

Speech by Khaled Khoja, President Of The Syrian National Coalition Delivered at the Fleeing Assad's Barrel Bombs Event at UNGA 70

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Speech

“Original in Arabic”

Khaled Khoja

President of the Syrian Coalition

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I would like to thank the Mission of Luxembourg for organizing this important event. And the other distinguished panelists – His Excellency Jean Asselborn, Raed Saleh and Ken Roth – for taking the time to give their essential perspectives.

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

For four-and-a-half years the world has witnessed the brutalisation of a nation by its own so-called government. Peaceful protests in Syria were met by force. At every opportunity, the Assad regime escalated the means of oppression – torture, snipers, tank fire, artillery, ballistic missiles, air-delivered munitions, naval mines, sarin, chlorine. And now barrel bombs.

The targets of this horrific use of force have been clear from the start – civilians. There has never been an attempt to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Two-thirds of civilian deaths are now caused by Assad's aerial bombardment. And 95 percent of everyone killed by Assad's air strikes are civilians.

Let me repeat that – 95 percent civilian. You think that the regime is attacking the Islamic State? Or even armed opposition groups? Think again. The statistics tell a different story.

What is happening in Syria is an extermination. One that is taking place in full view of the world – on our television screens, on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and through the personal stories of the 4.5 million refugees.

Nobody can claim that they do not know what is happening in Syria. Nobody can deny that the regime is responsible for the majority of civilian deaths.

We hear frequently that the international community has learned the lessons of the past. Of Bosnia. Of Rwanda.

But the international community has learned nothing. The mistakes of the very recent past are being repeated. Nothing has been done to stop the extermination of our population.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The failure to hold the principal perpetrators of the killing to account and to enforce multiple Security Council resolutions has had predictable consequences.

The scale and rate of death has risen continuously. The refugee crisis has put the region under enormous stress. And now Europe is feeling the impact. ISIS is gaining recruits and winning ground. Its reach is expanding and it is a direct security threat to the west.

The Syria crisis is a truly global problem.

One look at the statistics tells you that the principal driver of the two biggest challenges that the international community faces – the refugee crisis and the threat of extremism – is the indiscriminate killing of civilians, mainly through air attack.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It does not need to be this way. There is still time to avoid another Rwanda.

The facts and the statistics lead to an obvious conclusion. The first step to ending the crisis in Syria and alleviating its consequences is to stop the Syrian regime's aerial bombardment.

The means to do so are clear. The international community needs to enforce a no-fly zone in Syria.

To many western policy makers it has become a dirty word. To be avoided at all costs.

But to millions of Syrians it represents hope. Life-saving action. The start of a solution. And the end of fear.

Syrians are asking for a no-fly zone. And the international community should listen – because it is the only policy that begins to deal with the epic consequences of the Syrian crisis.

First, it will save lives. Some 200 civilians a week will be spared death.

Second, it will alleviate the humanitarian impact of the crisis and slow the refugee exodus from inside Syria. To our refugees in generous neighbouring countries, it will signal hope that the international community is finally serious about resolving the crisis. And that hope is key to encouraging fewer of them to leave for Europe.

Third, it will make the fight against ISIS more effective. Bombing ISIS in isolation has been a disaster. In the absence of an effort to protect civilians, it has only served to fuel extremism. Every barrel bomb dropped is a gift to ISIS's recruiters.

Stopping the bombing will also free up more of our moderate forces on the ground to combat ISIS. At the same time, it will encourage more people to join the fight against ISIS. But until our civilians are protected, the priority will be preventing the regime's attacks. The regime is responsible for seven times as many civilian deaths as ISIS.

Finally, a no-fly zone will increase the potential for the managed political transition that was agreed in the Geneva Communiqué. Denied its most prolific battlefield weapons – aerial bombardment – the regime will have no choice but to negotiate.

And, crucially, the regime's foreign backers – Iran, Hizballah and Russia – will know that efforts to bolster the regime are futile. A political solution will be their only choice too. This is far preferable to allowing Russia to continue its escalation. To get tied up for years in Syria. To take part directly in war crimes. And to take casualties. When ISIS inevitably kills some of the Russian occupiers, it will further fuel recruitment to its ranks.

It is surely best to send a strong signal now – through action – that will prevent these inevitable outcomes.

Most Syrians see Russia as an occupier that only serves to improve the regime's capability to commit crimes against humanity and war crimes against its people. It fuels extremism and weakens international efforts, led by Staffan de Mistura, to arrive at a political solution based on the Geneva Communiqué that the Russian government itself helped to author. We ask the international community, through the United Nations, to condemn this foreign intervention and we ask all foreign forces of Russia, Iran, Hizballah and ISIS to leave Syrian soil.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

No Syrian wants to ask for foreign help. Give us an alternative and we will take it. But the truth is that there is no credible alternative that works.

Only a ban on the regime's aerial bombardment, properly enforced and backed up by the prudent and limited threat – and if necessary use – of force will begin to enable the resolution of the Syrian crisis and its global consequences.

For your own good – if not the good of Syrians – stop creating obstacles. Take the action that will save lives, alleviate suffering, stem the refugee flow, make the fight against extremism effective, and improve the prospect of a political solution.

Help us achieve the peace we deserve. Help yourselves maintain the stability that you are so fortunate to enjoy.

Thank you.