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Parties to the armed conflicts in Syria committed war crimes, other serious violations of international humanitarian law and gross human rights abuses with impunity. Government and allied Russian forces carried out indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects using aerial bombing and artillery, causing thousands of civilian casualties. There were reports that government forces also used chemical agents. Government forces maintained lengthy sieges that trapped civilians and cut their access to essential goods and services. The authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained thousands, subjecting many to enforced disappearance, prolonged detention and unfair trials, and continued to systematically torture and otherwise ill-treat detainees causing deaths in detention. They also committed unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions. The armed group Islamic State (IS) besieged civilians, carried out direct attacks on civilians and indiscriminate attacks, sometimes reportedly using chemical agents, perpetrated numerous unlawful killings, and subjected thousands of women and girls to sexual slavery and other abuses. Other non-state armed groups indiscriminately shelled and besieged predominantly civilian areas. US-led forces carried out air strikes on IS and other targets, in which hundreds of civilians were killed. By the end of the year, the conflict had caused the deaths of more than 300,000 people, displaced 6.6 million people within Syria and forced 4.8 million people to seek refuge abroad.

Background

The armed conflicts in Syria continued throughout the year with ongoing international participation. Syrian government and allied forces, including Lebanese Hizbullah and other non-Syrian armed groups and militias, controlled much of western Syria and made advances in other contested areas. They were supported by Russian armed forces, which carried out large-scale aerial attacks across Syria, killing and injuring thousands of civilians according to human rights organizations. Some Russian air strikes appeared to be indiscriminate or to amount to direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, which would constitute war crimes.

Non-state armed groups primarily fighting government forces controlled northwestern and other areas, while forces of the Autonomous Administration controlled most of the predominantly Kurdish northern border regions. IS held parts of eastern and central Syria but lost ground during the year.

The UN Security Council remained divided on Syria and unable to secure a path to peace. Efforts made by the UN Special Envoy for Syria to promote peace talks were largely unsuccessful. In February, a Security Council resolution endorsed a cessation of hostilities agreed by Russia and the USA, but it was short-lived. In October, Russia vetoed a draft Security Council resolution calling for an end to aerial attacks on Aleppo city and for unimpeded humanitarian access. After government forces gained control of Aleppo in December, however, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that a ceasefire backed by both Russia and Turkey had been agreed between the

government and some opposition forces, to be followed by new peace negotiations that would commence in January 2017. On 31 December, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution welcoming the new peace effort while also calling for the “rapid, safe and unhindered” delivery of humanitarian aid across Syria.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, monitored and reported on violations of international law committed in Syria although the Syrian government continued to deny it entry to the country.

In December, the UN General Assembly agreed to establish an independent international mechanism to ensure accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria since March 2011.

Armed conflict – violations by Syrian government forces and allies, including Russia

Indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians

Government and allied forces continued to commit war crimes and other serious violations of international law, including direct attacks on civilians and indiscriminate attacks. Government forces repeatedly attacked areas controlled or contested by armed opposition groups, killing and injuring civilians and damaging civilian objects in unlawful attacks. They regularly bombarded civilian areas using explosive weapons with wide-area effects, including artillery shelling and unguided, high-explosive barrel bombs dropped from helicopters. The attacks caused numerous civilian deaths and injuries, including of children.

Government and allied Russian aircraft carried out several apparently deliberate attacks on hospitals, medical centres and clinics and aid convoys, killing and injuring civilians, including medical workers.

As the year progressed, government forces with Russian support increased attacks on eastern Aleppo, hitting residential homes, medical facilities, schools, markets and mosques, killing hundreds of civilians. Russian-made cluster munitions were also scattered across the area, with unexploded munitions posing an ongoing risk to civilians.

Two barrel bombs allegedly containing chlorine gas were dropped by suspected government aircraft on 1 August on two residential neighbourhoods controlled by non-state armed groups in Saraqeb city, Idlib province, reportedly injuring at least 28 civilians.

On 26 October, suspected government or Russian aircraft bombed a school compound in Haas, Idlib governorate, killing at least 35 civilians including 22 children and six teachers.

Sieges and denial of humanitarian access

Government forces maintained prolonged sieges of predominantly civilian areas controlled or contested by armed groups, including in Eastern Ghouta, Mouadhamiyah al-Sham, Madaya, Daraya and, from September, eastern Aleppo. The government sieges exposed civilian residents to

starvation and deprived them of access to medical care and other basic services, while subjecting them to repeated air strikes, artillery shelling and other attacks.

