



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

Dear Mr. President,

Over one year has elapsed since the United States aligned itself with Syria's Sunni-dominated opposition and the Middle East's Sunni powers - especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – for the purpose of overthrowing the Alawite-based regime of President Bashar al-Assad. While the United States pursues this goal in the name of the Syrian people, it is clear that its ultimate strategic objective is to deny Shiite Iran effective support from its most important regional ally in its struggle against the United States' Sunni allies for mastery of the Middle East.

The key elements of America's strategy have been economic sanctions, political backing for the Syrian opposition and military support to the Free Syrian Army and other Sunni-dominated armed groups. Lethal military support is channeled mainly through Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey – all American allies with considerable democratic deficits, especially in the realm of religious and ethnic minority rights.

The United States' active support for regime change in Syria has signaled an anarchic scramble for power and influence. The above-mentioned Sunni states seek hegemony, with our NATO ally Turkey threatening to invade and occupy Syrian territory, as it did in Cyprus in 1974. Meanwhile, al-Qaida and related terrorist groups vie with other Sunni-supremacist forces in the Free Syrian Army and Syrian National Council for leadership in the war against the regime.

In your stirring response to the Arab uprisings on May 19, 2011, you pledged to remain true to a “set of universal rights,” including “free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders.” You furthermore underscored the crucial character of these human rights when you declared:

Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal.

In the year that has passed since this pledge was made, the people of Syria have experienced an upsurge of death, displacement and destruction. The casualties have mounted in proportion to the chaos caused by the degradation of the Syrian state. The Syrian civil war has now become, in the words of Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, “a situation that is rapidly spinning out of control.”

During Syria's slow-motion descent into chaos, the Department of State has vigorously publicized and condemned atrocities committed by forces loyal to President Assad. But Syrian opposition forces increasingly match the Assad regime's disdain for the lives and liberty of the Syrian people, especially Christians and other non-Sunnis, who constitute about 25% of Syria's population.

Human rights monitors and church officials have reported cases of the armed opposition kidnapping, torturing, displacing, murdering, and using civilians as human shields. Such crimes are often accompanied by cries of “Allahu Akbar,” “Death to Unbelievers,” and other expressions of Islamic jihad.

Already in the spring of 2011, before the outbreak of anti-government violence, chants of “Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin,” became a refrain at public protests. Within a year, Islamist rebels had religiously cleansed 90% of the Christians from Homs, and are now reportedly holding 200 as hostages. This month, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, confirmed the expulsion of Christians from Homs and expressed fear that the same fate awaits the Christian community in his besieged see and in Damascus. One Alawite man who attempted to join a rebel group in Lattakia was rebuffed by rebels who told him, “We don’t need any Alawite pigs with us.”

The UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect have addressed the Syrian crisis, and warned last month that “with increasing violence and deepening sectarian tensions, the risk of further mass atrocity crimes is high.”

You will recall, Mr. President, that in January 2011, former President Amine Gemayal of Lebanon broke a taboo of the international community when he declared that Islamic extremists were committing “genocide” against the Christians of the Middle East. President Nicholas Sarkozy of France soon followed suit by describing this genocide process as “religious cleansing.” Within the past year, Syria has surpassed Iraq as the epicenter of this regional catastrophe.

The United States must lose no more time translating declared support for universal human rights into concrete, implementable policy, supported - as you pledged - “by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal.” The United States has lost its diplomatic leverage with the Syrian government. But this is not the case with the Syrian opposition and with their Sunni allies.

I urge you to begin by calling on the Syrian opposition and all members of the American-led “Friends of Syria” Contact Group - especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey - to declare support for minority rights, religious liberty, and religiously-neutral government, and to condemn all forms of religious supremacism. CSI furthermore calls on you to unveil without delay the U.S. policy response to the UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisers’ appeal for “immediate, decisive action,” to “protect populations at risk of further atrocity crimes in Syria.”

Mr. President, we cannot allow the religious minorities of Syria to be collateral damage of efforts to build a Sunni Islamist bloc against the regional ambitions of Shiite Iran. Failure of the “Friends of Syria” to guarantee the human rights of religious minorities will only cause these communities to cling closer to the Assad regime for protection, and thereby deepen and prolong the civil war.

Respectfully,



Dr. John Eibner
CEO, Christian Solidarity International-USA