

Christians in Middle East: U.S. attack on Syria would be detrimental

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NEW YORK (RNS) As the Obama administration considers a strike in response to recent chemical attacks, the head of a global evangelical group said Wednesday (Sept. 4) that Christians in the Middle East oppose military intervention in Syria.

“There is major consensus amongst the Christian leaders in this region that any military intervention would have a detrimental effect ... on Christians in Syria,” wrote Geoff Tunnicliffe, secretary general/CEO of World Evangelical Alliance, in a letter to the State Department, the White House and the United Nation’s Security Council.

Tunnicliffe was attending a meeting of Christian leaders in neighboring Jordan that included California megachurch pastor Rick Warren, “Touched by an Angel” actress Roma Downey and her “Survivor” creator husband Mark Burnett.

The group, convened by Jordan’s King Abdullah II, met with about 70 Middle Eastern Christians to discuss the challenges facing Arab Christians.

“I couldn’t find a Christian leader at the conference who supported military intervention,” Tunnicliffe said in an interview. “The question is, how do you protect Christians if there’s a regime change?”

Tunnicliffe said two Syrian pastors told him independently that Christians have received threats from those who say a regime change would mean a takeover by Islamists who would force Christians out of the country.

Christian representatives from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan were present at the gathering, as well as a few Muslim clerics and academics. In his address, King Abdullah II urged interfaith harmony.

"We are proud that Jordan constitutes a unique model of coexistence and fraternity between Muslims and Christians," the king said. "We also believe that the protection of the rights of Christians is a duty rather than a favor."

U.S. and French leaders say Basher al-Assad's Syrian government used chemical weapons in a Damascus suburb on Aug. 21, killing 1,429 people, including more than 400 children. In talks on military intervention, President Obama has won the support of House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, but faces significant opposition among religious and political leaders.

On Wednesday, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan wrote to President Obama, urging him to shun military options, saying an attack "will be counterproductive, will exacerbate an already deadly situation and will have unintended negative consequences."

Dolan, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairman of the bishops' international affairs committee, pushed the White House to "work urgently and tirelessly" for a ceasefire.

While she did not address Syria specifically in her presentation at the conference in Jordan, Downey noted her Catholic upbringing and her husband's Protestant background, and the tension between these groups in her native Northern Ireland.

"Our marriage is a living example of tolerance and healing and of not allowing old hurts and discrimination to live on," said Downey, who with her husband produced "The Bible" miniseries for The History Channel.

"We have come to believe that Christian unity is a critical element in responding to the global challenges we face today, including the difficulties of Arab Christians in the Middle East."

Warren, who has been largely absent from the national and international scene since his son's suicide in April, moderated a panel at the conference.

Tunncliffe said that evangelical leaders are discussing future statements on intervention in Syria.

"I know people are aware of the crisis," Tunncliffe said, noting that the Middle East is overwhelmed with 2 million refugees from Syria. "I'm not sure they're aware of

the extent of the crisis.”

Pope Francis and King Abdullah II met at the Vatican last week, saying dialogue is the “only option” to end the conflict in Syria.