



## Syria Alert 12: Starvation as a weapon

9 December 2013

The United Nations (UN) has announced that the long-expected peace conference on Syria in Geneva will begin on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January. According to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), President Assad's regime appears to be cooperating reasonably well with the inspection and removal of chemical weapons, yet the situation in Syria is rapidly deteriorating. Not only do civilians continue to be targeted by conventional weapons on a massive scale, but deliberate starvation is being used as a weapon of war. Furthermore, radical Islamist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh) are taking on a greater (and more violent) role in those parts of the country not under government control, and a new offensive in the Qalamoun could likely lead to even more refugees and destabilization in Lebanon.

### Starvation as a weapon

In besieged areas under opposition control, such as the Damascus suburbs Darayya and Moadhamiyat al-Sham, the Assad regime has begun using starvation as a weapon by presenting inhabitants the option to "surrender or starve".<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International also reports that Moadhamiyat al-Sham, a suburb of Damascus, is being starved.<sup>2</sup> IKV Pax Christi contacts inside Damascus have confirmed the slogan was written on the walls of Moadhamiyat al-Sham. In some of the neighbourhoods, the FSA militias organize groups of young men who volunteer to break through the blockades in order to guarantee a few hours of access. Most volunteers die during these operations. Some opposition and jihadist militias also use starvation as a weapon, as when besieging the Shiite towns Zahra and Nubl.

When UN agencies and other relief organizations report difficulty accessing parts of the Syrian population that need help, it is not an adverse result of the struggle, but rather an intentional starvation policy whose victims cannot be estimated. Valerie Amos, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, stated in the UN Security Council that in the last few months there has been no progress in the access to civilians in besieged areas.<sup>3</sup> The Assad regime states it does allow cross-border humanitarian aid from Lebanon and Jordan, but in reality the relief goods still have to be processed in Damascus by the Syrian customs authorities. Not only does this mean that distribution takes longer, but it also that the distribution is done fully under regime control. Yet, the deliberate and systematic nature of the starvation policy has yet to be recognized by the UN. Purposefully starving a civilian population is described as one of the "grave breaches" of the Fourth Geneva Convention and can thus be considered a war crime.<sup>4</sup> This was recognized by the Government of the Netherlands on 3 December.

### Jihad fighters threaten activists

In the northern areas around Idlib and Aleppo, where the government has lost control, ISIS is taking over and physically threatening non-violent, peaceful activists. While Al-Nusra consists mainly of Syrians, ISIS is made up predominantly of foreign jihad fighters, including hundreds from European

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3928268.ece>

<sup>2</sup> <http://livewire.amnesty.org/2013/11/22/syrias-town-of-the-starving/>

<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp/html/htt%3Cspan%20class=%27pullme%27%3EThe%20proceeds%20from%20the%20campaign%20will%20be%20used%20to%20finance%20micro-projects%20in%20developing%20countries%3C/span%3Ep://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2008/1000935/www.sealthedeal2009.org/petition/html/html/story.asp?NewsID=46652&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UqcNUOJbZdk>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57jp2a.htm>

countries. IKV Pax Christi knows of attempts to resist the growing influence of jihadist militias. For example, in Raqqa this past September, jihad fighters partly destroyed an Armenian church. Young non-violent activists, all of whom were Sunni Muslims, immediately organised demonstrations against ISIS. However, the situation of such activists is becoming increasingly challenging. ISIS threatens non-violent activists who set up local media and schools. We note that several well-known activists have moved (temporarily) to Turkey, while their colleagues continue to work inside Syria. Activists said they find it very difficult to understand why Turkey does not prevent the surpassing of the supply of weapons, money and foreign fighters to ISIS and Al Nusra.

### **Risk of escalation in Qalamoun**

Currently, government troops and opposition forces are fighting in the Qalamoun region, between Damascus and Homs on the border with Lebanon. Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias are reported to be involved in the operation; the latter is accused by Syrian activists of committing massacres in the city of Nabak. Lebanese partners report that this leads to a large influx of new refugees. At least 25,000 have arrived in a few weeks' time. The infrastructure in Arsal, the place in Lebanon to which refugees are heading, is not equipped to accommodate such large numbers. Over the next few weeks even bigger streams of refugees are to be expected. If the armed opposition were to also flee to the area, it could create friction and possible clashes in Lebanon. Lebanese partners stated they fear a continuation of the fights between armed opposition and Hezbollah in the Bekaa valley.

### **Use the diplomatic momentum**

These developments underline once again that the conflict in Syria urgently requires a political solution. The fact that the Assad regime and some of the opposition still seem to believe in a military conquest does not give cause for optimism. Without a solid and broadly-supported representation from the opposition there can be no political solution. IKV Pax Christi endorses the conclusion of the International Crisis Group that, despite all of its internal problems, the Syrian Opposition Coalition is still the only party that represents a broad spectrum of opposition groups.<sup>5</sup> It is important that the Syrian Opposition Coalition participates in negotiations with clear support from the Friends of Syria and the EU member states that recognized the Coalition as the "legitimate representative of the Syrian people". These states should make clear what the preconditions are for the Coalition to participate in the negotiations, in particular the demand to permit humanitarian access to all besieged areas. A political solution is unthinkable without participation of representatives of the opposition, who have strong support from a broad range of the population. Otherwise there will be only continued military confrontation, which is an unwanted option.

