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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2014 - Section XII: Human Rights in Countries of Concern - Syria

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Contents

1. [Give your comments and questions about the report](#)

This section covers human rights relating to Syria only. For human rights concerns relating to ISIL, see “Case Study: ISIL” on page 55. The conflict in Syria worsened in 2014. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 76,000 were killed, taking the overall total since the start of the conflict to more than 200,000. Continued conflict led to some of the most appalling human rights and humanitarian conditions in the world, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, denial of access to justice, strict limits on freedom of expression, and persecution of women and minorities. High levels of violence continued throughout the country, particularly in Northern Syria and around the suburbs of Damascus, resulting in deaths, injuries and displacement of civilians. There were numerous examples of violations of international humanitarian law in Syria, where the armed conflict has lasted nearly four years. The indiscriminate use of weapons by the regime showed no sign of abating in 2014. Regime actions included: indiscriminate bombardment by air and artillery of densely-populated civilian areas (between October and November, regime forces dropped hundreds of barrel bombs in Aleppo, Hasakeh, rural Damascus, Dar’a, Idlib and Hama governorates); the use of chemical weapons; the use of siege and starvation tactics against civilians; denial of humanitarian access; the targeting of communities based on their religious beliefs; and detention of thousands of civilians in appalling conditions, with reports of torture and extrajudicial killings. The delivery of humanitarian assistance remained extremely challenging due to violence and insecurity, shifting conflict lines, and obstructive administrative procedures put in place by the Syrian regime. There is evidence that extremist armed opposition groups have breached international humanitarian law. They have used explosive weapons in populated areas, including mortars and car bombs and, at times, cut water and electricity supplies to civilian areas, exacerbating an already dire situation. There is also evidence of arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings and the targeting of minority groups.

Overall, we assess that the vast majority of human rights and humanitarian law violations and abuses in 2014 were committed in a systematic way by the Syrian Government Forces and associated military groups.

We believe it is important for a moderate opposition to be able to exist in Syria, and we are providing a range of nonlethal assistance. The recipients of this assistance are carefully selected to ensure that assistance is not being given to those involved in extremist activities or human rights abuses.

In 2014, the UK's response to the crisis was to increase support for the moderate opposition and put more pressure on Assad in order to make progress towards a political settlement, which included our support for the Geneva II peace talks.

We also worked to alleviate suffering through an extensive humanitarian programme. In addition, we played a key role in the removal and destruction of the regime's stocks of chemical weapons and supported a range of civil society activists

inside Syria, with the eventual aim of holding those who have committed violations and abuses of international law to account.

However, this activity was set against a backdrop of a worsening conflict and an intransigent Syrian regime, which led to a deteriorating human rights situation overall. We have worked through international partners to seek accountability for those responsible for violations and abuses of human rights and humanitarian law, and to press for humanitarian access for those in need. The UK co-sponsored a number of international resolutions, including the UN General Assembly 3rd Committee resolution in November, and UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) 2165 and 2191. We consistently called for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court and supported efforts in the UN Security Council to achieve this. However, these efforts were blocked by China and Russia. We also supported projects inside Syria, aimed at documenting and addressing violations and abuses of human rights and humanitarian law, for future potential prosecutions. In 2015, we will continue efforts to find a political settlement to the conflict. Such a settlement is the only way to reduce suffering, violence and abuses in Syria sustainably. We will also continue to support efforts to document violations and abuses, to highlight these including through international fora, and to press for accountability for those responsible.

0.1 Freedom of Expression and Assembly

In 2014, the guarantees in the Syrian constitution for freedom of expression and assembly continued to be systematically violated by the regime. State media was tightly controlled and could not deviate from the approved narrative. Protests were routinely met with extreme levels of violence by the regime. Journalists remained a target of both regime and extremist groups. A report, commissioned by the Committee to Protect Journalists, issued in December, recorded that at least 17 journalists were killed in Syria in 2014, taking the overall number of journalists killed since the conflict began in 2011 to 79. The growing death toll led to Syria becoming the world's deadliest country for journalists for the third year in a row. Human Rights Defenders

The activities of human rights defenders (HRDs) were severely restricted. They faced a high risk of arbitrary arrest or detention. Enforced disappearances were targeted at those whom the regime considers to be its enemies, including HRDs. The Commission of Inquiry (COI) considers enforced disappearances to constitute a crime against humanity. There were also cases of prominent activists being taken hostage. On 12 November, regime security forces arrested high-profile Syrian activist

Louay Hussein; a further example of the regime's readiness to deny basic rights, freedoms and due process to the thousands detained.

Extremist groups also continued to hold large numbers of activists. Aid workers were targeted for kidnap in 2014, including from a range of Syrian and regional nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), who were working for the benefit of the Syrian people.

UK-funded projects worked to build the capacity of HRDs, civil society groups, media, local councils, and others to support transitional justice and good governance, and the documentation of violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law.

