

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

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[Back](#)

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*Monsieur le Président du Conseil des Droits de l'Homme*

We are on the cusp of the 11th grim year of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. With the anniversary of this lamentable and preventable ten-year tragedy only four days away, Syria remains a tinderbox. While the March 2020 ceasefire resulted in a significant decline in hostilities, it has only been a relative reduction from peaks of suffering inflicted at the beginning of last year. Many would have seen little difference in their daily lives, and the country remains far from a safe environment for civilians. Idlib and Hama governorates have seen continuous skirmishes, with shelling and counter shelling between Government forces and opposition armed groups.

The use of improvised explosive devices endures, with civilian-populated areas, such as markets and residential areas, primary targets, resulting in the indiscriminate killing and maiming of men, women, girls and boys.

Airstrikes by a multitude of parties across Syria have continued purportedly aimed at military targets. Several such attacks resulted in damage to civilian infrastructure, in civilian casualties and deaths, including the deaths of humanitarian workers in the northwest of the country and in Deir-ez-Zor.

In the south of the country, particularly in Dara'a, targeted killing of civilians continue. Targeted killings have also been carried out in Aleppo and parts of Deir-Ez Zor Governorate. ISIL has claimed responsibility for a number of those incidents. Despite their territorial defeat, the group continues to have a significant impact on the daily lives of civilians.

As prominent in recent months, as it has been in the past, is the issue of arbitrary detention across Syria. Our report released just 10 days ago, shows how the Government of Syria's forces arbitrarily arrested, tortured and summarily executed detainees. They have committed both war crimes and crimes against humanity. Other warring parties

perpetrated similar war crimes in their detention facilities – with UN-designated terrorist organizations such as HTS and ISIL also engaging in crimes against humanity. ISIL also carried out a genocide against the Yazidis, in part through detention.

Tens of thousands of people who were detained remain disappeared. The Government on a massive scale, but also other parties on a smaller scale, are deliberately prolonging the suffering of hundreds of thousands of family members by withholding information. We urge the Government of Syria, and all other parties subjecting individuals to disappearances, to take urgent steps to reveal their fate. Member states involved in the conflict must also increase efforts to convince the parties they support to share information about the missing.

A decade in, and as our report released in February so clearly shows, it is the civilians - children, women and men - of Syria who have suffered the brunt of this conflict.

Terrorist groups proliferated and inflicted their ideology on the people, preying particularly on women, girls and boys, as well as ethnic and religious minorities and dissenting civilians. Pro-Government forces have deliberately and repeatedly targeted hospitals and medical facilities, decimating a medical sector prior to the arrival of the most catastrophic global pandemic in a century. The provision of humanitarian aid has been instrumentalised, diverted and hampered – even with Security Council authorisation.

Half the pre-war population has been displaced, many repeatedly. Numerous Member States have intervened directly and indirectly, including through the imposition of unilateral sectoral sanctions that have dramatically worsened an already dire economic situation. There are basic human rights and humanitarian needs – food, water, health care, and education – that must be met for all, regardless of which entity controls a given territory.

Military solutions in Syria by all parties have led to a decade of death, denial and destruction. Opportunistic foreign funding, arms and other support to the warring parties poured fuel on this fire that the world has been content to watch burn.

Warring parties' have willingly prioritized territorial control and minimized risks to their own while disregarding the lives and the rights of civilians. As a result they have cumulatively committed almost every crime against humanity listed in the Rome statute and nearly every war crime applicable in a non-international armed conflict.

There is a dire need for international attention to address the grim situation of impunity that prevails in the Syrian conflict. Victims' demands for justice and accountability are a central component of any durable peace. Efforts to ensure accountability for the crimes being committed are being partly addressed through third state national judicial systems. The verdict recently handed down by a court in Koblenz, Germany exemplifies this. The Netherlands and Canada have requested formal negotiations with Syria under the UN Convention against Torture. We commend the great courage and ingenuity of Syrian

victims and activists, and the determination of some Member States to bring cases where they can. In this context we also acknowledge the contribution of the IIIM, and its head Catherine Marchi-Uhel, in the efforts to ensure that accountability prevails.

But it is not enough, it is only a beginning, after a decade of widely known abuse. More must be done to free the arbitrarily detained, locate and identify the missing, restore vital civil documentation, safeguard rights in relation to housing, land and property and provide psychosocial support among other issues.

As we speak, over 6 million Syrian civilians, including 2.5 million children, live in internal displacement with limited access to basic human necessities, in cities reduced to rubble, subject to predation by a constellation of armed actors, and in fear of being arrested, tortured or killed. It is far past time to finally put Syrians first – and expend every effort to support a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the conflict, beginning with an immediate nation-wide ceasefire.

-ENDS

**Statement by Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd  
Member of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry  
on the Syrian Arab Republic**

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11 March 2021

*Excellencies, Colleagues,*

We thank all of you for your thoughtful statements and questions today. I wish to close by highlighting a few key observations and recommendations.

We reiterate in the strongest terms that more must be done to free the arbitrarily detained, and to locate and identify the missing. Leaving hundreds of thousands of families in anguish is inhuman and degrading. Releasing information on their whereabouts and well-being, or the location of their mortal remains, if they have died, would show basic respect for the inherent dignity of the families. This is an issue that affects all Syrians, and it should be prioritized as a fundamental humanitarian imperative.

Furthermore, when the Commission speaks about innovation needed to address areas of restorative justice, we are referring to measures as follows: to support families, demobilize child fighters, provide holistic psycho-social support (in particular for children and victims of sexual and gender-based violence), preserving and restoring vital civil documentation, among other issues.

While the world is experiencing a great deal of collective fatigue from COVID-19, and enduring seemingly intractable conflicts, it is important to bring these discussions before the Human Rights Council, and to ensure that the conflict inflicted upon Syrians remains on the agenda of the international community.

Thank you.

[Back](#)