

Statement by the Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

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*Monsieur le Président
Excellencies,
Mesdames, Messieurs*

The conflict in Syria has reached a tipping point, threatening the entire region. With warring parties in unrelenting pursuit of the illusion of military victory, violence has escalated to an unprecedented level. Perpetrators of crimes have no fear or thought of consequence. Impunity has made its home inside the Syrian Arab Republic.

The international community, and specifically the Security Council, has yet to demand accountability for the crimes that are being committed daily against the Syrian people. Through their inaction, a space has been created for the worst of humanity to express itself.

It has done so. People are tortured to death inside detention centres in Damascus, men are beheaded in public squares in Al Raqqa, women live with the scars of sexual abuse, and children are recruited and used as members of fighting forces. Syrians live in a world where decisions about whether to go to the mosque for prayers, to the market for food and to send their children to school have become decisions about life and death.

Today, the Commission presents an update detailing the violence that has consumed Syria since I last addressed this body. We have compiled a dossier of eyewitness and victim accounts, corroborated cases and findings of individual responsibility. As we continue to request and await permission to enter Syria, we have sustained our field investigations in order to reach victims. In over 3000 interviews, we have collected detailed narratives indicating a massive number of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Patterns of violations have been established. The culpability of hundreds of alleged perpetrators is being determined. The result is a solid foundation of evidence that contains a resolute commitment to accountability.

Government forces have been making slow but significant gains in the strategic areas of Homs, Damascus and Aleppo governorates. This has been a result of often indiscriminate attacks and their use of prolonged sieges. More important has been the backing – in the form of both fighters and equipment – provided by external allies.

Non-state armed groups have been losing ground. In several areas, this is due to abusive treatment of civilian populations, inability to ameliorate the humanitarian situation and at times corrupt management of resources under their control. Ill-fated military operations and significant losses have contributed to a decline in support. Armed groups that have recently advanced in Idlib and Quneitra owe much to their collaboration with a wide range of other groups, including Jabhat Al-Nusra, as well as to the backing of foreign governments. ISIS continues to hold large parts of the north and east of Syria and likely will soon benefit from arms and equipment seized from recently occupied Iraqi cities. Foreign fighters continue to join the battlefield, helped by porous borders and growing recruitment networks.

The Government's aerial bombardment – including its continued use of barrel-bombs – across Syria results in significant civilian casualties and severe injuries. Aleppo city and towns in Dara'a countryside, in particular, have come under relentless assault. Functioning schools have been the subject of a marked increase in attacks, resulting in children being killed and injured.

People continue to be killed while held in Government detention centres, where torture remains in widespread and systematic use. We recently received and have begun to investigate thousands of photographs of bodies, many of them emaciated. Almost all bear marks of horrific abuse - including strangulation, mutilation, open wounds, burns and bruising. Such injuries are consistent with torture methods previously documented by the Commission.

Armed groups have shelled Government-controlled areas of Aleppo and Damascus cities as well as towns in Latakia. In Homs city, more than a dozen car bombs have exploded in Shia and Armenian neighbourhoods since March. In many instances, these bombings appear to target civilians, an act designed to spread terror.

Armed groups perpetrated mass hostage-taking and forced displacement. Approximately 60 women and children, kidnapped in September 2013 as they left Nubul and Zahra, have not yet been returned to their families. In March, ISIS fighters surrounded a Kurdish village in Al-Raqqah governorate and threatened to kill its residents if they did not leave. Terrorised, people fled with only the clothes on their backs.

ISIS has maintained control of Al-Raqqah, southern Al-Hasakah and eastern Aleppo governorates. ISIS conducts summary executions and its fighters have beaten women they considered to be improperly dressed.

In Resolution 2139 on humanitarian access, the Security Council unanimously demanded that the flow of food, water and medicines not be restricted. Yet, that is what the Syrian Government and non-State armed groups continue to do. Food is confiscated at checkpoints, as women are harassed and arrested for attempting to bring bread into besieged areas.

Victims of sieges in Damascus governorate consistently describe the agony of being encircled by checkpoints, subjected to continuous shelling, aerial bombardment and suffering as their supplies of food, fuel and medicine dwindle. At one checkpoint on the only road from Zabadani to Damascus, a large banner reads “Kneel or Starve.”

