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Civilians bearing the brunt in the battle for Aleppo

Civilians are increasingly bearing the brunt of the violence in the bitter battle between Syrian government forces and opposition fighters for control of Aleppo, Syria's largest city and the country's economic capital. The Syrian government forces' increasingly frequent use of aircrafts and artillery to strike residential areas is further exposing civilian residents to harm.

Scores of civilians not involved in the conflict, many of them children, have been killed and many more injured, in recent weeks as a result of air strikes and artillery and mortar attacks by government forces against residential neighbourhoods. Some of the victims died in the very places where they had sought shelter, having been forced to flee their homes due to the fighting.

During a 10-day fact-finding visit to Aleppo city in the first half of August, Amnesty International investigated some 30 attacks in which more than 80 civilians who were not directly participating in hostilities were killed and many more were injured.ⁱ In the overwhelming majority of cases the victims were killed or injured in attacks by government forces that violated international humanitarian law (IHL). Some attacks were indiscriminate; some appear to have been direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects. In some cases, the source of the attack could not be established.

Every day, the Amnesty International delegate witnessed a barrage of air and artillery strikes by government forces in different parts of the city. Attacks often failed to distinguish between opposition fighters and civilian residents and appeared to be generally directed at neighbourhoods which are under the de-facto control of opposition fighters and/or where opposition fighters are based or operate from, rather than at specific military objectives. The use of inaccurate munitions – both air-delivered bombs and missiles, and artillery shells and mortars – and an apparent lack of efforts to spare civilian lives resulted in a growing numbers of civilian casualties and appear to reflect a disturbing disregard for the rules of IHL and the need to protect civilians.

The presence of combatants and military objectives within densely populated urban areas has further heightened the risk of harm to the civilian population. Dozens of armed opposition groups, composed of Syrian army defectors and volunteers, are participating in the fighting in Aleppo. Many are acting under the general banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but in reality are only loosely connected with the FSA and operate largely independently of the FSA and of each others.ⁱⁱ

In addition to the killings of civilians as a result of attacks and armed confrontations in the context of the conflict, there has been an increase in killings of detained civilians and captured combatants. Bodies of mostly young men, handcuffed and bearing torture marks, are being found every few days dumped on the outskirts of the city, near the headquarters of the Air Force Intelligence. Amnesty International is alarmed that a pattern of extrajudicial and summary executions by all parties in the conflict appears to be gathering pace.

AIRSTRIKES

Daily air strikes have mostly targeted neighbourhoods that are under the de facto control of opposition fighters. The victims have been overwhelmingly civilians not involved in the fighting, many of them children. They were killed in their homes or when they ventured out, often to buy food.

Among the victims were 10 members of the Kayali family – seven of them children – who were killed when their homes, two adjacent two-storey houses, were bombed to dust in the afternoon of 6 August in the Sakhur district, in the north-east of the city. No one in the houses at the time survived.

In one house, Asma Kayali, 25, was killed with her three children – her daughters Kawthar and Fatima, aged nine and seven, and her four-year-old son Ahmad – along with her husband's brother, Mohammed 'Abdellatif Kayali, 24, and his four-year-old son, also called Ahmad. Asma's grief-stricken husband told Amnesty International that he had been at work when his home was bombed:

"When I went to work, I never thought that it was the last time I would see my family. I lost all that was dearest to me, my children, my wife, my brother, my cousins, everybody."

In the house next door, Safia Kayali, 55, was killed with her daughter Labiba, 25, her son Mustapha, 17, and her grandson Mohammed, 12. Safia Kayali's brother, who lived next door, told Amnesty International:

"It was about 2.15pm. I was at home. All of a sudden there were two loud bangs and everything around me shook. I ran to open the front door of my house but I could not see anything, the dust was so thick. When I began to see through the dust I saw that my sons' and my sister's homes had been reduced to rubble. There was no one around, the neighbours had fled. I went to look for someone to help me find a bulldozer to remove the rubble to look for my relatives; I was hoping to find them still alive, but in my heart I knew that it was impossible that anyone would have survived; the houses were literally pulverized."

