

President Hadi al Bahra Statement At Meeting of the Council of the Socialist International

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December 12, 2014

Remarks

Hadi al Bahra

President of the Syrian Coalition

Meeting of the Council of the Socialist International

United Nations, Geneva

December 12, 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, Your Excellencies,

I thank the Socialist International for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the Syrian people.

We're nearing four years of unimaginable suffering in Syria. In early 2011 thousands of men, women and children came to the streets to protest peacefully to demand our long-denied rights to freedom: the right to organize, to form political parties, to assemble, and to speak our thoughts freely and openly without fear of arrest, detention, torture or worse.

The Assad regime responded with force. First small weapons. Then heavy weapons. Artillery. Aircraft. SCUD missiles, barrel bombs and chemical weapons. At every stage, he went virtually unchallenged by the international community. And so he escalated.

As the regime's brutality increased, lawlessness took root and extremists prospered. Assad opened the prisons so that extremists could run free. He opened the borders, allowing Al Qaeda to cross from Iraq. Foreign fighters took advantage of the instability Assad created to hijack our revolution. Repeatedly, the regime colluded with foreign extremists like ISIS – not attacking them in areas where they were fighting the moderate opposition and funding their terror by buying oil stolen from the Syrian and Iraqi people.

The Syrian crisis is the largest humanitarian and security crisis since the Second World War. Its impact is global. The direct threat to Europe is acute. And make no mistake:

the foreign terrorist threat posed by ISIS today is the direct result of Assad's brutality. Terrorism cannot be eliminated without eliminating tyranny. The world cannot and will not defeat ISIS until it eliminates the force that nourishes it: the Assad dictatorship.

The Syrian people want a society that is free, democratic and inclusive. We will not bow to a tyrannical regime or to a small group of terrorists who are trying to impose their disgusting world view on others. We want a government that represents all Syrians, in which all ethnicities, religions and sects have an equal voice, and all men and women live and work as equals. There is a solution to the Syrian crisis. And the international community is an important part of this solution.

For the past four years, and for many decades before that, my colleagues and I in the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces pushed actively and vocally for meaningful democratic reform in Syria. We worked with local communities to push for basic rights, we came to the streets to demand change, and when the Syrian regime responded with brutal force, we exerted our basic right to self-defense.

Together, with our forces on the ground, the Free Syrian Army, we have fought a two-front war against both a merciless Syrian regime that slaughters its citizens and foreign extremist groups who kill and terrorize innocent civilians.

Even with our modest resources, we have had important successes: we've driven out extremists in places like Idlib, facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria's North and South, and re-established basic services in the areas under control.

We know, however, that long-term peace will only come with a national, political solution that provides Syrians the government they deserve. That is why in January of this year, we attended the Geneva II peace talks. There, we proposed a 24-point compromise plan that would lay out a roadmap to peace, transition, and restoring power to the people of Syria in a free society and fair process. Cornerstones of our plan included equality of citizens, de-monopolization of industries, and continuing the existence of state institutions while reforming them to meet human rights and non-corruption standards that will allow them to use the power and treasury of the state to provide services to the Syrian people – not to flow to one family or its personal military-industrial complex, while letting the rest of the country fight and starve among themselves.

In word and in deed, we engaged seriously during those talks. But it quickly became clear that Assad had no incentive to negotiate peace. As long as his forces were gaining ground, Assad's obsession with power would continue, and he and his oligarchs would continue to milk every last person and resource to cling to power.

To achieve a political solution to the crisis in Syria, the international community must create the conditions to change the dynamic on the ground. Unfortunately, right now, we are not achieving this. The current US-led campaign of airstrikes against extremist groups in Syria is part of the reason why.

In its current form, US-led coalition airstrikes are strengthening the Assad regime, weakening the moderates and serving as a recruiting tool for extremists, including many foreign fighters traveling to Syria from abroad.

To achieve the solution to the Syria crisis, airstrikes against ISIS are not enough. We must adopt a comprehensive approach that (1) defeats ISIS militarily; (2) removes the root cause of extremism – the Assad regime; and (3) puts in place the moderate governance that will ensure that there can be no resurgence of extremism. Rather than pursue these elements in sequence, these elements must be pursued in parallel.

Anything else will only worsen the situation in Syria and the threat it poses to international security.

To this end, I and my colleagues are working tirelessly to ensure that our friends, particularly in Europe take a four steps.

First, **increase practical support** for Syria's moderate opposition by supporting our forces on the ground and our interim government. Together we have worked to defend the Syrian people while also delivering moderate governance structures in opposition-held areas. Our recently established interim government has sought to reactive state institutions, by ensuring that employees return to their jobs, workers to their factories, and farmers to their farms. Unfortunately, both our interim government and our armed forces are greatly under resourced. If we do not receive adequate support soon, moderate forces will suffer, we will lose our ability to deliver a democratic future for our country and the extremists will win.

Second, **coordinate with our forces on the ground**. The US-led strikes on ISIS are failing to have the required impact in part because they are not coordinating with forces on the ground. Syrians know the terrain. They know the communities. They are the front line against extremism and they need to be supported and utilized. And our forces and those trying to administer moderate government on the ground need to be protected from aerial attack by the regime – so we need some form of no-fly zone.

Third, **isolate and weaken the Assad regime**. Assad's brutal dictatorship has no place in the international community. And a political solution will only be possible when the regime is under threat. We need more sanctions on sectors such as specialized fuels, and Russian funders and suppliers. The EU has an opportunity to adopt these measures on Monday in Brussels;

Fourth, **address the humanitarian crisis**. States are showing extraordinary generosity. But, unfortunately, many needs remain unmet. The World Food Program is struggling to keep its food voucher program going for refugees. States must meet the pledges that they have made. The importance of these types of programs for displaced Syrians cannot be understated, and they are needed now more than ever. And, on the ground, cross-border delivery is key. The Security Council provided a mandate for such delivery so that 3.5 million Syrians could be reached. But UN agencies have not used the authorization. Where the UN can't or won't act, states must work with NGOs to deliver aid outside the UN framework.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Many governments have tried to do some of what I have described, but not at the scale it needs to happen, and not in coordination. Tackling a problem as serious as the current crisis in Syria requires deliberate intent. It requires states to take meaningful, comprehensive action to stop this conflict and support our people. With the necessary will and resources, I believe we can still achieve this.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing your comments and hope that this is the beginning of a fruitful discussion.