Policy Recommendations for Canada

A. Canada must increase funding to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and associated humanitarian organizations. Canada must commit to providing 4.5 percent of the OECD members’ humanitarian relief for Syria—i.e. $68 million in the first six months of 2013—to help meet the needs of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons. Canada must support Norway’s call for the de-politicisation of the humanitarian response in Syria and for all parties to the conflict to allow humanitarian actors full access to all parts of Syria.

B. Canada must fast-track Syrian refugee and immigration applications. Canada must establish special programmes to increase the number of Syrian refugees as well as family class and independent class immigrants admitted to Canada. Such programmes should be designed to admit approximately 30,000 Syrian refugees over the next 12 months. Until the conflict is resolved, Canada should not deport any Syrians currently in Canada.

C. Canada must help Palestinian refugees in Syria who are caught in the conflict. Canada should contribute generously to UNRWA, to enable humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian refugees affected by the Syrian conflict. Canada should establish a special programme to receive Palestinian refugees currently or recently hosted in Syria, who, as non-Syrians, are particularly visible and vulnerable to pressure and violence from both sides of the Syrian conflict.

D. Canada must support international efforts for a non-military solution to the Syrian civil war. Recently, Russia (an ally of the Assad regime) and the Arab League (allied with the opposition forces) have agreed to promote the establishment of a transitional government. Canada should oppose direct or indirect foreign military involvement in the conflict. Canada should make human rights, not Canadian corporate interests, its top priority in its dealings with Syria.

E. Canada must support UN efforts to legally pursue war criminals in Syria. Canada should support the recommendations of the UN’s Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to refer cases to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Canada should halt comments denigrating the UN, its human rights bodies and humanitarian relief groups.

F. Canada must ensure that Canadian military exports do not wind up in the hands of either side in the Syria conflict. Canada must insist that all countries receiving Canadian military exports not provide weapons (whether made in Canada or elsewhere) to any actor in the Syrian conflict. Canada must also oblige current and past recipients of Canadian military exports to prevent the use of those exports in the Syrian conflict.

A: Canada must increase funding to the UNHCR

1. Canada must commit to providing 4.5 percent of the OECD members’ humanitarian relief for Syrians affected by the conflict: $68 million for the first six months of 2013. Canada pledged $25 million at the donors’ conference in Kuwait at the end of January 2013—scarcely 1.6 percent, although Canada’s share of OECD donor countries’ total gross domestic incomes is 4.5 percent. As of February 24, 2013, a total of 925,908 Syrians were either registered with the UNHCR as refugees, or awaiting registration. Another 2 million are internally displaced; millions more, although not displaced, are without basic services and the necessities of life, bringing the total of those within the country needing humanitarian assistance to 4 million. In December 2012, the UNHCR appealed for $1 billion for Syrian refugees, and $519.6 million for humanitarian assistance inside Syria, to cover the needs for the first six months of 2013. The refugees, the internally displaced and millions of Syrians still in their damaged homes are facing the winter and spring with inadequate supplies of water, food, clothing and medications.
2. Canada must support Norway’s call for the de-politicisation of the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. Canada should pressure all sides in the conflict to allow humanitarian organizations access to all parts of Syria. Canada should insist that humanitarian assistance be provided on the basis of the individual’s need. Decisions to extend or withhold humanitarian assistance should not be based on ethnicity or religion, or presumed sympathies for either the government or certain segments of the opposition.

B: Canada must fast-track Syrian refugee and immigrant applications

1. Canada should pursue all the following strategies to help Syrians fleeing the violence:

   a. Establish realistic and generous targets for the number of Syrian victims of the conflict to be resettled in Canada. As of February 24, 2013, a total of 925,908 Syrians were either registered with the UNHCR as refugees, or known to be awaiting registration. Doubtless, many thousands more have not approached the UNHCR yet. Another two million Syrians are internally displaced. In setting a target for the admission of Syrian refugees and internally displaced to Canada, Canada should be guided by the following precedents: Canada received 37,000 Hungarian refugees in 1956, 60,000 Vietnamese “Boat People”, and 20,000 Soviet Jews. Given the gravity of the crisis in Syria, Canada should aim to admit 30,000 refugees over the next 12 months (3.3 percent of the total).

   b. Immediately institute a policy of “no deportation” of Syrians currently in Canada either to Syria itself or to third countries that may deport them to Syria. Deportation to Syria at this time would expose deportees to undue risk of death or violation of their most fundamental rights.

   c. Expedite the processing of immigration and refugee applications that have already been filed by allocating special resources and personnel, and waiving some of the requirements.

   d. Issue temporary resident permits for early admission of Syrians who have been affected by the war and have relatives in Canada, to enable them to have their refugee or immigration applications processed within Canada.

   e. Encourage Air Canada to establish direct flights from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, to enable the refugees and immigrants to be evacuated efficiently and with minimum cost.

   f. Relax the criteria for independent immigration applicants. This can be accomplished by reducing the number of points required to qualify.

   g. Take its share of disabled Syrian refugees. Most of Syria’s neighbours are in no position to deal with disabled refugees, and in some countries, disabled people, particularly disabled women, cannot count on equivalent access to limited employment and study opportunities. Many of the region’s countries are themselves still living with the rubble of war, landmines, etc., all of which pose particular dangers to visually or mobility-impaired people. Canada should provide leadership in this area.

   h. Allow Syrians to make refugee claims at any Canadian visa office including that of Beirut.

   i. Allocate sufficient resources and personnel to deal expeditiously with the applicant volume.

   j. Treat internally-displaced Syrians, especially those from Homs, Hama and Aleppo as refugees, for the purposes of accessing the programme.

   k. Provide information on the programme and procedures to be followed for those in the refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, as well as in the displaced persons’ camps within Syria.

   l. Relax the requirements for faith-based groups wishing to sponsor refugees.

   m. Amend the current embargo on transfers of funds to Syria so that the internally displaced can receive funds for basic needs as well as the various steps in the application process and travel for visa interviews outside Syria. This could be accomplished by working with another embassy.

2. Canada should facilitate the resettlement in Canada of Syrian immigrants and refugees, by adequately funding the social services, language training, retraining and health care needed. The federal government should create a special pool from which to assign allocations to the different provinces where the Syrian refugees and immigrants arriving under the relaxed criteria settle. Funding levels should be sufficient to enable the already traumatised Syrian refugees and immigrants to live with dignity in the Canadian cities in which there are already Syrian expatriate communities.
C: Canada must help Palestinian refugees affected by the conflict

1. Canada should admit 10,000 (2.4 percent) of the 490,000 Palestinian refugees currently or previously resident in Syria. Canada must collaborate with UNRWA to meet the needs of Palestinian refugees who have fled to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt.

2. Canada must establish a special programme to facilitate the admission to Canada of UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees still or previously residing in Syria. According to UNRWA, about 490,000 registered Palestinian refugees were living in nine official and three unofficial refugee camps within Syria as of January 2012. Clusters of refugees, these refugees are vulnerable to both aerial bombardments and ground incursions. Even outside the refugee camps, as non-Syrians, Palestinian refugees are particularly visible and thus more vulnerable.
   a. Both government and armed anti-government forces have killed Palestinian refugees and pressured them, sometimes with force, to participate in the conflict. The week ending December 21 2012, the Yarmouk refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus was the scene of particularly violent clashes between pro and anti-government forces, provoking the exodus of 100,000 of the 150,000 Palestinian refugees living there.
   b. As of February 22, 2013, the number of Palestinian refugees in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance was over 400,000; 4,092 Palestinian refugees have already fled to Jordan, and nearly 30,000 have fled to Lebanon.

3. Canada must increase its funding to UNRWA General Fund for core programmes, to enable UNRWA to meet the needs of the Palestinian refugees who have fled Syria. Some of the Palestinian refugees residing in camps in Syria have fled to Lebanon and other neighbouring countries. Palestinian school children, uprooted from Syria and now in Lebanon, face particular challenges: in Lebanon, math and science are taught in English, not Arabic, and the UNRWA schools do not have sufficient supplies for all new students. Canada has not made a contribution to UNRWA’s General Fund since 2008. Its slight increase in its contribution to UNRWA’s Emergency Appeal does not offset the impact of its cutting of funding for the General Fund.

4. Canada must halt its denigration of the work of UN agencies, and particularly UNRWA. In recent years the Canadian government has been unjustly critical of UNRWA’s work. It has also undermined and defunded Canadian organizations which report on the humanitarian crisis suffered by Palestinians, and the violations of their rights under international law. It must restore the funding to such Canadian organizations, and halt its attacks on their work.

D. Canada must support non-military solutions to the crisis

1. Canada must support efforts to achieve a non-military solution to the crisis. It is a fact of life that a significant segment of the Syrian population still supports the ruling Baath party (although perhaps not Assad)—be it out of genuine identification with the goals of Baath party, or simply from fear of sectarian violence or Islamist rule. A durable non-military solution will therefor require participation by both pro and anti-government political forces. Some of the opposition forces have indicated a willingness to work with Baathists to restore stability to the country and begin the arduous task of post-war reconstruction, both physical and socio-political. Canada should accept that the full spectrum of Syrian political opinion—including forces that do not share the Harper government’s Middle East policies—will have to be represented in any post-conflict government, in order to overcome the legacy of the conflict.

2. Canada should oppose military involvement in the Syrian conflict. As noted by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, foreign military intervention against the Assad government would likely only exacerbate the Syrian crisis and escalate the loss of life. It would also pose the risk of provoking a region-wide conflict. Canada should therefore oppose unilateral intervention by NATO or members of the “Friends of Syria” group. However, if the UN General Assembly decides to send peace-keeping troops to either protect civilians from the parties to the conflict, or to keep the peace between the two sides, Canada should contribute to that effort.
E. Canada must support UN efforts to pursue Syrian war criminals

1. Canada must back the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria’s recommendation to pursue key Syrian individuals for war crimes and crimes against humanity. As noted by the UN Human Right Council-appointed Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, grave violations of international humanitarian law are being committed by both sides in the Syrian conflict, although government forces are responsible for the lion’s share. The magnitude and systematic nature of the crimes is such that Commission officials have urged that both government authorities and members of armed opposition groups be charged and tried in the International Court of Justice. Canada should support such a referral. It is important that Canada exhibit a principled and balanced approach to such offences. Although the majority of the gravest crimes are being committed by government forces, it is clear that the armed opposition groups’ hands are not clean. Amnesty International—a scrupulously neutral organization—recently called upon the Syrian opposition to rein in the armed groups, some of whom are under their control.10

F. Canadian military exports must not enter Syria

1. Canada must do its utmost to prevent its military exports from being used by either side in the Syrian conflict. Canada must insist on written commitments that any country receiving Canadian military exports not provide weapons—Canadian-made or otherwise—to any actor in the Syrian conflict. Canada must establish reliable mechanisms to track the end use and resale of its military exports. As well, Canada must oblige current and past recipients of Canadian military exports to prevent the transport of weapons to one side or another through their territory.

2. Canada should immediately suspend all military exports to Saudi Arabia (and to any country intending to forward Canadian military exports to Saudi Arabia.) There are credible reports that Saudi Arabia is providing weapons to armed Syrian groups. For years, Saudi Arabia has been the second largest recipient of Canadian military exports, receiving over $2 billion worth of military exports, second only to the US. According to a western diplomat recently cited in an article in the prestigious UK newspaper The Independent, Saudi Arabia is supplying weapons to armed opposition groups in Syria.11 As noted by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, foreign military intervention, especially outside of the control of the UN, would disastrously escalate the conflict with horrible consequences for the civilian population. Light Armoured Vehicles (LAV IIs) made in London Ontario have been supplied to Saudi Arabia, both directly and via the US.12 All military exports for use by Saudi Arabia should therefore be suspended until the Syrian crisis is resolved (and until Saudi Arabia—the last of the absolute monarchies—improves its own human rights record.)

For more Information...

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

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1 CBC.ca "Russia, Arab League offer to broker Syria peace talks." Feb 20, 2013
7 United Nations Radio. “WFP to the aid of Palestinians displaced from Yarmouk camp”. December 21, 2012/
9 UNRWA. "UNRWA Syria crisis situation update (Issue 35)”. February 22 2013