A school where opposition fighters were housed in a street behind the Kayali homes was struck at the same time. The day after, Amnesty International saw in the schoolyard an unexploded bomb (a Soviet-era unguided fragmentary OFAB-100-120 bomb), which fighters said had landed on the school at the same time as when the Kayali homes were hit. It is believed that the same kind of bombs struck the Kayali homes. Unguided bombs are imprecise and therefore unsuitable for use in urban areas, where they are likely to cause civilian casualties.

About half an hour later in the afternoon of 6 August, in a different part of the city, in the Bustan al-Qasr district, another air strike killed and injured yet more civilians – again, most of them children. Seven members of the Qrea'a family, who lived at the top of the building that was bombed, were killed and several were injured, at least three of them seriously. 'Abdellatif Qrea'a, a 43-year-old IT engineer, and his 37-year-old wife Wahiba were killed with their daughter Bara', 10, and their sons Hatem, 16, and Mahmud, 17. Their 14-year-old daughter Zahra lost one eye and sustained other serious injuries. The children's cousins, Taghreed, an eight-year-old girl, and 18-month-old Yussef, were also killed and their parents injured.

When Amnesty International visited the site, just hours after the strike, relatives and neighbours were still frantically trying to find one of the children. The child's body was eventually found three days later in a nearby building, where it had been thrown by the force of the explosion. A neighbour who witnessed the strike told Amnesty International:

"We found limbs which had been severed from the bodies of the victims. The children's mother was cut in half. The war plane swooped down twice, dropped at least two missiles up the road, one of which hit a building and killed a child. It then came back past the house, then turned back and bombed the building, killing and injuring so many people from the Qrea'a family. These poor people

were just sitting in their homes, they had nothing to do with the war. How can they [Syrian government forces] use war planes against innocent civilians? We have no way to protect our families from such indiscriminate bombings; we never know when or where the next missile will strike; even in our homes we are not safe."

Three days later, a close relative told Amnesty International that he had not yet mustered the courage to tell Zahra that her parents and siblings had all been killed: *"She knows that her two cousins died and she asked about her family but I could not bring myself to tell her."*

Civilians who fled their homes because of the fighting have come under attack in the places where they had sought shelter. Two children, 16-year-old Dalia Hamdun and her 17-year-old brother, were killed and four of their relatives were injured in the afternoon of 5 August when the school where they were sheltering was hit by rockets. A resident of the Sheikh Khodor district, where the school is located, who witnessed the attack, told Amnesty International: *"The aircraft swooped low and fired several rockets. Two, possibly three, hit the school and one landed in a street nearby. It was a few minutes after 5pm"*.

Dar al-Shifa, a hospital in the opposition-held eastern al-Sha'ar district which has been providing emergency treatment to casualties of such attacks, was itself the target of air strikes twice in the space of three days. A doctor at the hospital told Amnesty International that attacks on 12 and 14 August killed and injured several civilians near the hospital's entrance and damaged the upper floors of the buildings. A few days before the attacks, doctors at the hospital told Amnesty International that they tried to evacuate patients immediately after providing emergency treatment, both in order to keep their meagre resources available for emergency cases and because they feared that the hospital might be attacked. The hospital treats both civilians and fighters. When Amnesty International visited the hospital days before the attacks, among the patients were two young children suffering from the blood disorder Thalassaemia, who needed a blood transfusion. The attacks against the hospital were carried out using Russian-made S 5 rockets, as indicated by the rockets' remnants found after the attacks. Although not noted for their accuracy, these rockets are capable of being directed at a specific building. The fact that two such attacks were carried out against the hospital in the space of three days suggests that it was deliberately targeted, a flagrant violation of the prohibition in IHL of attacking hospitals and medical personnel.

