

Overture INT-11 -- 2022 225th General Assembly

On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria

Recalling the admonitions of Matthew 25:31-40, the Presbytery of the Cascades overtures the 225th General Assembly to respond to the suffering of the Syrian people and hardships endured by those in neighboring countries after eight years of conflict in Syria by:

1. Working to End Sanctions—Urge an immediate end to sanctions against Syria and the threat of sanctions against Lebanon, Jordan, and their nationals; and that human rights and humanitarian principles be placed at the center of U.S. policies on Syria by
 - a. directing the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to send a message to the U.S. President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and to each U.S. Senator and Representative to support these principles and goals and
 - b. directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to support this witness in their work.
2. Promoting Reconstruction in Syria—Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to send a message to the U.S. President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and to each U.S. Senator and Representative urging the U.S. government to
 - a. support UN agencies and provide full cooperation with their humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Syria;
 - b. contribute generously to international agencies, particularly those of the United Nations, to help fund the post-war reconstruction of Syria, materially, socially, and educationally, with special attention to the education and wellbeing of children and youth.
3. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to support this witness in their work.
4. Promoting an Enabling Environment of Peace—Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA), the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to urge the U.S. government and other member states of the United Nations to build on the broadly supported principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, especially by working to fulfill their common commitment to
 - a. the rights of the Syrian people to self-determination;
 - b. “Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character, to ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, to protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, and to ensuring humanitarian access throughout the country and to the territorial integrity of Syria;”(UN Security Council Resolution 2254).
5. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) and the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness, to urge the U.S. government to

- a. in joint action with other foreign nations involved on the ground, withdraw the U.S. military engagement in Syria and work through diplomatic channels to ensure the safety of the Kurds and other vulnerable populations;
 - b. urge the government of Israel to return to negotiating with the government of Syria for the full return of the Golan Heights as part of territorial Syria; and
 - c. work to ensure that only UN peacekeeping forces operate in Syria and that all foreign combatants depart.
6. Working for the Safe Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons—Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Ministry at the United Nations, to call on member states to build on the broadly supported principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which “underscores the critical need to build conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas, in accordance with international law” by working with the Syrian government to
- a. declare a general amnesty and repatriate all refugees desiring return while facilitating the return home of all displaced persons in ways that assure their safety, including freedom from torture, arbitrary detention, and other gross violations of human rights;
 - b. facilitate the repossession of property and the rebuilding of neighborhoods by extending the claim process to absentee property to a three-year period, easing the documentation process with alternative substantiation measures, and acknowledging the rights of squatters whose property was connected to utilities and government services;
 - c. use the opportunity of redevelopment in the service of national reconciliation as a priority by rebuilding communities and neighborhoods without favoring those with particular sectarian, religious, or political affiliations.

Rationale

In Matthew 25, Christ calls us to serve members of the family of God who lack the basics of life. Food, clothing, medical attention, and social connection, all offered with a generous heart, are ways to witness to Christ’s presence and his solidarity with those who suffer. “On Responding to the Current Syrian Crisis” (Item 12-09 of the 223rd General Assembly 2018, *Ibid.*), calls attention to the need to work for an end to the violence, alleviation of the suffering, supporting the UN in its work towards the reconciliation of Syrian society, and the engagement of our congregations in work and prayer on behalf of the Syrian people. The recommendations in this overture go further, as it has become clear that the humanitarian exceptions to sanctions laws are not working and that the crisis in Syria is a regional problem requiring a concerted international solution. This overture is a reflection of biblical values that place the lives and well-being of individuals and human community above the interests of political figures, economic elites, and powerful states. The recommendations also seek to respond to the passionate concerns of PCUSA partners on the ground, especially fellow Christians of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the heir of 200 years of Presbyterian mission endeavor and 2,000 years of Christian presence.

There is no doubt that the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad has been brutal. Our recommendations do not validate or valorize this government. Rather, we acknowledge that the U.S. attempt at regime change and the sanctions imposed on Syria have only deepened the suffering of the Syrian people.

While the conflict in Syria is in its final stage, it is far from certain that a durable peace is at hand. Catastrophic levels of destruction have left most Syrians remaining in Syria in dire poverty. According to United Nations, 69 percent of Syrians remaining in Syria are living in extreme poverty, with 90 percent spending half of their meager incomes on food. An estimated 400,000 people died during eight years of conflict, with 5.6 million fleeing the country and 6 million internally displaced. An estimated 43 percent of Syrian youth have had no schooling during the war, severely limiting their prospects and making them vulnerable to the blandishments of criminal gangs and extremist groups. In 2017 the World Bank estimated that one third of Syria's housing stock and half of its schools and hospitals had been destroyed.

The refugee crisis has strained the resources of bordering countries and has been exploited by nationalist politicians in the West in their bids for power. Many Syrians fear returning to their native land in the face of torture, reprisals, military conscription, and home confiscations. The once cosmopolitan social fabric of Syria is at risk of unraveling into sectarianism. Rebuilding may well occur in ways that reward politically connected individuals and groups at the expense of ordinary citizens.

The U.S. government's history of intervention driven by a regime change policy in the region has not only produced catastrophic results but are widely seen in the region as affronts to national dignity. Only a concerted international effort will bring about the conditions and resources for a lasting peace in Syria and the region.

1. The United States bears some responsibility for the current suffering of the Syrian people, especially in its draconian sanctions policy that is severely limiting medicines, building supplies, and other necessities from reaching Syrian civilians. The announced goal of sanctions is to drive a wedge between the government and its people. In practice, however, they force civilians to work with the government and the black market it protects to access needed supplies. This results in embittering ordinary people against the sanctioning countries. The report of the Special Rapporteur of the UN Council on Human Rights found sanctions on Syria contributing to the suffering of the Syrian people, eroding their human rights, and compromising the work of humanitarian aid organizations (Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on the Enjoyment of Human Rights on His Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, September 2018). Sanctions are thus both immoral and a policy failure. Nevertheless, the U.S. is now threatening the governments of Lebanon and Jordan with sanctions if their nationals participate in the rebuilding of Syria. By absorbing Syrian refugees, these countries have the highest proportions of refugees in the world, straining their infrastructures and challenging their economies. Especially in view of the accommodations Lebanon and Jordan have had to make during the Syrian conflict, their nationals deserve to participate in the opportunities that Syria's rebuilding presents.
2. Now is the time for generous assistance from the international community, including the United States, to help Syria rebuild and to meet the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. Unfortunately, humanitarian efforts have been politicized and hampered by all parties to the conflict, with the result that aid is not being delivered to those in need. A focus on humanitarian

principles requires our government to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance and to contribute generously in funding it.

3. An enabling environment of peace in the region is essential to the rebuilding of Syria. The United Nations has an essential role to play in the coming years in facilitating peacebuilding in Syria and the region. The Security Council is a place where the U.S. and Russia, often on different sides during the Syrian war, can come together to work to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and facilitate peacemaking in the region. Such cooperation in 2015 produced UN Security Council Resolution #2254, which lays out the guiding principles of ensuring Syria's future, including: "commitments to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character; ensuring continuity of governmental institutions; protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination; and ensuring humanitarian access throughout the country" and a Syrian-led political process facilitated by the United Nations. For its part, the US government should withdraw its military force from Syria and expand its diplomatic efforts to protect vulnerable populations like the Kurds. The U.S. government should work to ensure that all foreign combatants leave Syria and that only UN peacekeeping forces operate in Syria. At present UN peacekeeping forces are not in Syria. A small unarmed supervision mission was suspended in 2012 due to the violence. The U.S. government should urge the Israeli government to return to negotiating with the Syrian government over the return of the Golan in fulfillment of Syria's territorial integrity and international law, which would contribute to peace building in the region.
4. UN Security Council Resolution #2254 (see above) provides for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas. Hopefully U.S.-Russian cooperation will allow the UN Security Council to influence the Syrian government to welcome back its refugees by declaring a general amnesty. Rebuilding homes, livelihoods, and neighborhoods will depend, in part, on how the Syrian government recognizes claims to property abandoned during the war. Only about one in five refugees have title deeds in their possession, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council (Norwegian Refugee Council Briefing Note, Syrian Refugees' Right to Legal Identity: Implications for Return, January 2017). The situation is complicated by the prevalence of irregularities in property ownership and transfer. The sudden influx of rural people into the cities on the heels of the historic drought of 2006–2009 overwhelmed the Syrian bureaucracy, which nonetheless gave authorizations for municipal services to be delivered to homes and businesses in the absence of complete paperwork. The Syrian government has given very limited means and timespan for Syrians to reclaim their property (Syrian Law #10). A great concern is the government obliterating the homes and neighborhoods of its opponents and rewarding its loyalists and allies with real estate deals. This is already happening, according to the Carnegie Middle East Center (Carnegie Middle East Center, The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction, 4 September 2019). Instead, national reconciliation should drive redevelopment work with Syria's neighborhoods and communities restored.

Other Comments

Actions taken since the 224th General Assembly (2020)

1. 2020 Referral: Item 02-125. On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria. Recommendation 1.b. Working to End Sanctions—Urge an immediate end to sanctions against Syria and the threat of sanctions against Lebanon, Jordan, and their nationals; and that human rights and humanitarian principles be placed at the center of U.S. policies on Syria by

