The situation in Syria is the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by what is happening and to lose hope that it is possible to make a difference.

Yet we owe it to our brothers and sisters in Syria to support them during this difficult time. The apostle Paul calls us to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). We cannot simply turn away and ignore the suffering and violence, in which our government plays a role.

This issue of the Washington Memo examines the conflict and the ways in which the U.S. government is involved, and suggests some ways forward. Consider taking some time for the following:

• **Learn:** Read this issue of the Memo and the resources recommended for additional reading.

• **Write policymakers:** Turn the policy recommendations here into a letter to your Members of Congress. A sample letter is available at washingtonmemo.org/newsletter/spring2014.

• **Pray:** Prayers are urgently needed to end the conflict in Syria. The back page includes worship resources for use in your local congregation.

• **Give:** Generously support MCC’s response in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan to provide emergency food, shelter, non-food items, education, peacebuilding and disaster response training. Visit donate.mcc.org.

Let us weep, learn, pray, give and advocate together with the people of Syria.
Overview of the conflict
The conflict in Syria defies easy answers. The largely nonviolent revolution in March 2011 stemmed from economic grievances and a desire for greater freedoms. The Syrian government responded violently to these protests and the conflict soon turned into armed conflict.

That conflict has now become an international one, further complicating efforts to resolve it. Iran and Russia, as well as groups like Hezbollah, are lending their support to the Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad.

Other governments in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have given substantial support to the Syrian opposition. Wealthy individuals from the Gulf have also provided significant funding. Increasingly, Islamist fighters from various countries have joined the fight against the Syrian government, including some groups classified by the U.S. as terrorists.

U.S. involvement
The U.S. government has aligned itself with the opposition. It claims that this stems from a desire to support the revolution’s original democratic demands. But the decision is also driven by U.S. political, military and economic interests.

Thus far U.S. assistance to the opposition has included small weaponry, logistical support and intelligence gathering. In April reports began to emerge that larger anti-tank weaponry is now also coming from the United States.

Lebanese youth leaders commit to peace
Lebanon, a small country of only 4 million people, has long struggled with conflict and political divisions, often divided along religious and ethnic lines. The crisis in neighboring Syria is exacerbating these tensions. Youth leaders within the various political parties are often drawn into these conflicts, sometimes intentionally incited to hold violent demonstrations.

In 2012 local leaders approached the Permanent Peace Movement, a Lebanese organization, with the recommendation that they bring together youth representatives from each of Lebanon’s 18 political parties. They recognized the potential that youth have to model political dialogue on university campuses and in other settings. A three-day training and dialogue resulted, with support from MCC.

The Code of Conduct signed by all of the participants includes:
• The absolute rejection of violence in all its forms among students and in social media
• Affirmation of respect and acceptance of others and a commitment to work against hatred and intolerance
• Commitment to the principles of human rights and freedoms of religion, politics, expression and legal assembly
• Commitment to using democratic options at all levels
• Commitment to work together on issues common to youth across the political parties
• Adherence to the country’s laws and constitution, with a commitment to transparency and fairness.

The code of conduct has remained in effect since it was signed in December 2012. Participants in the effort noted that while the code itself is important, even more valuable were the skills they gained in building consensus, the process of dialogue and the forming of relationships with leaders from other political parties—outcomes that could bear fruit for years to come.
U.S. officials state regularly that "there is no military solution to this conflict." But the U.S. continues to provide support to the opposition under the rationale that this will give the opposition a stronger negotiating position against President Assad.

This policy has only served to escalate the war. As Archbishop Jean Kawak of the Syrian Orthodox Church says, "we can’t reach peace through violence. We have no other option but dialogue."

**Humanitarian impact**

Throughout the conflict civilians have been caught in the crossfire. More than 150,000 Syrians have died. More than 9 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance. There has been irreplaceable damage to Syria’s physical infrastructure and cultural heritage, a country with a long and rich history.

Neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are bearing the tremendous burden of hosting Syrian refugees, now numbering at least 2.6 million. Initially, as Syrian refugees took refuge in neighboring countries, many host communities responded with remarkable hospitality and generosity.

