

April 2, 2015

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.  
Prime Minister of Canada  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

I am writing to you on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to express our concern over the government's decision to extend and expand Canada's participation in the U.S.-led military mission against so-called Islamic State (IS) militants. As articulated in my letter to you on October 10, 2014, MCC is deeply concerned that a prolonged military campaign will further de-stabilize the Middle East and be counterproductive to building sustainable peace.

Over the past four years, MCC has programmed over US\$26 million for our Syria and Iraq crisis response. We are grateful for the continued generosity of MCC's supporters and for strong financial support provided by the Government of Canada, including for recently-approved projects in contested areas within Iraq and Syria.

Given MCC's more than six decades of programmatic experience in the Middle East, we are aware of the region's tremendous complexities. As our partners have informed us, religious and ethnic sectarianism exacerbated by years of exclusionary politics, shifting alliances, weakening institutions, and western military involvement has contributed to the rise of extremist activity and further complicated progress for peace.

Like all Canadians, MCC is profoundly troubled by the brutal, deliberate, and systemic violence perpetrated by IS militants and other armed groups against religious minorities, other Muslims, and western hostages. All atrocities must be condemned equally and unequivocally.

At the same time, however, we are concerned that not only will air strikes in Iraq and Syria fail to address the deep-rooted ethnic and religious divisions underlying the present violence, but they will exacerbate existing—or create new—economic, social, and political grievances. As lessons from past interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya should caution, military responses—while limiting violence in the short-term—often fuel extremist activity and contribute to further violence and long-term instability.

To this end, MCC urges the Government of Canada to focus its resources on non-military means of addressing insecurity in the Middle East—including support for inclusive governance, anti-radicalization strategies, and a regional diplomatic solution to existing conflicts. Additionally, as humanitarian needs in the region are rapidly exhausting the resources provided by the international

community, we believe Canada can, and should, do more. Specifically, in addition to increasing access to food, water, medicine, and shelter for displaced peoples and vulnerable host communities in Syria, Iraq, and neighbouring countries, we urge assistance for two crucial, but under-resourced, areas.

First, we encourage greater support for civil society groups and religious and community leaders seeking to address ethnic and religious divisions through innovative peacebuilding and conflict transformation programs. Communities across the region need strategies to both resolve and prevent conflicts *before* they lead to sectarian violence. To this end, MCC is grateful for the support committed by the Office of Religious Freedom for peace education work that we—together with our partners in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria—are engaged in alongside students, civil society groups, and religious leaders to advance respect for diversity and promote bridge-building. Community-based initiatives for mitigating and resolving inter-religious conflict, increasing social cohesion, and enhancing religious tolerance are vital for countering extremist ideology and fostering long-term peace.

Second, we encourage greater investment in initiatives that provide access to safe education and psychosocial support for children and families traumatized by violence, displacement, and social upheaval. As our partners in Syria and Iraq have told us, armed groups seeking to recruit members for their cause often target vulnerable individuals. More psychosocial assistance and formal and non-formal education interventions are needed to build resilience and to ensure that people dealing with trauma are not at risk of being drawn into further cycles of violence.

Finally, we urge that Canada's military intervention remain clearly separated from its humanitarian assistance. When humanitarian activities are too closely aligned with military objectives, aid is politicized in ways that are harmful to humanitarian workers and conflict-affected people alike. In this way, it is crucial that Canada's humanitarian assistance abide by the principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality.

The current violence in Syria and Iraq threatens to become a much wider regional conflict. Rooted in our firm belief that there is no military solution to this complex situation, MCC urges Canada to focus its resources on promoting nonviolent measures—measures that facilitate peace, not more violence—for working towards long-term and sustainable security in the region. On behalf of MCC, I assure you of our prayers toward this end.

Sincerely,



Donald G. Peters  
Executive Director  
MCC Canada

CC: The Honourable Thomas Mulcair, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada  
Justin Trudeau, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada  
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada  
The Honourable Jason Kenney, Minister of National Defence  
The Honourable Rob Nicholson, Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Paul Dewar, NDP, Official Opposition Critic for Foreign Affairs  
Hélène Laverdière, NDP, Official Opposition Deputy Critic for Foreign Affairs  
Marc Garneau, Liberal Party of Canada, Opposition Critic for Foreign Affairs