0.2 Access to Justice and the Rule of Law

Impunity prevailed across Syria with limited access to fair, independent and impartial dispensation of justice, and numerous accounts of enforced disappearances were documented. The COI has reported that the families of many of those "disappeared" by the regime are often too afraid to approach the authorities to inquire about relatives, and have been denied any information about their loved ones, or confronted with administrative hurdles seemingly aimed at deterring them from searching further.

The Syrian Commission for Transitional Justice released a report in cooperation with the Syrian National Coalition in which it highlighted the crime of enforced disappearance. The commission recorded more than 60,000 cases of enforced disappearances from the beginning of the crisis – these include 1,511 women and 1,348 children.

0.3 Death Penalty

The secretive nature of the Syrian authorities meant that it was unclear how many people were executed in 2014. However, there were widespread reports of executions and deaths in detention. In January 2014, UK law firm Carter-Ruck and Co published a report which examined a sample of over 55,000 photographs purporting to show the bodies of over 11,000 people detained, visibly tortured, and killed by the regime. It was not possible to determine whether these are extrajudicial killings.

Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment Syria has been a party to the UN Convention against Torture since 2004. But the COI reported that the regime continued to commit torture and other ill-treatment at intelligence agencies' locations, prisons, and military hospitals. Air Force Intelligence has been consistently identified as among the worst perpetrators of torture, although Military Security and other arms of the state were also involved.

Torture techniques include beatings, sexual violence, and the deprivation of food, water, sleep and medical care. The use of torture and other ill-treatment has been used as part of the siege strategy, employed to contain the local population, and is clearly used by the regime as a matter of state policy. There has also been a rise of reported deaths in custody.

The report by Carter-Ruck and Co (see above) states that investigators found that the evidence was credible, and constituted evidence of torture by agents of the Syrian regime. The COI reported that

some opposition and extremist groups were using torture, but not on the same scale, or as systematically.

0.4 Conflict and Protection of Civilians

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that more than 200,000 people had been killed since the conflict began. The majority of deaths are as a result of indiscriminate or disproportionate shelling of civilian areas by the regime. Regime forces continued to use barrel bombs in densely populated areas, especially in Aleppo, Idlib and Deraa provinces. Between February and June, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented 650 major new sites damaged by barrel bombs in Aleppo alone.

The findings of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact Finding Mission corroborated allegations that the regime continued to use chemical weapons, in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The OPCW report notes that chlorine was used “systematically and repeatedly” in a number of incidents which took place in northern Syria in the spring. Witnesses of these attacks consistently confirmed the presence of helicopters at the times of the attacks, leaving little doubt as to regime culpability.

The regime and some opposition groups deliberately obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid to particular areas. We played a principal role in efforts to improve humanitarian access. In February, our efforts helped the adoption of UNSCR 2139, which demanded unhindered humanitarian access for UN agencies and their partners, including across conflict zones. This continued to be flouted over the months that followed, particularly by the regime.

In July, with strong UK backing, UNSCR 2165 was adopted to allow cross-border aid into Syria, using four specific border crossing points: Bab al-Salam; Bab al-Hawa; Al Yarubiyah; and Ar Ramtha – overriding the need for the regime’s consent. In December, UNSCR 2191 renewed the decisions taken in UNSCR 2165 for a further 12 months.

There appeared to be a deliberate attempt by the Syrian regime to use starvation as a method of warfare, which would constitute a breach of international humanitarian law. The UN estimated in November that some 212,000 people were trapped in areas under siege, with more than 185,000 of those besieged by the regime.

The number of refugees who have fled Syria stood at over 3.3 million by the end of 2014. Meanwhile, there were 12.2 million people within Syria in need of humanitarian aid, an increase of 2.9 million on last year’s figure. The number of internally displaced persons reached 7.6 million. As well as leading to unimaginable suffering in Syria, this placed a major strain on surrounding countries, which faced an enormous influx of vulnerable refugees. The UK helped to lead the international response to the humanitarian crisis, pledging £100 million over the course of the year to support emergency, life-saving humanitarian interventions both within Syria itself and in neighbouring countries. This brought our total commitment to £700 million by the end of 2014, more than the UK has given to any previous humanitarian crisis.

0.5 Freedom of Religion or Belief

The continued brutality of the Syrian regime has radicalised many and stoked sectarian tensions. There was a dramatic increase in attacks on religious personnel and buildings by extremist armed groups. For example, a Christian priest, Father Francis Van der Lugt, was shot dead in Homs in April. Historic churches were used as bases for military operations, and others desecrated, looted or destroyed.

Extremist groups such as ISIL have undermined the right to freedom of religion or belief in Syria. For example, ISIL burned down an Armenian church in Tel Abyad and destroyed a Greek Catholic church in al Raqqa governorate.

