

This document is a supplement to MCC Canada's *Peace Sunday Packet for 2015* entitled: "Crossing to the other side: Living as peace of peace in a time of fear and terror." It was prepared by Jennifer Wiebe, Director, and Rebekah Sears, Policy Analyst, for MCC's Ottawa Office.

Seeking alternatives: Are nonviolent responses to terrorism possible?

We live in a context of growing fear—fear about terrorism.

Few terms have so furtively made their way into our daily discourse. Yet while the specter of terrorism has gained a sense of urgency in our homes, churches, and communities, most of us have only a vague impression of what it is. The word "terrorism" has been used in distinct ways throughout the centuries to describe a wide range of actions and actors. First popularized during the French Revolution (1793-94) when it was used (rather positively!) to describe the methods wielded by the revolutionary state, the term "terrorism" has since shifted to describe anti-government activity (such as the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s), and, more recently, nebulous movements that have political causes and networks beyond national borders (such as al Qaeda and ISIS).

Despite decades of formal attempts through the United Nations and other bodies, the international community has failed to come to a consensus on a universal definition for the word "terrorism." Indeed, shifting terminology—such as "insurgency," "terrorism," and "violent extremism"—identifies the complex challenge of violence today.¹

While there is no consensus definition, however, virtually all experts point to two identifying components of "terrorism:" the targeting of civilians and the cultivation of fear. One basic definition suggests that terrorism is violence motivated by political, social or religious ideology and used to invoke fear and bring about change.²

What can people of peace do to respond?

The following suggestions, while not constituting an exhaustive list, provide a starting place for individuals, organizations, and churches to start thinking about nonviolent responses to the fear that terrorism creates.

"Over-reaction to terrorism, it should be remembered, is a fundamental objective of most terrorists in history. We should not accommodate their goals in this regard."

*James Judd, Director
of the Canadian Security
Intelligence Service*

¹Lisa Schirch—Director of Human Security at the Alliance for Peacebuilding—describes these terms as follows: "insurgency" is an armed rebellion against a state or international authority such as the UN; "terrorism" is a tactic used by non-state insurgent groups or by states themselves; and "violent extremism" is a contagious, global movement that may have insurgent and terrorist characteristics. Schirch, Lisa, "Peacebuilding Approaches to Violent Extremism," (2015 Draft). Forthcoming publication.

²Hoffman, Bruce, "Chapter 1: Defining Terrorism," *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, New York: 1998).

1. Understand the root causes of terrorism

The roots of violent extremism are anything but simple. Not born out of thin air, terrorist groups are shaped by complex and interconnected environmental, social, political, economic, and, sometimes, religious factors. As an organization committed to peace, MCC believes that seriously examining what terrorist groups are saying and doing—their histories, motivations, how they interpret and apply their ideas, what tools they use for recruitment, etc.—is vitally important work. Understanding the causes of violent extremism is the first step towards effective intervention, and critical to ensuring we do not respond in ways that make matters worse in the long-term.³

As Lisa Schirch—Research Professor at Eastern Mennonite University, and the Director of Human Security at the Alliance for Peacebuilding—argues, various global trends, political structures, and push-pull factors drive terrorist activity. The widespread availability of cheap weapons (sold by Western arms dealers), growing economic hardships from climate change-induced droughts and floods, growing religious extremism in all religions, and resentment of Western interventions such as drones and aggressive military action, for instance, are some of the larger global patterns that serve as the backdrop for violent extremism. Particular political contexts—highly-corrupt states that favour elites, grossly abuse human rights, and repress dissent—provide the soil within which terrorist groups are more likely to develop. Motivated by political and economic grievances, terrorist organizations thrive in such contexts when they are seen as an alternative to government corruption and repression.⁴

In addition, beyond global trends and structural causes, a unique set of push-pull factors drive radicalization and influence participation in violent extremism. Pull factors—those dynamics that lure people to join a cause—include things such as economic incentives, intolerant religious ideologies that call people to violence, effective recruitment campaigns, the promise of protection from state repression, and so on. Push factors, on the other hand, are those dynamics that make people vulnerable to the “pull”—including the absence of a support network or sense of belonging, a lack of economic opportunities, social or cultural disenfranchisement, perceptions of political and economic injustice, unhealed trauma or exposure to violence, etc.⁵

Understanding some of these underlying causes is important if we are to address effectively the unique challenges violent extremism brings using multidimensional approaches. MCC encourages people of peace and members of peace churches to understand these complexities, to pray for people involved in extremist activity at home and abroad, and to work to address push-pull factors whenever they can.

