

22nd June 2013

The Honourable Julia Gillard
Prime Minister
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House, Canberra 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Re: Syria

The Medical Association for Prevention of War shares the concerns of many people at the terrible bloodshed and suffering that is occurring in Syria, which shows no signs of easing. We are becoming increasingly alarmed that outside intervention including by Western nations is seeking to further militarise the conflict, which can only escalate the suffering of millions of innocent people.

A recent UN report found at least 93,000 documented deaths thus far, with injuries on a much greater scale and massive destruction¹. Children were reported as suffering the heaviest toll anywhere in the world. The UN puts the number of internally displaced people at 4.25 million. There are 1.6 million refugees, likely to climb to 3.5 million by the end of the year². Less obvious effects include the severe strain on countries hosting the refugees, with possible resentment towards these desperate people when resources are already very strained and totally inadequate.

You will be fully aware that the politics of this war are complex and defy simple “good versus evil” explanations. The rebels who are fighting government forces are not united in a common purpose and goal, and what might have once been an uprising against a repressive government has been overtaken by much wider agendas with regional and global implications. Many jihadists from outside Syria have joined the fighting. There are reports that groups with al-Qaeda links may be the dominant force in the uprising now.

¹ Human Rights Data Analysis Account (Commissioned by the UNHCR) Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic 13 June 2013

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs . Eight things you need to know about the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis 7 June 2013

Some of the rebel forces gained their experience, for example in bomb-making, in combat against Western troops in Iraq. Therefore talk of “arming the rebels” can cover a range of possible scenarios including arming the very fighters against whom Australian and other Western troops risked their lives in Iraq. Such a position is clearly indefensible. Talk of arming the “right” rebels ignores the enormous complexity of knowing who’s who, and the fact that weapons rarely stay with their intended recipient forever.

You will be aware also of the multiple countries in the region and beyond who see the war in Syria as having implications for their own security and interests and are supporting either Syrian government forces or one of the opposition groups. This has many indications of being a proxy war.

Even the matter of who has used chemical weapons is not clear-cut, as UN human rights investigators reported recently “It has not been possible, on the evidence available, to determine the precise chemical agents used, their delivery systems or the perpetrator”, although most testimony received related to their use by state forces³. However, talk of a “red line” having been crossed by the use of chemical weapons is not a compelling argument for military intervention which will only add to the civilian suffering. Terrible situations can always be made worse.

The supply of weapons, whether they come from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, France, the UK, the US or another player, will only perpetuate the war, not bring it to an end. There is no crushing military defeat of any side imminent, but only a protracted further destruction of the country. Arming any of the protagonists is likely to:

- Greatly increase the civilian losses and suffering;
- Legitimise the violence that is the fundamental problem, and provide an incentive for the fighting to continue;
- Damage international efforts for peace talks to occur, divert attention from the need for them, and reduce prospects that negotiations will be entered into;
- Undermine the efforts of those Syrians who are striving for a Syrian solution and the cessation of outside military interference and what many of them see as illegitimate attempts to impose regime change.

In the case of Western military interference, the problem of unintended consequences is very real. As in Afghanistan and Iraq, Western interventions could represent a gift to Islamist propagandists and recruiters. Syria could well be delivered into the hands of al-Qaeda.

³ UN human rights team believes chemical weapons used by both sides in Syria. ABC News 4 June, 2013

MAPW notes and agrees with the recent remarks of UN Secretary- General Ban Ki-Moon that the US decision to provide arms to rebel fighters would not help resolve the situation. “Only political solutions can address this situation sustainably”, he said. Sweden has correctly warned of the risk of an arms race between rival foreign supporters of the government and the rebels.

While there is no single easy way forward to end this war, MAPW urges the Australian government to do all that is possible to at least ensure maximal aid and protection for its victims and maximal prospects of ending the fighting. In particular we urge you to use Australia’s position on the UN Security Council to:

- Express Australia’s grave concern at the increasing militarisation of the conflict;
- Call for a cessation of arms supplies by all parties, including our allies;
- Ensure expert access to investigate reports of the use of chemical weapons;
- Promote attention and all possible assistance to those Syrians who are struggling to find a peaceful way forward amid an overwhelming focus on violence;
- Hasten negotiations between all parties, as the only step that can put an end to the human catastrophe that is unfolding.

We applaud your statement that Australia is committed to a political settlement, and seek an explicit and clear statement from Australia of opposition to the arming of any sides in the conflict, including by our allies.

Finally, millions of Syrians need humanitarian assistance, a task that dwarfs Australia’s relatively miniscule refugee “problem”. It is essential that Australia provides all possible assistance for them and that other UN member states be encouraged to do the same. Australia’s provision of \$78 million (not much more than 1 day’s worth of Australian military spending) is very welcome and we hope this can be augmented to help deal with what the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has described as “human suffering on an epic scale”.

Thank you for your attention to these matters and we hope that Australia is able to help bring an end to this terrible further chapter in Middle Eastern history.

Yours sincerely,

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Acting President

Medical Association for Prevention of War