0.6 Women's Rights

Syria fell further down the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index and was ranked 139 out of 142 in their 2014 report. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, it ranked 142 out of 142.

Under-reporting made it difficult to make an estimate of the extent of sexual violence. Nonetheless, the COI and others made it clear that both sexual violence and the fear surrounding the issue have been consistent features of the conflict. Government forces used rape in many settings, but the COI suggested that it is most common in prisons and detention centres. This may indicate that its use is institutionalised. The National Coalition estimated that the number of women detainees in regime detention centres doubled over 2014. Women held in regime detention facilities were raped, and threatened with rape or being displayed to male inmates. There were also reports that regime forces arrested and detained women to force surrender, information or confessions from their male relatives. The COI's August report referred to sexual violence committed by armed opposition groups; for example, taking women hostage for use in prisoner exchanges. However, they did not reach the scale of those committed by the regime. The UK integrated the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative into a range of programmes in Syria. We promoted female roles in policing and civil defence work, and supported the empowerment of women in programmes with Syrian local councils and in gender-based violence programmes within our humanitarian programme.

The COI reported that lack of access to medical care affected the prenatal and postnatal health of women and their children. Women in labour were not allowed to go through regime checkpoints, and were forced to give birth under often dangerous circumstances, without pain medication or sterile conditions.

Many of the most vulnerable households in Syria are supported by women, who often lack necessary assets to meet their needs and those of their children. The UK provided mental health services and psychosocial support, safe spaces, and reproductive health services. Our partners are training healthcare workers to provide appropriate care to rape survivors. We are also providing financial and livelihoods support for vulnerable Syrian women to help reduce their risk of exploitation and forced marriage, while contributing to prevention by raising awareness of girls' and women's rights, and engaging men and boys.

The UK has been one of the most prominent advocates of women's participation in the political process. We helped ensure that women were represented in both regime and opposition delegations at the Geneva II Peace Conference, as well as helping to build the institutional capacity of independent women's organisations.

0.7 Minority Rights and Racism

Estimates from the Minority Rights Group suggested that, in 2011, Syria was 74% Sunni Muslim, 11% Alawite, 10% Christian, 3% Druze and 2% other Muslim. Syria also has a large Kurdish minority which is estimated at 10-15% of the population, as well as other, smaller ethnic minorities, including Turkmen, Assyrians and Armenians. HRW have estimated that 300,000 Kurds in Syria are stateless because of changes to nationality laws in the 1960s. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that the number of stateless Kurds may now have fallen to 160,000; however, this is because many have fled the war. Because of the conflict, babies born to Syrian refugee women living in Lebanon and Jordan could end up stateless.

Since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, ethnic and sectarian tensions have been heightened, as some minorities have been perceived as supporting the regime, and others discriminated against. The regime has sought to exacerbate these tensions and divisions by claiming that the majority Sunni opposition is opposed to a pluralistic Syria. This has led to minority communities being singled out. However, in a brutal, lawless conflict, it is often hard to identify for certain whether groups are targeted for sectarian or racist reasons. The UK has provided support to the moderate opposition, who have committed to protect all of Syria's communities. We are also supporting non-governmental efforts to promote dialogue between different ethnic and sectarian groups, with a view to a future political settlement.

0.8 Children's Rights

The conflict had an appalling and severe impact on children in 2014. The UN Secretary General's Annual Report on Children in Armed Conflict report (CAAC) highlighted the use of weaponry and military tactics by Syrian regime forces, which resulted in countless deaths and the maiming of children, and obstructed children's access to education and health services. Children were murdered, tortured and subjected to violence by all parties. There was also evidence of early forced marriage among girls.

The COI reported that regime groups, Kurdish armed groups, and several armed opposition and extremist groups were responsible for the recruitment and use of children in combat and support roles, as well as conducting military operations, including terror tactics, in civilian-populated areas. Extremist groups such as ISIL, Ahrar Al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra also targeted children to use as hostages for use in prisoner exchanges. It also noted widespread reports of children as young as 13 being held and tortured or executed by the regime.

The COI reported that regime sieges resulted in young children suffering severe malnutrition, and that children were detained with adults and subjected to torture. In July, a dozen schools were shelled, leading to the death and wounding of children in several governorates. According to the COI, regime forces also used schools for military purposes. The militarisation of schools and use of children by pro-regime armed groups violates the commitment of Syria to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Over 7.2 million children are in need across the region. An estimated 5.6 million children in Syria are living in dire situations, over 2.5 million children in Syria are not attending school, and over 1.6 million refugee children need access to education. As part of our broader humanitarian effort, we are supporting organisations in Syria and the region for the "No Lost Generation" initiative, which aims to increase support, and protection for Syrian

children. This includes education, psycho-social support, and community-based child protection initiatives.

This publication is part of the [2014 Human Rights and Democracy Report](#).