However, as the war has continued and the number of refugees continues to grow steadily, tensions with host communities are growing. Vital services such as water and sanitation are being strained beyond their capacity. The war in Syria has also exacerbated tensions within countries like Lebanon. This has resulted in increasing incidents of violence, and there is potential for much greater spillover.

Until the war comes to an end, the humanitarian toll will continue to grow exponentially. Because of this, many Syrians with whom Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) works express their strong desire to see the conflict end. They urge U.S. citizens to support policies that will bring an end to this brutal war.

**Policy recommendations**

- **Support an immediate ceasefire.** There are already small examples of local ceasefires, worked out in communities where members of the opposition forces and the government army were acquainted with one another. The United States should put its full diplomatic support toward a national-level ceasefire, effective immediately.

- **Cease military and all other support for armed parties to the conflict.** The U.S. should end its military support for the Syrian opposition and direct all of its energies toward a political solution. The U.S. should insist that its allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar end their military involvement as well. At the same time, the international community must continue to urge Russia and Iran to end their military support for the Syrian government.

- **Actively pursue a negotiated, political agreement.** Any such agreement will need to be brokered by Syrians, but the U.S. and others in the international community will need to support this outcome and make clear that it is a top diplomatic priority. A political agreement will need to guarantee protection of the rights of all Syrians.

- **Respond generously to the humanitarian crisis.** The U.S. has provided $1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance thus far, a commendable contribution. At the same time, the needs only continue to grow. Thus the U.S. and others in the international community must continue to respond generously. Humanitarian assistance should be directed only to agencies that are operating in accordance with international humanitarian law.

When I was in Lebanon in February, I asked the Hassan family what they would tell the U.S. government if they could. Like so many others I spoke with, they said they simply want the fighting to stop so that they can return home.

Take a moment today to urge U.S. policymakers to heed the cry of Syrians for peace and the chance to return home.

**Lending a helping hand**

Through MCC food and relief programs, Syrians in villages affected by sectarian fighting overcome barriers to help one another. In the fall of 2013, Christians in the villages of Sadad and Haffar experienced significant violence. Several months later, the Syrian Orthodox Church, an MCC partner, offered shelter in a church in a nearby village to 500 Muslims who have been displaced from their homes.

In other villages, 6,000 families displaced from their homes receive food assistance through an MCC partner organization, Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue. Bridges have been built between various ethnic and religious groups through working together to meet the overwhelming needs caused by hunger. During fighting in one village in the area, Muslim neighbors entered a Christian church to protect it from vandalism and looting.

Recently, the Middle East Council of Churches provided nearly 3,900 families with heaters, fuel, bedding and clothing. Once more, those who have been displaced multiple times are finding hope. The Syrian Palestinian family of Imti and Khol were forced to flee their homes in a camp near Damascus. They arrived in Dar’aa with their 3-year-old quintuplets. The church of Dar’aa helped to meet their immediate needs during the cold winter through an MCC donation of a stove, blankets and clothing. Human compassion continues to bind these communities together.

*Naomi Enns is the MCC representative for Lebanon and Syria, together with her husband, Doug.*
Prayer: Weep with those who weep . . .

by Ken J. Nafziger

Opening hymn

HWB 368  O God of love, O Power of peace
Sing only stanzas 1–2. Sing the first stanza in unison, the second as a round.

Hymn and prayer

STJ 54  Longing for light
Sing stanza 2, and then begin the spoken prayer. Sing the refrain at the asterisks.

In the darkness of uncertainty, when we don’t know what to do, when decisions are hard to make, light up our darkness. *

In the darkness of our anxiety when we are worried about the future, when we don’t know where to turn, light up our darkness. *

In the darkness of our despair, when life seems empty, when we feel there is no future worth seeking, light up our darkness. *

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world; where there is oppression, injustice, and poverty, light up our darkness. *


Remembering

Have 22 people from your congregation help you to form a representational human graph, to visualize the facts and numbers surrounding the war in Syria. The leader will say, “These 22 people represent the entire population of Syria,” followed by a moment of silence. Then continue by moving people as indicated.

Leader, spoken in a loud voice:
The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.
O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
—Habakkuk 1:1–3

Leader: These 22 people represent Syria’s population of some 22 million.

