

Human rights and democracy in the world: Syria country report

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Syria

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Systematic and widespread violations of human rights as well as international humanitarian law continued to be committed by all parties to the conflict, in particular the Syrian regime and the UN-listed terrorist organisations. The Syrian regime continued to conduct deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, used chemical weapons and forcibly displaced civilians in contravention of international law. The regime has continued to instrumentalise humanitarian aid as a weapon of war through siege warfare and used denial of access for humanitarian assistance to compel civilian communities to surrender or starve. The regime's practices of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances continued. In 2018, there was a marked increase in the number of cases where individuals who had disappeared, presumably at the hands of the regime, turned out to be registered as dead in the civil registry. It is estimated that over 100,000 detainees and disappeared remain unaccounted for. Moreover, in 2018, housing, land and property rights have been curtailed further, for instance by the passing of "Law 10" in April, which potentially provides the basis for the state to confiscate property without due process or adequate compensation. Human rights violations pertaining to women's rights (including inheritance rights) and children's rights remain of particular concern.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2018, the EU continued to provide substantive support to Syrian civil society organisations, including to the work of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board, both established by the UN. Civil Society will need to play a prominent role in post-conflict Syria, and in helping that the process of reconciliation is driven by all parts of Syrian society. The EU continues to provide support in that respect to the CSOs. In 2018, the EU continued to support the Syrian people and Syrian civil society and women, as essential stakeholders, to promote democracy and human rights in support of peace and stability in Syria. The EU has supported efforts to promote freedom of expression in Syria, including through supporting free and independent media. In 2018 the EU gathered women representatives in Gaziantep who developed a set of concrete recommendations to empower women and to increase women participation in the peace process at all levels. A high-level forum of Syrian women was invited to meet with HRVP Federica Mogherini in late 2018 in Brussels in order to highlight the specific challenges they face. The EU has also continued its work to ensure accountability for war crimes, human rights violations and abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, including the confirmed use of chemical weapons. The EU is one of the main funders of accountability

actions in Syria. The focus of EU-supported projects includes documentation efforts of human rights violations and war crimes, transitional justice, International Humanitarian Law and extensive support to civil society organisations. In addition to local and international NGOs, the EU also worked with international organisations such as the OHCHR, the International Commission for Missing Persons, and the Commission for International Justice and Accountability notably to gather documentation and foster progress towards launching a comprehensive data collection process relying on families of missing persons. The EU has been a key supporter in the establishment of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), and continues to financially support the IIIM's vital work. The EU has also supported the work of the fact-finding missions of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons as well as the UN established Independent International Commission of Inquiry. The EU will remain at the forefront of accountability efforts and relentlessly pursue accountability for the atrocities committed in the Syrian conflict. The situation in Syria should be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In the absence of avenues for international justice, the prosecution of war crimes under national jurisdiction represents an important contribution towards securing justice.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2018 EU's high-level political attention continued to be devoted to the Syrian crisis, including in the context of the Brussels Conference in April 2018 which succeeded in maintaining the international focus on the situation in Syria. The conference also served to reemphasise the EU's political objectives in Syria, namely to see an end to the fighting and commitment of the parties to engage in a credible political process in line with UNSCR 2254.

The EU has also further enhanced its support to the Syrian opposition and its substantive dialogue with civil society organizations and human rights activists.

The EU has continued its targeted restrictive measures against individuals and entities connected to the Syrian regime's policy of violent repressive policies.

4. EU financial engagement: The Syrian crisis is one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The EU and its Member States have together allocated over EUR 10.8 billion in humanitarian, development economic and stabilisation assistance since the start of the crisis, making them the leading donor of the international response for Syrians. Since 2011, the EU's support in response to the Syrian crisis has exceeded EUR 5.2 billion, including both urgent life-saving humanitarian assistance, and non-humanitarian aid, which responds to immediate and medium-term needs. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) as well as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) provides funding to build capacity and to support work of civil society organisations (CSOs) to promote human rights in Syria, to support human rights defenders (HRDs) and to develop legal solutions with Syrians to protect human rights.

5. Multilateral context: The EU has continued to support the resolutions on Syria of the UN Human Rights Council, as well as of the UNGA Third Committee, condemning the escalation of violence in the country, the use of barrel bombs by the Syrian authorities and the human rights abuses by armed extremist groups, and asking parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and to ensure unhindered access for aid organisations in Syria. The EU also organised a high-level event on the Syrian crisis in the margins of the UNGA 2018 in New York in order to help maintain international attention on Syria.

In Geneva, the EU has continued to participate actively in the work of the Humanitarian and Ceasefire Task Forces.

Link to 2018 EU annual report "Human rights and democracy in the world":

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/complete_eu_country_updates_on_human_rights_and_democracy_in_the_world_2018.pdf