For further reading, see:

- Hoffman, Bruce, [“Chapter 1: Defining Terrorism.”](#) *Inside Terrorism*, excerpted from *New York Times* on the Web (Columbia University Press, New York: 1998).
- Eid, Mahmoud & Karim, H. Karim, [“Ten years after 9/11 – What have we learned?”](#) *Global Media Journal—Canadian Edition*, 2011.
- Rogers, Paul, *Why We’re Losing the War on Terror* (Polity, Cambridge UK: 2008).
- Schirch, Lisa, [“Theories of Change on Counterterrorism, Counterinsurgency, and Preventing Violent Extremism.”](#) *Alliance for Peacebuilding Policy Brief* (Mar 2015).
- Siebert, John, [“Civil society can play a key role in preventing and dealing with domestic radicalization.”](#) *The Ploughshares Monitor*, Volume 36, Issue 1 (Spring 2013).

³ Western military interventions in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East, for instance, have had far-reaching and counter-productive impacts. As Professor Paul Rogers (Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University) argues, military intervention by the West could actually build support for ISIS, both at home and abroad. In order to deal with radicalization in our own societies, Canada and its allies must confront some of the tragic mistakes committed in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria—mistakes that are exploited by groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda. See his article [“On not bombing Syria.”](#) *OpenDemocracy*, 17 July 2015.

⁴ Schirch, Lisa, “Peacebuilding Approaches to Violent Extremism,” (2015 Draft). Forthcoming publication.

⁵ Ibid.

“In the same way that a malnourished, exhausted, neglected, or traumatized body is more susceptible to disease or infection, a person who lacks resources, opportunity, and support is more vulnerable to engaging in violent extremism.”

*Georgia Holmer,
US Institute of Peace*

2. Support initiatives that restrict the flow of weapons

As UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon wrote in spring of 2015, the widespread accessibility of weapons has been a major factor in the over 250 conflicts of the last decade, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and record levels of displacement.⁶ The illicit flow of small arms and light weapons destabilizes communities, negatively impacts development, and supports the emergence of extremist movements.⁷ Armed gangs, insurgent groups, pirates, or terrorist movements can all increase and impose their power through unlawfully acquired weapons.

Massive injections of arms from the outside can have a destabilizing effect across entire regions, as evidenced in Libya and Iraq. After the fall of Muammar Gadhafi in Libya, weapons that were poured into the region by the international community—which was arming various actors within the conflict—then began feeding terrorist movements in Mali, Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon. The diversion of small arms and light weapons, Ban Ki-moon says, “may occur as a result of a transfer without proper controls, unauthorized re-transfer, thefts from poorly secured stockpiles, hand-outs to armed groups or barter involving natural resources. Corruption is a problem often associated with diversion.”⁸

In the Middle East, the Islamic State (IS) has laid claim to Soviet, Chinese, and American weapons. Smuggled from Syria (through the Turkish border) and seized from over-run U.S.-backed Iraqi military bases (with stores dating back to the 1980s), these weapons range from assault rifles and machine guns, to field and anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers, tanks, and other heavy weaponry.⁹ While there are no confirmed estimates for the total amount of conventional arms seized by ISIS, as a 2014 UN report notes, the group has stored up enough small arms, weapons, and ammunition to enable them to continue fighting for two years, even in the face of U.S.-led airstrikes. The quantities seized, in fact, are estimated to match those of an actual country’s military force. What steps will the international community take to ensure that the lethal and non-lethal supplies delivered to the region are not diverted to IS or other groups?¹⁰

“The diversion of weaponry is a colossal problem in many parts of the world. It allows rebels, gangs, criminal organizations, pirates, terrorist groups and other perpetrators to exponentially bolster their power.”

