

October 17, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write as fifteen organizations deeply concerned about negative impacts of United States-led airstrikes on civilians in Syria and Iraq on top of the devastating violence against civilians that continues to be perpetrated by the Syrian and Iraqi governments, government-allied forces, and extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS).

Following recent news alleging that as many as a dozen civilians were killed in the Syrian village of Kafr Daryan as a result of a U.S. airstrikeⁱ, we are further troubled by reports that the White House has exempted current military operations in Syria and Iraq from tighter standards geared toward minimizing civilian casualties, known as the “near certainty” policy. By exempting current military strikes from this policy, the U.S. government undermines the stated goal of prioritizing civilian protection as a primary and predominant objective.

Given the humanitarian imperative of this crisis, we encourage the U.S. government to take every possible action to prioritize the protection of civilians. Further, with this imperative in mind, we are concerned about backlash to current U.S. actions from civilian populations and an emboldening of extremist groups, as we are already seeing in Syriaⁱⁱ. In Iraq – where government forces and government-allied Shia militias have been accused of human rights violations – there are also concerns that the U.S. intervention has the appearance of being aligned with the Shia-dominated government. These unintended outcomes often help to perpetuate rather than mitigate cycles of violence. To this end, we want to address the following questions:

- What special precautions is the U.S. taking to protect civilians endangered by U.S. military operations?
- What steps are being taken not to harm health facilities, medical personnel, or other first responders, and to avoid further damage to systems and infrastructure that support necessary services including water and food?
- What are the diplomatic strategies that the U.S. government is pursuing both with Iraqi tribal leaders in Sunni majority areas vulnerable to IS recruitment efforts as well as with partners like Turkey and Qatar, and civil society leaders and organizations? How is the U.S. engaging diplomatically with these same internal and external actors to peel away and present viable nonviolent alternatives to those who have joined IS?
- Underscoring the need for long-term solutions and recognizing that airstrikes are incapable of reaching a successful resolution to the crisis, how is the U.S. government engaging in peacebuilding and development in the short term and beyond to support a successful transition out of cycles of violence?
- What is the U.S. doing to investigate reports of civilians being killed and any allegations of violations of international humanitarian law on the part of U.S. armed forces or that of U.S. partners, including the September 23 incident in the village of Kafr Daryan?

We are gravely concerned by Human Rights Watch's (HRW) report that the U.S. military may have failed to properly distinguish between military targets and civilians during the September

23 airstrike. HRW notes that “witness accounts suggest that the attack on the village harmed civilians but did not strike a military target, violating the laws of war by failing to discriminate between combatants and civilians, or that it unlawfully caused civilian loss disproportionate to the expected military advantage.”ⁱⁱⁱ At a minimum, we would strongly encourage the U.S. government to investigate this incident and any others where reports may indicate wrongdoing, issue public reports on the findings, and commit to appropriate measures of redress.

In Syria, communities are already reeling from widespread human rights violations, including crimes against humanity and war crimes^{iv}. Civilians have been forced to flee, and those who remain in Syria face a humanitarian disaster, as targeted attacks have virtually eliminated access to health care and other services in many parts of the country. Similarly in Iraq, civilians remain at risk of serious human rights violations that the United Nations has said may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity as well as the secondary effects of violence, including “a lack of access to basic food, water or medicine^v.” Given the context of brutal conditions faced by civilians in both countries, the U.S. and its partners must be even more vigilant in protecting them.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Carl Wilkens Fellowship
Charity and Security Network
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public
Witness
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Genocide Prevention Program - George
Mason University School for Conflict
Analysis and Resolution

Leadership Conference of Women Religious
MaryKnoll Office for Global Concerns
The Peace Alliance
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute
Justice Team
STAND
Student Peace Alliance
Syrian American Medical Society
United to End Genocide

Cc: Assistant to the President for Homeland Security Lisa Monaco
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Susan Rice
Special Assistant to the President and Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the
Gulf Region Philip Gordon
Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel
Secretary of State John Kerry
Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Sarah Sewall
Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance
Nancy Lindborg
United States Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power
Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights
Stephen Pomper

ⁱ <http://news.yahoo.com/white-house-exempts-syria-airstrikes-from-tight-standards-on-civilian-deaths-183724795.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://online.wsj.com/articles/airstrikes-in-syria-roil-rebel-alliances-1411773506>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/27/ussyria-investigate-possible-unlawful-us-strikes>

^{iv} http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoLSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf

^v http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_POC_Report_FINAL_6July_10September2014.pdf