

# Armed Attacks on Civilians in Syria between 2011 and 2016

*Composed by Legal Policy Advisor of Amnesty International*



(Amnesty International, 2016)

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Case: Armed Attacks on Civilians in Syria

Course: Human Rights Law and Conflict Resolution – IPM-FT1HJLCR-15

Study: International Public Management, The Hague University of Applied Sciences

Version: First Opportunity, Final version

Submission: 20 June 2016, The Hague, The Netherlands

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As human beings we have the most extraordinary capacity for evil. We can perpetrate some of the most horrendous atrocities.

-Desmond Tutu

(Tutu, 2016)

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## Introduction: *The multi-layered internationalized conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic*

The complex multi-layered internationalized Syrian conflict is rooted in the Syrian uprising in 2011, which subsequently is embodied in the Arab Spring: a revolutionary chain of public government reform protests, initiated in Tunisia and in subsequent waves proceeded to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, which was responded upon by brutal government violence which caused many civilian casualties (Ismael & Ismael, 2013). Paradoxically, the protests in Syria were answered by president Bashar al-Assad with a brutal crackdown against the civilian population conducted by the police and military forces, which caused at least 200 casualties in the 'civil uprising phase' of the Syrian civil war: essentially reinforcing the grievances of the civilian population (Kahf, 2014). As a result, a destructive vicious circle of militias and rebel organizations emerged in reaction to the extensive violence of the Assad regime, which ironically only caused more civilian casualties due to indiscriminate violence committed by government forces and other opposition groups within Syria.

Subsequently, other regional (Iran and Turkey) and international (USA and Russia) actors mingled into the conflict in order to strengthen their (geopolitical)-interests, and started supporting their proxy-armies within the sovereign state of Syria. (Schar, 2016) However, even if the official intentions of these foreign actors were to protect civilians and ensure human rights, their military or non-military actions, directly or indirectly, caused many civilian casualties and empowered the vicious circle of violence and destruction. (Terril, 2015)

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, the Syria death toll is more than 191.000 people, as of August 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Staffan de Mistura, the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria, projected at least 400.000 casualties on 22 April 2016 (Hudson, 2016). He based his analysis on a recent report from the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR).

Essentially, this report provides an analysis whether or not the main actors in Syria, the Syrian government backed by Russia and Iran, ISIS, the Opposition Rebels, the Kurds and the USA-led coalition and Israel, have in various degrees and contexts, committed human rights infringements and thus, breached one, or a combination of the following laws or treaties: International Law Geneva Conventions, C) International Declaration of Human Rights, which consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and two additional covenants (ICCPR and ICESCR), and the Arms Trade Treaty (hereinafter "ATT") (Zeith, 2014) (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

This report does focus on insights and recommendations to politicians, policymakers, diplomats, and state-officials, also from the involved states, as it's essential to inform those on the decision-making governance level in order to gain traction for persecution of those who committed attacks against the

civilian population. Moreover, this report will provide explicit recommendations to the target audience; however, one does anticipate on the rejection of this report by those who have wilfully committed attacks against civilians, and therefore one must carefully consider whether or not amnesty must be provided in certain contexts of force-majeure or self-defence.

Subsequently, this report attempts to determine which legal actions can be taken, regarding the complexities and obstacles posed both within and outside the Syria, and compose a judicious course of action that may provide the opportunities to prosecute the states and non-state actors which have committed attacks against civilians. Cooperation between the International Criminal Court (ICC), International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), and NGO's (e.g., Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International) is required in order to exchange experiences, expertise and evidence, and devise a feasible course of action for the persecution of those actors who have breached international law committed attacks against innocent civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter "SAR").

[EXPLAIN SHORTLY/Summary of the last chapter]: the *hybrid court for the Syrian Arab Republic*]

# Human Rights Infringements in the Syrian Arab Republic: *Attacks on civilians between 2011 and 2016*

This chapter will primarily focus on International Humanitarian Law (hereinafter “IHL”)<sup>1</sup> and International Human Rights Law (hereinafter “IHRL”)<sup>2</sup>. These laws apply for the internationalized conflict in the SAR, as extensive attacks have been committed against the civilian population.

