

23 February, 2016

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

I am writing to you on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada regarding the government's recently-announced plan for addressing the crises in Syria and Iraq.

Over the past four years, MCC has programmed over US\$34 million for our Syria and Iraq crisis response. As MCC's largest ever humanitarian effort, this response—carried out by our network of local partners in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan—includes ongoing projects in emergency relief, peacebuilding, trauma healing, education for displaced children, and the provision of vital winter supplies. As we have since 1979, MCC also continues to help refugees find safety and rebuild their lives in Canada. We are grateful for the continuing generosity of MCC's supporters and for the strong financial support provided by the Canadian government.

Given our more than six decades of experience in the Middle East, we firmly believe that there is no effective military solution for dealing with the region's complex security issues and protracted crises. As our partners have urged, dedicating rigorous support for a comprehensive political process in Syria, strengthening inclusive governance in Iraq, supporting peacebuilding initiatives that prevent religious and sectarian violence, and investing in humanitarian measures that build regional resilience are critical for ending violence and restoring long-term peace.

To this end, MCC welcomes the non-military components of the Government of Canada's new policy, particularly its commitment to increasing political diplomacy and humanitarian aid to the region. As rising needs continue to outpace the resources provided by the international community, we affirm the government's plan to deliver \$1.1 billion in aid over three years, and to ensuring that this assistance remains clearly separated from Canada's military objectives. As MCC has seen first-hand, humanitarian aid that balances emergency response with long-term development not only offers urgent relief to displaced peoples and burdened host populations, but helps stabilize communities, promote resilience, and prevent further migration.

In addition to the promise of sustained support for access to food, clean water, shelter, sanitation and hygiene, we are greatly encouraged by the government's pledge to invest in protection and education for displaced children and to build capacity in host countries where refugees are under-resourced and local communities are becoming increasingly vulnerable. Indeed, access to safe, formal and non-formal education is needed to ensure young children experiencing trauma are not at risk of being drawn into further cycles of violence. Beyond these welcome commitments, we urge Canada to consider providing

further support for local conflict transformation initiatives that help mitigate inter-religious conflict, increase social cohesion, and enhance religious tolerance.

MCC believes humanitarian and diplomatic measures that address deep-rooted political, social, and economic grievances must be at the core of the international community's response, and we affirm the significant steps Canada is taking to this end. We remain deeply concerned, however, that Canada's anti-ISIS military efforts are contributing to the emergence of local and regional armed organizations that weaken the state structures necessary for long-term stability.

First, while MCC is pleased that direct participation in coalition airstrikes has come to an end, we are concerned that continued involvement in the campaign through reconnaissance and refueling is counterproductive, only serving to further destabilize populations and exacerbate existing local grievances. Our Syrian and Iraqi partners have reported that as coalition airstrikes attempt to retake cities from ISIS not only do they cause immeasurable harm to civilians, but they demolish vital health, sanitation, and educational infrastructure. In this way, airstrikes are leaving cities virtually uninhabitable and fueling massive displacement.

Second, MCC is concerned that the expanded military training role for Iraqi security risks intensifying unresolved—or creating new—tensions. Within Syria and northern Iraq, troubling reports continue to surface that Kurdish forces are engaged in widespread human rights violations in areas they retake from ISIS, including the destruction of villages and use of repressive practices against local Arab populations. Against the backdrop of evolving Iraqi Kurdish politics, western military support is also enabling current Kurdish political leaders to consolidate territorial gains and extend undemocratic control over political institutions, the media, and the economy. Beyond these problematic elements, our partners are very concerned that Canada's provision of military equipment will have a destabilizing effect across the region. Given the multiplicity of actors and competing interests, weakened governance structures, and high levels of corruption, the potential for weapons diversion is unacceptably high.

As the violence in Syria and Iraq has become a much wider regional conflict, the need for a peaceful solution has grown increasingly urgent. It is imperative that the international community continue to expand its diplomatic efforts to support a negotiated political solution to the Syrian civil war and greater inter-party political cooperation in Iraq.

On behalf of MCC, I offer you our prayers as you continue to make important decisions regarding Canada's involvement in the coming months.

Sincerely,



Donald G. Peters
Executive Director
MCC Canada

CC: Hon. Stéphane Dion, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of International Development
Hon. Harjit Singh Sajjan, Minister of National Defence
Hon. Rona Ambrose, Interim Leader, Conservative Party of Canada
Hon. Thomas Mulcair, Leader, New Democratic Party of Canada
Elizabeth May, Leader, Green Party of Canada
Hon. Tony Clement, Official Opposition Critic for Foreign Affairs
Hélène Laverdière, NDP Opposition Critic for Foreign Affairs
Hon. Deepak Obhrai, Official Opposition Critic for International Development
Robert Aubin, NDP Opposition Critic for International Development
James Bezan, Official Opposition Critic for Defence
Randall Garrison, NDP Opposition Critic for Defence