

October 17, 2019

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6



Dear Minister:

I am writing on behalf of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) to urge the Canadian government to take a much stronger position regarding the recent actions of Turkey in Syria. Despite the recently announced 5-day ceasefire, the National Union has grave concerns regarding Turkey's aggression and Canada's response. Canada has previously taken a laudable position regarding the safeguarding and resettlement of Syrian refugees, but your response to Turkey's invasion of Syria has been inadequate and the resulting regional destabilization unacceptable. As a NATO ally of Turkey, Canada should be taking a much stronger position and engaging in action to back up our words. The limited ceasefire is a positive development in the short term, but it could also solidify positions in the conflict. Without Turkey's withdrawal from Syria and a return to negotiations, the situation will remain intransigent. Minister, further action from Canada and the international community is needed to avoid the resumption of violence in Syria.

Minister, at a time when the situation in Syria was beginning to allow some to consider the possibility of a negotiated peace, Turkey's invasion of Syria has created more refugees, more civilian casualties, and more chaos and uncertainty in a region already in the midst of turmoil and violence. Condemnation and symbolic sanctions by the international community, including Canada, have made no discernable impact on Turkey's ongoing military action. The short ceasefire may actually consolidate Turkey's position within Syria, and we believe it is necessary that strong action be taken in aid of halting this destabilizing invasion. Words and moral suasion are not having an impact.

The Turkish justification for this incursion into Syria is not credible. Turkey has stated it was moving into Syria to create a safe zone for the repatriation of refugees. But the invasion has created even more refugees and internally displaced peoples. The invasion is clearly related to Turkey's concern that the Kurdish peoples will use control of northern Syria as the base for their long-standing goal of creating Kurdistan, a state for the over 35 million Kurds who are in the region. Turkey is using violence to deny the Kurdish peoples an opportunity for self-determination, and they are doing it by invading another country.

Minister, in the context of this assault against the Kurds, I would also suggest that we review Canada's terrorist list and its inclusion of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey has been clear that the attacks in Syria are a preemptive attack against the PKK. Canada should not be seen to be aiding in the oppression of the Kurdish peoples, who have the right to self-determination, a long-standing principle that Canada has supported and that is enshrined in Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations.



Further to Canada following the lead of the United Nations, there are reports by the UN human rights office that Turkey could be deemed responsible for documented summary executions that are taking place and that these acts may amount to war crimes. These have included the execution of a prominent Kurdish politician. Canada must do everything we can to stop the situation in the region from becoming more unstable and dangerous.

Minister, it is not acceptable that Turkey, our NATO ally, ignored international pressure by proceeding with this armed incursion. Turkey has also condemned and threatened NATO countries that criticized its invasion of Syria. This is an aggressive stance from Turkey that compels us to urge Canada to call for the removal of Turkey from the alliance. I would bring to your attention that the collective defence principle enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty could place Canada at risk of having to defend Turkish aggression in the region.

We also call on you to review Canada's participation within the NATO alliance, as NATO seems to no longer be meeting its own stated objectives. NATO claims to be committed to peaceful resolution of disputes and to ultimately preventing conflict through its cooperation on defence and security-related issues. NATO is clearly not meeting these objectives. It is long overdue that Canada reviews our participation in NATO, an institution launched in 1949, and that in the past has been used to undermine the role of the United Nations.

Minister, Canada should be supporting the goal of a political transition to peace and democracy in Syria, one that would allow displaced Syrians a voluntary return to their homeland, without fear of violence or oppression. Turkey's actions leave us farther from this goal. Canada's voice must be heard on this issue, and we must add strong action to our words. We must join those who seek the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria and a return to negotiations. The path to peace and democracy is being harmed by this invasion and by the international community's unwillingness to stand together to condemn the increased violence.

Minister, now is the time for Canada to take stronger action to address this invasion and firmly assert that we are on the side of peace, democracy, and respect for international law.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LB' with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Larry Brown
President

cc: National Executive Board
President of the Canadian Labour Congress
Canadian Ambassador to Turkey
Turkish Ambassador to Canada