

**Notes for a Presentation**

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**to the Canadian-Turkish Women's Association**

**The Syrian Conflict and the Canadian Response**

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*Check against delivery*

This evening I am going to discuss the catastrophe unfolding in Syria.

I will reflect on the world's response, including in particular, Europe's response, Turkey's response and Canada's response.

I will as well briefly discuss the regional and strategic issues in play.

I am also going to suggest five things that the world could do to alleviate the suffering, and that Canada could support.

## **The Facts**

First a few facts about the human toll of this dreadful conflict.

I appreciate that statistics and numbers numb the mind.

And I realize that most people, including most Canadians,  
did not connect emotionally with the Syrian crisis

until they saw the picture of the body of poor four year-old Alan Kurti washed up on the beach in Bodrum.

But if the scale of our reaction is to match the size of the need,

we will have to register in our minds the enormity of the tragedy.

So what do the cold, emotionless numbers tell us?

Over 250,000 people have been killed in Syria—

civilians and combatants combined—since 2011

and over one million injured, many horribly (the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—OCHA).

In 2014, the worst year yet, 76,000 people died as a result of the conflict, including 3,500 children (the London-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights.)

13.5 million of the people still inside Syria,  
the equivalent of the total population of Ontario,  
need humanitarian assistance to survive (UNOCHA).

4.2 million people have fled the country and are now refugees--  
they are in many respects the lucky ones.

Tiny Lebanon has taken in 1.15 million refugees; nearly one of every three people there is a refugee.

Jordan hosts over 630,000 Syrian refugees, in addition to large numbers of Palestinians and some Iraqis from past wars.

Turkey, the largest of the neighbouring countries, has absorbed over two million refugees (UNHCR, October 20015),  
becoming the world's biggest refugee hosting country;

(By the way, Canada ranks 33<sup>rd</sup>.

The claims to generosity by the Conservative government were so much electoral piffle.)

As regards Turkey, beyond the serious, negative impacts on its 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 about \$8 billion on direct assistance to the refugees it is hosting—a

Turkey is spending about 7-8 times more than Canada has spent.

And Turkey has received somewhat under \$500 million in assistance from the international community.

In the main refugee-receiving countries, including Turkey,

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' resources are long since depleted and people are resorting to child labour, begging, theft and sex work to survive.

Millions of children are suffering from conflict related trauma and ill health,

and disrupted education.

Youth—teenagers—are indefinitely sidelined from school, along with their hopes and ambitions

These youngsters, if ignored by the rest of us, will be the tinder of some future terrorist conflagration.

In Europe, we have seen some of the best and some of the worst of human reactions to this tragedy.

The Europeans' high pain threshold for others' suffering,

especially for the suffering of Syrians

vanished when the fighting brought the refugees to their own doorsteps.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has led the progressive response to the refugee flows.

Under her leadership, Germany is likely to receive 800,000 refugees, or more,

and to settle very many of them there permanently.

(The Germans will also eventually send back simple economic migrants from the Balkans and elsewhere.)

Just yesterday Mrs. Merkel said in Nuremberg that "there are very, very many (refugees), but there are 80 million of us."

"We can and will manage this integration." (Sputnik International)

Massive as the German program is, refugees will comprise just 1% of the total population.



Mrs. Merkel's opening Germany's border to refugees fleeing for their lives is a rare act these days of political courage.

Integration will not be a painless or seamless process in Germany,  
not least because of the language and culture.

Germany will experience the same sorts of social unease as Syria's neighbours do.

This will especially be the case in the former East Germany where seven decades of Nazi'ism and Communism spawned a virulent strain of xenophobia.

But, given Germany's aging population, there will ultimately be demographic benefits as second generation Syrian-Germans come into the workforce—

and underwrite German pensions and social benefits

The Swedish government's reaction has also been humane, receiving far more refugees than its comparatively small population would suggest,  
just under 10 million people.

But, everywhere in Europe, and beyond, xenophobia is on the rise,  
especially in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is leading the opposition in Europe to refugee inflows,  
closing his country's borders,  
and treating people fleeing for their lives as criminals.

Two images will define Hungary in my mind for years to come  
—the Hungarian border guards throwing food to penned-in refugees,  
like so many animals  
and the Hungarian camerawoman tripping a refugee father running for safety with his child in his arms.

The Hungarians proclaim they are protecting Europe's Christian values.

I am myself agnostic, but I am pretty sure that Christ was claimed to have said that we should do unto others, not just other Christians,

what we would have them do unto us.

The Europeans are struggling to share the burden on an EU wide basis and are contemplating mandatory quotas for each country,

a proposal the Hungarians and other East Europeans will have difficulty accepting

To avoid having foreigners in their midst they would pay Turkey to keep the refugees there.

They would be happy to turn Turkey effectively into what Prime Minister Davutoglu termed a kind of permanent concentration camp,

a proposal the Turks have thus far rejected,

even though they need financial relief from the enormous burden they are bearing

## **Strategic Situation**

Strategically, the situation in Syria and the neighbouring region,  
already complex,  
is getting more and more complicated—  
and dangerous.

Attempts by the Americans, the Turks and the Saudis to craft a peace deal with the Russians, Iranians and Syrians continue to founder on divergent objectives.

The US-led coalition wants to remove Assad from office and the Russian coalition on the contrary seeks to prop him up.

The Russians, who had been using their veto power in the UN Security Council to defend Assad politically,

have now moved aircraft and tanks into Syria to protect him and their own interests there.

The US Coalition is reportedly delivering heavier arms to the Free Syrian Army and others in response.

The lengths the Russians will go to are not clear.

This is especially worrying against the background of the Russian aggression in Crimea and Russian incursion into Eastern Ukraine.

