

Statement by Commissioner Karen Koning AbuZayd of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, to the 48th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

 [ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx)

[Back](#)

27 September 2021
Madam President,
Excellencies,

Ten years after this body established our Commission, the parties to the conflict continue to perpetrate war crimes and crimes against humanity and infringing the basic human rights of Syrians.

As President Assad enters his fourth term in office – controlling about 70% of the territory and 40% of the pre-war population – there seems to be no moves to unite the country or seek meaningful reconciliation.

On the contrary, incidents of arbitrary and incommunicado detention by Government forces remain unabated and we continue to document grave violations of human rights and IHL.

Further, during the reporting period, the Syrian economy has been rapidly deteriorating, causing bread prices to soar and a striking more than 50 per cent increase in food insecurity compared with last year. Riverbeds are at their driest in decades, and widespread community transmission of the COVID-19 seems unstoppable by a health care system decimated by the war and lacking oxygen and vaccines.

This is no time for anyone to think that Syria is a country fit for its refugees to return. The war on Syrian civilians continues. Recent months have seen increased fighting and violence in the northwest, northeast and south of the country, according to the report before you which covers the period from 1 July last year to 30 June this year.

The lull in hostilities in northwest Syria, brought about by the March 2020 ceasefire agreement between the Russian Federation and Turkey, has been unravelling with aerial bombardments and shelling.

Medical facilities, such as the de-conflicted hospital in Atarib, markets and residential areas have been struck by aerial and ground attacks, often indiscriminately, causing numerous civilian casualties.

Meanwhile the southwest experienced fighting not seen since before the 2018 Russian-brokered agreement between the Syrian Government and the armed opposition groups.

Shockingly, the past months have seen the return of sieges and siege-like tactics, in Dar'a, Quineitra and Rif Damascus governorates. Three years after the suffering in eastern Ghouta, another tragedy has been unfolding before our eyes in Dar'a Al-Balad.

Meanwhile, despite public statements indicating a desire to adhere to basic human rights norms, the UN-designated terrorist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued imposing restrictions on media and the freedom of expression in its area of control in the northwest, including by arbitrarily detaining media activists and journalists, including women.

In the Afrin and Ra's al-Ayn regions of Aleppo, civilians live in fear of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices that are frequently detonated in crowded civilian areas - striking markets and busy streets and claiming the lives of many. The Commission documented the killing and maiming of at least 243 women, men and children in seven such attacks – but the full toll on civilians is considerably higher. Indiscriminate shelling also continued, including on 12 June when munitions struck multiple locations in Afrin city, killing and injuring many and destroying parts of the “de-conflicted” al-Shifa hospital.

The “Syrian National Army” (SNA) in this area also continued to unlawfully deprive civilians – primarily of Kurdish origin - of their liberty, with documented cases of torture including sexual and gender-based violence in detention.

The security situation in certain areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also deteriorated, seeing increased attacks by Da'esh remnants, conflict with Turkish forces and mounting discontent and protests amongst the population, in particular in Arab populated areas. SDF continued to detain more than 10,000 suspected former Da'esh fighters in prison facilities across eastern Syria since at least 2019. Among them are around 750 boys, held in at least ten prison facilities.

Strikingly, years after the territorial defeat of Da'esh, thousands of women and children remain unlawfully interned in camps across northeast Syria in the territory controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF coalition.

In Al Hawl and other camps near the Iraqi border in northeast Syria, an estimated 40,000 children are held. Nearly half are Iraqi; 7,800 come from nearly 60 other countries.

Since mid-2019, almost 5000 Syrian children have been released from the camps to communities in the northeast under so-called tribal sponsorship agreements. Some 1000 foreign children have also been released and brought home, as shown in an annex to the report.

Yet, most foreign children remain deprived of their liberty, since their home countries refuse to repatriate them.

Most are under 12 years' old. No one accuses them of crimes, yet, for almost three years, they have been held in horrifying conditions, deprived of their basic rights.

These children must also be protected in line with international human rights and humanitarian law. Protection can never mean indefinite detention of children. The first remedy for unlawful detention is release. Punishing children for the crimes of their parents cannot be justified.

Excellencies,

In the midst of a pandemic, the Government of Syria, HTS, SNA and the SDF continue to hold a vast number of detainees in appalling detention conditions where detainees in fragile health may not survive a COVID-19 outbreak.

While the past decade has seen fluctuating waves of arbitrary detention campaigns – from mass arrests of demonstrators in the early days to mass internment of men, women and children today, this has been the constant.

Syrian families missing their loved ones have a right to the truth about their whereabouts and fate. We recommend UN Member States to facilitate the creation of a mechanism with an international mandate to coordinate and consolidate claims regarding missing persons, including persons subjected to enforced disappearance.

And in light of the implosion of the Syrian economy, we also recommend for States to remove all obstacles to humanitarian aid, including those exacerbated by sanctions, that have overly cumbersome humanitarian exemption procedures.

Excellencies,

Through this past decade of suffering, violations and abuses that we in the Commission have attempted to bear witness to, the root causes of this conflict – detention and disappearances, torture, denial of freedom of expression, discrimination, inequality, unresolved housing, land and property rights issues, and myriad other issues – remain unresolved and unaddressed.

The main difference now is that it is not only the Syrian Government but also the different armed and terrorist groups controlling territory that also engage in patterns of violations, abuse, and exploitation of regular Syrians.

It is with a heavy heart that this will be my last time addressing this body in this capacity. It has been a privilege and an honour to be a part of this Commission, to bear witness not only to the suffering and the violence, but also the resilience of ordinary Syrians and to amplify their voices before the international community. Their voices have not been sufficiently heard.

After so many years, I once again implore this body to address their needs and aspirations, and to finally put this conflict to an end. It seems almost everything has been tried to conclude this conflict militarily, to assuage different interests, and to sanction the

conflict out of existence - perhaps it is finally time to attempt the only thing not yet attempted – to put the interests of Syrians first. To end this war. To release the arbitrarily detained. To locate the missing and reunite them with their families. There is so much to do and too much time has already been squandered.

Thank you.

[Back](#)