Although expectations for Geneva 2 are low amongst many stakeholders, the current diplomatic momentum should be used to improve the situation of civilians in Syria. The chemical weapons inspection and the initiative for Geneva 2 have, at a minimum, led to stronger contact between Western countries and Russia. The recent improvement in relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran can also open prospects. Russia and Iran are in a better position to put pressure on Assad's regime to permit humanitarian help to reach civilians in the territory it controls. In November, the UN General Assembly's committee on human rights agreed on a general condemnation of human rights violations.<sup>6</sup> On 2 October, the Security Council also agreed to a "Presidential Statement" on humanitarian access. These should serve as a basis for an operational action plan.<sup>7</sup> To reach a consensus in the Security Council, the Council's non-permanent members should assume responsibility for frequent, informative Arria formula meetings.<sup>8</sup> Such meetings should be an opportunity to inform Security Council members about the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, including the restricted access that civilians in besieged areas have to basic services as well as the dangers civilians continue to face due to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/146-anything-but-politics-the-state-of-syria-s-political-opposition.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.3/68/L.42/Rev.1&referer=/english/&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.3/68/L.42/Rev.1&referer=/english/&Lang=E)

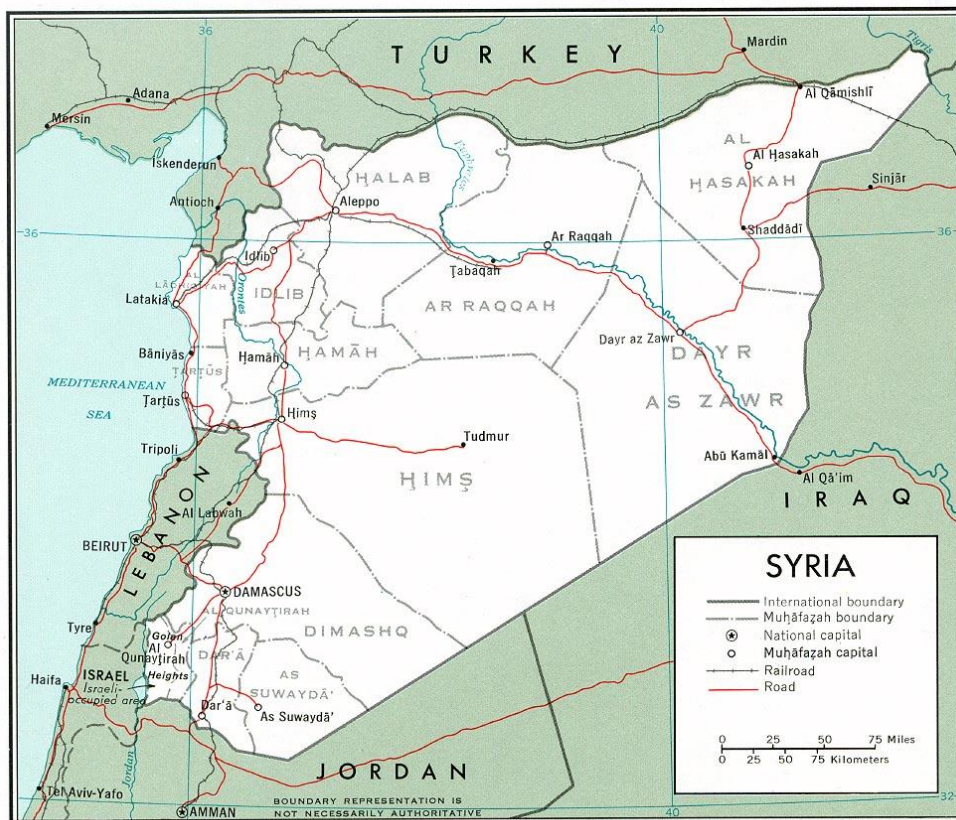
<sup>7</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/protection-in-the-syrian\\_b\\_4310996.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/protection-in-the-syrian_b_4310996.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/185/40088.html>

## Recommendations

The international community should speak with a clear and united voice on the following points:

- Urge UN Security Council members to support a resolution that explicitly condemns the use of starvation as a weapon, that confirms the rights of civilians to have access to humanitarian aid, and that opens all humanitarian corridors to allow access to the besieged civilian population.
- If the UN Security Council fails to support such a resolution, ask the UN Secretary-General to assume responsibility for permitting UN agencies to provide cross-border help.
- Take the initiative to call frequent, informative meetings about the starvation of Syrian civilians and other war crimes.
- Request the International Criminal Court to start a preparatory study to examine intentional and planned starvation to determine whether there have been war crimes and who has committed them.
- Use the diplomatic momentum to examine once again with Russia and Iran the prospects of a UN arms embargo on all parties in Syria.
- Insist on Syria's neighbouring countries, in particular EU accession country Turkey, to cut off the supply of weapons, fighters and money flowing to jihadist groups.
- Continue and step up cooperation with Syria's neighbouring countries in their efforts to provide adequate help to the increasing flow of refugees in the coming winter. Financial assistance will not be enough, and in particular the EU member states should enter into a dialogue with the host countries on how to assist in maintaining stability and preparing resettlement of the increasing number of refugees.
- Continue strong condemnation of the use of internationally banned landmines and cluster munitions as well as the targeted use of explosive weapons on schools, hospitals and other populated areas.



*Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement IKV Pax Christi*  
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