

Inside Syria's civil war
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It's only getting worse. That's the message of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, which presented an update of its findings to the U.N. Human Rights Council today. The report, which includes information gathered through June 15, describes conditions on the ground as "dangerous and quickly deteriorating." If its findings are to be believed, that claim is, if anything, an understatement. Here are some of the most important takeaways from the report.

The government is increasingly using heavy weaponry to repress the opposition. The report describes how President Bashar al-Assad's regime has used helicopter gunships and artillery "in the shelling of entire neighbourhoods believed to be anti-government, even during the presence of observers."

The commission sees such indiscriminate tactics as a sign of regime weakness, not its strength. The use of such weapons, it reports, reveals the Syrian military's "inability to hold territory," and marks a new strategy of assaulting rebel strongholds and then withdrawing, instead of trying to permanently occupy hostile areas.

Syrian rebel groups are becoming increasingly deadly and radical. While the commission was not able to confirm reports of more sophisticated weaponry reaching the rebels, it did note they were "improving in efficiency and organization" -- in particular using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to great effect against the Syrian military. As a result, the report says, the rebels have effectively challenged the Assad regime in the governorates of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo and undermined government control of the border areas, allowing the free flow of people and arms from neighboring countries.

Some rebel groups have been guilty of the same abuses that they decry in the Assad regime. The commission reported that anti-government forces had extra-judicially executed Syrian military forces, government supporters, and suspected informers. Meanwhile, some rebel groups were "involved in criminal/opportunist activities such as kidnappings and abductions for ransom."

In one instance, the commission related a discussion with a Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighter about how captured government soldiers were treated. "Lower level soldiers were reportedly tried by a court applying Sharia law, according to the fighter. Multiple FSA soldiers interviewed told the [commission] they had never heard of international humanitarian or human rights law," the report stated. "One soldier stated that he believed the creed 'an eye for an eye,' which he described as being part of Sharia law, supersedes international standards. Another FSA soldier told the [commission] that Alawite soldiers are normally killed immediately upon capture, while soldiers from other sects are offered the chance to join the FSA, and if they refuse to join, they are released to their relatives."

The evidence of rebel groups' abuses pales in comparisons to violations committed by regime forces. The report details instances of torture, sexual abuse, and executions committed by Assad's security forces. Methods of torture described by former detainees includes "mock executions; electric shocks applied to sensitive parts of the body, including genitals; cigarettes burns; and beating with electric cables, whips, metal and wooden sticks and rifle butts." In other cases, detainees were "forcibly shaved, made to imitate dogs and to declare that 'there is no God but Bashar' while in a position of supplication."

There is also evidence that pro-Assad forces are using sexual abuse as a weapon. After Syrian military forces recaptured the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs from rebel fighters in February, for instance, the commission received multiple reports of rape and sexual assault against the area's residents. One man "described being forced to watch as his wife and two of his daughters were raped by three of the men involved," the report said. "Afterwards, he stated, he, too, was raped while his family was made to watch."

The commission doesn't establish guilt for the Houla massacre, but its evidence points toward Syrian military forces. On May 25, over 100 people -- including many women and children -- were killed in the village of al-Houla, many of whom were summarily executed at close range. A large section of the report

is devoted to reconstructing the events there, in an attempt to determine who was responsible for the massacre.

The commission's efforts fell short of conclusively identifying the culprit, but nevertheless provided valuable information on the political loyalty of the town and the placement of Syrian forces. It describes the government checkpoints present in the town, including on Main St., one of the two primary locations where the massacre was committed. "[T]he checkpoints were sufficiently close to the crime scenes that the noises emanating therefrom (gunbursts and screams) would likely have alerted those manning the checkpoint," the report states. "Thus, the [commission] determined that the location of the checkpoints...made it likely that those manning the pro-Government checkpoints were aware."

The report was unable to identify the political loyalties of the two families that suffered the massacres, but did note that the neighborhoods where the killings took place "appeared aligned to the opposition more than the Government." Meanwhile, it noted, "it was opposition groups who first arrived to the scene, cared for the wounded, prepared the deceased for burial, and were present in large numbers during the funeral."

Even if the commission was unwilling to blame pro-Assad forces on the basis of this evidence, there was no denying the brutality of the killings. "Interviewees...described the scene inside the houses as horrific, with groups of women, boys and girls huddled together in the corner of living rooms," the report says. "Blood was visible on the walls, indicating many were standing when shot...Multiple interviewees described stab wounds and the apparent use of axes."

As the revolt stretches on without effective international action, accounts like this look to become an increasingly common aspect of Syria's civil war

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