The sieges prevented civilians leaving the area to seek medical care. For example, on 19 March a three-year-old boy reportedly died in al-Waer, in Homs city, after government forces prevented him from leaving the area to receive medical care for a head injury.

On 12 May, government forces prevented a UN humanitarian aid delivery, due to be the first since 2012, from entering Daraya. Government forces fired mortars into a residential area of the town, killing two civilians. In June, government forces allowed two limited convoys to enter Daraya but simultaneously intensified their indiscriminate attacks using barrel bombs, a napalm-like incendiary substance and other munitions, forcing the town's remaining inhabitants to submit to being evacuated in late August.

From July, government forces trapped some 275,000 people in eastern Aleppo, subjecting them to intensified air strikes, including bombing by Russian forces. Suspected government and Russian aircraft bombed a UN/Syrian Arab Red Crescent aid convoy destined for eastern Aleppo on 19 September at Urum al-Kubra, killing at least 18 civilians including aid workers, and destroying aid lorries.

Attacks on medical facilities and workers

Government forces continued to target health facilities and medical workers in areas controlled by armed opposition groups. They repeatedly bombed hospitals and other medical facilities, barred or restricted the inclusion of medical supplies in humanitarian aid deliveries to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, and disrupted or prevented health care provision in these areas by detaining medical workers and volunteers. In June, the NGO Physicians for Human Rights accused government forces and their allies of responsibility for more than 90% of 400 attacks against medical facilities and 768 deaths of medical personnel since March 2011.

The UN reported that 44 health facilities were attacked in July alone. Four hospitals and a blood bank in eastern Aleppo city were struck in aerial attacks on 23 and 24 July. One, a children's hospital, was hit twice in less than 12 hours.

Armed conflict – abuses by armed groups

Non-state armed groups committed war crimes, other violations of international humanitarian law and serious human rights abuses.

Indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians

IS forces carried out direct attacks on civilians as well as indiscriminate attacks in which there were civilian casualties. IS claimed responsibility for a series of suicide and other bomb attacks in the Sayida Zaynab district of southern Damascus, including one on 21 February in which 83 civilians were killed.

IS forces also carried out suspected chemical weapons attacks, including in August and September in northern Syria. Munitions fired by IS at Um Hawsh, near Marea, Aleppo governorate, on 16

September caused blistering and other symptoms common with exposure to mustard agent. Some of those affected were civilians.

The Fatah Halab (Aleppo Conquest) coalition of opposition armed groups repeatedly carried out indiscriminate artillery, rocket and mortar attacks on the Sheikh Maqsoud district of Aleppo city, controlled by Kurdish People's Protection Units known as the YPG, killing at least 83 civilians and injuring more than 700 civilians between February and April. In May, at least four civilians in the area required medical treatment for symptoms that suggested they had been exposed to a chlorine attack.

Armed opposition groups fired imprecise mortars and missiles into government-held western Aleppo, killing at least 14 civilians on 3 November, according to the independent monitoring group Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Unlawful killings

IS forces committed war crimes by summarily killing civilians as well as members of rival armed groups and government forces whom they held prisoner. In areas of al-Raqqa, Deyr al-Zur and eastern Aleppo that it controlled, IS carried out frequent public execution-style killings, including of people they accused of spying, smuggling, adultery and blasphemy.

On 28 July, IS members were reported to have summarily killed at least 25 civilian women, men and children, at Buwayr village near Manbij.

On 19 July, a video published on the internet showed members of the Nour al-Dine al-Zinki Movement ill-treating and then beheading a young male.

Sieges and denial of humanitarian assistance

IS forces besieged and at times indiscriminately shelled government-held neighbourhoods of Deyr al-Zur city. UN agencies and Russian forces repeatedly air-dropped aid into the besieged areas; however, local human rights activists reported that government forces within the besieged areas seized much of the aid intended for civilians.

Abductions

Both IS and other non-state armed groups abducted civilians and held them hostage.

In January, Jabhat al-Nusra abducted at least 11 civilians from their homes in the city of Idleb. Their fate and whereabouts remained undisclosed at the end of the year.

The fate and whereabouts of human rights defender Razan Zaitouneh, her husband Wa'el Hamada, and Nazem Hamadi and Samira Khalil also remained undisclosed following their abduction on 9 December 2013 by unidentified armed men in Duma, an area controlled by Jaysh al-Islam and other armed groups.