Leader: One of these has died in the war, representing 150,000. Of these 150,000, 11,500 are children who died.

(One person should sit down or in some way disappear from the line.)

Leader: Four of these people face hunger, representing 4 million Syrians.

(These folks might clutch their empty, aching stomachs.)

Leader: Ten of these people require aid of all kinds, including medical assistance, shelter, and more. They represent 10.25 million people.

(These folks should show some other discomforts.)

Silence

Hymn

STJ 66  If the war goes on
(During the hymn, all return quietly and slowly to their seats.)

Longer version available online.

Closing prayers

Full text of prayers online, to be accompanied by solo flute and the singing of STS 16, Peace before us.

Complete text of the worship resources is available online at washingtonmemo.org/newsletter/spring2014.

Ken Nafziger is professor of music at Eastern Mennonite University.

Abbreviations

HWB  Hymnal: A Worship Book
STJ  Sing the Journey
STS  Sing the Story

IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

Senator ______________
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-3121
senate.gov

Representative ______________
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 224-3121
house.gov

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-1111
president@whitehouse.gov

GET INVOLVED!

• Check out our website at washington.mcc.org.

• Read our blog at washingtonmemo.org.

• Sign up to receive action alerts and the monthly E-Memo.

• Follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/mccwashington. Like us on Facebook at facebook.com/MCCWashingtonOffice.

UPCOMING EVENTS

June 20–21
Daryl Byler speaking on Palestine and Israel
Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference assembly
Glendale, Ariz.

August 4–September 5
Congressional recess
Opportunity for in-district visits

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Washington Office staff. Subscribe or change your address by sending an email to mccwash@mcc.org or by calling (202) 544-6564.

Staff: Tammy Alexander, Agnes Chen, Patricia Kisare, Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach (Director and Managing Editor).

All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
Facts about Syria

1 million
Syrian refugees in Lebanon

More than half
of Syrians who are displaced from their homes are children

4 million
Total population of Lebanon

$4.2 billion
Amount requested by the United Nations for the crisis

$1 billion
Received thus far

9.3 million
People in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria

21.9 million
Syria’s population before the war began

More than 150,000
Syrians who have died as a result of the war

## Policy Principles

### U.S. policy toward Syria should...

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Prioritize an immediate ceasefire.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>There are already small examples of local ceasefires, worked out in communities where members of the opposition forces and the government army were acquainted with one another. The United States should put its full diplomatic support toward a national-level ceasefire, effective immediately.</td>
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<td>The U.S. should end its military support for the Syrian opposition and direct all of its energies toward a political solution. The U.S. should insist that its allies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, end their military involvement as well.</td>
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<th>Actively pursue a negotiated, political agreement.</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>A process leading to a negotiated agreement will need to be led by Syrians, with strong support from the U.S. and others in the international community. Any durable agreement must guarantee the rights of all Syrians.</td>
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<th>Respond generously to the humanitarian crisis.</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>The U.S. has provided $1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance thus far, but the need continues to increase. U.S. assistance should: be directed to agencies operating in accordance with international humanitarian law, provide support for host communities and governments, and reach the needs of less visible refugee populations.</td>
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### Resources for Learning More

- **MCC's Middle East Crisis Response**
  - mcc.org/middleeastcrisis

- **U.S. Government's Humanitarian Response**
  - usaid.gov/crisis/syria

- **United Nations Humanitarian Response**
  - syria.unocha.org

### A Liturgical Prayer

**From the Syrian Orthodox Church in Damascus**

O Lord, righteousness belongs to you,  
but we disgrace our faces because we have sinned against you.  
To you, our Lord God, belong mercies and forgiveness,  
for we have rebelled against you  
and not obeyed your voice to walk in your law which you set before us.  
Righteous are you, O Lord, in all your works  
that you have done even as we have not obeyed your voice.

Now therefore, O God, hear the prayers of your servants and our supplications  
and cause your face to shine upon your sanctuary, for your name’s sake.  
Incline your ear, O God, and hear.  
It is not because of our righteousness that we bring our supplications before you, O Lord,  
but because of your abundant mercies.  
Be not slow to answer us, O God, for we have been called by your name.