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Jesuit head: US strike on Syria would be 'abuse of power'

by Joshua J. McElwee

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Washington — A U.S. military strike on Syria would be an "abuse of power" that should be "condemned and rejected," the global leader of the Jesuit order of Catholic brothers and priests has said.

Jesuit Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, who leads the some 17,000 member order that counts among its ranks Pope Francis, adds his voice to a chorus of Catholic prelates around the world sharply criticizing the attack in an interview made public Wednesday.

"With all respect for the people of the United States, I think that a military intervention like the one being planned is itself an abuse of power," states Nicolás in the interview. "The US has to stop acting and reacting like the big boy of the neighborhood of the world. This leads inevitably to abuse, harassment and bullying of the weaker members of the community."

Nicolás, a native Spaniard whose superior general role in the past has been referred to as the "black pope" because of its influence around the world, also says such a military strike would question the authenticity of the United States' Christian heritage.

"Remember that at one point in the Gospel, when the disciples of Jesus could not liberate a young man from an evil spirit, Jesus told them: 'This kind of spirits cannot be driven away if not by prayer and fasting,'" he states.

"I find it extremely upsetting that a Country that considers itself, at least nominally, Christian, could not imagine other ways of acting that would not be 'military', and, instead, contribute to bring Humanity back to the law of the jungle."

Nicolás' comments were published Wednesday in an online newsletter circulated from the order's headquarters in Rome as part of a short Q-and-A style interview with the priest. Their publishing comes as the U.S. Congress is receiving briefings and updates from the Obama administration, which is seeking congressional approval for a military strike against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's government.

Secretary of State John Kerry, a Catholic, is to brief the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on the matter Wednesday afternoon. In a similar briefing before the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee yesterday, Kerry said U.S. intelligence had evidence "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Assad's government had perpetrated an Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack against rebel forces in the country.

Kerry, a 1976 graduate of the Jesuit-run Boston College Law School, is one of an estimated 53 members of Congress who graduated from Jesuit institutions of higher education. Some 30 officials in the Obama administration are likewise estimated to have graduated from institutions run by the order.

Before critiquing the proposed U.S. strike in Syria, Nicolás says he does not usually make comment on political situations, but that "in the present case we are dealing with a Humanitarian situation that exceeds all the limits that would ordinarily keep me silent."

"I have to confess that I cannot understand who gave the United States or France the right to act against a Country in a way that will certainly increase the suffering of the citizens of that country, who, by the way, have already suffered beyond measure," he continues.

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"Violence and violent action, like what is being planned, have to always be the last resort and administered in such a way that only the guilty are affected. In the case of a Country this is evidently impossible to control and, thus, it seems to me totally unjustified."

Nicolás also says that he is making his comments because he respects the United States and is afraid it is making a "terrible mistake."

"What disturbs me most now is that precisely this country I respect so much is at the point of doing such a terrible mistake," he states. "And something similar goes for France."

"A Country that has been a real leader in esprit, intelligence, and that has made gigantic contributions to Civility and Culture is now tempted to bring us back to barbarism, in open contradiction of what France has been a symbol of for many past generations: That two such Countries would come together for such an outrageous measure is part of the world's anger," he continues.

"We are not afraid of the attack; we are afraid of the barbarism to which we are being lead."

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