ARTILLERY AND MORTAR STRIKES

Syrian government forces in Aleppo and other cities throughout the country have used artillery and mortars to bombard densely populated civilian neighbourhoods killing scores of civilians and injuring many more. These are imprecise weapons that are completely inappropriate for use in urban fighting. Their repeated use to bombard civilian areas amounts to carrying out indiscriminate attacks and violates IHL.

Four members of the Hindi family – a baby girl, her grandmother, her aunt and her uncle – were killed and several others were injured when an artillery shell struck their home in the Qaterji area of the Tariq al-Bab district, east of the city centre, during the night of 7/8 August at about 1.40am. An artillery shell exploded by the front door of the house and fragments flew into the courtyard and some of the rooms located off the courtyard. At the house, Amnesty International found a fragment of the shell lodged in a mosquito net covering the cot where baby Sana' had been sleeping in one of the rooms off the courtyard. In the same room, the bed where her two-year-old brother Abdelsalam had been sleeping was covered in blood. The boy was in hospital with multiple shrapnel injuries fighting for his life. The children's 85-year-old grandmother, Nadima Sheikha, was killed in the attack, along with her 55-year-old daughter, Amina Hindi, and her husband, Yussef Hamudeh, also 55. The children's

mother sustained multiple shrapnel injuries to the head and body. The children's father told Amnesty International:

"What have we come to? Why are we being bombed in our own homes? My baby daughter is gone, my boy and my wife may not survive, my mother who was in great health was killed. Why such attacks? There are no fighters here. Just ordinary residents. My sister and her husband had fled their home because of the fighting there [in the Bab Neirab area]. They came here to be safe, but instead of safety they found death."

According to other residents there were no opposition fighters in the neighbourhood and when Amnesty International's delegate visited the area there was no visible presence of opposition fighters. Nor was there any visible presence of government forces, who seemed to have retreated from this and other neighbourhoods around opposition-held areas. A similar situation prevailed in other neighbourhoods that had recently been shelled, including where civilians were killed and injured while queuing to buy bread (see below).

Similar strikes in neighbourhoods where opposition fighters were present often struck civilian homes, rather than opposition fighters' headquarters or positions. In the Fardus district, south of the city, in the evening of 9 August an artillery shell struck the home of the Suri family, killing a three-year-old boy, Fadi Suri, and severely injuring three other children. Fadi's brother, six-year-old Salah, lost his left hand; the children's cousin, seven-year-old Sham al-Din, lost several toes; and his 17-year-old sister Laila sustained a serious leg injury and may lose her leg.

An earlier strike in the neighbourhood's market on 27 July killed some 20 people and injured dozens, most of them young men. Residents who witnessed the carnage told Amnesty International that most of the casualties were caused by a second strike, which took place four minutes after the first, as rescuers and onlookers had gathered at the site of the first strike.

Artillery and mortar strikes aimed by government forces at areas with a strong presence of opposition fighters have frequently killed and injured civilian residents and passers-by. In the evening of 6 August, a 17-year-old boy, Jamil Hares, and his neighbour Hamza Shaaban, were killed and 12 other men were injured, including Jamil's 46-year-old uncle who lost his hand, when a shell exploded near them as they stood on the pavement outside their homes in the Seif al-Dawla district. One of those injured told Amnesty International:

"We were in the street outside our home, waiting for the Adan,ⁱⁱⁱ because there is no electricity in our area and we cannot hear the call to prayer from inside."

A second man, who lost his left foot in the blast, told Amnesty International:

"I was going home from work; it was just before Iftar.^{iv} All of a sudden there was shelling and I was hit in the leg."

Doctors who treated the 50-year-old man told Amnesty International that his left foot had been completely severed by the shrapnel.

A taxi driver who rescued some of the wounded told Amnesty International:

"I was driving home to have Iftar with my family and when I got near home I heard artillery shelling nearby so I stopped the car to seek shelter. Then an artillery shell landed nearby, immediately followed by a second one which killed and injured people. There was blood and human flesh everywhere. I took one of the injured to a hospital."