The siege of Yarmouk, one of the tightest and longest sieges of the Syrian conflict, continues to be enforced by the Government. On a sporadic basis, UNRWA is able to deliver food and nutritional assistance to the 20,000 remaining residents, most of them Palestinian refugees. The last medical clinic inside Yarmouk is no longer operational. The Government has refused to authorize the inclusion of medicine and surgical supplies in aid packages.

The shortage of medical supplies is exacerbated by attacks on makeshift clinics and field hospitals inside armed group-controlled areas. Recently, the Government destroyed a field hospital in Jasem in Dara’a, killing medical staff. The resultant lack of medical care has led to increased deaths of women and children during childbirth.

Sieges that have been lifted, such as in Homs city and Moadhamiya in Damascus, while providing relief to some, have come at a heavy price. Where ceasefires are negotiated, they should be for humanitarian reasons and ensure that evacuees have access to basic guarantees and are not detained arbitrarily. As a result of negotiated truces in Damascus suburbs, armed groups put down their arms and Government forces ceased shelling. Limited humanitarian aid was allowed in and basic services, such as electricity, water and medical care were restored, leading to an alleviation of civilian suffering.

Government forces and non-State armed groups have targeted the food supply and points of food distribution, indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. They have also deliberately disabled and destroyed essential civilian infrastructure, such as water distribution networks and electricity grids. Violence targeting humanitarian workers continues to obstruct the efforts of humanitarian agencies to deliver aid to those Syrians most in need. It is in this context, with all its risks to civilians, that the recent Presidential elections took place.

The war has had a devastating impact on Syria’s economy, inflicting harm on livelihoods and habitat from which few Syrian families have escaped unscathed. This disastrous situation has been compounded by economic sanctions.

Monsieur Le Président,

We cannot continue to view the conflict in Syria in the same way that we did a mere three months ago.

Attempts to reach a negotiated political settlement appear to have been abandoned. In response, the warring parties have recommitted themselves to the dangerous illusion that military victory is within reach. This illusion has led Syria down the path of more bloodshed, shattering a nation and leaving a legacy of violence that will scar generations of Syrians.

Influential states have turned away from the hard work that is required for a political solution. Some states and individuals continue to deliver mass shipments of arms, artillery and aircraft to the Syrian Government, or contribute with logistical and strategic assistance. Other states support armed groups with weapons and financial support. In so doing, they are fuelling a proxy war inside Syria.

None of these states can claim ignorance of how their support will be used. The weapons they transfer to the warring parties in Syria are used in the perpetration of war crimes and violations of human rights. States cannot claim to prioritize a political settlement, while their actions demonstrate that their priorities lie in military escalation.

We are now closer than ever to a regional war in the Middle East. Events in neighbouring Iraq will have grave and violent repercussions for Syria. The most dangerous aspect of these developments has been the rise of the sectarian threat, a direct consequence of the dominance of extremist groups like ISIS. Growing numbers of radical fighters are targeting not only Sunni communities under their control but also minority communities including the Shia, Alawites, Christians, Armenians, Druze and Kurds.

As Lakhdar Brahimi stated in his last official interview, Syria is on its way to becoming “a failed state” and the international community – through its acts and its omissions – is complicit in this.

The Commission continues to urge a negotiated political solution. This is the final and crucial month for Syria to fulfill its obligations to eliminate its chemical weapons stocks under Resolution 2118. While unanimously supported, Resolution 2139 has been egregiously violated. The decisions and commitments of the Security Council are being disregarded. The Security Council must strengthen the mechanisms for implementing its resolutions. Under the UN Charter, there are tools that remain at its disposal and it is imperative that all actors make use of and comply with them.

Accountability must be part of any future settlement, if it is to result in an enduring peace. We have travelled historic distances in pursuit of justice in the former Yugoslavia, in Sierra Leone and in Rwanda, to name a few. But the international community has stumbled and fallen when it has come to seeking justice for, and in our protection of the Syrian people. In Syria, the majority of the population are victims of the current conflict. They are entitled to expect, in spite of all they have suffered, that justice will not be denied to them.

Thank you.

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