



The Arab Program for Human Rights Activists  
البرنامج العربي لنشطاء حقوق الإنسان

***ANNUAL REPORT ABOUT THE SITUATION IN SYRIA:  
CONDITIONS FOR CIVILIANS, HUMAN RIGHTS  
VIOLATIONS AND BREACHES OF INTERNATIONAL LAW***

COVERING THE PERIOD FROM JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2017

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## **Executive Summary**

The following report examines the circumstances and conditions civilians in Syria had to live in during 2017 and gives an overview over the main violations of international and humanitarian law. By elaborating on their background, the aim of this work is to portray the difficulties and challenges civilians faced during the conflict and to depict the breaches of international law that took place in Syria. The report is thus meant to help the international community and political actors in understanding the detrimental effects of the war on the life of civilians and to offer approaches on how to respond more impactfully to them.

### **Key findings:**

- The majority of violations and breaches of international law were connected to military warfare that rather saw an escalation than de-escalation in the past months. Ending the war is therefore imperative as the situation will otherwise only aggravate more in the near future.
- However, certain violations were not part of conventional warfare, like chemical attacks, sieges and bombings. Their perpetrators need to be pressured by the international community and their actions impartially investigated.
- Civilians face thereby a multitude of difficulties due to war and committed breaches of human rights. They are killed or wounded, displaced from their homes, robbed of their livelihood and live in miserable conditions in make-shift camps. Approaches to improve their situation should comprise more responsibility by the conflict parties for their fate, more funding for aid agencies and more commitment for a peaceful solution to the war.
- Lastly, forced disappearances and oppression of the civil society are flagrant in the whole country. Their cases need to be well documented and put forward to the respective authorities. Without the civil society no sustainable peace can be established, which is why the international community should concentrate its efforts on this issue and include it in all approaches.

## **I. Introduction**

The Syrian Civil War which took its beginning 2011 with peaceful demonstrations during the Arab Spring, escalated gradually to a full-fetched, multi-dimensional conflict that claimed at least 300.000 lives and displaced nearly 13 million people. With the war raging in the whole country for seven years and the participation of a multitude of state and non-state armed actors, the effects of the fighting on civilians were devastating. Urban battles, aerial bombardments, political oppression and the presence of extremist groups contributed to an extremely worrisome situation for the civilian population that was compounded by a general lack of funding for humanitarian aid programs.

Despite significant political and military shifts in recent months, these didn't convert into any kind of improvement for civilians, in fact, the opposite holds true. 2017, the sixth year of the Syrian Civil War, was marked by a sharp increase in casualties and escalation in violence, with 955 killed civilians only in September of that year. It was additionally, according to UNICEF, the deadliest year for children in the whole conflict. As by international law non-combatants must be protected and excluded from any military operation, these high rates of civilian casualties were accompanied by an accumulation of violations of international conventions and human rights.

With all this happening in the seventh year of the conflict, it becomes clear that the Syrian Civil War won't level off in the near future and that therefore propositions and measures on how to protect civilians and to ensure the adherence to international law are vitally needed to mitigating the effects of the war on civilians. This report aims by detailing the situation for civilians in Syria during 2017 at offering an incentive to this end. This will be pursued through depicting the difficulties civilians faced and through giving an overview of the breaches of international law that occurred in Syria. Both serve in order to enable the international community and policy makers to relate to the general conditions of the civilian population and to comprehend the dynamics in place affecting them. Understanding the issues is in this regard the first step in approaching them which is the purpose of this report.

## **II. Civilians in the Syrian Civil War during 2017**

This section will first depict the major events that occurred in Syria in 2017 and eventually outline the impact these had on the civilian population with a focus on international law violations.

### **II.I The Syrian Civil War in 2017: Major events**

The year 2017 cemented the trajectory the Syrian Civil War entered the years before, that is, a further internalization of the conflict with more intervention by foreign actors, a gradual decline of Syrian opposition groups at the expense of the Syrian government and an escalation of the fight against the extremist group Da'esh. All these developments entailed a degradation of the conditions for civilians and resulted in the death of up to 10.000 civilians.