The attacks on civilians can be distinguished between two types of actors: state actors and non-state actors. This difference is not only essential for the possible prosecution of these actors, whether by the International Court of Justice (ICJ)<sup>3</sup> or the International Criminal Court (ICC),<sup>4</sup> but also to determine their – legal – accountability within the international community, and to trace their roots of military and financial support from external actors (Briscoe, 2013). However, the relevant external actors in this particular conflict, are not prosecutable under the international Arms Trade Treaty,<sup>5</sup> as the USA, Turkey, Russia, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran did not ratify the treaty. (United Nations, 2016) (Zeith, 2014)

## Human rights violations by state actors<sup>6</sup>

### *The Syrian Government*

Arguably, the most significant – in both scale and in quantity – human rights violations have been conducted by the Syrian government; for instance, a “majority” of civilians, “including a large number of children” were killed when government forces launched missile and rocket attacks on areas that were not under government control (UNHRC, 2016, p. 7). This, by itself, is not an IHL violation; however, when one takes into account that these areas did not contain perceptible military targets (UNHRC, 2016, p. 7), these attacks did breach IHL as the conflict in Syria is not a direct conflict between states (i.e. an *intrastate conflict*). Therefore, the Fourth Geneva Convention (GCIV)<sup>7</sup> was breached<sup>8</sup> by the SAR.

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<sup>1</sup> The laws that are only applicable during armed conflict; i.e., the “laws of war” (ICRC, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The laws that are always applicable; i.e., during time of peace and during time of armed conflict (OHCHR, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> The ICJ is limited to the settlement of legal disputes, “in accordance with international law,” between states (ICJ, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> The ICC is limited to the investigation and trial of individuals who have, allegedly, committed genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (ICC, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a multilateral legally binding convention that regulates the international trade in conventional arms, and entered into force in December 2014. The treaty seeks to prevent the suffering of humans, which is caused by irresponsible, and/or illegal arms transfers. Therefore, it promotes accountability and transparency of arms trade (UNODA, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> State actors are sovereign states with International Personality, which provides legitimate international representation, and certain privileges and responsibilities towards the International community. (Human Rights, 2016)

<sup>7</sup> *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, ICRC (1949).

<sup>8</sup> I.e., article 3 (1a) of the GCIV states that “persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms [...] shall in all circumstances be treated humanely” and

Due to the political interest of the Syrian state in the country, there is an “imbalanced distribution of international aid provided to Syria” (MSF, 2013); humanitarian aid is primarily being distributed over territories that are under government control, therefore, “aid remain[s] minimal” for approximately “seven million Syrians living in opposition-held regions, where conditions continue to worsen” (MSF, 2013). The Syrian government is directly accountable for this; therefore, the Syrian government has violated article 3 (2) of the GCIV (1949)<sup>9</sup>. This means that humanitarian aid (e.g., from the ICRC<sup>10</sup> or MSF<sup>11</sup>) should also be provided to all opposition parties and, arguably, terrorist organisations (e.g. the Al-Nusra Front and Daesh) and the civilians in the territories occupied by these non-state actors. Thus, despite its political interests, the Syrian state should not restrict any humanitarian aid to civilians that are living in areas occupied or besieged by opposition or terrorist forces.

Furthermore, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), there is “evidence [that] strongly suggests that Syrian government helicopters dropped barrel bombs embedded with cylinders of chlorine gas on three towns in Northern Syria in mid-April 2014” (HRW, 2014). Therefore, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has established a mission in order to investigate facts “surrounding allegations of use of chlorine in Syria,” this was agreed upon by the Syrian government in 2014 (OPCW, 2014); this resulted in the destruction of all chemical weapons (by the OPCW) declared by the Syrian Arab Republic (OPCW, 2016). Thus, the Syrian government, allegedly, had and used chemical weapons against non-combatants. When this can be confirmed, there is a clear violation of the ratified convention on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)<sup>12</sup> by the SAR. However, it must be noted that there is no hundred-percent certainty on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian state; after reports that this was the case, investigations were conducted by the UN, which came to the conclusion that there was “strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof,” that rebels seeking to oust Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad” used chemical weapons; moreover, the UN-member<sup>13</sup> stated that “her panel had not yet seen any evidence of Syrian government forces using chemical weapons” and that “more investigation was needed” for this to be confirmed (Waterman, 2013).

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“violence to life and person in particular murder of all kinds [...] shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever” (ICRC, 1949).

<sup>9</sup> Article 3 (2) of the GCIV states that “the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for,” while “an impartial humanitarian body [...] may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict” (ICRC, 1949).

<sup>10</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross.

<sup>11</sup> *Médecins Sans Frontières*; i.e., Doctors Without Borders.

<sup>12</sup> “The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and requires the destruction of both chemical weapons production facilities and the weapons themselves” (ICRC, n.d.). The Syrian government violated this agreement; the CWC states, in article 1 (1b), that “never under any circumstances” a state should “use chemical weapons” (ICRC, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> Carla del Ponte, member of the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (Waterman, 2013).

