense of the mystery of how to live amid pain. "It's not a philosophy, it's a reality," said Dababneh, a psychologist by training who oversees a program to help refugees with trauma and other effects of war, flight and displacement.



A Christian banner on a street in the Nabaa-Bourj Hammoud neighborhood of Beirut, Lebanon. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

"When life doesn't give you the answer of hope, you can find the answer in your faith, in Jesus Christ's resurrection," she said. If you look at the plight of refugees strictly from politics, there is little hope, she said, comparing it to the sepulcher or Jesus's empty tomb. "There is no hope, it is dark, there is no life," she said, noting that many refugees have no hope returning to their home countries. "All signs point to the end. But God made a miracle" — a miracle Christians celebrate at Easter.

Celebration of Easter is in order but with some sober reflection needed, said Wafa Goussous, an executive with the Middle East Council of Churches, a regional ecumenical body. "I think churches in the West must sacrifice. Easter is about the sacrifice and the resurrection, this is what the Father offered his children," she said. In practical terms, that means that Christians, wherever they are, must be willing "to step out of our comfort zones" and respond more rigorously to such dire humanitarian crises as the Syrian and Iraqi refugee crisis.

"The Christians in the world must ask, 'How are we celebrating Easter?'" she said. In the case of the refugee crises, "to witness a disaster like this, with children being thrown into the sea, and then [for Christians in other countries] kneeling down and praying to the Lord to help them — no, it's not enough anymore. Christians must raise our voices by putting pressure on the politicians to seek peaceful solutions and stop this humanitarian crisis. Christians and non-Christians in Syria are facing life threats every minute. Sadly, it is becoming only news to be watched on television."

Also reality for Goussous and many others is the flight of Christians from the Middle East. Some are trying to escape wars and conflict; others are simply worn out from an atmosphere that makes Christians unwelcome in the region from which Jesus and his movement originated — and on which Christian holy places and sites still stand. "This is our home," Goussous said of the need of protecting Christian traditions and holy places. "Where else can we go?"

In nearby Lebanon, similar worries bedevil this Easter season.

The family of Syrian refugee Mervat Dib, the mother of four children, fled Syria because of threats posed by ISIS. The fear of rape was a particular worry, she said. "We don't talk of those things," she said recently at a Beirut health clinic run by the Assembly of Female Religious Congregations, a consortium of sisters from different congregations.



The family of Syrian refugee Mervat Dib, the mother of four children, fled Syria because of threats posed by ISIS. The fear of rape was a particular worry, she said. "We don't talk of those things," she said recently at a Beirut health clinic run by the Assembly of Female Religious Congregations, a consortium of sisters from different congregations. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)



Iraqi refugee Sanaa Abdallah Yaacoub, with one of her daughters at a clinic run by a consortium of Catholic sisters, says that, as Easter is celebrated in the Middle East, attention must be paid to concrete

solutions to help achieve peace and secure safety for those, like her and family, who have fled unsafe places. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Dib believes there is no future in Syria for Christians and wonders what kind of future there may be in the Middle East as a whole. "Christians are being persecuted in Syria and other countries in our region. We need to take care of the Christians now."

Iraqi refugee Sanaa Abdallah Yaacoub, 42, agrees. As Easter is celebrated in the region, attention must be paid to concrete solutions to help achieve peace and secure safety for those, like her and her family, who have fled unsafe places. "I ask for peace at this time of year. We have no aim, we're lost," said the mother of five children, ages 12 to 21 and a widow — her husband died in 2011 from a car bomb explosion. "That is why we are searching for a place in peace."

The search for security and the remembrance of the Easter narrative that originated in the Middle East have particular poignancies right now.

"This is his [Jesus'] land, and we are his people," said Marlene Constantin, a project manager at the Catholic Near East Welfare Association / Pontifical Mission. As she reflects on this year's Easter, she thinks it is essential for all Christians to embrace the essential teachings of Jesus. "These problems we face in the region are far from his experience and teaching," Constantin said. "I think everything starts from that point."

She worries about the "power of evil" and the "evil stance" she sees in the region now. The Christian community often feels under threat. And yet, she believes Easter's quintessential message is that "even with these problems, Jesus will not abandon us." So she continues to affirm her faith.

