



19 September 2013

The Honourable John Baird, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Trade
and Development Canada
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0G2
Canada

Email: John.Baird@parl.gc.ca

Re: The Government of Canada and Syria

Dear Minister:

On behalf of the 25 member denominations of The Canadian Council of Churches, which together represent 85 per cent of Christians in Canada, I am writing to you to reiterate our conviction that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. We call on Canada to provide vigorous support for compromise through diplomatic and political processes to bring a just and lasting peace to Syria. We welcome the recent ray of hope created by diplomatic proposals to remove chemical weapons from Syria and trust that this is a step toward a more comprehensive peace process. We also urge a more generous response by Canada to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and its immediate neighbours.

Recent Canadian Council of Churches Statements

On May 17, 2013 The Canadian Council of Churches wrote to Prime Minister Stephen Harper with urgent concerns about the various crises afflicting the Middle East. The letter emphasized the humanitarian tragedy in Syria and the desperate need for international support and cooperation to stop threats to all citizens, including Christians, Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities. The letter states:

“We are concerned for the safety and security of all the people in the region, but in particular, the weak, vulnerable and powerless. The spread of sectarian violence puts all generations throughout the region at risk and is a menace to the hopes and dreams of the younger generations.”

Many of the 25 member denominations of The Canadian Council of Churches have connections with churches in the Middle East through direct communion or working partnerships. In

addition, many Canadian churches are involved in local and national dialogues with Jews, Muslims, Baha'i and other faith communities in Canada. Through both interfaith and ecumenical relationships we are working to promote religious freedom and respect for the rights of all cultural and religious minorities. Our sisters and brothers of all faiths in Syria suffer when atrocities—including directed attacks on religious leaders—take place there.

Churches also are responding through Canadian and international aid agencies and networks to the humanitarian needs within Syria and the neighbouring countries to which Syrians have fled seeking refuge from the fighting in their country.

The Threat of Further Military Action

It is estimated that in Syria 100,000 people have been killed and approximately 6,000,000 driven from their homes and communities since the start of the current conflict.

The international community's response to the horrific use of chemical weapons in Syria should first be determined in terms of its responsibility to protect vulnerable Syrian civilians, who are the primary victims in this devastating two-year conflict. Then the world community should assist in advancing a comprehensive peace process that will lead to the cessation of Syrian hostilities and the beginning of negotiations that will result in a sustainable, just and peaceful Syria.

Russia and other allies of the current Syrian Government, along with the United States and its allies, including Canada, should now turn their efforts to removing weapons of mass destruction and negotiating peace. Threats by the United States and its allies to engage in bombing or other military action against Syria in response to chemical weapons attacks fail to address the two priorities: civilian protection and finding a path to peace.

The Witness of Syrian Churches

Christians in Syria already find themselves in the crossfire between opposition groups and government forces. An outside military response to chemical weapons use could make the situation worse. Canada should implore the most influential foreign powers to lead diplomatic attempts to stop further killing, rather than contemplate expanded military operations or fueling the fires of conflict with further arms supplies to Syrian combatants.

Syrian Christian leaders have spoken publicly and communicated with Canadian churches in the past weeks, clearly stating that military action by the West would be disastrous and have unintended consequences for the already suffering Christian community there. The head of Syria's Melkite Greek Catholic Church has stated that reconciliation initiatives are still viable and should be a top priority. Gregorios III, the Church Patriarch of Antioch, has called on the international community to work for peace.

No Military Solution

Pope Francis has urged leaders to “find ways of overcoming the conflicting positions and to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution.” Compromise through political and non-military processes must prevail. Measures should include the following:

- Advance diplomatic processes to resolve the Syrian conflict through negotiation. International diplomacy must take place hand-in-hand with assistance to local community and civil society efforts to build peace within Syria from the ground up.
- Create and implement a United Nations arms embargo applicable to all sides in the Syrian conflict.
- Revitalize the international, previously agreed process to make the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.
- Hold all state and non-state actors in the conflict, without exception, to their obligations to respect international human rights and humanitarian law, and make them subject to investigation and prosecution for violations by appropriate international institutions, including the International Criminal Court.

Generous Humanitarian Responses

Faith communities are already at the forefront in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis, contributing to and leading programs of assistance and food security. We also are grateful for contributions by the Canadian government, but many needs remain unmet.

Canada needs to adopt further humanitarian measures to:

- Dramatically increase assistance to all displaced Syrians, whether inside or outside Syria, so that their basic needs are met until they can safely return to their homes; and
- Expedite a process that allows more sponsored Syrian refugees to apply for protection in Canada, and maintain and increase public funding that assists refugees upon their arrival in Canada. Churches and faith communities have long taken a lead role in refugee sponsorship and we want to continue these efforts.

The Difficulties Ahead

Finding a path to a just peace in Syria will not be easy. Complicated logistics, risks and setbacks cannot be avoided by delaying substantive negotiations. And the risks and costs of diplomacy pale in comparison to the risks of unintended consequences and the accompanying costs of escalating military actions.

“Now is the time to raise one voice for peace and work for a negotiated solution among all parties to the conflict.” (World Council of Churches Communiqué, September 18 2013)

Our Prayer

For all who love peace and defend the helpless, we pray that diplomacy will win the day; that chemical weapons and other devices of mass destruction will be destroyed; that armed violence will cease; and that a just and comprehensive peace will prevail.

We pray that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, will guide and enlighten you and all representatives of the Government of Canada, as well as world leaders struggling to end Syria’s war.

We continue to pray for you, the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada as you address your responsibilities in the Middle East.

The Canadian Council of Churches calls on their members and all Christians, and invites members of other faiths, to join in praying for peace in Syria.

Sincerely,



The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton
General Secretary

Attachment: Church Leaders’ Letter on the Middle East (May 17, 2013)

cc: Paul Dewar, M.P., The New Democratic Party of Canada
Marc Garneau, M.P., The Liberal Party of Canada
Jean-Francois Fortin, M.P., Bloc Québécois
Elizabeth May, M.P., The Green Party of Canada
Richard M. Sanders, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim, Embassy of The United States of America
Georgiy Mamedov, Ambassador of the Russian Federation