Despite ongoing peace talks in January 2017 that were preceded by a ceasefire for the whole country, fighting took place in various populated areas, most notably around Wadi Barada. The Syrian government undertook there a military campaign to regain access to a water spring that is used to supply the capital Damascus and was previously cut by the rebels controlling it. After the spring was polluted in December 2016, the Syrian military launched their offensive and captured Wadi Barada shortly after. The contamination of the water well, presenting a serious violation of international law, was attributed to both sides.

The military campaign was thereby accompanied by heavy aerial bombardments and lead to the displacement of up to 50.000 civilians. This was in fact a constantly emerging pattern throughout 2017 in Syria, with battles forcing people to leave their homes, threatening their lives and constituted hence a heavy burden for them. A comparable situation unfolded in February, when the Turkish army spearheaded together with allied Syrian opposition forces a major offensive to capture the northern city of al-Bab from Da'esh that expelled at least 30.000 civilians and killed over 400. Subsequent fighting between various actors in Syria lead to similar events which are in contradiction to humanitarian law that requires conflict parties to protect civilians from indiscriminate attacks and save them from unnecessary displacements.

In that regard, most notably the Four Towns Agreement from March that involved the four Syrian cities Madaya, Zabadani, Kfraya and Foua was a disconcerting development. Firstly, as it relocated all of the inhabitants without having the option to stay, while secondly, all four cities were besieged by different armed actors for two

years, leading to food scarcity and severe malnutrition. In addition to this, one transportation bus used to evacuate civilians from Kfraya and Foua, was targeted by a car bomb when it stopped on a roadside, claiming 112 lives, the majority of them children. A similar gruesome event occurred shortly after the evacuation deal, when in April chemical gas was dropped in the village of Khan Sheikhoun, killing over 100 people.

These events represented a drastic escalation in violence and significant breaches of international law, that couldn't be contained even after new peace talks were held that saw the establishment of so-called safe zones. These were set for four areas in Syria and were meant to protect civilians from bombings and military offensives, but proved to be not respected by the conflict parties as air campaigns continued, especially in the excluded parts of the country. Only in Mai 150 civilians were killed in two airstrikes in the eastern Syrian cities of al-Mayadeen and al-Bukamal. These occurred as the fight against Da'esh was intensified, when several conflict parties launched campaigns to conquer territory from the group.

Particularly, the offensive to drive Da'esh out of their self-proclaimed capital Raqqa heavily affected civilians and displaced over 200.000. The urban fighting during the campaign, starting in June, was thereby a serious issue, due to airstrikes and collateral casualties that both were exacerbated by Da'esh's use of civilians as human shields. In that context, 167 civilians were killed by aerial bombardments in the city within a few days in August, while fleeing from the fighting turned out to be very strenuous and the supply situation for refugees proved to be only limited. Similar problems arose during the offensive to re-capture the city of Deir al-Zour from Da'esh.

However, these were only the two biggest military campaigns in 2017, smaller ones which focused on villages were as detrimental to civilian lives, despite being less referenced. Thus, Syria saw a sharp spike in casualties during that period that couldn't be curbed by the establishment of a fifth de-escalation zone in the province of Idlib in September. In fact, shortly after its announcement, up to 150 civilians died in subsequent airstrikes targeting the countryside of Aleppo, Idlib and Hama, with 42 villages hit in only one day. These actions continued also after Da'esh lost most of its presence in Syria and was driven out of all bigger cities throughout November.

This happened as after the campaign against Da'esh, new ones were launched by different actors within the conflict, so that the war didn't calm at all, it rather shifted.

In the end of 2017, new offensives were launched in the suburbs of Damascus, Idlib province and northern parts of the country that unfolded in the first months of 2018.

All in all, according to various estimates, over 10.000 civilians were killed in Syria during 2017, while the number of internally and externally displaced rose to over 11 million and people living in besieged areas was around 400.000 as of September.

## **II.II Violations of human rights and international law in Syria**

These developments aggravated the circumstances for civilians in Syria and incorporated various violations of human rights and international law. Based on the previous description of events that took place in Syria in 2017, they are going to be detailed in the following.

The most dominant pattern throughout the conflict was that whenever military offensives were launched, they yielded disconcerting consequences for civilians. A major factor in this regard lies within the eventual displacement of people, who either fled the fighting or were evacuated. One example can be found in the conquest of Raqqa, during which only from April to June 2017 over 150.000 people were forced to leave their homes. The majority of them ended up in make-shift camps with no adequate supplies or medical care.

Although international laws allows armed actors to order the displacement of civilians due to reasons related to the conflict, it is their responsibility to ensure that they receive a decent and proper treatment. Reports from refugee-camps around Raqqa suggested however the opposite, with camps offering only poor conditions. A related issue were the evacuation deals that saw the relocation of the population in a contested area, like the aforementioned Four Towns Agreement, which was found by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry as partially unlawful.

In addition to forced displacement and the relocation to inadequate camps, another significant violation of international norms consisted in the besiegement of various civilian-populated areas, most notably in Eastern Ghouta. These sieges entailed harsh restrictions on the delivery on humanitarian assistance and hence aggravated the supply situation, constituting therefore a troubling breach of humanitarian law that occurred periodically throughout 2017 in Syria.

These events were indirect consequences of launched offensives, it were however direct military actions as well that violated international norms. Aerial bombardments,

the usage of artillery and urban fighting claimed a heavy death toll among civilians and questioned whether the humanitarian imperative to protect the lives of non-combatants was fully applied. At the same time, reports suggest that at several incidents conflict parties used non-combatants as human shields. Following this, civilians repeatedly came under crossfire on various occasions in Syria which explains the high death toll with over 10.000 killed in 2017.

Furthermore, as another direct impact of the fighting, the warfare destroyed or damaged the homes or working places of many people, forcing them thus to relocate and leading to a loss of critical income. Widespread military offensives contributed therefore to the staggering rise of internally and externally displaced people in Syria, counting over 11 million for 2017, while according to numbers of the UN, 13.5 million were in need of humanitarian assistance after losing their livelihood. These numbers are in direct relation to military offensives, which makes the conflict parties responsible for them.

With regards to violations of international norms via military actions, an extraordinary breach consisted in the usage of chemical weapons in Syria. Apart of the before-mentioned attack on Khan Sheikhoun, a variety of other cases were documented, in which chemical substances and nerve agents were used against civilians, constituting a horrendous violation of international law. The vast majority of the attacks were perpetrated by the Syrian military, which staged assaults against civilian-populated areas multiple times throughout the conflict. These happened in a manner, which has been described as systematic and a mean of psychological warfare by observers.

Another important issue concerned bombing and suicide attacks that targeted non-combatants, like the incident during the Four Towns Agreement. Some of them had thereby a sectarian background, as one bombing at a religious shrine that killed over 40 people. They were mostly conducted by Da'esh and to a smaller extent by extremist opposition forces, aiming directly at terrorizing the public and sowing ruptures in the society.

Another major burden on the lives of civilians that accounted for a serious violation of human rights were arbitrarily arrests and forced disappearances, as it happened throughout the country on a regular base. Only in 2017, according to estimations, over 4.000 people were detained, while the number of disappeared ranked in the tens of thousands. In addition to that, demonstrations were suppressed and protestors

imprisoned in several cases. This affected political activists and journalists who spoke out against the authorities and led to a very restricted environment beset by outspread oppression in the country.

The main perpetrators of these acts were thereby the Syrian security forces who stifled dissents and any form of opposition through arbitrary arrests, mistreatment in prison facilities and systematic torture. In that regard, many families are left clueless about the faith of their loved ones who disappeared months to years ago.

### **II.III Recommendations for the international community**

Based on the elaborations on the breaches of international law and human rights in Syria, this section will outline recommendations for political actors and the international community on how to react to them.

A substantial portion of the depicted violations were in direct relation to warfare. Aerial campaigns and usage of artillery, destruction of the cities with the perishing of livelihoods and displacement were all major factors that had a severe impact on civilians, violating their human rights either directly or indirectly. Pursuing therefore a non-military solution to the war that puts an end to the fighting is the first and most important imperative for the international community. Only an established peace can prevent these from taking place.

However, there are caveats to this: While displacement and civilian casualties in the course of military offensives may be covered by international law under certain circumstances and can therefore merely be stopped by an end of hostilities, other raised issues require a separate dealing. The usage of chemical weapons and bombing attacks are by no means part of conventional warfare and need thus to be condemned with the upmost seriousness. Parties resorting to this kind of actions have to be pressured and exhorted by the international community using political and diplomatic means, while impartial investigations need to be set in place to fully examine the incidents and identifying the culprits. A halt of these actions would alleviate, although to a certain extent only, the impact of the war and improve slightly the conditions of international law in Syria.

Connected to this issue are sieges as they have been used throughout the war and constitute a blatant breach of international norms. Various parties restricted via sieges supplies or trapped the population, worsening purposefully the humanitarian situation



in those areas. The international community needs to make it clear that all actors are obliged under international law to provide unlimited access to food and medical treatment, while those parties who used civilians as human shields and prevented them from fleeing, need to be condemned at the same time. Military offensives that do not include sieges on contested areas and incorporate safe passage for non-combatants to flee the fighting scene, would contribute to lessen the immense death toll among civilians and enhance the conditions for them.

While displacements may be allowed under international law, it has to be ensured that when these take place, they are in conformity to norms. Thus, they should only occur for military reasons and include the opportunity for the people to return to their homes. Several evacuation deals weren't lawful, as observers have concluded, so it is crucial to deal with this issue. By using international supervisors during the evacuation and facilitating exchange with relief agencies, the detrimental impact of displacement can be alleviated.

This can be further pursued by improving the situation in camps for displaced persons. The international community needs to make it clear to the conflict parties that it is first their obligation under international law to preserve civilians and vital infrastructure during military campaigns, and second that fleeing people lie under their responsibility and therefore need to be taken care of by the respective parties. By allocating more funds to humanitarian efforts and coordinating closer with the related agencies, the camps can offer a more decent and proper living that doesn't violate basic human rights and deprive people of their dignity.

A last aspect concerns the widespread oppression of the civil society and journalists in Syria. The international community needs to set-up and fund impartial bodies to investigate independently these issues and to document them, while applying pressure at the conflict parties using this kind of actions. It is an important component of any peace effort to have a civil society that can strengthen and advance it. Allowing therefore civilians to participate in the political sphere and to accompany peace-building and reconciliation approaches without fearing detention and repression is imperative. Thus, the international community has to put great emphasis in this issue by raising it excessively, especially in front of the Syrian government, as the main oppressor of the civil society.

### **III. Conclusion**

This report outlined major violations of human rights and international law in Syria during 2017 and provided recommendations for the international community, on how to respond to them.

It has been found that the best and most efficient way to stop the violations consists in putting an end to the war itself and to stop the fighting. This will halt the various human rights breaches connected to militarily campaigns.

However, certain actions that are not part of conventional warfare need to be prevented by applying pressure on the respective actors and by empowering international agencies to get more involved and to investigate autonomously the violations.

Lastly, it is important to remind the conflict parties that they are required to offer basic services to the civilians under their control and to facilitate for that purpose their contact and cooperation with aid agencies. At the same time, it is imperative to make sure that aid efforts are properly funded and can be implemented thoroughly.