So does Salvatorian Sr. Susanne Rahhale, who works at the sisters' clinic, located in the Nabaa-Bourj Hammoud neighborhood. Rahhale embraces the message of Pope Francis in stressing "divine mercy," the need to reveal the holy in everyday life. "Helping others is one way to convey this message," she said.

It is telling that Rahhale mentioned Pope Francis. The pontiff, in opening Holy Week celebrations, compared [the fate of refugees](#) in the world today to the indifference experienced by Jesus, saying, "many do not want to take responsibility for the fate of the many emarginated people, the many migrants, the many refugees."



"This is his land, and we are his people," Marlene Constantin, a project manager at the Catholic Near East Welfare Association / Pontifical Mission, right, said of the Easter narrative of Jesus's death and resurrection. Salvatorian Sr. Susanne Rahhale, left, who works at the sisters' clinic, located in the Nabaa-Bourj Hammoud neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon. Rahhale embraces the message of Pope Francis in stressing "divine mercy," the need to reveal the holy in everyday life. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Two members of the Antonine Sisters, a Lebanese Maronite Catholic congregation, were equally adamant on the theme of remembering refugees and the need to end the wars that have caused so many to flee their homes.

"Peace, peace, peace," Sr. Judith Haroun, the congregation's general superior, said emphatically in a recent interview at the congregation's mother house outside of Beirut.

Antonine Sr. Isabelle Nassif, local superior of Our Lady of Grace Convent, agreed, and has particular hopes for her country. "We are just praying for peace. Peace and justice." She paused. "We hope that our Lebanon will flourish again, like the cedar of Lebanon" — a reference to Lebanon's continued challenges in recovering from past conflicts as wars in neighboring countries still rage, and the crush of refugees continues.

It is not always easy, she added, to affirm the "yes" of the Christian message, particularly in challenging times. "It can be difficult; it's not always sweet. But it keeps going and going and going, and it gets stronger. We do it for him [Jesus]. We have to show his face to the world."

In Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Good Shepherd Sr. Amira Tabet coordinates a social service center that provides education and other needs for a predominately Muslim population. To Tabet, Easter reaffirms the Holy See's affirmation of divine mercy, as well as the sacramental life of service and charity to others. "It is unlimited love," she said of Christ's life and example.

"The love of Christ resurrected is stronger than anything in the world."



In Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Good Shepherd Sister Amira Tabet coordinates a social service center that provides education and other needs for a predominately Muslim population. To Tabet, Easter reaffirms the Holy See's affirmation of divine mercy. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

[Chris Herlinger is GSR's international correspondent. His email address is cherlinger@ncronline.org.]

Source: <http://globalsistersreport.org/news/spirituality/easter-message-echoes-poignantly-true-iraqi-syrian-refugees-38891>

Pakistani Christians Demand Protection

Already living under the shadow of discriminatory laws and social exclusion, Pakistan's impoverished and long-suffering Christian minority now find themselves in the crosshairs of Islamist extremists.

Following an attack in the eastern city of Lahore that saw at least 73 people killed this past Easter Sunday, Pakistani Christians say they feel extremely vulnerable and have called for government protection.

The attack on March 27 took place in a park in eastern Pakistani city, where churches were also targeted by Pakistani Taliban factions last year.

"Until recently, terrorists were not so focused on our community. But now, all their attention is on us," said Irshad Ashnaz, the vicar of Lahore's Christ Church. "Perhaps it is time now for the [Pakistani] government too to turn their attention to us."

Zubaida Masih lost her 16-year-old son, Wasif Masih, in Lahore's Gulshan-e Iqbal park bombing on March 27. She blamed lax security at the park for her loss.

"This happened just because of a lack of security. What else can we say? If there had been stronger security measures, this would not have happened," she said.

Masih said the authorities provided some security to Christian churches after 15 worshippers were killed in bomb attacks on two churches in Lahore's Christian neighborhood, Youhanabad, on March 15, 2015.

"There were security measures at churches but not in parks," she said.

Pakistan's estimated 3 million Christians are a tiny minority in a country of 200 million Muslims. Their ancestors were low-caste Hindus who converted to Christianity in the 19th century, and today Pakistan's blasphemy laws are frequently misused against them. Mostly relegated to sanitation jobs, Christians and other non-Muslim minorities are barred from holding high office.

In recent years, Christian communities have endured mob violence and terrorist attacks. More than 80 worshippers were killed in an attack on a 130-year-old church in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar in September 2013. In March that year, a Muslim mob burned 170 houses, 16 shops, and two churches in a Christian neighborhood in Lahore.

