



## **American Friends Service Committee**

September 4, 2013

Dear President Obama,

For nearly a century of working with people affected by wars and their aftermath, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has witnessed again and again how efforts to protect lives through military means, no matter how well intended, ultimately cost even more lives and cause more destruction. Military strikes also delay, rather than advance, the peaceful political negotiations that ultimately end these conflicts.

As the United States is considering military strikes in Syria, we wish to add to the conversation some lessons from direct experience. After engaging people who have different political backgrounds in Syria, it is clear that a peaceful future for Syrians – or the region at large – will not come from further military action on behalf of one party or another.

The discussion we hear in the news regarding Syria poses a stark choice between military action and doing nothing at all to protect lives and end violence. Our experience shows this to be a false choice. Violence only serves to deepen and prolong conflicts and undermines the security of all the people in the region. The proposed military strikes against the Syrian government will only prolong the suffering of the Syrian people and risk escalating the war. We do not believe in doing nothing, instead we urge the U.S. government to wholeheartedly support meaningful and substantive diplomatic efforts to end this war.

We grieve the senseless destruction of life in Syria. The United Nations assesses that since March 2011, when fighting began between the Syrian government and opposition groups seeking to oust President Bashar Al-Assad, as many as 100,000 people have been killed, almost 2 million have fled to neighboring countries, and a further 4 million have been internally displaced. In addition, at least 6.8 million Syrians, half of whom are children, require urgent humanitarian assistance. The Syrian government troops and militia have conducted deliberate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate airstrikes and other attacks on civilians, used cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas. Armed opposition groups have also committed their share of indiscriminate shelling and serious abuses against suspected government supporters. We warn that providing weapons and materiel to the government or non-state armed groups known to commit widespread abuses can make a party complicit in their abuses.

We are also shocked and dismayed by the reported use of chemical weapons. The video images of men, women, and children struggling to breathe and apparently suffering the effects of chemical weapons following attacks near Damascus on the night of Tuesday, August 20, have caused us at AFSC and many others to question again what can be done to stop the violence in Syria.

Reinforcing a “red line” against chemical attacks, while certainly important, is not the only international standard at stake. There is also international law prohibiting deliberately and indiscriminately killing civilians, which the Syrian government has flouted on a much larger scale. In addition to the 1,429 people whom U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said were killed

by the chemical attack outside Damascus are the tens of thousands of civilians whom Syrian troops and militia have killed in two-and-a-half years of war.

We condemn in the strongest terms all forms of violence and war, including targeted acts of violence against civilians, missile strikes, and the use of chemical weapons. Both the opposition and the government have been responsible for atrocities and we deplore all such acts.

At this time all efforts should be put towards revitalizing the search for a political settlement. Any other debate is a distraction which leads to a prolongation of this war, and further accumulation of death, displacement, and destruction. A political exit from this war requires leadership that takes the moral high ground, and far-reaching concessions and a reduction in demands from all parties. The sole viable outcome is a compromise that protects the interests of all Syrian constituencies.

AFSC therefore urgently calls on all governments and parties to the conflict to end the violence in Syria by taking the following steps:

- The U.S. should immediately call for a comprehensive arms embargo on all parties to the conflict. As your Administration has long recognized, the only viable and sustainable solution to the crisis in Syria is a political one.
- We urge your Administration to provide full support to the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, and to press for the rapid convening of a Geneva II conference. For those conferences to be meaningful, they must include Iran in the search for a political settlement.
- Seek a transition that builds on existing institutions, rather than replacing them, and does not alienate those people who have served the government or the army. Neither the interests of the U.S. nor the interests of the peoples of the region are served by collapse of the Syrian state and the resulting political vacuum.
- Syrians must lift up the voices of their full population, including ethnic and religious minorities, refugees (Iraqi and Palestinians) and those who have served the regime, to ensure that none is privileged over the other, and that no component of Syrian society is targeted for retaliation.
- Governments should respond to the United Nations' call for humanitarian relief funding for displaced Syrians. As we write, the UN reports that donor countries have only provided a small fraction of what is needed. All should act before the refugee flows further destabilize the region.

We thank you for your deep concern for the people of the region, and hope that you will act quickly to lead our nation and the world at large toward better ways to take compassionate actions that are stronger and more durable than further violence.

In peace and hope,



Shan Cretin,  
General Secretary, AFSC