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September 25, 2015

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I last wrote to you and then Ambassador Susan Rice regarding the ongoing crisis in Syria on May 28, 2013 at which time I noted the efficacy of establishing a no-fly zone in Syria. I continue to believe that doing so is in the best interest of the United States, our allies in the region, and the Syrian people. I therefore write to you today to renew this request.

The humanitarian crisis detailed in my May 2013 letter has regrettably grown more critical in the intervening years. This crisis, in which millions of innocent Syrians find themselves today, demands our full attention and fervent commitment to creating a strategy that will bring an end to the deplorable conditions facing the Syrian people.

When I wrote to you in 2013, 70,000 Syrians had been killed in the fighting that began in March of 2011. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights now estimates that 330,000 people have died in the ongoing conflict. Furthermore, at the time of my 2013 letter, over 1.4 million refugees – three-quarters of whom were women and children – had fled the country to seek safe haven in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. This number has since soared to 4 million. They have suffered incredible loss, witnessed untold atrocities, and experienced permanent trauma. Additionally, in May of 2013 the United Nations reported that 4.25 million Syrians were internally displaced, caught in the middle of the struggle between opposition forces and those loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad. Today, that number is 7.6 million. Finally, when I wrote to you in 2013, 6.8 million Syrians were in need of urgent assistance. Today, this number stands at 12.2 million people - over half of Syria's population. These numbers are unlike any we have seen since the Second World War.

These astoundingly tragic numbers represent Syrian mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lawyers, doctors and laborers who yearn for nothing more than a free and secure future for their loved ones. Indeed, allowing the current situation in Syria to continue is not only morally suspect, but also contrary to our long-term strategic interests. We know too well the results that come from a generation of growing up alienated and angry in refugee camps. Such a life leads to radicalization, revenge and continued destabilization.

While I commend the Administration's ongoing commitment to provide humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, including non-lethal aid to opposition forces, President Assad remains in power. He has demonstrated to the world that he is above no brutal tactic if it will keep him in power. This includes the use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate missile strikes and the use of barrel bombs. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, indiscriminate barrel bomb attacks have killed nearly 14,000 people and are capable of obliterating entire neighborhoods. Indeed, in many areas, including Aleppo, Homs, Dara'a, Azaz, and around Damascus, the Assad regime has used its air force, as well as scud missile strikes to decimate entire population centers as part of a systematic effort to crush opposition forces and terrorize its own people. Human rights groups report that fighter jets and helicopters have targeted hospitals, bakeries, and residential buildings and have noted that the leading cause of death of Syrian civilians this year has been the indiscriminate use of aerial weapons.

The Assad regime's air superiority has allowed it to push back rebel advances and hamper their ability to maintain effective control over captured territory. Imposing a no-fly zone over Syria would help provide opposition forces with the cover necessary to establish governance in strategically important parts of the country and protect civilians. Such a no-fly zone would be defended by radar and patriot and sea based weapons systems, ensuring that American pilots face as little harm as possible. We must take steps to help put an end to the violence and bring about the political transition necessary for a democratic Syria. Enforcing a no-fly zone would send a strong message to the Assad regime and the world that the ongoing escalation of violence in Syria is unacceptable.

As you are keenly aware, the situation in Syria is constantly changing. The recent deployment of Russian troops, military aircraft, and surface-to-air missile batteries in Latakia to ostensibly help the Assad regime fight the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is of particular concern. Specifically, reports that Russia has sent Sukhoi Su-27 fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles to Syria are most troubling as such jets and weapons systems are only used to disrupt air power, a power ISIL clearly does not possess. Although these latest moves by Russia certainly complicate the establishment of a no-fly zone in Syria, we must not let them deter us from working diligently to ensure that such a zone is established and enforced. I encourage you, Mr. President, to highlight the implications of this development when you meet with President Putin next week, with the goal of finding a solution that allows both our countries to work in tandem to impose a no-fly zone in Syria, thereby protecting Syria's most vulnerable citizens.

Mr. President, the situation in Syria may be more complex than it was when I wrote to you on May 28, 2013, but the need for immediate and strong action remains just as necessary as it was then. With each passing day, the violence has grown more sectarian, militarized, and radicalized at the cost of innocent Syrian lives. As you carefully consider the options facing our nation and allies, I encourage you to support imposing a no-fly zone. Thank you for your consideration of this urgent matter. I respectfully ask to be kept informed as the Administration evaluates possible courses of action in Syria, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alcee L. Hastings". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

Cc: Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations