



There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria

Urgent need for an all-inclusive political peace process

On 5 February 2015, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic published a report addressed to the Human Rights Council in session from 2 to 27 March 2015 (item 4). The conduct of an ever-increasing number of actors is characterised by a complete lack of adherence to the norms of international law. Civilians continue to suffer. Human rights are being violated to a shocking degree. A political solution is still absent. The unrest and war in Syria started in the city of Dara in March 2011. This article summarizes the latest facts taken from this report¹ and from additional sources.

Throughout the last three years, the Syrian government has made liberal use of barrel bombs. These makeshift explosive weapons have caused thousands of civilian casualties. Barrel bombs are regularly dropped on crowded areas, such as bakery lines, transportation hubs, apartment buildings and markets. Aid distributions have also been targeted. In 2013, Pax Christi International launched a Lenten Campaign "Bread is Life"², based on the use of these barrel bombs attacking bakeries. Throughout the duration of the violence, government forces have relied on paramilitary groups and militias, initially the *shabbiha*, and now the National Defence Force. It has benefitted from the interventions of foreign fighters, including Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias.

The armed opposition makes up the Free Syrian Army (FSA). While increasingly organised armed groups identified themselves as FSA, it remains unclear whether the FSA leadership, based in Turkey, had effective command and control over ground forces. After 2012, hundreds of groups of varying sizes emerged. The multiplicity of actors exacerbated the violence and further endangered civilian life. The first foreign fighters came from Libya in 2011. Since then, thousands of extremist backers and foreign fighters have come from several countries, including European and other Arabic countries.

An extreme anti-government armed group is the Jabhat Al-Nusra that has flourished as the conflict continues. In April 2013, after the breakdown of the alliance with Jabhat Al-Nusra, we have seen the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS). ISIS is well-organised and has extensive territory in Syria and Iraq, posing a significant threat to peace and security. In June 2014, ISIS proclaimed itself a "caliphate". Meanwhile, they have gained control over significant economic resources and have a stable source of funding. ISIS inflicts severe penalties against those who transgress or refuse to accept their self-proclaimed rule. This includes hundreds of public executions, mainly of males, followed by the display of bodies in an effort to terrorise and force the submission of civilian communities living under their control. They have carried out executions of captured soldiers and fighters from other armed groups.

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>

² <http://www.paxchristi.net/news/bread-life-fast-just-peace-syria/436#sthash.CTCfgpoz.dpbs>

Minorities have been forced to either assimilate or flee. Christian churches and Shia shrines in its areas of control have been destroyed.

Furthermore, many facts from unknown perpetrators exist as well. For instance, in Al-Ghouta, significant quantities of sarin were used causing mass casualties. The evidence available concerning the nature, quality and quantity of the agents used indicated that the perpetrators likely had access to the chemical weapons stockpile of the Syrian military, as well as the expertise and equipment necessary to safely manipulate large amounts of chemical agents.

Civilians have no protection

The human cost of the ongoing conflict in Syria is immeasurable. The Syrian State has manifestly failed to protect its citizens from mass atrocities. War crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed on a massive scale. Many Syrians have suffered multiple violations and abuses from different actors. The scale of human suffering has grown as the conflict has escalated. Protection is a legal obligation.

The government has employed a strategy of controlling the population, combining long-lasting sieges with continuous air and ground bombardment. Civilians are targeted on the basis of their perceived opposition to the government. Humanitarian aid has been instrumentalised for military gain. In many cases, aid to civilians living in areas under non-State armed group control is not delivered. The conditions imposed by armed groups on the delivery of humanitarian assistance use civilian suffering as a retaliatory measure.

As the conflict has escalated, males of fighting age have emerged as the main targets of violence. Some 85 % of the documented victims are male. Boys and men are at constant risk of being targeted or instrumentalised by the parties in the conflict. Minors have been recruited and used by all parties to the conflict, at times systematically. With Syrian men killed, disappeared or unable to move for fear of arrest at checkpoints, there has been a drastic increase of female-headed households. Women and girls are the victims of sexual violence.

Children are also forced to be engaged in the conflict. Meanwhile, some 5,000 schools have been destroyed which means a decline in children's education. Some children who have been displaced or sought refuge in neighbouring States have been out of school for two or three years, increasing the risk of radicalisation among adolescent youth. Children have been recruited, trained and used in active combat roles. ISIS has instrumentalised and abused children on a scale not seen before in the Syrian conflict. It has established "cub camps" across areas under its control, where children are taught how to use weapons and trained to be deployed as suicide bombers. More than half of Syrian school-age children, up to 2.4 million, are out of school as a consequence of the occupation, destruction and insecurity of schools.

More facts about violations of basic human rights are reported. For instance regarding the situation of detainees, the sick and the wounded persons, persons with disabilities as a consequence of an increased use of landmines and improvised explosive devices by all parties to the conflict. The health care system has collapsed and many hospitals can no longer function. Violence targeting humanitarian workers and facilities continues to obstruct the efforts of humanitarian agencies to deliver aid to those Syrians most in need. Furthermore,

humanitarian aid workers who want to protect civilians are attacked and human rights defenders put in detention. The parties in conflict continue to conduct hostilities in an indiscriminate, often disproportionate and unlawful manner. Pax Christi International, as a faith-based organisation, is especially concerned about religious courts operating in areas under the control of non-State armed groups, who fail to operate in a manner consistent with international standards, resulting in miscarriages of justice. Similar concerns go to forced confessions and the use of torture in obtaining information.

Internally displaced persons and refugees

Since the beginning of the conflict, more than 10 million Syrians have fled their homes. This amounts to nearly half of the country's population; now deprived of their basic rights to shelter and adequate housing, security and human dignity. More than 3 million people, most of them women and children, have fled the country. Most of them stay in neighbouring countries: Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, as well as in North Africa. A further 6.5 million people are believed to be internally displaced. An estimated 10.8 million are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, with 4.6 million living under siege or in hard-to-access areas. Palestinians in Syria have emerged as a particularly vulnerable group. More than half a million Palestine refugees are directly affected. Nowhere can they seek refuge. 95 % of them are in continuous need of humanitarian aid.³

Accountability

The armed conflict has been characterised by massive, recurrent violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that demand urgent international and national action. This was recognised by the Security Council in its resolution 2139 (2014), in which the council stressed the need to end impunity and reaffirmed the need to bring perpetrators to justice. Nevertheless, no concrete measures are yet in place to ensure accountability.

No political solution achieved

Several peace plans have been presented and discussed. The conflict should be resolved politically. But the prospects for such a solution have been further complicated by the multiplication and fragmentation of armed actors on the ground. But almost nobody is acting on this. The only perspective today is the current step-by-step approach adopted by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General Staffan de Mistura that addresses the fragmentation of the conflict by focussing on a localised freeze of hostilities in Aleppo city. It emphasizes a bottom-up approach to resolving the conflict through the reinforcement of localised agreements. Such a local process, in addition to confidence-building measures could reduce hostilities at least locally and improve humanitarian conditions.

Critical financial and military assistance injected by different States and non-State actors into the conflict has fuelled the warring parties' unwillingness to compromise as they continued to believe that they could prevail militarily. This is done to the advantage of hard-liners on all sides. Extremist groups are dominating over the "moderates." At the same time we see the spread of extreme (religious) ideologies and an increased regionalisation of the conflict. Extremism and terrorism proliferate daily.

³ <http://www.unrwa.org/>

Pax Christi International supports the following policy lines

- Ending the war and saving lives should be the top priority.
- Stopping all weapon deliveries to all parties involved in the conflict.⁴
- Stopping the use of barrel bombs, land mines and explosive remnants of war.
- Stopping the funding of conflicting parties.
- Ending the impunity. Bringing the perpetrators to justice.
- Tackling the root causes and promoting social inclusion and peaceful alternatives to violent narratives.
- Giving effective protection and assistance to civilians, especially to the most vulnerable. Providing the necessary humanitarian aid.
- Ending all forms of unlawful recruitment of children or their use in hostilities.
- Guaranteeing the freedom of religion and belief. Protecting the minority's rights.
- Sharing the burden and responding to the growing needs of refugees and internal displaced persons.
- Returning to internationally-mediated negotiations and agreeing on a political solution to the conflict. The Security Council should urgently agree on and implement a well-defined and all-inclusive peace process.
- Supporting the non-violent peace actors and human rights defenders. Encouraging local pockets of stability. Support local civil society is a necessity.
- Strengthening the liberal religious leaders who promote good relations between different religious groups.

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⁴ <http://www.paxchristi.net/news/call-action-stop-arms-deliveries-syria/3458#sthash.Jsu5bqIM.dpbs>