There was no news of the fate or whereabouts of human rights defender Abdullah al-Khalil since his abduction by suspected IS members in al-Raqqa city on the night of 18 May 2013.

Armed conflict – air strikes by US-led forces

The US-led international coalition continued its campaign of air strikes begun in September 2014, predominantly against IS but also certain other armed groups in northern and eastern Syria, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra). The air strikes, some of which appeared to be indiscriminate and others disproportionate, killed and injured hundreds of civilians. They included suspected coalition air strikes near Manbij that killed at least 73 civilians at al-Tukhar on 19 July, and up to 28 civilians at al-Ghandoura on 28 July. On 1 December, the US-led coalition was reported to have admitted causing the deaths of 24 civilians near Manbij in July while asserting that its attack had “complied with the law of armed conflict”.

Armed conflict – attacks by Turkish forces

Turkish forces also carried out air and ground attacks in northern Syria targeting IS and Kurdish armed groups. A Turkish air strike reportedly killed 24 civilians near Suraysat, a village south of Jarablus, on 28 August.

Armed conflict – abuses by the PYD-led Autonomous Administration

Forces of the Autonomous Administration, which was led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), controlled most of the predominantly Kurdish northern border regions. In February, YPG forces demolished the houses of dozens of Arab civilians in Tal Tamer, al-Hassakeh governorate, accusing the owners of being IS supporters, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The High Commissioner also reported the forced recruitment of 12 children by the Asayish, Kurdish security forces and the YPG.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, YPG shelling and sniper attacks killed at least 23 civilians in opposition-held areas of Aleppo city between February and April.

Refugees and internally displaced people

Millions of people continued to be displaced by the conflicts. Some 4.8 million people fled Syria between 2011 and the end of 2016, including 200,000 who became refugees during 2016, according to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. In the same six-year period, around 6.6 million others were internally displaced within Syria, half of them children, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The authorities in the neighbouring states of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which hosted nearly all of the refugees (including Palestinians displaced from Syria), restricted the entry of new refugees, exposing them to further attacks and deprivation in Syria. More than 75,000 refugees from Syria crossed by sea or land to Europe; many European and other states failed to accept a fair share of refugees from Syria through resettlement or other safe and legal routes.

Enforced disappearances

Government forces held thousands of detainees without trial, often in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance, adding to the tens of thousands whose fate and whereabouts remained undisclosed following their enforced disappearance by government forces since 2011. They included peaceful critics and opponents of the government as well as family members detained in place of relatives whom the authorities sought.

Those who remained forcibly disappeared included human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his friend Mohamed Thatha, missing since October 2012. Released detainees said they had seen Khalil Ma'touq in government detention but the authorities denied holding the men. Thousands of people, mostly Islamists, remained disappeared since they were detained by Syrian government forces in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees by government security and intelligence agencies and in state prisons remained systematic and widespread. Torture and other ill-treatment continued to result in a high incidence of detainee deaths, adding to the thousands of deaths in custody since 2011.^{[1](#)}

In August the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, an NGO that uses scientific approaches to analyze human rights violations, estimated that there were at least 17,723 deaths in government custody between March 2011 and December 2015, resulting from torture and other ill-treatment.

Unfair trials

The authorities prosecuted some perceived opponents before the Anti-Terrorism Court and the Military Field Court, both of whose proceedings were flagrantly unfair. Judges failed to order investigations into allegations by defendants that they had been tortured or otherwise ill-treated or coerced into making “confessions” that were used as evidence against them at trial.

Unlawful killings

Government and allied forces committed unlawful killings, including extrajudicial executions. On 13 December, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said that government and allied forces had entered civilian homes and committed summary killings as they advanced through east Aleppo and that, according to “multiple sources”, they had killed at least 82 civilians, including 13 children, on 12 December.

Women's rights

On 15 June the independent Commission of Inquiry determined that thousands of Yazidi women and girls were forcibly transferred by IS forces into Syria from Sinjar, Iraq, sold in markets and held in slavery, including sexual slavery. Many women and girls were subjected to sexual violence, rape and other torture. Women and girls caught trying to escape were gang-raped or otherwise tortured or harshly punished; one woman said that the fighter who had bought her killed several of her children and repeatedly raped her after she had tried to flee.

Death penalty

The death penalty remained in force for many offences. The authorities disclosed little information about death sentences and no information on executions.

1. “It breaks the human”: Torture, disease and death in Syria’s prisons ([MDE 24/4508/2016](#))

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