It is, therefore, highly recommendable for the UN and the OPCW to open further investigations in order to confirm which actors were responsible for the use of chemical weapons in the SAR – which is considered to be a *war crime*. The involved actors in the SAR are highly recommended to cooperate with the UN and the OPCW.

This will result in one of the following scenarios: Either the Syrian government has used these weapons and, thus, violated International Law. It should be held accountable for this. Secondly, other – i.e., non-state actors – have used chemical weapons in the SAR; they should then be held accountable for this. This can be done through the formal request of the involved states in the conflict to locate and arrest individuals who gave orders for these atrocities, so they can be tried at the *hybrid court for the Syrian Arab Republic*.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the Syrian Arab Republic had signed and ratified the GCIV and the CWC, it can – and should be – held accountable for its breaches of the GCIV and, violations by any actors who breached the CWC (ICRC, n.d.). As it will be near-impossible to prosecute the responsible individuals who are part of the Syrian government – as long as it is in power – at the *hybrid court for the Syrian Arab Republic*, there should be increased pressure from the international community on the Syrian government; for instance, international cooperation with the government against terrorist organisations in the country should only be granted when the Syrian Arab Republic discontinues its (1) attacks on civilians, (2) its constraint on the equal distribution of humanitarian aid, and (3) its use of chemical weapons.

### *The United States*

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has played an active role in supporting the Syrian opposition, since the early phase of the conflict in Syria, since 2011 (Cloud & Abdulrahim, 2013). Subsequently, in 2012 the CIA covertly armed and supported Syrian opposition rebels – from the CIA locations in Southern Turkey – in the fight against the Syrian government (Schmitt, 2012).

Since then, the CIA has extensively armed the Syrian opposition rebels, as a proxy-army against the Syrian government. Additionally, the CIA has conducted various secret military programmes in Jordan and Turkey to arm the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and many other fragmented rebel groups, in which the US closely cooperates with Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Maetti & Apuzzo, 2016). According to reports of Human Rights Watch, the FSA and other opposition rebel groups have committed “serious human rights abuses”, including torture and executions of prisoners (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Therefore, one could argue that the US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are – directly or indirectly – responsible for the attacks committed against civilians by non-state actors, as they have provided the materials to the so-called Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Countries that provide arms to illegitimate non-state actors within a sovereign country are not only breaching the International Customary law,

One can therefore argue that these mentioned states, primarily the US, are breaching a combination of International Laws and treaties: 1) Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter<sup>15</sup>.

The US<sup>16</sup> conducted 3834 airstrikes in Syria until the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, and the allies of the US conducted 237 airstrikes. A spokesperson for the US military projected that the official number of casualties by US airstrikes in Syria and Iraq is 41<sup>17</sup>. However, according to estimates of Airwars<sup>18</sup> the US led coalition airstrikes between August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014 and June 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, have approximately inflicted 1278 civilian casualties<sup>19</sup>. [2 EXAMPLES]

These attacks on civilians breach the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva convention (GCIV), article 3. However, the major obstacles to hold the US accountable for their – official and covert – actions, is that the US did not ratify most relevant treaties<sup>20</sup>, in order to protect their military missions and personnel<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Article 2(4) which reflects upon customary international law states that: “ All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...” (Schmit, 2014) Initially, article 2(4) seems to exclude arming rebels: however, the ICJ ruled in the case of Nicaragua (1986), in which the US supported the Guerrillas who fought against the Nicaraguan government, that the “US activities in relation to the contras constitute, a breach of the customary international law principle of the non-use of force”. Therefore, “there is little doubt that the provision of lethal aid directly to the Syrian rebel forces would amount to a “use of force,” at least by the generally accepted standards the ICJ set forth in Nicaragua”. (Schmit, 2014)

<sup>16</sup> On 22 September 2014 the US initiated airstrikes against ISIS in Syria, in cooperation with regional countries as, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. As this report primarily focuses on the three major state-actors, it will provide some cases where US airstrikes caused civilian casualties.