Ban Ki Moon
UN Secretary-General

Given the ways in which widespread availability of arms serves to multiply the force of terrorist organizations, it is crucial that the international community stop flooding conflict zones with cheap weapons that only serve to fuel violence and prolong human suffering. “Deny access to illegal weapons and ammunition,” Ban Ki-moon says, “and you deny criminals, armed groups, and extremists a central means to perpetrate violence, intimidation and harm.”¹¹ The flow of weapons as a cause of conflict can be addressed through concrete measures, like those outlined in the [Arms Trade Treaty](#) (ATT)—an international agreement regulating the trade and transfer of conventional (non-nuclear) weapons; thus far, Canada has refused to sign-on to this crucially important convention.

For further reading, see:

- Ackerman, Spencer, [“ISIS has enough weapons to carry on fighting for two years, UN warns.”](#) *The Guardian* (Nov 2014).
- Van Buren, Peter, [“Dude, where’s my Humvee? Islamic State capturing Iraqi equipment at alarming rate.”](#) Reuters (June 2015).
- United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, [“The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant: report and recommendations submitted pursuant to resolution 2170,”](#) (Nov 2014).
- Schroeder, Matt and Stohl, Rachel, [“Small Arms, Large Problem: The International Threat of Small Arms Proliferation and Misuse,”](#) Arms Control Association (2006).
- Thornhill, Ted, [“ISIS arming themselves with US-made military hardware.”](#) *Mail Online* (Sept 2014).

⁶ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, [“Small arms and light weapons”](#) 27 Apr 2015: p 3.

⁷ NATO, [“Small arms and light weapons \(SALW\) and mine action \(MA\).”](#) 24 Mar 2015.

⁸ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, [“Small arms and light weapons”](#) 27 Apr 2015: pp. 2-3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ As Project Ploughshares reported in its October 2014 brief entitled [“Short- term gain for long-term pain—Canada’s challenge in responding to Islamic State.”](#) Canada “is currently providing airlift assistance to deliver military supplies to Iraqi and other security forces fighting IS. The Royal Canadian Air Force is reported to have delivered almost 226,800 kg of donated military supplies to Iraqi security forces....Canada [has also given] \$10-million in non-lethal security assistance that includes helmets, body armour, and logistics support vehicles,” p. 3.

¹¹ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, [“Small arms and light weapons”](#) 27 Apr 2015: p. 2.

3. Encourage inclusive political dialogue

Understandably, governments often are hesitant to engage in dialogue with terrorist groups for fear that doing so will serve to condone extremist positions and legitimize their tactics. Indeed, the horror generated by brutal, public violence (such as the beheadings carried out by ISIS) tends to provoke swift—and politically popular—military responses. In the face of grisly violence, dialogue often seems like appeasement.

As many experts are recognizing, however, talking to insurgent groups or terrorist organizations is not the same thing as agreeing with their aims. More to the point, dialogue is often necessary for achieving long-term peace. As the CEO of Inter Mediate and former chief British negotiator on Northern Ireland Jonathan Powell argues, governments typically defer dialoguing with armed groups for far too long because it is deemed too dangerous or naive. But the real risk, he argues, lies in not talking. Despite any moral, practical, or political arguments made initially, in most historical cases—from Northern Ireland and South Africa, to Mozambique, El Salvador, Indonesia, and the Philippines—negotiation with terrorist organizations has been critical for ending protracted conflict. Without dialogue, Powell argues, armed violence typically continues, creating further death and destruction. “It is a question of when, not whether, you talk,” he says.

Increasingly, experts are noting that while governments tend to rely heavily on hard security solutions (counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism approaches), the use of force has proven to be inadequate for dealing with the unique challenges violent extremism poses. Even if groups such as ISIS, al-Shabaab, al Qaeda, or Boko Haram were defeated militarily, other groups may rise up in their aftermath if local grievances are not dealt with or properly understood. Moreover, as lessons from past interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya should caution, military responses by western forces—while providing some relief in the short-term—often exacerbate political grievances, fuel extremist activity, and contribute to further violence and instability in the long-term.