- b. directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to support this witness in their work)—From the Cascades Presbytery (Minutes, 2020, Part I, pp. 10–11, 303 of the electronic copy).
2. 2020 Referral: Item 02-125. On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria. Recommendation 3., Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to support this witness in their work—From the Cascades Presbytery (Minutes, 2020, Part I, pp. 10–11, 303 of the electronic copy).
 3. 2020 Referral: Item 02-125. On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria. Recommendation 4. Promoting an Enabling Environment of Peace—Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA), the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, to urge the U.S. government and other member states of the United Nations to build on the broadly supported principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, especially by working to fulfill their common commitment to do a. and b.—From the Cascades Presbytery (Minutes, 2020, Part I, pp. 10–11, 303 of the electronic copy).
 4. 2020 Referral: Item 02-125. On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria. Recommendation 5a.-c. Direct the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) and the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness, to urge the U.S. government to do a.-c.—From the Cascades Presbytery (Minutes, 2020, Part I, pp. 10–11, 303 of the electronic copy).
 5. 2020 Referral: Item 02-125. On Responding to the Human Needs of Those Affected by the Crisis in Syria. Recommendation 6.a.-c. Working for the Safe Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons—Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Ministry at the United Nations, to call on member states to build on the broadly supported principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which “underscores the critical need to build conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas, in accordance with international law” by working with the Syrian government to do a.-c.—From the Cascades Presbytery (Minutes, 2020, Part I, pp. 10–11, 303 of the electronic copy).

Response: The Presbyterian Mission Agency has responded to this referral through the ministries of Compassion, Peace and Justice. In the spring of 2020 additional sanctions were placed on Syria through the passage of the Caesar Act. The Office of Public Witness in coalition with its ecumenical and NGO partners has strongly advocated for the lifting/modifying of this sanctions regime. Concerns were communicated about the impact of these broad US sanctions on the civilians of Syria to congress both through sign on letters and lobby visits. Additionally, we communicated our concern about the destabilizing effect of the Syria sanctions on Lebanon and the surrounding region and urged congress to examine the impact of U.S. policies on the civilians they are intended to protect and support. The Office of Public Witness continued to raise concerns about the sanctions policy through a newly formed coalition, “Lift Sanctions, Save Lives “and advocated in support of legislation that would require a reporting of the effects of United States sanctions on the populations of the countries that are targeted. The Office of Public Witness also issued an action alert asking Presbyterians to tell their members of congress to prioritize the health and safety of the most vulnerable in Syria by ending the current program of sanctions.

Meetings are ongoing with the Department of Treasury and the National security council concerning the effectiveness of Syrian sanctions and the need for a blanket humanitarian exemption to ensure that aid will get through to those who need it.

The Office of Public Witness has continued to advocate with congress for full funding of the United Nations programs. We have lifted-up both with congress and the administration the rights of the Syrian people to self-determination and the need to ensure humanitarian access throughout the country. Advocacy continues with the State Department and other relevant office in the administration for a full removal of U.S. troops as well as other measures to ensure a peaceful end to the conflict.

The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations (PMUN) bears witness to the plight of the Syrian people at the United Nations as the conflict has entered its 11th year. As a member of the NGO Working Group on the Security Council, PMUN advocates for the people of Syria by meeting with the members of the Security Council. We have advocated for greater access for United Nations humanitarian aid by allowing cross-border mechanism to remain open and urged members to support a political solution and break the stalemate in the drafting of new constitution reforms in order to achieve stability and the return of refugees and rebuilding of communities that have been devastated by the conflict for over a decade. Our offices also support the Syria Lebanon Mission Network with their advocacy efforts.

Since this overture was originally presented to the 224th General Assembly early in 2020, and then referred by Assembly action to the 225th GA in 2022, the conditions of poverty, marginalization, political instability, and economic stagnation detailed in this report have only worsened. The impact of COVID-19 in a country whose medical resources, already strained by years of war, has greatly increased the suffering of the Syrian people and further slowed hopes for rebuilding, even while active conflict diminishes. Hospitals have been destroyed, safe housing is unavailable for many; populations that remain in temporary housing, camps, or multiple family crowded and unsanitary conditions both worsen the effects of the pandemic and weaken the recovery. The needs for concerted, apolitical, generous and long-term assistance are more needed now than two years ago.

Further, the collapse of the Lebanese economy and severe deflation of the value of its currency, as well as its own increased political instability is crushing the Lebanese people and driving an unprecedented percentage of the Lebanese population into poverty, along with their Syrian neighbors. While this overture explicitly addresses the plight of the Syrian people; the fact remains that the war in Syria has deeply impacted and afflicted the stability and well-being of Lebanon as well. Throughout the war, Lebanon has hosted (formally and informally) up to 2 million Syrians, many of whom cannot or will not go back. The burden of hosting has contributed to the current weakened state of Lebanon, attenuating Lebanon's ability to support and resource the rebuilding of the lives of their Syrian neighbors. For our partners in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, this has presented additional challenges of providing equitably for its communities in both countries, and has strained their resources severely as they attempt to support general and nonsectarian humanitarian relief to Syrians, refugees within Lebanon, and Lebanese citizens now living in poverty, some of whom were also adversely affected by the Beirut port blast in August 2020, which affected tens of thousands of citizens. Considering inclusion of this expanded context, including Lebanon and Syria both, might be a prudent expansion of the scope of this overture.

With regard to the urging of generosity from the United States and United Nations humanitarian entities toward rebuilding a diverse and sustainable Syria, a specific and directed invitation for continued Presbyterian generosity toward this effort would be additionally helpful. Since the war began in 2012, around half a million dollars has been committed to relief work in the region through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) and Presbyterian World Mission, in partnership with the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL); the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), and the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC).