

Notes for a Presentation

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Saving Lives in Syria

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Check against delivery

Today I am going to talk to you about the catastrophe unfolding in Syria.

I am going to suggest five things the world, with Canada's participation, can do to alleviate the suffering: first, impose no fly zones in northern and southern Syria, second, train vetted Syrian resistance forces, third, contribute more generously to the UN's humanitarian assistance programs for Syrian residents and for Syrian refugees, fourth, permanently re-settle many more of those Syrian refugees best able to adapt to life beyond the Middle East, and fifth, do nothing to legitimize or strengthen Assad.

Prime Minister Harper has expanded Canada's mission against ISIS, into Syria. "In the face of this menace," he is reported to have said recently in Kuwait City, "the worst thing we could possibly do is nothing." The Prime Minister has been considerably more circumspect, however, when it comes to Syria and the vast destruction of citizens actually being perpetrated there, the lion's share apparently by the Assad regime. Many lives can still be saved in Syria, the scene of some of the worst man-made suffering in decades, but not by turning a blind eye to Assad's ongoing military atrocities. Ignoring such atrocities would be the opposite of the "moral clarity" claimed for the Harper government's mission by Foreign Minister Nicholson. It would also send a terrible signal to other potential perpetrators.

Prime Minister Harper is not alone, of course, in his selective outrage. The sheer scale of the Syrian tragedy appears to have numbed the world's conscience—220,000 dead, combatants and civilians, and one million injured, many horribly --according to recently resigned UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos. Perhaps people feel that the conflict has become too complex and is too far gone for anything worthwhile to be done. Maybe humanity is just fatigued with a war for which there has been no entry strategy, never mind an exit strategy. Possibly, with the advent of

ISIS, some people think it safer not to get too involved in the Middle East and shrug at the infinitely greater jeopardy lived, and died, by others. Maybe some people just care less when it is Muslims who are suffering. Whatever the explanation, the world has forsaken the innocents of Syria, whose desperate situation worsens. The Responsibility to Protect has given way to the Disposition to Ignore.

While we have averted our collective gaze, the situation in Syria has deteriorated drastically. 2014 was the worst year yet; 76,000 people died this past year as a result of conflict, including 3,500 children, (the London-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights.) Well over 12 million people need humanitarian assistance--a 12 fold increase since 2011-- just to keep body and soul together (UNOCHA), 5.6 million of the most vulnerable are children (UNOCHA) 4.8 million people are cut off from food and medical resources by the fighting and by sieges. More than half of Syria's hospitals are destroyed (UNHCR). Physicians for Human Rights reported more attacks on medical facilities in April this year than in any of the previous 15 months. A quarter of Syria's schools have been damaged, destroyed or taken over for shelter (UNOCHA). 7.6 million Syrians have fled their homes, some more than once (UNOCHA). Harsh winter conditions, now eased, compounded their misery.

Nearly four million Syrians have had the comparatively good fortune to find refuge in communities and camps in neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan—at enormous cost to the host countries. In tiny Lebanon, refugees comprise nearly one-third of the population, the equivalent in Canada of an influx of the entire population of Ontario. According to the World Bank, the cost in terms of lost economic activity to the Lebanese economy of the Syrian crisis is vast—about \$8 billion. Jordan hosts over 622,000 Syrian refugees and large numbers of Palestinians as well. Turkey, the largest and richest of neighbouring countries, has absorbed over 1.6

million refugees, becoming the world's biggest refugee hosting country; the number of refugees in Turkey is projected to rise to 2.5 million by year's end. Beyond the negative impacts on the Turkish economy of lost trade and tourism revenues—only the brave and the bargain hunters holiday on the periphery of a war zone--Turkey has spent more than \$6 billion on direct assistance to the refugees it is hosting (UNHCR).

In the main refugee-receiving countries, the extraordinary hospitality of the local populations is fraying under the pressures of the disproportionate burden they are bearing. Competition between refugees and locals for housing, jobs, health care and education is destabilizing. Many locals feel Syrians are responsible for reductions in their incomes and for rises in rents, food costs, unemployment and crime. After years in exile, refugees' savings are long since depleted and people are resorting to child labour, begging, theft and sex work to survive. Millions of children are suffering from trauma and ill health, and their educations are disrupted. And they are the lucky ones. They are safe from the fighting.

What should the international community do to alleviate the great suffering there and how can Canada help in the larger effort?

First, stanch or at least slow the bleeding.