The city is the capital of eastern Punjab Province, where most of Pakistani Christians are concentrated. In one of the worst riots against Christians in Punjab, eight people were burned alive when a mob torched an entire village in 1997, which rendered its 20,000 residents homeless.

Following the recent bombing, Pope Francis has called on Islamabad to protect its Christian citizens.

"I appeal to civil authorities and all sectors of [Pakistan] to make every effort to restore [security and serenity] to the population, and in particular to the most vulnerable religious minorities," he told pilgrims at St. Peter's Square on March 28.

Pakistani authorities, however, are adamant they are doing everything they can to protect Christians and other minorities.

Balighur Rehman, a state minister for the interior, said Pakistan's religious minorities do not feel particularly vulnerable.

"Pakistani minorities understand they are not the only targets of the terrorist attacks," he told Radio Mashaal. "Our mosques, funerals, and other soft targets have been hit, as well."

Islamabad appears to have launched a massive crackdown against Taliban sympathizers in the eastern Punjab Province, which has traditionally escaped large-scale military operations -- the hallmark of Pakistani counterterrorism efforts in the restive northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

Authorities have so far questioned thousands and detained hundreds as part of its investigation into the Lahore attacks.

Critics, however, still point out Islamabad's unwillingness to go against all militants operating out of its territory.

On March 28, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif again repeated the familiar government mantra of going after all terrorists.

"Today, I am addressing you to renew my vow that we are accounting for each and every drop of the blood of our martyrs," he said in a televised address. "This score is being settled, and we will not sit comfortably until until the last score is fully settled."

There is, however, little solace for Pakistani Christians in such pledges. Thirty-five-year-old driver Nadeem Gul, who survived the Lahore attack, says Christians are afraid to celebrate.

"We have had to learn to live with fear," he told *The Guardian*. "Every time there is a religious festival, we Christians feel a looming sense of threat. We cannot be happy on our holy occasions."

Radio Mashaal correspondent Gul Ayaz contributed reporting. With reporting by Reuters and The Guardian.

Source: <http://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-christians-demand-protection/27644659.html>

Growing Islamist drive highlights insecurity of African Christians

When a new president was installed on March 30 in the Central African Republic, religious leaders here and elsewhere hoped the event will signal a new beginning after four years of strife. Yet with Islamist insurgencies now spreading fear across much of the continent, peace and stability still look some way off.

"I hope our new head of state will gather people from east and west, north and south, and at last bring reconciliation," said Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, head of the Central African Republic's Catholic church. "But this will mean standing upright and working for our country's development, as well as understanding the fractures in our society and bringing justice for conflict victims."

Faustin-Archange Touadéra, a practicing Protestant, won the presidency with a two-thirds majority in the Central African Republic's mid-February election, conducted under the watchful eyes of heavily armed international peacekeepers.

The ballot had been repeatedly postponed because of violence in the country, one of Africa's poorest. A fifth of the population has fled fighting between mainly Muslim and Christian militias. But church leaders urged Catholics to vote, and believe the peaceful outcome owed much to a late November visit by Pope Francis to the capital, Bangui.

"The Holy Father's presence was a decisive, catalyzing moment -- he came as a messenger of peace and gathered Christian and Muslim communities together," Nzapalainga told *NCR*. "Since then, we've felt a wind of peace blowing through our country. There's been a total turnaround and people are looking with hope to the future and turning away from the past of daggers, machetes and destruction."

The Catholic church's nine dioceses make up a third of the 4.4 million inhabitants of the Central African Republic, where a rebel movement calling itself Seleka suspended the constitution in March 2013 after ousting President François Bozizé. Co-led by Arab-speaking Islamists from Chad and Sudan, Seleka was driven back after the January 2014 deployment of French and African peacekeepers.

But bloody clashes continued between rival Christian and Muslim militias as a transitional government grappled to reassert control, until Touadéra, a former prime minister, won the presidency as a "candidate of the people," promising to make the Central African Republic "prosperous, just and fraternal" again.

Insurgencies

Meanwhile, other countries in the region are also struggling to contain Islamist-backed insurgencies that have risked pitting Christians and Muslims against each other. Recent outrages in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Ivory Coast, all viewed as Western allies against Islamist militancy, have highlighted insurgent coordination.