Amnesty International spoke separately to four witnesses, who said that there was no armed confrontation and no presence of opposition fighters near the location of the artillery strike that killed and injured these civilians.

The opposition-held Bustan al-Qasr district and areas around it have been repeatedly shelled and bombed in recent weeks. One of the many projectiles, a mortar, which struck the nearby al-Kallasa district, killed a 15-year-old boy, Ahmad Hamwi, while he was at home with his mother and siblings at about midnight on 7 August. At the house, the boy's relatives showed Amnesty International the remains of a mortar that had exploded in the courtyard, sending fragments flying, including into one of the rooms off the courtyard where Ahmad was sitting. At the time of the attack, relatives from Bustan al-Qasr who had fled their home because of the attacks there, were sheltering in the house.

In the nearby Masharqa district, the third-floor apartment of the Feddawi family was struck by what appeared to be an artillery shell on the evening of 10 August. A 12-year-old girl, Ra'ya Feddawi, and her father Hussein Feddawi were killed and two of her siblings, both children, were injured. A neighbour who witnessed the attack told Amnesty International:

"The shelling happened just before Iftar; Hussein was thrown all the way down to the street. He was taken to hospital but died some hours later. One of the children was killed instantly and two others were injured and I think that one of them later died. Artillery shells are always going over, on the way to Bustan al-Qasr; maybe it was one of those that hit this building."

ATTACKS ON BREAD QUEUES

In the evening of 10 August, an artillery shell landed in a street outside a bakery in the Tariq al-Bab district, killing and injuring several residents who were queuing for bread. There is currently a bread shortage in Aleppo, with long queues outside bakeries day and night. Pools of blood were still visible in the street near the bakery when Amnesty International visited the area the following morning. Doctors at the nearby Dar al-Shifa' hospital, which was itself targeted two days later, told Amnesty International that they had received the bodies of 14 people – nine men, one woman and four children – who had been killed in the strike and had treated 24 people who had been injured.

Among those killed was 29-year-old Yusef Derahshani. One of his relatives told Amnesty International that he had died instantly as shell fragments had caused massive injuries to his head. A 12-year-old boy who sustained a minor head injury told Amnesty International:

"I was waiting to buy bread when the bomb exploded. I didn't see the bomb. People fell, and ran and screamed. Many people fell. My head was bleeding and I was very scared but I am OK now."

Another resident said:

"There was a man with two children, I don't know if they were his children or his nephews, they were about 12 and 7; all three died; but I don't know them; they were not from the neighbourhood; they must have come from another neighbourhood to buy bread. Some people have no bread in their neighbourhoods."

The following night, at about 3am, more civilians were killed and injured in another strike near a bread queue that was hit in the Sheikh Sa'id district. Residents who helped in the rescue efforts told Amnesty International that at least five people were killed and several injured. One said that he saw horrific injuries, including a severed leg.

Among the victims were two children, Kifa' Samra, 13, and her 11-year-old brother Zakarya. The children's father told Amnesty international:

“The children were waiting to buy bread for Suhur.” My daughter’s body was found next to the body of a woman from the neighbourhood. They were both struck in the head and were killed instantly. My boy was also struck in the head and died immediately. This was the first time that there was an attack in this area. Nothing has ever happened here. We have no FSA here, no fighting. Why such attacks which kill innocent people?”

A third victim was Basma Rustom, a mother of 11 children in her late thirties. One of her neighbours told Amnesty International:

“Her husband has been missing in detention for the past year and a half. Now she is gone too. What will become of the children? Why did this happen? She was just waiting to buy bread to feed her children.”

Residents in both Tariq al-Bab and Sheikh Sa’id districts, said they were not aware of the presence or activities of opposition fighters in the neighbourhoods. When Amnesty International visited the areas on 11 and 12 August there was no visible presence of opposition fighters or government forces. A resident described the situation as follows:

“The forces of the state are not present in the area. There is no police, no traffic police, no authorities or administration; the rubbish is not being collected any more and other services are not provided. There aren’t even ambulances to evacuate the sick. There is no FSA either in our area, so we did not expect any attack because normally from what we know it is the areas where there is FSA that get bombed. Now we are also being bombed by the state which is supposed to protect us and we don’t understand why.”

Civilians continue to be killed and injured while queuing for bread. In the early morning of 16 August, dozens of people, including about eight children, were reportedly killed outside a bakery in the eastern Qadi ‘Askar district. Amnesty International was no longer in the country and could not investigate the incident, but residents contacted by phone said the carnage was the result of an air strike. Although opposition fighters are based in the area, the strike did not target fighters, according to witnesses, but instead hit a street full of residents queuing for bread.

DISREGARD FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (THE LAWS OF WAR)

The presence of armed combatants and the conduct of hostilities in an urban setting pose an inherent heightened risk for the civilian population, with civilians getting caught in the crossfire and being forcibly displaced. Both government forces and opposition fighters have been operating in, and launching attacks from, residential areas in Aleppo, thereby increasing the risk to civilians in those areas. However, the presence of combatants in residential areas does not relieve the warring parties of their obligations to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians. International humanitarian law, which is legally binding on all parties to an armed conflict, aims at minimizing risks to civilians and reducing human suffering. It requires warring parties to take all measures necessary to spare civilians and civilian objects.

Warring parties have obligations to take precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks by the adversary, including to avoid - to the maximum extent feasible - locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas. International humanitarian law also expressly prohibits the use of tactics such as using “human shields” to prevent an attack on military targets. However, failure by one side to separate its fighters from civilians and civilian objects does not relieve its opponent of its obligations under IHL to direct attacks only at

combatants and military objectives and to take all necessary precautions in attack to spare civilians and civilian objects.

The use of means of combat that cannot be directed at a specific military objective may result in indiscriminate attacks. The widespread use by Syrian government forces of battlefield weapons that have a wide impact radius and/or wide margin of error, or cannot be directed at specific targets, such as artillery shells, mortars and free-fall unguided bombs and rockets, in densely populated residential areas has resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties. The continued use of such weapons in civilian areas, in full knowledge of the fact that they have and will continue to inflict heavy civilian casualties (and cause massive damage to civilian objects), is a flagrant violation of the prohibition of indiscriminate attack. Such attacks are inherently indiscriminate.

Opposition fighters, while mostly fighting with short-range light weapons, have at times also used imprecise or even inherently indiscriminate weapons (such as mortars and home-made rockets) that equally pose a danger to civilians.

A fundamental rule of international humanitarian law is that all parties to a conflict – in this case Syrian government forces and opposition fighters (members of the FSA and other armed opposition groups, regardless of whether they are affiliated to the FSA or not) – must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks may only be directed against combatants. In case of doubt, individuals and objects should be presumed to be civilian (and immune from attack).

Intentional attacks directed against civilians not taking part in hostilities, indiscriminate attacks (which do not distinguish between civilian and military targets), and disproportionate attacks (which may be expected to cause incidental harm to civilians that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated) are prohibited and constitute war crimes. These rules are part of the fundamental principle of “distinction” which applies at all times without exception. Attacks on hospital or medical facilities are expressly prohibited.

ABUSES AGAINST DETAINED CIVILIANS AND CAPTURED COMBATANTS

Civilians in Aleppo, where anti-government protests remained non-violent until some weeks ago, have long been at the receiving end of a brutal crackdown by government forces. The recent outbreak of armed confrontations between government forces and opposition fighters has dramatically increased the risk of abuses – including extrajudicial and summary executions - and other revenge attacks by both government and opposition forces.

International humanitarian law, notably Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, expressly prohibits “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture” and “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment” against detained persons, whether civilians or captured combatants.

Deliberate killings of detained civilians and captured combatants are serious violations of international humanitarian law and constitute war crimes. Likewise, torture and other ill-treatment can never be justified, under any exceptional or other circumstances whatsoever. The fact that one of the parties to a conflict may have committed such crimes does not in any way excuse the commission of similar crimes by other parties. Amnesty International continues to investigate reports of abuses against detained civilians and captured combatants.

EXTRAJUDICIAL SUMMARY EXECUTIONS BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

As the conflict has engulfed parts of the city in recent weeks, extrajudicial and summary executions of civilians not involved in the conflict by government forces have increased sharply. Bodies of mostly young men, usually handcuffed and shot in the head, have been frequently found dumped in an around al-Zahra district in the north-west of the city. The area is home to the headquarters of the notorious Air Force Intelligence and as is completely controlled by government forces. Many of the victims were known or suspected activists involved in anti-government protests and/or in solidarity networks providing relief and medical care to victims of government repression and people displaced by the conflict.^{vi}

Families whose relatives were arrested by Air Force Intelligence officers and whose bodies were later found dumped in al-Zahra have generally been unwilling to speak out for fear that they and other relatives may suffer a similar fate. In light of the treatment meted out to their relatives, and given the recent increase of such cases, their fears appear to be justified.

Amnesty International has, however, obtained information about some cases. For example, on 10 August at about 10.30pm-11pm a group of men stormed the home of the Rihawi family in al-Zahra and arrested all the men present: Saad al-Din Rihawi, a teacher; and two of his sons, Mahmud and Mazen, both students aged 20 and 18. The following day the bodies of the three men, along with two other burned bodies, were found in the family car in the area. The hands were tied behind the back and all had been shot in the head. Friends of the young men told Amnesty International that both had been active in the anti-government protest movement and more recently had been involved in the solidarity and relief network, volunteering at schools that were housing people displaced from their homes by the conflict. A relative of the family told Amnesty International:

“When the men stormed the apartment the family knew that they were likely to be officers from the Air Force Intelligence, as they are the main security force operating in the area. Mahmud was on the internet. Like many kids his age, he had been making anti-government remarks on Facebook and the like. The men examined the laptop and took it. They took the two boys and their father downstairs and returned upstairs to search the apartment. Then they left, taking the two boys and their father and the family car, which was parked downstairs. The neighbours told us they returned at about 3am and searched the apartment again. The following day a stranger telephoned saying he had found the bodies of my relatives [their IDs were with them] dumped in al-Zahra in the family car, together with two unidentified burned bodies.”

The bodies of Ali and Ibrahim Khalifa, their brother-in-law Maher al-Aqra (all three in their mid- to late twenties and married with young children) and their 16-year-old cousin Abd al-Qader Khalal were found in their car on 11 August in al-Zahra district. The four went missing on 9 August as they were returning home from Hreitan, north of Aleppo. A relative told Amnesty International:

“They went to Hreitan on Wednesday [8 August] to visit Maher’s family and to get bread, as Maher said that bread was much cheaper in Hreitan... On Thursday morning they called to say that there was no bread in Hreitan and that they were leaving to return to Aleppo. They never arrived home and we had no news until Saturday [11 August] at 2pm when we received a call from a stranger saying that the four had been taken by the Air Force Intelligence. After two hours we received a call from another stranger who informed us that our car was in al-Zahra neighbourhood with seven bodies inside and that he had called an ambulance to take the bodies to the morgue of the University Hospital. The caller had found one of my relative’s business cards in the car. At the hospital we found the bodies; their hands were tied at the back and they had been shot in the forehead. They had marks all over their bodies, as if they had been lashed with cables or whips, and two of them had a bruised and swollen eye.”

In another case, Ahmad Haka, a 27-year-old shopkeeper and father of two young children, was arrested by members of the Air Force Intelligence on the evening of 23 July from his small grocery shop in al-Zahra district. One of his relatives told Amnesty International:

“There had just been a small anti-government demonstration outside the local mosque after evening prayers. [Ahmad Haka] went back to his shop and was watching the al-Jazeera channel when the security men went into the shop and they slapped him for that. They took him away and the following day his body was found with his hands tied behind his back dumped with three other bodies by the Maliya roundabout in al-Zahra district. We recognized the body from the video but have not been able to find the body. We have heard that there are a lot of bodies in the University Hospital but it is tightly controlled by government forces and we are scared that anyone who goes there to ask about a body may be at risk of arrest.”

A man whose three relatives were extrajudicially executed and who was himself injured and left for dead, told Amnesty International:

“I was with my relatives in our van and we were stopped near the Air Force Intelligence in al-Zahra district in the early afternoon. Those who stopped us were members of a shabiha militia working with the Air Force Intelligence. We were driven outside the city and there the women from our family who were with us were freed. Three male relatives and I had our hands tied at the back with plastic handcuffs and were made to kneel on the ground. Our captors sprayed us with gunfire from their Kalashnikov rifles and left. My three relatives were killed. I was left for dead but survived. I received a bullet in the knee, one in the arm and one in the back, which also cut through my handcuffs. From remarks made by our captors I think we were targeted in an act of revenge, because we are originally from a village which has been very supportive of the opposition and where a few days earlier many soldiers had been killed by the FSA.” (The names of the victims and other details of the case have been withheld to protect the survivor’s security.)

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Syrian government to put an end to such practices, which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes which should be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

UNLAWFUL KILLINGS BY ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS

On 31 July 2012, 14 members of the Berri clan, believed to be members of a notorious shabiha state-armed militia group were captured, beaten and subsequently shot dead by opposition fighters belonging to the Tawhid Brigade in the Bab al-Nairab neighbourhood of Aleppo. The summary execution-style killing was filmed by al-Tawhid Brigade fighters, who also filmed their captives being interrogated and abused inside a “hospitality” building belonging to the Berri clan, where they were captured. The men, including the head of the clan, Ali Zein al-‘Abdeen Berri (known as Zayno Berri) bore obvious signs of ill-treatment, indicating that they had been beaten after their capture. Video clips of the incident were publicized in Syria and worldwide on social media and in international media and drew widespread condemnation, including from some FSA spokesmen. Fahad al-Masri, the FSA’s Head of Central Media, condemned the killings in a televised interview on 1 August and said the FSA had opened an investigation into the incident and those responsible would be held to account.

This is the most well known and egregious but not the only example of abuses committed by opposition fighters in Aleppo. As the conflict continues there are growing concerns about abuses committed by opposition fighters belonging to a plethora of armed opposition groups operating in the city.

Amnesty International has called on the FSA leadership to take steps to put an immediate end to such abuses and to ensure that these and any other killings of captives be investigated in an impartial, independent and comprehensive manner and the results passed on to the UN Commission of Inquiry (which is responsible for monitoring, documenting and reporting such incidents to the Human Rights Council). This would be instrumental for possible prosecution when and if the situation in Syria is

referred to the ICC.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ The organization's delegate visited the strike locations, examined remnants of munitions used in the strikes, and interviewed survivors, relatives of victims, witnesses and medical personnel who rescued and treated the victims.
- ⁱⁱ These include groups belonging to the well-known Tawhid Brigade, whose links with the FSA remain to be clarified.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The call to prayer, in this case the prayer signalling the end of the day's fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.
- ^{iv} Breakfast, which during the holy month of Ramadan is taken at sunset, after the day's fasting.
- ^v The last meal of the night before fasting begins at sunrise during the holy month of Ramadan.
- ^{vi} One of the best known such cases occurred in late June 2012, when three young medics, who were part of a network providing emergency medical care in secret field hospitals to demonstrators shot by security forces, were arrested by Air Force Intelligence officers. Their bodies were found a week later burned, mutilated and with torture marks and gunshot wounds to the head. See: "Syria: Detained medics tortured and killed amid Aleppo crackdown", 26 June, at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/syria-detained-medics-killed-brutal-bid-silence-dissent-2012-06-26>