

Statement for the Record of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Submitted to

Senate Judiciary Committee

Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights

Hearing on

“The Syrian Refugee Crisis”

January 7, 2014

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) thanks the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights for calling the January 7th hearing which examines the scope of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The ELCA is a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a global communion of 142 churches in the Lutheran tradition, representing over 70 million Christians in 79 countries.¹ Our church firmly believes that the plight of Syrian refugees and of Syrians still residing in-country, should be addressed with expediency and with priority consideration given to how the U.S. can best assist the most vulnerable.

At the height of World War II, Lutherans made up almost 20% of the refugee population fleeing to the U.S. This experience compels the ELCA to ask today that the Subcommittee consider taking additional measures and make the appropriate additional resources available so that the immediate needs of Syrian refugees can be met. As the Subcommittee deliberates on how best to address the protracted and burgeoning Syrian refugee crisis, the most vulnerable Syrian refugees should be resettled in the U.S. and efforts should be made in continued partnership with the international community to take those diplomatic steps necessary to help Syria reach a peaceful resolution to its current crisis.

Given our service experience in the region² and as a significant partner in the U.S. resettlement program, the ELCA welcomes the opportunity to offer a statement for the Subcommittee's hearing and encourage the Subcommittee to consider the following as it deliberates further on the best humanitarian responses to the mounting crisis in Syria and its neighbors:

Increased Financial Support to the Region is Necessary to Meet the Basic Short-term Needs of Syrian Refugees

Syria's civil war has exacerbated a refugee crisis already extant in the Middle East. Not only are Syrian nationals pouring into neighboring countries, but refugees who fled to Syria from places such as Iraq find themselves once again fleeing for their lives, but often not permitted to cross international borders. The compounding effect is that in countries like Jordan, which has long been a beacon of welcome for the region's refugees, meeting the basic needs of every arriving Syrian refugee is impossible.³ And while in theory neighboring countries like Jordan and Turkey are committed to protecting refugees seeking safety, in practice, limited resources and a lack of encouragement by the international community, has meant that

¹ The ELCA, as a member of the LWF, has a long history of service and humanitarian assistance in the Middle East. For the past century and a half, Lutherans have engaged in mission activities of many kinds in the Middle East, but particularly in areas of social service, such as education, health care and assistance to refugees. The work of the ELCA has largely focused on Palestine, but we also have strong relationships in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. The ELCA's engagement with the region is informed primarily through relationships with Christian churches and agencies. We have followed closely the initial optimism and increasing disappointment many of our companions have expressed regarding the ostensible Arab Spring. We know our Arab Christian companions to be deeply committed to their home countries and to the rebuilding of relationships with all of their neighbors.

² Lutheran churches, through the LWF have more than sixty years of experience assisting refugees in the Middle East, starting with efforts to meet the humanitarian needs of Palestinians displaced as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

³ The LWF has a strong presence in Jordan and has established collaborative relationships with UNHCR and the Jordanian government and has been active in the preparation processes of the UNHCR Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP). Through LWF, the ELCA has significantly contributed to meeting the emergency needs of Syrian refugees in camps and host communities in Jordan, which is becoming more and more difficult as the civil war continues and as more and more refugees flee every day. Assistance is provided to all in need on a non-discriminatory basis, as is the case with all ELCA and LWF humanitarian service work.

many refugees attempting to cross international boundaries are denied access and are left waiting entry at the border or are sent back to the Syrian interior, where humanitarian assistance is difficult to obtain⁴.

Without increased financial support to Syria's neighbors, the refugee crisis in the region, already at boiling point, will undoubtedly breed unrest, putting at risk any tenuous peace in place. In both camp and urban refugee settings, countries of first asylum have a difficult time housing and feeding Syrian refugees and are, thus, tacitly encouraged to deny entry at borders. Short-term needs as basic as water, food, and housing are more and more difficult to meet, putting at risk programs aimed at longer-term stabilization. As the crisis wears on, other needs arise, including issues related to education, health and hygiene, and mental health.