"These groups reject Western values and Muslims who won't accept Shariah law, and are trying to attract world attention with their attacks," explained Rafael D'Aqui, an expert with the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need. "They've obtained huge sums from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere to build mosques where there were previously no Muslims and train imams in a hard, radical school. There's talk of a militant Muslim fraternity, intent on invading Christian areas."

In northern Mali, ethnic Tuareg rebels overran a swathe of territory in 2012, operating alongside Islamist fighters driven out of neighboring Libya after the fall of Moammar Gadhafi.

France, the former colonial power, intervened here, too, in January 2013, driving the rebels back to the mountainous Algerian border after they had imposed Shariah and vandalized the fabled Timbuktu. Yet guerrilla raids continued, alongside sporadic attacks on churches and presbyteries, raising fears that the Islamists could regroup.

Under a June 2015 U.N.-brokered peace deal with the Mali government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, regional assemblies are to be elected and rebel Tuaregs integrated into national security forces.

However, last November, as Islamic State-linked terrorists launched bloody attacks in Paris, assailants from al-Qaida in the Maghreb and a Malian offshoot, al-Murabitoun, occupied a hotel in Bamako, the Malian capital, leaving 20 hostages dead. This February, they launched another attack on a U.N. mission in Timbuktu.

Religious leaders from the predominant Muslim population condemned both outrages. But Fr. Edmond Dembele, secretary-general of the Episcopal Conference of Mali, admits that Christians who fled the advancing Islamists still feel unsafe to return.

"Ordinary Christians and Muslims have always lived well together here, attending each other's ceremonies and sharing in community life, so our church is shocked at what's happened," Dembele told *NCR*. "We know there's a minority of Muslims who'd like to see things change. But they're just a small group; and while we're all equally affected, I'm confident we can withstand these attempts to sow fear and stir interreligious conflicts."

Courage and firmness will be needed in making good that pledge.

In mid-January, attackers linked to al-Qaida stormed hotels and restaurants in Ouagadougou, capital of neighboring Burkina Faso, leaving 29 dead, including six Canadian humanitarian workers. The assault took place just after a failed military coup by troops loyal to former President Blaise Compaoré, who fled abroad after 27 years in power during October 2014 riots. Here, too, the Catholic bishops' conference appealed for national unity in response.

But in mid-March, al-Qaida was back, this time in the Ivory Coast, with a high-profile attack on a beach resort in Grand-Bassam that left at least 16 dead.

Tensions have been rising all over French-speaking Africa. In Senegal, security was tightened this January after the arrest of Islamist militants; in Niger, Muslims destroyed 45 Catholic and Protestant churches during two days of frenzied rioting in January 2015.

Niger's newly retired Archbishop Michel Cartagey has also pledged to uphold friendly ties with the predominant Muslim community. But he's warned that the anti-Christian violence, which left a dozen dead, was "well thought-out, prepared and organized."

"Some local Muslims, young included, showed courage and solidarity by sheltering Christians in their family homes -- while others stood in our church doorways saying the rioters would have to kill them as well," said the Niamey-based archbishop, whose church shares its bishops' conference with Burkina Faso and runs a joint commission for Islamic-Christian dialogue. "But we're still in the dark as to why this fury erupted and precisely who was behind it. Although the authorities did what they could, they had trouble controlling the situation."

Outside interference

Niger's resource-starved president, Mahamadou Issoufou, insisted the rioters "understood nothing about Islam," and has helped rebuild the destroyed churches. Like other regional rulers, he's blamed agitators from Nigeria's extremist Boko Haram movement and vowed to crack down on militant Islam.

Formed in 2002, Boko Haram publicly allied itself with the Islamic State group in March 2015 and has killed at least 17,000 Nigerians during a seven-year insurgency. The group operates at will in Niger and Chad, and has left 2.3 million displaced and 5.6 million facing hunger, according to a March U.N. report.

In 2013, Christian churches welcomed a government state of emergency in northern areas, as efforts were made to rein in Boko Haram's brutality. But some prominent churchmen, including Archbishop Ignatius Ayau Kaigama of Jos, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, have doubted whether military efforts can stem the violence.

Islamists are now posing hazards across the continent in Kenya, where groups linked to al-Qaida vowed revenge after local troops invaded neighboring Somalia in 2011 to help quell a Muslim insurgency there.

