

Genocide and Mass Atrocities Alert: Syria

Updated: 26 April 2013

Since the beginning of March 2011, the stability of the Syrian Arab Republic has degenerated at an alarming rate. Genocide Watch warns that massacres and mass atrocities against pro-democracy protesters and the civilian population are being committed by Syrian security forces under the command of the al-Assad government. Protests turned violent as former Syrian troops defected and formed the "Free Syrian Army," which the Syrian government continues to call a "terrorist" organization to justify its all out war against the rebels and Sunni Muslim civilians. What began as the violent repression of civilian protests has escalated to a civil war. Whole cities have been shelled by Syrian tanks and mortars, and investigations have led several countries to accuse government forces of using chemical weapons against civilians. Reports of human rights abuses by rebel forces have increased. One group of jihadist rebels has declared itself an al-Qaeda affiliate. With over one million people displaced and the death toll over 70,000, the war rages on, threatening the stability of the region.

Violent attacks on civilians by the al-Assad regime have continued to escalate in brutality as the government and opposition forces vie for control of strategic locations. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in February 2013, the death toll in Syria was approaching 70,000 – an overwhelming increase since July 2011, when Genocide Watch issued its first Genocide Alert for Syria. As of April 2012, the U.N. Refugee Agency recorded over 1,300,000 refugees having fled to neighboring countries, mainly Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

As the intense struggle for power continues between the al-Assad regime and opposition fighters, the government has tried to close off borders and shut down the Internet. However, information on the mass atrocities has been obtained from victims and witnesses by the U.N. Human Rights Council, the BBC, Human Rights Watch, and the Arab League's Commission of Inquiry. Video footage of the violence and witness testimonies continue to surface on the Internet and are broadcast on world mass media. Although the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria has cited abuses on both sides, their report in February 2013 held that government atrocities far outweighed those committed by rebels.

The evidence is conclusive that the al-Assad regime is committing intentional crimes against humanity. Among the crimes the al-Assad regime is committing are: indiscriminant, widespread attacks on civilians, arbitrary detention of thousands in the political opposition, genocidal massacres of whole villages of Sunni Muslims, rape of detainees, widespread torture- including torture and murder of children- and denial of food, medicines and other essential resources to civilians.

The Alawite government of al-Assad believes it is about to lose all power in a zero-sum, winner take all revolution. Its massacres have become genocidal. Early warning signs and stages of genocide in Syria are:

- Prior unpunished genocidal massacres, such as those perpetrated by Assad's father in Hama in the 1980's;
- Rule by a minority sect – the Alawite sect that supports Assad – with an exclusionary ideology
- Systematic human rights atrocities;
- Fear by the ruling elite that any compromise will mean total loss of their power;
- Deliberate targeting of particular groups -- Sunni Muslims and army defectors;
- Denial by the Syrian government that it is committing crimes against humanity, blaming "foreign-inspired terrorist gangs" for the armed conflict.

Previous efforts by the U.N. Security Council to pass a resolution proposed by the Arab League, calling for the resignation of President Assad and supporting an Arab League peace plan, were impeded by Russia and China's veto. A nearly identical U.N. General Assembly Resolution was passed in 2012 by a vote of 137 to 12, and the past U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan, denounced the al-Assad regime's crimes against humanity. Shortly thereafter, Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued a recommendation that the U.N. Security Council refer evidence of atrocities committed by government forces in Syria to the International Criminal Court. In April 2012, a peace proposal called for a UN-supervised ceasefire, but the deadline passed with no lessening of violence. Plans such as the U.N. Supervision Mission in Syria have continued to fall

through due to the intense, ongoing violence.

Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed U.N. and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria in August 2012. He has proposed an arms embargo on both sides. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also supports ending the supply of weapons on both sides. However the Arab League opposes this action because al-Assad continues to receive military supplies from Iran and Russia. In April 2013, the U.N. Security Council issued a non-binding statement that "The escalating violence is completely unacceptable and must end immediately," and that the Council "urged all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access for aid organizations to those in need in all areas of Syria." But the U.N. has taken no action.

Despite the Syrian National Coalition being granted Syria's seat at the Arab League in March 2013, factions remain within the opposition forces, and there is growing concern of spillover from the conflict to other countries in the region. There is still hesitation among Western countries to provide further aid and arms to the rebels. Russia rejects any actions that could lead to regime change. The pressure on the United States to urge regional allies to intervene has increased with recent reports citing the use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad regime.

Genocide Watch offers the following recommendations:

- The Arab League, Turkey, the Islamic Conference, and other nations should demand an immediate cease-fire in Syria, with full rights for non-violent protest.
- The Arab League and Turkey should quickly create an Islamic Court to try al-Assad and other Syrian officials for crimes against humanity under Islamic law;
- The Arab League, Turkey, European Union, US and other nations should impose targeted national and regional sanctions against financial accounts, visas, and businesses owned by top officials of the Syrian regime and its army;
- Arab and NATO nations should offer to cooperate with Russia to air lift and ship in humanitarian and medical relief supplies to all parts of Syria;
- The UN General Assembly should pass another resolution demanding fully protected access for UN and international aid workers and journalists to all areas of Syria.