If the US-led coalition can muster the will to use air power, including in Syria, to help stop ISIS, it can stop the barrel-bombing and other air-launched atrocities of the blood-soaked Assad regime. [Human Rights Watch](#) has used satellite imagery, witness statements and video and photographic evidence to identify at least 1450 locations in rebel-held territory, where the Assad regime has used barrel bombs and the like. This past weekend the regime killed 75 people, mostly civilians, with barrel bombs (Al Jazeera). Reports of chemical weapons use continue.

In the recent past, No-Fly Zones in one form or another have been successfully employed: in Bosnia (NATO's Operation Deny Flight), in Libya (Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector) and in Iraq (Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch). The no-fly zones were successfully imposed on Iraq from 1992 to 2003 after the first Gulf war, and are credited by some (President George H.W. Bush) with saving many lives, a claim that can neither be confirmed nor infirmed. Something similar could be done in the North and South of Syria using Turkish, Kurdish and other regional air bases, and ship-based aircraft.

The idea is controversial. In the first place, there is little prospect of Russia acquiescing in a Security Council resolution authorizing intervention. President Putin appears resigned to back the murderous Assad's fight to the last Syrian. Second some argue that the No Fly Zone in Libya was an error, that the people of Libya would have been better off without it. NATO's imposition of the Security Council mandated No Fly Zone might have cost as many as 155 people their lives, killed by NATO fire. But that number pales in comparison to the number that Gaddafi would have slaughtered in Bengazi alone if NATO had not acted. Gaddafi was threatening "rivers of blood". And going "door to door" and "showing no mercy." Who doubts that he was going to do just that if he wasn't stopped? But, the counter-argument continues, the post-bombing consequences have been hugely destructive as competitive, malevolent forces were unleashed and the country's unity was fractured. Indeed, the country and swathes of North Africa have been destabilized, as faction faces faction and predators like Al Qaeda in the Maghreb operate. But the situation was hardly peaceful before the UN authorized intervention in Libya. UN Resolution 1973 read in part;

Expressing grave concern at the deteriorating situation, the escalation of violence, and the heavy civilian casualties...

Condemning the gross and systematic violation of human rights, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions...

Considering that the widespread and systematic attacks currently taking place in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya against the civilian population may amount to crimes against humanity...etc.

It is important to draw the right lesson from the Libya experience. Was the lesson of Libya that outsiders should not intervene to protect the innocent, no matter how bloody repression becomes? Or was the lesson that outsiders should not intervene inadequately to protect the innocent? The same Security Council resolution that authorized the No Fly Zone also, authorized *“Member States... to take all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory.*

It was the UN Security Council under pressure from the Russians, the Brazilians and others that insisted that there be no foreign boots on the ground in Libya, which meant that there was no one to prevent the looting of the weapons stores, and the arming of militias across North Africa and beyond.

Further, some perspective is necessary. Libya is an example of intervention to protect civilians and Syria is an example of non-intervention. Definitive and non-politicized casualty figures in both Syria and Libya are hard to come by, and some caution in use of the numbers available is in order. That said, in Libya, according to The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, a third party public data resource in Sweden, between 1,914 and 3,466 people were

killed during the 2011 fighting in Libya. According to Libya Body Count, a further 3330 have died in renewed fighting in the past year and a half. The upper range estimate for Libya, therefore appears to be about 6,800 people, combatants and non-combatants. In Syria, in 2014, in the absence of a no No-Fly Zone and outside intervention to protect civilians, more than 76000 died violently.

It is true that the Libyan weapons stores were looted when Gaddafi fell, and that some of these weapons contributed to instability in Libya and beyond in the region notably in Mali and Northern Nigeria. But the correct lesson to draw, I would argue, is not that intervention was ipso facto a mistake but that precluding outside protection of arms stores was a mistake. Indeed, the US had plans in 2013 to secure Syrian chemical weapons stores in the significantly more difficult military situation in Syria if that had proved necessary before the Assad regime gave up the bulk of its chemical weapons.

According to the Rand Corporation and others, the establishment of a Syrian No Fly Zone could pave the way for more extensive military intervention—which some would welcome but others would decry as “mission creep”. Nor is intervention cheap. General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, has put the cost of a No Fly Zone in Syria at a billion dollars a month. He also warned about the risk of inadvertently empowering other extremists. Still, the arguments against a No Fly Zone in Syria strike me as being more political and strategic than military and tactical. The Russians are protecting a client state, and the Americans are tiring of bearing never-ending burdens in the Middle East, even if they created this problem in the first place.

