Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff who have visited Homs, Aleppo and other Syrian cities report mile after mile of destroyed buildings. Before the war, these cities were hubs of activity, bustling commercial centers and home to millions of people.

As the war has moved to other parts of the country, life has returned to parts of these cities, with markets reopening and people going back to work. But other parts remain as rubble, the rebuilding too costly and daunting to contemplate.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people who had been scattered from their homes, promising that their cities would be rebuilt (61:4). Looking at the ruins around them, this must have been a difficult message to believe.

The people of Syria today, too, long for their cities and homes to be restored. A recent United Nations survey indicates that three in four Syrian refugees still hope to return to their homes.

MCC has been present in Syria since 1991, building relationships and, in recent years, providing emergency relief and support for peace programs. As we walk alongside the people of Syria, we hear their longing for peace and to return home.

As global brothers and sisters, we can respond by praying regularly for the people of Syria, giving to MCC’s crisis response and asking our government to help rebuild their country. ★
Key issues in current U.S.-Syria policy

Military involvement: When the war first broke out, the U.S. goal was to support opposition groups with the aim of removing President Assad. As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, U.S. efforts shifted toward combating ISIS, through airstrikes and support for Kurdish forces.

In December 2018, President Trump announced that he would be withdrawing all U.S. troops from Syria. Despite earlier indications that the president wanted to get U.S. troops out of Syria, the announcement caught U.S. allies and many of the president’s top advisors off guard.

Members of both parties in Congress pushed back against the move and in early February the Senate easily passed an amendment by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) opposing the withdrawal of troops. Later that month the White House said it would keep 400 troops in Syria, out of an estimated 2,000 personnel.

As of April, the U.S. military has begun withdrawing troops but may seek other ways to stay involved in the conflict. This could include the use of private contractors, continuing support for allied groups in Syria and increasing the U.S. military presence on the Iraq side of the border. The U.S. also remains the world’s largest arms supplier to the Middle East.

The need for a constructive role

Syrian church follows God by welcoming the stranger

“What does the Lord your God require of you?” (Deuteronomy 10:12)

I had the opportunity, as part of an MCC monitoring visit, to see how Syrian churches are responding to God’s question by welcoming strangers in their midst.

I traveled to a town in rural Hama, in central western Syria. In the basement of the town’s Greek Orthodox church, I met two men who were good friends and former neighbors, Jamal and Kamal (pictured at left), along with about 30 other Syrians. (Real names of the people and the town not used for security reasons.)

All who had gathered at the church had ended up in this predominantly Christian town after fleeing their homes to avoid the fighting and death of the Syrian war. Jamal and Kamal had arrived in the town from Raqqa, a city in eastern Syria.

In Raqqa, Kamal and Jamal had lived for many years as good neighbors. Kamal and his family are Christian, while Jamal and his family are Muslim.

When Islamic State forces were preparing to invade Raqqa in 2013, Jamal went to Kamal with the urgent plea that they both gather their families and flee for safety. Together, they and their families eventually found shelter in the town where I met them.

Through Syrian churches like the Greek Orthodox congregation where we congregated, MCC has provided regular food parcels and monthly cash allowances to thousands of families like Jamal’s and Kamal’s, helping them meet basic needs.

“This is a good village,” Jamal told us. “The people here give without discrimination between Christians and Muslims.”

By opening their town to uprooted people, the townspeople have followed in the way of the God who “loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing,” and who tells God’s people that doing what God requires means also loving strangers (Deuteronomy 10:11–19).

Alain Epp Weaver is director of strategic planning and learning for MCC. He visited Syria in February 2018.
Reconstruction: Syria’s economy and infrastructure have been devastated by the war, with the cost of rebuilding estimated to be at least $250 billion. The U.S. says it will not provide reconstruction funding to the two-thirds of the country under Syrian government control. In Congress, the No Assistance to Assad Act (H.R. 1706) has been introduced to codify this approach.

One U.S. official described this as the “you break it, you fix it” rule. Under this logic, the Syrian government, Russia and Iran should cover the costs of reconstruction, because they carried out most of the air strikes. Language in the “Caesar bill” (S. 1, H.R. 31) would punish individuals and countries that provide reconstruction funding by imposing sanctions on them. The U.S. sees this as a way to pressure Syria and its allies to make concessions in diplomatic negotiations.

There are a number of problems with this approach. Armed groups supported by the U.S. have also caused significant damage during the war. Additionally, many Syrians do not support their president but still want to be able to pick up the pieces of their lives. They want to be able to rebuild their homes, to have sustainable livelihoods and to grow their own food again. Long term, a stable and healthy Syria and surrounding region is in the best interests of everyone, including the U.S.

The social, religious and economic grievances that led to the rise of ISIS will not be solved militarily. The best way to ensure that ISIS and other extremist groups do not reemerge is to address the underlying drivers of insecurity and to support community-based initiatives to prevent and resolve conflict.

Diplomacy: There are many reasons why the United Nations-led peace process to end the war in Syria has stalled. But it has not helped that in recent years, the U.S. has largely disengaged from the process. The U.S. does not want to be at the table with Iran, with whom it has major policy differences. But for any peace agreement to be effective, it will need to have support from all armed groups and countries that are involved in the war.

