

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

ACTION ALERT: AUSTRALIA AND IRAQ WAR



Australia is becoming involved again in a military way in the Middle East. This poses a challenge to the longstanding Quaker commitment to 'taking away the occasion of war'. What can we do to make known our concerns in a context of considerable public outrage about the behaviour of the extremist groups in Iraq and Syria? This Alert gives background information and questions to assist Friends in responding in discussion with others, in public statements, and in contact with politicians and bureaucrats.

The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott MP, has said that the commitment of 600 military personnel and aircraft (following an earlier dispatch of humanitarian supplies and ammunition) is a measured additional response to a request from Iraq for assistance in defeating the ISIS terrorist group which has occupied significant parts of the country. On 15 September he said: "There is a world of difference between what is happening now and what's happened on previous occasions in the Middle East...it is a broad-based coalition including a number of significant Middle Eastern countries, and it is absolutely with the welcome, the cooperation and the support of the Iraqi government".

The Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten MP has gone along with this approach, with a caveat that the deployment should not extend to Syria. The Greens Leader Senator Christine Milne has opposed the decision on the grounds that it is an open-ended commitment to war. Parliament has not been consulted, and the attempt by the Greens to reintroduce legislation to make this necessary has so far failed. Public opinion, while in favour of the humanitarian and weapons aid given earlier, is more divided about whether Australia should commit to a greater military role. Two polls conducted on-line by the ABC-TV program *The Drum* on 11 and 15 September (1800 and 2500 votes respectively) showed over 70% were against greater military involvement.

The UN Security Council issued a media statement on 14 September following the latest death of a western aid worker at the hands of ISIS:

The members of the Security Council stressed again that ISIL must be defeated and that the intolerance, violence and hatred it espouses must be stamped out. The members of the Council further emphasized that such continued acts of barbarism perpetrated by ISIL do not intimidate them, but rather stiffen their resolve that there has to be a common effort among Governments and institutions, including those in the region most affected, to counter ISIL, Al-Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, as the Council resolved in United Nations Security Council resolution 2170 (2014).

The members of the Security Council recalled United Nations Security Council resolution 2175 (2014) and their demand that all parties involved in an armed conflict comply fully with the obligations applicable to them under international humanitarian law, including to ensure the respect and protection of all humanitarian personnel. The members of the Security Council also recalled their condemnation of all forms of violence and intimidation to which those participating in humanitarian operations are increasingly exposed.

Commentary

Paul McGeough (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 September 2014) said that the smart thing for the Government would have been to defer a decision, as it was not yet clear that countries in the Middle East were prepared to take on the terrorist challenge themselves. He also saw the deployment as “an escalation from the other side of the world that likely will put the IS madmen on the lookout for Australian targets”. In his view, the absence of a timeline and clear objective would most probably lead to ‘mission creep’, embroiling Australia again after years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Clive Williams (*The Canberra Times*, 1 September 2014) made the following comments:

(The) latest offensive in Iraq has been blunted by US air strikes that are able to target its vehicles. This will force IS to resort to a slower ground campaign through Iraq's towns and villages where air strikes cannot be used for fear of causing collateral damage. The US is conducting aerial surveillance of Syria, presumably with a view to mounting air strikes there as well to stop IS from surging across the border into Iraq. The challenge for Australia, and other nations with Sunni Muslim populations, is how to undermine the attraction of the Syrian and Iraq conflicts for young Muslim men who, in Australia's case, are obviously not deterred by the 15 Australians killed so far in the fighting. This suggests the need for programs within Australia's Muslim communities to identify young men at risk and develop diversionary programs.

Jack Waterford (*The Canberra Times*, 17 September 2014) recalled that Tony Abbott himself, in a speech to the Institute of Public Affairs in 2003, said that winning the war on terror could never be done on the battlefield and was a test of character which would be won by moral strength. Tony Abbott said that “if the war on terrorism just involves finding targets and destroying them, it will fail. In the process, the west will end up sacrificing its values in order to save them”. According to Jack Waterford, recent statements by the Prime Minister have not acknowledged that the accidental killing of civilians through bombing is problematic.