Experts differ on the danger of imposing a No Fly Zone in Syria, but there is considerable confidence that imposing No Fly Zones in the North and South of Syria is militarily practicable. For example, according to US

defence intelligence experts Chandler Atwood and Jeffrey White, of the Washington Institute

...[Syrian] equipment, personnel, and facilities have been lost in the course of the war or diverted to fighting the rebels, and a number of early-warning radar and air-defense sites in the north, in the Damascus area, and adjacent to the Golan Heights have been overrun by opposition forces, creating gaps or weakening coverage...air operations over the highly contested southern and northern parts of Syria would not require a large campaign to destroy the regime's remaining local air-defense assets...That goal could also be achieved with relatively limited risk, setting conditions for an international humanitarian assistance campaign or efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Further, the Israelis have reportedly conducted a half dozen airstrikes during the current conflict, as well as the earlier one in 2007 against the alleged nuclear reactor development at al-Kibar without suffering so much as a hang-nail injury. The Turks, for their part, are insistent that Bashar Assad must remain the principal enemy, because they believe there will be no peace as long as he is in power, and they want US help to impose a No Fly Zone and a Buffer Zone inside Syria along the border. The U.S. does not really want a no-fly zone, but does want to persuade the Turks to allow U.S. warplanes striking at the Islamic State to use the NATO air base at Incirlik. The Turks are refusing that request until Washington agrees to their bottom lines. The US Administration officially takes the position that it neither rules a no-fly zone in or out. President Obama, who will make any such decision, has evinced little enthusiasm for getting the US involved any further in Syria than it is already.

In the circumstances what should Canada do? The Canadian government could declare itself open to participating in monitoring or policing a No Fly

Zone if one is declared, as we effectively did in the 1990 Gulf war. Canada could provide aircraft as we are doing in the coalition effort against ISIS.

Second, we can train moderate Syrian forces. The Turks and the Americans have agreed to train in Turkey, far from the front lines, “vetted” members of the Free Syrian Army into military units. Here too there is disagreement: the Americans see the units fighting ISIS and the Turks see them fighting Assad. Canada could nevertheless support that program as and when it goes ahead. Canada is already helping to train Kurdish Peshmerga forces but more needs to be done to cope with ISIS and ultimately with Assad.

Third, we can contribute more generously to the UN’s humanitarian assistance programs for Syrian residents and for Syrian refugees. In 2014, only about 60% of the UN’s request for \$5.9 billion (US) in aid for Syria was met by international donations. “Unfulfilled” donor commitments forced the World Food Program to suspend food aid to 1.7 million Syrian refugees in December. The same month, the UN launched a new appeal for 2015, at \$8.4 billion the largest ever (UNHCR). The US has been by far the largest donor, and Canada has ranked a reasonable fifth among donor countries, providing about \$685 million (Cdn) cumulative since the crisis began in 2011. But the needs are much greater than the assistance funds available. The UNDP launched the Syria Response Plan in December 2014 and five months later it had been able to raise only 17 per cent of that money (UNDP). Using the UN’s sliding scale for contributions, Canada’s share in 2015 would be about \$250 million.

Fourth, we can help permanently re-settle those Syrian refugees best able to adapt to life beyond the Middle East. With no political solution in sight, and with death and devastation awaiting returnees to Syria, many have no prospect of going home. The world has pledged to provide shelter to 80,000 refugees (UNHCR), with Germany leading with 30,000, followed by the US, Brazil and Sweden. Meanwhile, along the borders of the EU, Syrian

refugees are met with legal barriers and in some cases physical barriers. The EU has even decided to attack smugglers' boats to try to stem the tide of refugees into Europe.

Canada has committed to take 10,000 refugees by 2017. We could progressively increase our quota to approach the greater inflows we successfully integrated in past decades-- 40,000 Hungarian refugees in the Fifties, 20,000 Czechs, Chileans and Ismailis in the Sixties and Seventies and 100,000 Vietnamese in the Seventies and Eighties. The Syrians are generally a well-educated people and many would make successful immigrants in Canada.

Fifth, we should do nothing to legitimize or strengthen Assad. Instead, we should be building cases against him and his fellow perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity for eventual prosecution by the International Criminal Court. If out of fear of ISIS and of a desire to stop the Islamist extremist group the Coalition were to ally itself *de facto* or *de jure* with Assad for fleeting tactical advantage, it would be the ultimate betrayal of the Syrian innocents. And of our own values.

The world can still save many lives in Syria. But to do so it will need to cure its collective myopia, retrieve its human solidarity from wherever it has misplaced it and generate the political will to do more than wring its already raw hands over the ongoing slaughter.