It is also critical that the U.S. and others in the international community allow Syrians to take the lead on the peace process. This must include a diversity of Syrian voices, including women’s groups and civil society organizations, as they work toward creating a new constitution that will respect the rights of all Syrians.

Humanitarian assistance: The U.S. is the largest bilateral donor to the Syria crisis, contributing more than $9 billion since 2012. This amount is significant but pales in comparison to the $54 billion spent by the U.S. since 2014 combating ISIS in Syria. As the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighboring countries continues, it is vital that the U.S. continue to provide emergency humanitarian assistance.

In summary, to help Syria move toward peace, the U.S. should end its military involvement, address root causes of insecurity, support diplomatic efforts, and provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. These actions will be necessary to help a devastated Syria thrive again.
Prayer

God of life, 
Who cares for all creation and calls us to justice and peace, 
May our security not come from arms, but from respect. 
May our force not be of violence, but of love. 
May our wealth not be in money, but in sharing. 
May our path not be of ambition, but of justice. 
May our victory not be from vengeance, but in forgiveness. 
May our unity not be in the quest of power, but in vulnerable witness to do your will.

Open and confident, may we defend the dignity of all creation, sharing today and forever the bread of solidarity, justice and peace. 
This we ask in the name of Jesus, your holy Son, our brother, who, as a victim of our violence, even from the heights of the cross, gave forgiveness to us all.

Amen.

—Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). Founded in 1974, MECC is a fellowship of Evangelical/Protestant, Oriental Orthodox, Greek Orthodox and Catholic Church families.

A prayer for the people of Syria

God, source of all compassion, the promise of your mercy and saving help fills our hearts with hope. 
Hear the cries of the people of Syria; bring healing to those suffering from the violence, and comfort to those mourning the dead. 
Empower and encourage Syria’s neighbors in their care and welcome for refugees.

Convert the hearts of those who have taken up arms, And strengthen the resolve of those committed to peace. O God of hope and Father of mercy, your Holy Spirit inspires us to look beyond ourselves and our own needs. 
Inspire leaders to choose peace over violence and to seek reconciliation with enemies. 
Inspire the Church around the world with compassion for the people of Syria, and fill us with hope for a future of peace built on justice for all. 
We ask this through Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Light of the World. 
Amen.

—Catholic Relief Services

Offering

Take up a special offering for MCC’s response to the Syria/Iraq crisis.

Scripture readings

2 Kings 6:8–23
This Scripture passage tells the story of how the prophet Elisha creatively brought about peace with the king of Aram, modern-day Syria.

Isaiah 61:1–4
The prophet Isaiah tells of a time of restoration, when ruined cities shall be rebuilt.

Songs

HWB 368 O God of love, O Power of peace 
STJ 102 When from the darkness 
STS 115 Beauty for brokenness
Facts about Syria

21 million
Syria's population before the war (2010)

13 million
Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance

6.2 million
Syrians displaced from their homes inside the country

5.7 million
Registered Syrian refugees who have fled the country

$54 billion
Amount the U.S. has spent on military efforts to counter ISIS in Syria

$8.8 billion
Amount the United Nations says it needs to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighboring countries

Sources: Brown University Costs of War project, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Bank
# Policy Principles

**U.S.-Syria policy should...**

| **1** | End military involvement. | The U.S. government should **end all forms of military engagement in the Syrian conflict**, including the full withdrawal of U.S. troops. U.S. arms sales to allies in the region also help drive the conflict and must be ended altogether. |
| **2** | Address root causes of violence. | The best way to ensure that ISIS and other extremist groups do not reemerge is to address the underlying drivers of insecurity, through **support for community-based initiatives that prevent and resolve conflict** and increase social cohesion. |
| **3** | Support negotiations. | The U.S. government needs to **fully engage in diplomatic efforts to end the war in Syria**. These negotiations must involve all parties who are active in the conflict, including Iran, in order to be effective. The U.S. should support a robust and inclusive process for Syrians, including women's groups and civil society voices, to develop a new constitution that will respect the rights of all Syrians. |
| **4** | Continue humanitarian assistance. | The humanitarian crisis in Syria continues, with as many as 13 million people still in need of emergency assistance, more than 6 million people displaced internally, and more than 5.7 million people registered as refugees outside of Syria. It is **vital that the U.S. and others in the international community maintain emergency assistance**, while also investing in early recovery activities such as livelihoods projects. |
| **5** | Help to rebuild Syria. | The well-being of Syria's people and the future stability of the region depend on rebuilding the country which has been devastated by war. Rather than withholding reconstruction funding and seeking to impose sanctions on countries that provide reconstruction funding, the U.S. should **recognize the importance of helping the people of Syria rebuild**. |

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**Learn more**

- **A Common Place magazine, Spring 2018**
  [mcc.org/stories/devastation-hope-syria](http://mcc.org/stories/devastation-hope-syria)

- **Timeline: 25 years of MCC in Syria**
  [mcc.org/stories/25-years-mcc-syria](http://mcc.org/stories/25-years-mcc-syria)

- **UNHCR | The UN Refugee Agency**
  [unhcr.org/syria-emergency](http://unhcr.org/syria-emergency)