In September 2013, gunmen from Somalia's Al-Shabaab group attacked Nairobi's upmarket Westgate shopping mall, leaving 67 dead and more than 175 wounded. In April 2015, they murdered a further 148 in a school shooting spree at Garissa.

Meanwhile, Christian-Muslim tensions have also been mounting in Tanzania, where 120 Muslims were arrested, including Sheikh Issa Ponda, the Council of Imams head, after Islamist protesters attacked churches in Dar es Salaam in autumn 2012.

Some observers think the violence reflects a 1989 "Abuja Declaration," issued by a Nigeria-based organization with offshoots in some 20 countries. This demanded the eradication of Christianity and continent-wide imposition of Shariah, and called for only Muslims to hold "strategic national and international posts."

"The recent campaigns can't be seen as isolated or separate -- we have to conclude they reflect interference from outside," Bishop Tarcisius Ngalalekumtwa, president of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference, told *NCR*. "Ordinary Muslims have nothing against the Christian religion and Catholic faith -- the only ones who do are fundamentalists, pressed and influenced from abroad. But we're all affected by the intimidation, and are meeting and praying to encourage each other."

Violent Islamist groups have also been reported in Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and the mineral-rich Democratic Republic of Congo, widely considered Africa's most Catholic country, where up to 5.4 million people were killed in wars involving two dozen armed groups in 1995-2003.

Meanwhile, concern has risen this year for Christians in northern Cameroon, where Boko Haram marauders have already killed 1,100 civilians and 65 police and troops, according to government data. Radio France International reported that interfaith "watch committees" had placed mosques and churches under guard during Friday prayers and Sunday services, and helped prevent civilian victims in five separate suicide bomb attacks March 10-13.

However, Catholic groups say Boko Haram still regularly takes control of whole villages, abducting child hostages to be used in random attacks. As elsewhere in Africa, Western missionaries, on whom local church life depends, have had to be withdrawn after a spate of abductions.

"They know if you strike the head, you strike the whole body -- that's why they're spreading fear among Christian communities," explained D'Aqui, from Aid to the Church in Need. "We count on Western Christians to back efforts to protect and reinforce these endangered church communities, helping them find ways to survive and develop."

Need for alternatives

Effective solutions, D'Aqui says, will depend on military deployments and security measures, but also on humanitarian assistance, the tackling of poverty and inequality, and investment in grassroots infrastructure.

While Boko Haram has stirred youthful hearts and minds with its Islamist indoctrination, it has also exploited economic hardships, offering money and prospects to those who embrace its fundamentalist creed.

"Most of our staff are Muslims, and interfaith relations were always positive and mutually reinforcing here," said Niek de Goeij, representative of U.S. Catholic Relief Services in Mali. "But while there's a rapidly growing population here, youth opportunities are extremely limited, and there's a great waste of human capital which any terrorist or criminal group can exploit. There's a real need for viable alternatives in jobs and livelihoods."

Such aims will loom large for Touadéra as he takes office in the Central African Republic. The ravaged country's Supreme Court is still investigating fraud in the presidential elections, while sexual abuse charges have been leveled against the 10,000-strong African peacekeeping force, currently patrolling alongside French troops.

With sporadic attacks continuing from Seleka remnants and other groups, measures must urgently be taken to secure disarmament and the rule of law; foster national reconciliation; and rebuild health care, education and social services.

But Imam Omar Kobine Layama, president of the Central African Republic's Islamic Council, agrees that Pope Francis' late 2015 visit helped place the country on a road to recovery, by delivering a conciliatory message that might just reach Islamist militants.

"We counted on the Holy Father to bring a clear message about the unity of believers, interfaith dialogue, human rights and peace, which could really liberate us and help rebuild social bonds," the imam, who's twice visited the Vatican in a bid for peace, told *NCR*. "The ideology professed by extremist groups like Boko Haram hasn't found sympathizers here, and our own imams have advised against any contacts with it."

Nzapalainga concurs. "The bell of dialogue and negotiation is sounding here, along with the bell of compromise and consensus," the archbishop told *NCR*. "If we speak harsh words about our national fractures, we also have to see and understand them clearly. In this Year of Mercy, let's hope former enemies hear this new message of peace."

[Jonathan Luxmoore's two-volume study of communist-era persecution, *The God of the Gulag*, has just been published by Gracewing in the U.K.]

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