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Jordanian priest: Superpowers must find political resolution in Syria

by Tom Tracy by Catholic News Service

Amman, Jordan — A priest with strong interfaith ties in the Middle East said the global superpowers must find a political resolution to the Syrian civil war and humanitarian crisis but cautioned any armed intervention would result in longer-term instability.

"What we need is for the Americans to work with the Iranians and the Russians to find a political solution; otherwise, we will have another Iraq or Afghanistan," Fr. Nabil Haddad, director of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, told 12 U.S. Christian writers and bloggers.

Haddad spoke about the Syrian crisis and a wide range of regional concerns Wednesday to the group, convened at a Marriott hotel in Amman by the Virginia-based Jordan Tourism Board.

A member of the Melkite Catholic church and of the Middle East Council of Churches, Haddad was also active in the recent summit on protecting Arab Christianity held in early September in Jordan.

The priest told the group Wednesday that extremist groups in Syria have gained ground during the conflict's three-year history. He predicted that an armed intervention would be counterproductive and might cause a severe backlash against Christians, along with serious repercussions for the whole region.

The Jordanian model of interfaith coexistence, mutual support and what he called "an alliance of moderation" among Christians and Muslims can serve as a model for the Arab region, Haddad said.

He said Melkite Catholics are worried the Christians in Syria are "in danger of being wiped out by the extremists."

He pointed to the mass exodus of Chaldean Christians from Iraq during the last decade.

"My patriarch is worried and crying out for all people around the world to protect his Christian community" in Syria, where they "are being victimized for nothing more than because they are Christians," he said. "If we only tailor a policy to protect a minority, this is suicidal."

The best way to protect the Arab Christians is by spreading a culture of respect and human dignity, he said, noting that "by doing that you don't need to protect minorities."

Pope Francis, he added, has been making a great change in the image and mindset of the Muslims in the region and around the world.

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"I think the Christians were able to make a difference recently in terms of the dangers of (potential intervention in Syria) and to stop the noise for war in a region where people are fed up with pain, fear and with intervention," he said.

Pope Francis repeatedly spoke out against armed intervention and led a prayer vigil for peace.

Established in 2003, Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center seeks to engage Muslim leadership in the region. Haddad said he has worked with imams to denounce religious and sectarian violence.

"We see it as our sacred duty to work with the moderate Muslims who think their religion has been hijacked," he said.

"I say to (Muslims) that 'you need me as a witness to your moderation, and we Christians need a duty of loyalty to our faith and to give our share in serving society.'"

"We work with the Muslims by showing our Christian message of love, which doesn't mean to be submissive and naive, but by a strong message of love as a parent within a family. No one is going to help us better than our neighbors, and none better than the Christians."

Haddad also fielded questions on Christian conversions in the region, interchurch relations among Christian denominations and Holy Land tourism development in Jordan.

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