

A reaction from the The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch & All the East to the proposed resolution on the war in Iraq

Dear reverends, distinguished guests, sisters and brothers in Christ,

First of all, please allow me to thank you all for your kind invitation in attending this assembly and being given the opportunity to represent not only an orthodox voice, but most especially, a Syrian one. I speak with a voice that originates from the cradle of Christianity, witnessing all salvation events from The Nativity of our Lord until His resurrection.

I come from Damascus, a city that opened its doors from the outset of the Iraq crises to those Iraqi refugees who suffered the forced migration of conflict in their homeland. Syria offered them refuge from this homelessness. We cannot in this assembly numerate the unimaginable consequences of the Iraq invasion. Regardless of the great damage to infrastructure in Iraq, the fracturing of Iraqi social fabric due to the onset of religious tension between sects, fanaticism and the deterioration of security at all levels, has most deeply effected this disenfranchised refugee population.

The Syrian government, with its very limited capacity in hosting the estimated 1.5 million Iraqis at their height in number, combined its efforts with Syrian and international NGO's as well as Church partners, in working together to fight for justice and peace so allowing Iraqi refugees a chance at a life free of conflict and with the possibility of development. The limiting capacities of a country to accommodate such vast numbers of immigrants, has though incurred restrictions. For though Iraqis have been granted asylum in Syria, it is an asylum that the Syrian government has had to control for the protection of its own population against the negative impacts of a mass influx of foreign labour. In this way Iraqis are treated as 'guests', so limiting their access to employment opportunities. Countries that provide opportunities for resettlement offer possibilities for an otherwise disenfranchised population, to experience freedom in the choices of for their future.

Based on such realities as faced in our new millennium, we in Syria deeply appreciate your serious concerns over the Iraqi crisis and your endeavours to generate a voice that calls for policies addressing and seeking out a final and durable solution to Iraq, and its numerous refugees.

We also greatly appreciate your efforts in welcoming more Iraqi refugees to your country, offering them help and support to compensate in whatever ways possible, for all that they lost in the war. We must be careful in doing this though, for in fleeing their homeland to seek refuge and in some cases being offered this solution in terms of resettlement in a 3<sup>rd</sup> country, a future perceived back in Iraq disappears. We have also a responsibility to help these refugees understand the consequences of abandonment. Iraq must be a country they believe stands the chances if rebirth, and yet only with their support.

The Lebanese civil war generated a somewhat similar situation and it should be taken as an example. Many Lebanese, who had fled a violent civil war to countries spread worldwide, returned in time, regenerating the possibilities of a healthy democracy and society.

We count on your prayers so that peace may become a true reality in our region, and not a mere intangible dream. We will continue to count on your prayers and support so that we may maintain to the degree we have always been able to provide services, support to the Iraqi refugee population and those throughout the world suffering the pains of conflict. Your continuous support to the Iraqi refugees in Syria, who in some cases were given the opportunity to live in the relative security of your country, so vastly differing from the insecurity and fears of being without a home, will continue to be of paramount importance. Within this population of forced migrants it is the youth that are most valuable. They are the future, and if not protected in their states of transience between homes, may be left little recourse but partake in the underworlds of financial recompense, at the great expense of their dignity. It is our responsibility to give them a chance to live beyond these desperate means, as well as offer them the faith that the home they fled too, may one day be one they can return to and help rebuild.

At this point, we would like to assure you of our unwavering support for this proposed resolution. We will publish it in our magazines for all to understand better what this assembly believes and proposes in the face of Iraq and its continuing realities.

And finally, we thank you all for your financial support to the Patriarchate and MECC, in helping us meet the needs of the very vulnerable in Syria, the Iraqi refugees.

May our God grant you all to witness His name and enjoy a prosperous life filled with offerings and promises of service in His field.

Samer Laham

Director of Ecumenical Relations and Development.

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East