Policy Recommendations for Canada

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) has three policy pillars which guide its recommendations for Syria:

a) support for international law,

b) a belief that all parties in conflict must be held to the same standard

c) a belief that violence does not lead to solutions.

As well, implicit in the recommendations below are the two additional observations:

d) the Syrian people should enjoy a genuinely representative form of government which would allow them to periodically elect new leaders, should they choose to do so, but

e) the dynamics in Syria are far different than they were in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and all efforts must be made to find an alternative to all-out civil war in Syria.

There are some who would argue that support for the Assad regime in Syria would provide long-term stability in Syria. Even if there were a magical guarantee of this, CJPME does not believe that the Syrian people should forego the chance for a brighter future in exchange for a stable regime which has maintained repressive policies for decades. Like many other countries in the Middle East, sectarianism is a danger in Syria, yet this danger should not eclipse Syrian aspirations for universal civil and political freedoms, and for greater accountability from the government.

A. **Canada must do everything it can – short of military intervention – to stop the violence in Syria.** Although government forces bear primary responsibility for this new escalation and brutality of recent months, opposition forces are also guilty of atrocities and violations of international law. All must be called to stop. All must be held accountable. Nevertheless, Canada should be careful before calling openly for regime change, as this may simply give the Assad regime greater resolve to maintain its grip on power at all costs.

B. **Canada must do everything it can to provide humanitarian aid to the Syria people.** While the UN Envoy Kofi Annan seeks to solidify the terms and steps toward a ceasefire, Canada must do whatever it can on the ground to relieve the suffering of Syrian civilians.

C. **Canada must give sustained support to international attempts to broker a ceasefire in Syria.** Sustained support for the UN Initiative led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is critical. While Syrians deserve a more representative form of government, a prolonged and bloody civil war in Syria is a real possibility unless an end to the current violence can be negotiated. There is no backup plan should the Annan plan fail, so Annan’s efforts should not be abandoned lightly. The “Friends of Democratic Syria” may be working at counter-purposes to the Annan plan, so Canada may wish to reconsider its participation in the “Friends” group.

D. **Canada must help Syria transition to a more representative style of government.** The current regime in Syria is in a strong position to maintain its survival, despite its lack of legitimacy. Recent Canadian calls for its dismissal reinforce regime fears, and may lead it to further harden its positions. Canada must instead encourage progressive change, and hope that a cessation of violence can help foster a climate of greater trust between the regime and the opposition.

E. **Canada must re-examine its relation with other autocratic regimes in the Middle East.** There are other “Syrias” waiting to happen in the Middle East: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, etc. Canada must review and revamp its relations with these countries’ governments and determine what pressure can be applied now in order to avoid bloodshed and civil war in the coming years. Had the West pressured Syria for reforms in years past, the current crisis might have been averted.
A: Canada must do everything it can to stop the violence in Syria.

1. Canada must help pressure the Assad regime, Russia, and other international players to wholeheartedly support Annan’s six-point plan. For a number of reasons, Russia is the only international player able to influence Syria. The Assad regime is unlikely to engage meaningfully if there is no pressure from Russia to buy into the plan.

2. Canada must discourage any attempt to move arms into Syria. Whether intended for the Syrian opposition, or for the Assad regime, Canada should discourage and condemn any attempt to move arms into Syria. Such arms work directly at counter-purposes to the Annan Plan.

3. Canada must unequivocally condemn all violent acts in Syria. On the brink of civil war, with unthinkable crimes already reported, the government and the Syrian opposition must be harshly condemned when such acts recur. Indifference to such crimes from the West creates a sense of empowerment on the part of the Assad regime, and drives the opposition to use more violence.

B: Canada must provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian people.

1. Canada should echo calls for protection of civilians according to international law. International humanitarian law provides for the protection of non-combatants at all times. Canada must ensure that civilian populations in Syria have the opportunity to flee violence, and receive humanitarian aid at all times.

2. Canada should provide direct humanitarian aid to the Syria people. Canada has offered $7.5 million in aid to Syria, but this aid subsumes aid previously promised to Syria. Canada should consider larger sums of aid, and verify aid supply mechanisms in case the situation grows rapidly worse.

3. Canada should provide matching funds for Canadian charities fundraising for Syria. Canada should bolster the efforts of average Canadians to address the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people by providing matching funds for all charitable fundraising in Canada.

C: Canada must support international attempts to broker a ceasefire in Syria.

1. Canada should offer international observers for the UN Plan. Canada is currently a member of the “Friends of Democratic Syria” group, so the Assad regime may exclude Canada from any role in the implementation of the Annan plan. Nevertheless, Canada should be ready to respond to a call for monitors or observers should the opportunity arise. (Canada may wish to reconsider its participation with the “Friends” group, eschewing rhetoric over an ability to help directly.)

2. Upon request from the UN Envoy, Canada should deploy peacekeeping forces to Syria. Again, as a member of the “Friends” group, Canada may be barred from providing peacekeepers. However, Canada should be prepared to send peacekeepers if the opportunity arises.

D: Canada must help Syria to have a more representative style of government

1. Canada must push for journalistic freedom of movement and access in Syria. Canada should use diplomatic channels to promote this element of the Envoy’s six-point plan.

2. Canada must push for freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully in Syria. Again, Canada should use diplomatic channels to promote this element of the Envoy’s six-point plan.

3. Canada must push for the release of political prisoners, and an end to arbitrary detention. This point from the Envoy’s six-point plan applies to all sides of the conflict in Syria. Government and armed opposition groups should also be pressured to end the criminalization of violence (e.g. kidnappings, etc.)

4. Canada must use its leverage with players to promote progressive reform. The Assad regime justifies dragging its heels on the Annan plan because other players continue to meddle in Syria. Unless it wants to risk all-out civil war in Syria, Canada must help create conditions for the discussion of a path to reforms in Syria. Canada should also try to help the Syrian opposition to develop greater internal unity, and to develop a clear vision for Syria. By its dithering and inability to create a unified vision, the opposition bolsters the government’s argument that it – the government – is the best guarantor of stability.
E: Canada must re-examine its relation with other autocratic regimes

1. Canada must apply pressure now to other autocratic regimes in the Middle East. As demonstrated clearly with Egypt and Libya, cozy Canadian relations with authoritarian regimes will eventually backfire, both morally and economically. While Canada did not have a “cozy” relationship with Syria, it neither pressed Syria for reform as an antagonist, nor did it practice “constructive engagement” with Syria to push for reforms.

2. Canada must better define its principles in judging the governments of the Middle East. Canadian government ministers seek to justify their partiality for Israel by saying that it is “the only democracy in the Middle East,” but ignore a Palestinian government that was freely and democratically elected in 2006. Regardless, democracy guarantees only a process, and not an outcome. Instead, Canada should emphasize human rights and international law in modulating its relations with governments and opposition movements in the Middle East.

For more Information...

For more information, please consult CJPME Website (www.cjpme.org) or call CJPME at 438-380-5410.