In urban centers like Cairo, waves of Syrian refugees made it difficult for refugee service centers such as St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS)⁵ to serve and support the refugees they are called to serve. Egypt has since imposed visa restrictions for Syrian nationals, which makes it nearly impossible for Syrians to continue to seek refuge there.

Lutherans intend to continue our efforts to support refugees in the Middle East and *urge Congress to further appropriate resources in order to keep up with the growing basic food and housing needs of refugees living in either camp or urban settings*. An increase in financial support -- as a sign of helping to shoulder the burden of the refugee crisis -- is necessary in order that Syria's neighbors meet the basic needs of refugees. Increased support will not only protect Syrian refugees, but will encourage Syria's neighbors to live in to their international protection obligations. Increased financial support could help quell the potential for unrest in both camp and urban refugee settings by enabling host countries to meet the basic needs of the Syrian refugees who continue to flood into their borders.

The U.S. Must Help to Open All Parts of Syria for Humanitarian Access

In addition to our efforts to address the needs of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, the ELCA has in recent years developed a strong relationship with the Syriac Orthodox Church and is actively supporting that church's efforts to address the needs of internally displaced and distressed persons (IDPs or IDDPs) within Syria. The Syriac Orthodox effort had included providing housing for families in the Damascus and Aleppo districts, as well as medicine, minor surgical services, and powdered milk supplies. However, these efforts are hampered not only by a lack of resources, but by the inaccessibility of much of the country. Without the help of the U.S. and the international community in opening up all of Syria for the purposes of humanitarian aid, there is far too little hope for many in Syria, who face dire conditions.

The ELCA is particularly concerned about how sectarian tensions are contributing to a lack of access to humanitarian relief and assistance. There is specific concern in regard to Syria's Alawite and Christian communities, who are reported to be targeted by majority Sunni populations. Sectarian tensions increase the difficulty that humanitarian workers face in accessing the very populations who most require assistance.

⁴ Amnesty International, *An International Failure: The Syrian Refugee Crisis*, December 13, 2013, available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT34/001/2013/en/8a376b76-d031-48a6-9588-ed9aee651d52/act340012013en.pdf>

⁵ In Cairo, the ELCA is the primary supporter of St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS), a central agency serving the needs of various refugee communities, including Iraqis and, more recently, Syrians. StARS is associated with RLAP, the Refugee Legal Assistance Project, which initiates intake procedures for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Funded in part by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), StARS is an important source of on-the-ground information and perspective for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies alike. The ELCA has also supported, through the ACT Alliance, ecumenical efforts to address the needs of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries.

Within Syria, foreign fighters associated with various militant Islamist revival groups have complicated the sectarian landscape. Neither rebels, nor foreign fighters, nor the regime have a monopoly on extremism or atrocities. Within this climate, traditionally Christian towns and villages have been targeted.

Any effort to ease the refugee situation in neighboring countries should take in to consideration measures that can alleviate the dire conditions of IDPs and IDDPs. Such measures require that the U.S. help the international community to open all parts of Syria for humanitarian access. NGO and church partners are prepared to further carry out these important humanitarian aims should additional resources be made available and should Syria be opened so that humanitarian help can reach those who need it.

All Vulnerable Syrian Refugees Should Have Access to the U.S. Resettlement Program

We are extremely grateful that the U.S. Government is concerned about the refugee crisis emanating from the Syrian civil war and has responded with extraordinary levels of financial assistance through UNHCR for this purpose. Along with other elements of the civil war, the refugee crisis could serve as a destabilizing influence on the region. While governments around the world must respond to the human suffering in various refugee contexts, we believe that they must also identify and address the causes of the conflict perpetuating the refugee crisis. It is not enough to simply address the glaring humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs/IDDPs, as we suggested above. Along with other elements in the context of the civil war, the refugee crisis could exacerbate any of the region's tenuous stability and serve as a destabilizing influence in the entire region.

