

Greetings President Biden,

March 11, 2021

As people of faith, we have a deep sense of the sacred dignity of all people. We also have a clear conviction of our sacred call as human beings to seek all possible creative, nonviolent approaches to transform conflict and meet the needs for accountability.

We recognize you as a fellow person of faith, who seeks to live in accord with such ways of being. And we recognize that last week, just over a month since taking office, your team ordered the killing of other human beings ([22 people killed](#)), and thus, the traumatization of their families through military airstrikes, as well as contributing to regional instability. We are deeply disappointed and distraught by this choice of our President's team. We acknowledge the challenges of being in your position and the needs to be responsive, reliable, and to seek security. While we are deeply concerned with the loss of any life, we were encouraged by reports that you called off a second strike after reports of women and children were present. Yet, the human destruction and military strikes your team did unleash do not meet the needs to be responsive, reliable, and ensure security.

One of the main arguments for this human destruction is that it will “[deter](#)” and “[de-escalate](#)” future destructive action by Iran. This seems false. We have been going back and forth with attack and counterattack. Did deterrence and de-escalation happen after we killed the Iranian general in January 2020? Or, after the intensification of the Pentagon's naval and air exercises near Iran? Or, after the U.S. seizure of Iranian oil tankers? Or, after increasing economic sanctions? Rather, such human destruction creates trauma, bitterness, dis-placement, and the likely “blowback” that the CIA has named about such activity long ago. As [Bennis and Peterson-Smith](#) aptly stated about the claim of de-escalation, this is “pretty astonishing.” And thus, less than a week after this most recent bombing we experience an air base hosting U.S. troops being bombed in retaliation.

Another argument for this human destruction is the [claim of proportionality](#). Such an analysis is too narrow and vague. This action is more than just one action of destruction compared to another action of destruction. It is a pattern of behavior by both countries that has created and intensified an unhealthy, corrosive, and distrusting relationship. Such a relationship has led to enormous amounts of suffering, trauma, and death over the years. Simply calling this “proportional” misses the relevant moral aspects and functions to perpetuate the destructive conflict. One “proportional” act after another, and another, and another doesn't make it just, but makes it an “eye for an eye,” and thus, a cycle of destructive conflict.

Instead, we need a broader more adequate moral analysis to determine strategy and action in such situations. We need to [focus on norms](#) that cultivate the habits and skills to engage conflict constructively, to break cycles of violence, and to build a more sustainable peace. Part of this is calling on you to do what you claimed about leading with [diplomacy](#). Yet, there is much more

than that. Another claim is that this human destruction was [“necessary” for “accountability.”](#) The issue of accountability is a genuine need when harm occurs. Accountability is not about increasing harm, suffering, or death for others. That is retribution. That is what too much of our criminal justice system is about in the U.S., as many Black, indigenous and people of color will testify. Accountability is about enabling a process that makes it more likely the perpetrators increase understanding of the harm caused, grow in empathy for those harmed, acknowledge responsibility for the harm, and work with the stakeholders to repair the harm as much as possible. As part of a thorough, multilateral investigation into a particular attack or series of attacks, this is what we would do if we were about accountability. Such a process would include U.S. acknowledgement of harm as part of the broader pattern of behavior. As the [just peace norms](#) signal, there are many other nonviolent resistance options to shift the dynamic of this conflict.

It is not a coincidence that our Black, indigenous and people of color community in the U.S. suffers from this retributive focus in our criminal justice system, and that people in the Middle East, particularly Iran and Syria, have been consistently suffering from these retributive acts of human destruction. Our habits, policies, and institutions of systemic racism are a notable aspect of this reality. With your Administration’s commitment to addressing racial justice and equity, we ask you to apply that in foreign policy as well and shift away from these patterns.

As people of faith, we urge and pray that you will shift course. There is no time to waste on the old ways of human and ecological destruction. We can be better. President Biden, you can lead us in this direction.

Sincerely,

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