<sup>17</sup> (Dearden, 2016)

<sup>18</sup> Airwars is a project by independent journalists

<sup>19</sup> (Air Wars, 2016)

<sup>20</sup> “In 2005, the United States withdrew from the Optional Protocol to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations Concerning the Compulsory Settlement of Disputes. The Optional Protocol provides for jurisdiction in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when any state party to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR)1 seeks to sue another state party for violating it” (Quigly, 2009)

<sup>21</sup> Despite the historical actions of the United States to promote international justice and hold perpetrators of the most serious crimes accountable, the US voted ‘no’ against the Rome statute in 1998 (Internationaljusticeproject, 2014). Additionally, the Bush administration signed the American Service Members Protection Act (ASPA) (Cornell University Law School, 2016), in order to protect US military and government service personnel against persecution by the ICC. Considering the fact that the US has deployed military personnel in the Syrian conflict, both on the ground as military advisors and special forces (Global Research, 2016), and in the air with fighter-jets and drones, the ASPA provides a shield of immunity to the US (Iubold & Entous, 2016).

### *The Russian Federation*

The Russian military is actively participating in the Syrian conflict since December 2012<sup>22</sup>. Despite the criticism by Western leaders, Russia intensified its activities in 2013 by providing weapons and guided-missiles to the Syrian government. (Jonathan Saul , 2014) On 1 October 2015, Russia launched its first airstrikes against ISIL, and the Syrian opposition as enemies of the Syrian government<sup>23</sup>. According to Airwars, the Russian airstrikes have caused 816 civilian casualties until June 9<sup>th</sup> 2016. However, the total casualties claimed by Russian Airstrikes is between 4000 and 5000, yet not confirmed<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, according to Amnesty International the Syrian and Russian forces are intentionally targeting hospitals as a strategy of war<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Russian military personal and advisors assisting in air-defence systems, provided by Russia (Borger, 2012)

<sup>23</sup> (Payne, Starr, & Cullinane, 2015)

<sup>24</sup> (Air Wars, 2016)

<sup>25</sup> (Amnesty International , 2016)

## Human rights violations by non-state actors

Due to the significant number of involved non-state armed groups in the SAR<sup>26</sup> this report is limited to human rights violations by the main non-state actors.

### *The Al-Nusra Front and ISIS (Daesh)*

ATT treaty: Turkey arms opposition & daesh with weapons.

### *The 'Free Syrian Army' and other non-state armed groups*

According to Human Rights Watch, non-state armed groups have “launched indiscriminate mortar and other artillery strikes from areas under their control that killed civilians in neighbourhoods under government control,” it is notable that these assaults “repeatedly hit known civilian objectives, including schools, mosques, and markets” (HRW, n.d.). This is in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention<sup>27</sup>.

[FYI: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/dark-side-free-syrian\\_b\\_2380399.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/dark-side-free-syrian_b_2380399.html)]

[FYI: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24486627>]

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<sup>26</sup> For example, the Free Syrian Army, the Syria Islamic Liberation Front, the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, the Ansar al-Islam Gathering, the Durou al-Thawra Commission, among others (Lund, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> GCIV (1949): article 3 (1a) states that “persons taking no active part in the hostilities,” i.e., civilians, “shall in all circumstances be treated humanely” (ICRC, 1949, pp. 169-170). Furthermore, “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture [...] shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever” (ICRC, 1949, pp. 169-170). These attacks by non-state armed groups are *grave breaches* because it involves the “wilful killing” and “inhuman treatment” by which the actors are “wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health” (ICRC, 1949, p. 221).

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons-idUKKCN0SU2Q920151106>

## Policy Objective:

[We will write this after the inventory of Human Rights infringements is finished]

## Justification of Legal Course of Action: Truth Commission and *Hybrid Tribunal*.

The International Criminal Court<sup>28</sup> (ICC) is a civil criminal court which seeks to prosecute individuals for the most serious crimes, located in The Hague and was established by the Rome Statute in 1998. The Rome statute entered into force in 2002, and devised four major International crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. However, the 'crime of aggression' may be included in the courts jurisdiction after 2017, as thirty ratifications and further agreements by state parties are required (Crimeofaggression, 2016).

However, the court's jurisdiction is limited to the states parties of the ICC, and this creates a chain of major -legal and practical- obstacles in the prosecution of those individual actors who have attacked civilians in Syria. (ICC, 2016) Firstly, the Syrian Arab Republic has signed the Rome statute, but not ratified the treaty, which restricts the ICC for prosecuting individuals that have committed crimes within the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic or Syrian nationals that have committed such crimes elsewhere (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

However, the US still signed the Rome statute in 2000.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) seeks to

ICC and ICJ is problematic, as states did not ratify Rome statute

Therefore, the UN Security Council members should be convinced by the international community that they must approve an ICC referral, and cannot veto this anymore.

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<sup>28</sup> The ICC was created by the Rome Statute, which entered into force on July 1, 2002. As from 4 March 2016, 124 states have ratified the Rome statute, and subsequently became ICC states parties. (Assembly of States Parties , 2016)

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