The ELCA urges the Subcommittee to consider the following when determining how best to address the Syrian refugee crisis:

A. *Geneva II.* We are grateful that the U.S. Government is energetically supporting the Geneva II negotiations process and urge it to continue to do so. All affected parties must be constructively engaged in dialogue. The Syria crisis is informed by forces and movements beyond Syria; the outcomes will also have far-reaching implications. It is in the interests of the United States to resolve the conflict in Syria rather than address only the secondary effects of the conflict. *Therefore, the ELCA hopes that the U.S. Government will continue to support diplomatic measures that serve to help end the Syrian conflict.*

B. *Sectarian Violence.* The present situation within Syria and the prospects for peaceful resolution are profoundly implicated by ongoing sectarian-identified violence. While it is important to not reduce all violence to sectarian causes, the dynamic cannot be ignored. The effects of sectarian tensions are felt within the refugee reality, especially when certain groups cannot seek assistance through normal channels (access to which is often informally controlled by demographically dominant groups).

Sectarian violence is a feature not only of the Syrian civil war, but colors the realities of service provision among refugee populations. As is the concern of access to humanitarian assistance in-country, so too do we harbor specific concern for the Alawite and Christian communities' ability to access normal means for humanitarian assistance and to access refugee camps such as Za'atari. Targeting by the Sunni majority is a real and growing concern. Thus, for example, Christian refugees in Jordan have largely found themselves in urban environments rather than in refugee camps. Because they fear being further targeted in countries of first asylum, Alawite and Christian refugees in particular have been unable to easily access refugee service centers where refugee processing takes place. This obviously hinders their ability to access the resettlement program and dramatically diminishes their chances for third country resettlement.

When working with the international community, the ELCA asks the U.S. Government be mindful to the many and varied levels of inaccessibility rife within contexts of sectarian violence and persecution, most especially the Alawite and Christian communities who seem to be specifically targeted.

C. The Special Needs of Christian Communities in this Context. The question of refugee resettlement is difficult for many Arab and Middle Eastern Christian communities. Throughout the region, Christians have seen diminishing percentages of overall population figures, diminishing their influence on their civil society structures. In some cases, as in some manifestations of the Arab Spring, this has led to increasingly difficult circumstances for Christian communities unable to influence events in their locales. Some Christians—most notably in Egypt and Syria—have suffered targeted violence against their communities. It is inappropriate to apply the term “persecution” to all Christians in either country, though some have most certainly had harrowing experiences. Nevertheless, Arab and Middle Eastern church leaders have deep concerns about the opportunity for resettlement. Since many individual Christians’ experiences would qualify them for resettlement consideration, Christian leaders are concerned about the rapid disappearance of Christian populations in the region. This was the experience of Christian churches in Iraq and too easily could become the experience especially of churches in Syria. Church leaders are caught in the difficult position of publicly counseling steadfast presence in the home country while acknowledging the profound pain and terror experienced by many families.

A June 2013 conference sponsored by the Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, which gathered several major Christian leaders from throughout the region, sought to promote Christian presence and witness of Arab Christians within the region and expressed concern about humanitarian efforts contributing further to the present reality of Arab Christian diasporas. *While resettlement is a recognized option, the international community, including the U.S. Government, should be cognizant of the potential unintended consequences of this generous act.*

With the above considerations in mind, *the ELCA believes that the degree of violence within Syria makes necessary the use of resettlement as a humanitarian tool for the most vulnerable.* As a refugee faith community we have experienced the anguish of fleeing from home knowing that return will not be a viable option for perhaps years to come. Although not an option that the ELCA readily recommends, the ELCA hopes that the U.S. Government will make accommodations in the U.S. resettlement program to welcome all vulnerable Syrians, regardless of religious affiliation, into U.S. communities. Given the protracted nature of Syria’s civil war and the difficulties that refugees face in camps and urban settings in countries of first asylum, this is not an unreasonable request.

