

## SLPN ANNUAL GATHERING MINUTES—Sept 26-28, 2023

### “Loosening the Chains: Advocating for Sanction Relief for Syria & Lebanon”

Online and in Person at the United Methodist Building in Washington, DC

#### Welcome from Jimmy Hawkins--Director of the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness

Jimmy leads 2 advocacy offices: D.C. and UN. They set priorities based on the outcomes and policy positions that emanate from the General Assembly.

There are 3 big, free conferences coming up:

- March 2024—Commission on the Status of Women (UN)
- April 2024- Ecumenical Advocacy Day with advocacy training
- Oct 20-22—Louisville, Advocacy training for college students, young adults and seminarians

**Josh Landis** (the Sandra Mackey Chair, Department of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma)

Reviewed the current situation in Syria which is in a horrible economic state. That National Budget of the Syrian Government is \$3B, but the money needed to reconstruct the country is hundreds of billions. Electricity is only available 1-8 hrs/day. Most people can't afford the fuel to run generators. The average government worker makes \$25-30/mo, which makes food unaffordable. Those that are “getting by” are receiving funds from relatives outside the country.

The sanctions are immiserating the population but not ousting the Assad regime. The Arab League nations have accepted that Assad is there to stay and have normalized relations. The NE and NW opposition-controlled areas are getting aid, and the U.S. is the largest provider of aid, but this is not sufficient and the situation will continue to deteriorate. The greatest need is to rebuild electrical plants, but with sanctions, no one can invest and risk is high. The U.S. Government is afraid that aid will be used to rebuild government buildings and weapons factories.

The argument for Normalization:

1. Reduce illegal drug trade (Kapton)
  2. Reduce flow of refugees
  3. Reduce likelihood that ISIS will reestablish itself.
- All of these can be mitigated with economic growth.

The country remains fragmented, making it difficult for anyone to rule. ISIS can exist because it can run between factions. The solution to ISIS is to have a stronger government and a police force to control things.

Josh does not think that the Biden Administration will withdraw because it would leave the Kurds vulnerable and could result in a fiasco like Afghanistan. The U.S. sanction position does leave the door open for Russia, China, and Iran to gain strength in the country. It is unlikely that Syria will become a democracy, so using that as a condition for sanction relief has a remote chance.

Syria is a subset of Israeli relations. Israel prefers to have weak neighbors. Many Christians believe they are better off under the Assad regime than a rebel group or a vacuum of power. The general American public doesn't really care about Syria, but it is unlikely that Biden will reverse course on Syria unless Assad is gone.

**Rev. Salm Hanna**--Pastor of Evangelical Church in Latakia, Syria and Director of NESSL Relief Program in Syria

85% of the Syrian population live on aid (from churches, NGOs, relatives outside of the country). The Christian population is only 650,000 now, which is less than half of the amount before the war. There is no chance to have democratic elections because the government crushed their opposition in the past, and people are fearful to challenge Assad.

The largest amount of earthquake aid has come from Russia. The country can't live on humanitarian aid alone. The people want to stand on their own feet and resume their livelihoods. Also, there is donor fatigue after 12 years.

#### **Summary comment from Lobby Day:**

We visited 8 Senators' offices and 4 Representatives as well as the State Dept. and the Treasury Dept (OFAC).

--The offices appreciated hearing our point of view, which seemed new to them. Continuing education will be important and contacting more offices by the Zoom members is needed.

--Unlikely to have radically different policy on Syria.

--Government likes the tool of sanctions. Their approach is to offset unintended consequences with humanitarian aid (which is clearly not 1:1 and does not get at the root cause).

--Eliminating sanctions does not seem to be an option. We should explore partial relief approaches (carrots rather than sticks)

--Do not expect USG to "Normalize" relations with Syria

--Need to look for allies

--OFAC is willing to help us get money transfers through

**Joseph Kassab**- (General Secretary of NESSL) Focusing on Lebanon

Lebanon is still under a "caretaker government" which prevents new projects and funding from IMF or World Bank. The economy is only \$20B. The people are in despair, but are getting used to it.

Education is in turmoil. There are 700,000 students, one third of which are in government schools, but not certain that they will open in Oct. The government doesn't pay the teachers enough to commute to work. There are now 300,000 Syrian students that need to be integrated into the school system. (Half of the population of Lebanon is now Syrian.)

#### Statistics:

- 66% don't have proper clothes
- 55% can't pay for schools
- 45% can't pay for transport to school and work
- 36% can't pay for internet
- 20% are paid <\$50/mo
- 5-7% are wealthy families
- 22% are middle class
- 43% have difficulty providing basic needs.

#### NESSL Efforts:

1. Relief—most of our congregations are in remote areas where there are few charities. NESSL helps support 300 families
2. Schools (focus on providing teachers with better salaries)
3. Enhancing life of pastors

#### **Rev. Dr. Elmarie Parker** (Regional Liaison to Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq)

Discussed Partnerships with churches, and NGOs, particularly MECC and FMEEC. Elmarie is starting to develop partnerships with other Gulf States. Her husband, Scott, has become the pastor of Church @ the Park, which particularly focuses on issues of the homeless.

#### **Khalil Haddad** ( head of the Compassionate Protestant Society of NESSL)

For the past 3 years, the organization has been supplying hygiene kits, money to families to repair houses, fuel for teachers to get to work, and agro baskets for every season. Solar panels have been installed in one school. There are 4 refugee education centers for ages 4-12. School will start next week with classes in English, Arabic, science, math, sports and music. It is hoped that these students will be able to return to Syria and become integrated into their schools. We are hosting 300-350 students for a partial year.

There continues to be concern about thousands of new illegal immigrants from Syria coming into Lebanon which stresses the systems.

**Business Meeting was conducted.** (see separate minutes)

#### **Communion**

**Ann thanked the participants and closed us in prayer.**

Respectfully submitted by Mary Vane, Secretary