Andrew O'Neill of Griffith University's School of Government said (*The Conversation*, 17 September 2014) that:

With IS controlling significant portions of Iraq, the military effort will be strategically directed at dislodging them from key positions and destroying the group's key

infrastructure and ability to conduct sustained combat operations. No matter what gloss politicians put on it, this mission therefore cannot be genuinely classified as humanitarian *per se* – remember the inaction of Australia, the US and others over the slaughter of thousands of civilians in Syria and the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.

Other media reports have raised many questions about involvement in an area which Australia does not fully understand and in which there are so many conflicting interests. For example, the PKK has been listed as a terrorist organization by Australia, yet it is closely linked with the Peshmerga Kurdish fighters to whom ammunition has been supplied. In addition, not only is the Iraqi government insecure, the many different groups in northern Iraq tend to form and disband alliances at different times for various purposes, and there is no unity on an ongoing basis. The risk that the involvement will spill into Syria will add another layer of complexity.

Statement to President by 50 Religious and Other Leaders in US, supported by Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) on 27 August 2014.

The statement affirmed that “lethal weapons and airstrikes will not remove the threat to a just peace in Iraq” and included the following specific suggestions:

- Stop bombing to prevent bloodshed and avoid provoking ISIS supporters.
- Provide humanitarian relief through the United Nations.
- Engage with the UN and Iraqi leaders in diplomatic efforts for a political solution.
- Support community-based nonviolent resistance.
- Strengthen financial sanctions against armed actors in the region.
- Bring in professionally trained unarmed civilian protection groups.
- Call for an arms embargo on all parties to the conflict.
- Support Iraqi civil society efforts to build peace and reconciliation.

At the request of QPLC, the Presiding Clerk of Australia Yearly Meeting wrote to our Prime Minister urging that political and humanitarian options be given priority over military action.

British Quakers issued their own statement to the Prime Minister in late September 2014:

Quakers acknowledge with sadness the recall of Parliament to consider British military action. As the tragedies in Syria and Iraq unfold, Quakers in Britain again asks for military restraint. Quakers acknowledge and deplore the extreme criminal behaviour displayed in the region. We too, want the violence and suffering to end. We remind those who make these decisions in Britain that it is often easier to start a war than to end it, and that additional violence itself fuels a bloody and destructive cycle. The bitterness and hatred created lasts for generations. Such violence threatens us all.

We stress that diplomatic channels must be used at all times, but especially when considering violence and war, particularly through the good offices of the United Nations. Britain is a wonderful living example of the potential of multi-faith peace-making. We have many British citizens of Iraqi and Syrian origin who are in active dialogue with their families and friends in the region. It is those people who tell us how such criminality is created – by desperate people who feel they have lost everything to violence inflicted on them by the West, and that violence is their revenge. Desperation has a human face and humanity is what we share.

Quakers ask that Parliament discuss whether this is an opportunity for Britain to export peace in a way hitherto unexplored – through our multi-faith and multicultural connections which spread across the world. Quakers again ask for Government to take a further critical look at the role that the arms trade plays in promoting and increasing the likelihood of war. We trust and pray that as Parliament makes these difficult decisions on our behalf, they are guided by love of humanity and the desire for peace for everyone.“

Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, Quakers in Britain

Questions for Discussion

- Can humanitarian assistance be given to the region without Australia becoming enmeshed in the military conflict?
- What diplomatic steps is Australia supporting to bring about a political solution to the crisis? How is Australia using its role on the UN Security Council to advance peace in the Middle East?
- What are the goals of our involvement in military activity in the region? Does Australia have any way of reducing the chances of accidental killing of civilians in air strikes?
- What other strategies does Australia have (eg financial) to undermine the ISIS movement?
- What practical steps can be taken to challenge those young Australians who are drawn to become part of the terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria?

Canberra, September 2014