For the most vulnerable Syrians, resettlement to a third country is the only durable solution. Europe, Australia, and Canada have pledged to accept 15,244 Syrian refugees⁶; the U.S. has historically welcomed more refugees than all the other 27 resettlement countries combined. *The U.S., then, has both a moral obligation to individual refugees and to the international community to begin immediately accepting Syrian refugees into the U.S. refugee resettlement program.* Resettlement will not only serve the individuals resettled in the U.S. but will help Syria’s neighbors in meeting the growing needs of the Syrian refugees residing in countries of first asylum.

In FY2013, only 36 Syrian refugees were admitted to the U.S. In FY2014, the U.S. has committed to resettling 34,000 refugees from the Near East and South Asia. This number includes Syrian refugees and

⁶ Amnesty International, *An International Failure: The Syrian Refugee Crisis*, December 13, 2013, p. 1, available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT34/001/2013/en/8a376b76-d031-48a6-9588-ed9aee651d52/act340012013en.pdf>

is an increase of a mere 3,000 over the FY2013 refugee admissions ceiling.⁷ The Syrian refugee crisis will only abate if the U.S. increases the number of Syrians it resettles, particularly the most vulnerable.

The ELCA believes that *supplementary resources need to be made available for Syrian refugees so that additional Syrian arrivals into the U.S. do not disrupt the regional allocations as outlined in the FY2014 Presidential Memorandum for Refugee Admissions*. The ELCA is the largest church partner of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), the second largest resettlement partner of the Department of State, with a vast network of refugee resettlement service partners throughout the U.S. As such, and as a church with strong immigrant and refugee roots, we know, from that grounded experience, that Lutheran congregations and members stand ready to welcome Syrian refugees this fiscal year. *Syrian refugees should be welcomed in addition to the 70,000 already allocated for arrival in FY2014.*

Recommendations

As the Subcommittee considers how best the U.S. can help protect and support vulnerable Syrian refugees, the ELCA recommends the following:

- **The U.S. Government should increase its financial support to the region as a necessary to means to meet the basic short-term needs of Syrian refugees.** The ELCA recommends that the U.S. government further appropriate resources in order to keep up with the growing basic food and housing needs of refugees living in either camp or urban settings. An increase in financial support to help Syria's neighbors meet the basic needs of its refugees is necessary. The U.S. should also encourage its international partners to increase support for refugee-hosting countries through development assistance, bilateral aid, and increased funding of U.N. humanitarian appeals.
- **The U.S. must help the international community to open all parts of Syria for humanitarian access.** Any effort to ease the refugee situation in neighboring countries should take in to consideration measures that can alleviate the dire conditions of IDPs and IDDPs. Such measures require that the U.S. help the international community to open all parts of Syria for humanitarian access. NGO and church partners are prepared to further carry out these important humanitarian aims should additional resources be made available and should Syria be opened so that humanitarian help can reach those who need it.
- **All vulnerable Syrian refugees should have access to the U.S. Resettlement Program.** Supplementary resources need to be made available for Syrian refugees so that additional Syrian arrivals into the U.S. do not disrupt the regional allocations as outlined in the FY2014 Presidential Memorandum for Refugee Admissions. Syrian refugees should be welcomed in addition to the 70,000 already allocated for arrival in FY2014.

The ELCA would like to thank the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights and Senator Dick Durbin, Assistant Majority Leader and Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee, in particular, for your concern about Syrian refugees and your willingness to take the time to host this important hearing.

The ELCA supports the generous assistance of the U.S. government to date and encourages continued – and increased – support for Syrian refugees, IDPs and IDDPs and for a continued commitment to the diplomatic way forward for peace.

As always and as aforementioned, the ELCA, along with our Lutheran partners worldwide, plan to continue to assist as we are able to serve our neighbor in need. It is our hope that, as the Subcommittee continues to deliberate, that the U.S. Government will prioritize this significant humanitarian situation

⁷ Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2014, p. 1, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/219137.pdf>

and make every reasonable effort to ensure that the most vulnerable Syrian refugees are identified and served in order to alleviate, to some degree, the magnitude of the refugee crisis being experienced by Syria's neighbors; this while ensuring that resettlement does not diminish Syria's ethnic and religious communities the opportunity to fully repatriate and flourish once peace comes.