In this way, inclusive political processes are crucial for dealing long-term with whatever threat terrorist groups pose. Timing, of course, is crucial. As Powell acknowledges, “while [groups such as] ISIS may not want to talk with us at the moment, we need to start building a channel to them, as we did with the IRA in 1972, so we can communicate.” When done carefully and strategically alongside other interventions—such as supporting initiatives that strengthen rule of law, increase respect for human rights, and invest in democratic processes, etc.—political dialogue can serve to reduce extremists’ reliance on violent tactics, understand and address their legitimate grievances, and guide pragmatic possibilities for the future.

For further reading, see:

- Elisson, Fredrik & Di Giovanni, Janine, “[Dear ISIS, We Need to Talk.](#)” *Newsweek* (3 July 2015).
- Jones, Seth & Libicki, Martin, “[How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida.](#)” Rand Corporation (2008).
- Powell, Jonathan, “[How to talk to terrorists.](#)” *The Guardian* (7 Oct 2014).
- Powell, Jonathan, *Terrorists at the Table: Why Negotiating is the Only Way to Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2015).
- Siebert, John, “[Canada and ISIS: Short term gain for long-term pain.](#)” Project Ploughshares (3 Oct 2014).

“When it comes to terrorism, governments seem to suffer from a collective amnesia. All of our historical experience tells us that there can be no purely military solution to a political problem, and yet every time we confront a new terrorist group, we begin by insisting we will never talk to them... In fact, history suggests we don’t usually defeat them and we nearly always end up talking to them.”

*Jonathan Powell,
Inter Mediate*

¹² Powell, Jonathan, “[How to talk to terrorists.](#)” *The Guardian* (7 Oct 2014).

¹³ As RAND Corporation assesses in its 2008 report “How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida,” violent extremism is on the rise, despite over a decade of Western donors investing primarily in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism approaches. Political processes are crucial.

¹⁴ Powell, Jonathan, “[How to talk to terrorists.](#)” *The Guardian* (7 Oct 2014).

4. Invest in local peacebuilding initiatives

Mennonite Central Committee works through local partners around the world as they are best positioned to understand the needs of their communities and to develop locally-driven solutions to complex problems. In our over six decades of work in the Middle East, we have partnered with organizations seeking to address immediate humanitarian needs while also tackling long-term violence and injustice in order to transform their communities from within.

At a grassroots level, preventing violent extremism and building local peace requires addressing the push-pull factors that drive individuals to participate. As MCC's partners in Syria and Iraq have told us, for instance, armed groups seeking to recruit members for their cause often target those who are psychologically or economically vulnerable. In this way, local civil society organizations providing psychosocial assistance, educational opportunities, and prospects of a stable income are crucial for building community resilience and ensuring that people dealing with trauma are not at risk of being drawn into further cycles of violence. Security, stability, and a sense of purpose help disrupt recruitment and mobilization at the local level.

In addition, community-based initiatives that mitigate and resolve inter-religious conflict, increase social cohesion, and enhance ethnic and religious tolerance are also vital for countering extremist ideology and fostering long-term peace. Communities across the region need strategies to both resolve and prevent conflicts before they lead to sectarian violence. Some of MCC's partners in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are actively engaged in [peacebuilding](#) alongside students, civil society groups, and religious leaders to advance respect for diversity and promote bridge-building. In Iraq, MCC's partner Iraqi al-Amal Association is working to change the civics curriculum to train students and teachers in cross-cultural communication, active citizenship, and acceptance of other cultures and religious values. In Syria, MCC's partner, Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue, trains young activists and community leaders on citizenship and inter-religious dialogue. In Lebanon our partner, Permanent Peace Movement, is working with teachers and community leaders in workshops on strategies for mitigating and resolving interreligious conflict. Creative humanitarian work, nonviolent activism, and peacebuilding initiatives are already taking place.