Whatever the Russians' purpose and ambitions, the dangers of conflict between the US led coalition and the Russian-led coalition,

through miscalculation or accident,

have increased.

Turkey, for its part, has to calculate how it will deal effectively with Russians off its northern coast and on its southern border.

From the 16th century through to the Cold War, Turks and Russians have often faced off,

and sometimes fought,

over the Black Sea, Crimea, Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus.

Meanwhile the Turkish campaign against the domestic terrorist organization, the PKK and its Syrian cousin, the PYD continues,

with its attendant domestic reverberations reaching into the November 1 Turkish elections.

At the same time, the security kaleidoscope takes further deadly turns as ISIS,

long considered by Ankara as the lesser (to Assad) of two brutal evils, perpetrates major terrorist attacks in Turkey in apparent retaliation for Turkish cooperation with the US.

If the situation were not complex enough, natural gas has become a subject of both competition and cooperation between Turkey and Russia.

The Turks are building pipelines from Azerbaijan,  
and potentially from the Eastern Mediterranean,  
into Europe, relieving European dependence on Russia.

At the same time Russia apparently hopes to send gas via a new "Turkey Stream" pipeline to Europe, bypassing Ukraine .

Perhaps the prospect of both sides making very big bucks will incentivize cooler heads in Russia and Turkey to keep the Syrian dispute within some bounds

### **Canada and the Transition to a New Government**

The Harper government had committed Canada to spend \$816 million for Syria in international humanitarian assistance, development assistance and security assistance funding.

The new Liberal government has committed to increasing humanitarian assistance,

by an unspecified amount of money.

Also the Harper government committed Canada to resettling 21,300 refugees, over the next four years.

The Liberals have promised to welcome 25,000 refugees by the end of this year.

The Harper government had committed Canada to contribute nine aircraft and a few hundred military training personnel to the US-led military coalition against ISIS.

The Liberal government promised to end Canada's air combat mission in Iraq,

and to refocus Canada's military contribution in the region on the training of local forces.



How the new Liberal government will handle this issue with the Obama administration is not yet clear.

### **What's to be done about Syria?**

What should the international community do to respond to the fighting in Syria and alleviate the great suffering there?

**First, the world can intervene to stanch or at least to slow the bleeding.**

So long as the war goes on the misery will continue,

the deaths and maimings will increase

and the refugees will continue to flee to some place safer.

Every day that passes in the Syrian civil war turns out to have been a better day to intervene in some way than the day after was.

One possible option for intervention is the imposition of no-fly zones and the creation of internationally protected buffer zones in Northern Syria and possibly southern Syria

to which internally displaced Syrians could flee and refugees could return

Such actions at least might save many lives.

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.

Something similar could be done in the North and South of Syria using Turkish, Kurdish, Jordanian and other regional air bases, and ship-based aircraft.

The US Administration officially takes the position that it neither rules a no-fly zone in or out.

American experts differ on the extent of the danger of imposing a No Fly Zone in Syria,

but there is considerable confidence on the part of some that creating such 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,

no fly zones “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.”

Thus far, President Obama has been more interested in pivoting to Asia than getting his foot caught in the Middle East

and has evinced little enthusiasm for getting the US involved any further in Syria than it is already.

**Second, Canada can contribute more generously to the UN's humanitarian assistance programs for Syria.**

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 last December.

The same month, the UN launched a new appeal for 2015, at \$8.4 billion the largest ever (UNHCR).

Five months later the UN had been able to raise only 17 per cent of that money (UNDP).

Canada ranks 12<sup>th</sup> as a donor country to the UNHCR.

As a comparatively rich G20 country, we can and should do more.

**Third, we can launch and lead an international campaign to fund the UN humanitarian agencies adequately.**

The UN's regular budget is paid for by the assessed contributions of all UN members.

As I just mentioned, the budgets of the UN's humanitarian agencies are funded by voluntary contributions, mostly from states.

Voluntary contributions are inadequate.

The number of people forcibly displaced at the end of 2014 had risen to a staggering 59.5 million compared to 51.2 million a year earlier and 37.5 million a decade ago.

According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, “We are witnessing a paradigm change,

an unchecked slide,

into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement

as well as the response required

is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before.”

There is an obvious case to be made in the UN General Assembly to put the UNHCR and other UN humanitarian agencies on the same funding basis as the regular budget—

i.e., assessed, mandatory contributions.

Canada has the diplomatic skills to lead a campaign to do so.

We could also press to revisit and rewrite the refugee convention of 1951 to cover internally displaced persons.

**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.

Meanwhile, along the borders of the EU, Syrian refugees are met with physical barriers,

and too often with animosity.

The incoming Liberal government has promised to welcome 25,000 refugees by the end of this year

Given the enormous need, 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

80,000 Vietnamese in the Seventies and Eighties.

The Syrians are generally a well-educated people and many would make successful citizens of Canada.

There are many ironies in the Syrian conflict, the most shocking of which is that the US,

the country that de-stabilized the whole region

has agreed to take fewer refugees than the city of Munich.

**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 a desire to stop ISIS, the Coalition were to ally itself *de facto* or *de jure* with Assad,

Or acquiesce in his staying in office because he presents a greater danger to the West than Assad does

it would be the ultimate betrayal of the Syrian innocents.

And of our own values.

## **Conclusion**

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.

If the will can be found, it is not too late for the world to save many lives in Syria, and to alleviate much misery.

But to do so the world will need to cure its collective myopia,

and generate the political will to do more than wring its already raw hands over the ongoing slaughter.

The world will have to retrieve its humanity from wherever it has misplaced it

And act.

Thank you