MCC encourages support for these already-existing efforts, investing in local leaders working to build lasting change.

For further reading, see:

- Gienger, Viola, "[Countering extremist violence: local activists are already doing the job.](#)" *The Olive Branch*, United States Institute of Peace (19 Feb 2015).
- Holmer, Georgia, "[Resilience for Women Countering Violent Extremism.](#)" *The Olive Branch*, United States Institute of Peace (6 Mar 2015).
- Khalid, Wardah, "[Bombs Are Not the Answer: 5 non-military ways to stop the Islamic State group.](#)" *US News & World Report* (18 Feb 2015).
- *The New Internationalist*, "[Syria's good guys: inside a forgotten revolution.](#)" September 2015 Issue.

"...People can actually transform their societies from within...and our job is to think about how we can help them and not impose from the outside."

*Karin Ryan, senior advisor
for human rights
at The Carter Center*

5. Build relationships with the “Other” here at home

One of the unfortunate products of the climate of fear is the reflexive association of terrorism with Islam. In many ways, Muslims have become the feared “other.” Although many of the high-profile attacks in recent years have been committed by extremists purportedly acting in the name of Islam, most Muslims deplore this violent distortion of their religion. Heightened rhetoric that criticizes Muslims and demonizes particular religious communities serves to foster divisions within our society based on fear and suspicion.

As the American Psychological Association notes, “xenophobia—fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners—can be heightened under a terrorist threat and can become a social and psychological danger. The fear generated by terrorism can be exacerbated by a population’s diversity if there is a distrust between groups, categories and classification of citizens. It is important to recognize that diversity in a population can be an opportunity for unity and strength.”¹⁵

Not surprisingly, since 9/11, Muslim Canadians report experiencing a significant increase in incidents of vandalism against their mosques and community centers, as well as restrictions on, and politicization of, specific cultural and religious practices. In 2013, while other religious groups reported a decline in hate crimes, Canadian Muslims reported a 44 percent increase.¹⁶ Young Muslims are particularly vulnerable to being treated as the “other.” Feeling unwelcome, isolated and misunderstood may in fact contribute to their joining “radical” or extremist groups.

Broad public education—supported by well-informed and balanced dialogue—is critical. As Jim Judd, director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service argued, “We...have to avoid falling prey to the terrorist propaganda which would have people believe that this is a clash of civilizations or cultures or religions...Our own response...has to be carefully modulated and very focused....And we have to be very careful in our use of language on these issues.”¹⁷

MCC encourages people to speak out against this culture of fear—resisting unhealthy stereotypes that diminish relationships, isolate particular communities, and perpetuate division. People concerned with peacebuilding can reach out in friendship to Muslim neighbours and other newcomers, contact local associations to learn more about their work; create forums for inter-religious dialogue our own communities; visit local mosques to learn about their faith practices; and work in partnership for common goals.

For further reading, see:

- Canadian Coalition for Refugees (CCR), [“Statement in solidarity with Muslims”](#) (23 Mar 2015).
- Kidwai, Nadian, [“Muslims are Canadians and vice versa.”](#) *Winnipeg Free Press* (16 Mar 2015).
- *Ottawa Citizen*, [“Too much secrecy helps terrorists.”](#) (27 Jan 2007).

“Today, there is an ideological battle for the hearts and minds of Muslim youth. An alarming number have decided that they have no future here. We must reverse this trend by engaging them...Heaping scorn, suspicion, and fear only feeds their isolation.”

Sheema Khan,
columnist for the *Globe and Mail*

¹⁵ Fields, Rona M. & Margolin, Joe, [“Managing traumatic stress: Coping with Terrorism”](#) American Psychological Association (Sept 2001).

¹⁶ Sanders, Carol, [“Suspicion of Muslims real danger, activist says.”](#) *Winnipeg Free Press* (18 June 2015).

¹⁷ As cited in the *Ottawa Citizen*, [“Too much secrecy helps terrorists.”](#) (27 Jan 2007).



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