

Genocide and Mass Atrocities Alert: Syria
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(February 2012)-- 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 have turned violent as former Syrian troops have defected and formed the "Free Syrian Army," which the Syrian government has called a "terrorist" organization, and used to justify its ever more violent repression of civilian protests. Whole cities have been shelled by Syrian tanks and mortars, and at least 6000 civilians have died.

Since 1970, Syria has been under the repressive rule of the al-Assad family regime and the socialist Ba'ath Party. Tensions and political strife have been an on-going theme in Syria due in large part to the opposing ideologies of the regime's ruling Alawite minority -- Baathist socialism- and the Sunni Muslim majority, which makes up three quarters of the country's population, and largely favors adherence to Islamic law. After the Hama Massacre of 1982- a 'scorched earth' operation that killed 20,000 people to combat an attempted Sunni Muslim uprising- the government became increasingly authoritarian, relying on repressive policies to maintain control. Torture and killing of opposition leaders became policy.

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, the Constitution was amended to permit his 34 year old son, Bashar al-Assad to take power after a one-party "election." Dynastic successions are characteristic of Middle Eastern autocracies, as they are in North Korea. There was a brief "Damascus Spring" when political life became freer, and Bashar al-Assad promised reforms, but the only reforms were economic, freeing the economy from the stranglehold of state socialism. Political repression returned quickly.

During the Arab Spring of 2011, which swept authoritarian regimes out of power across North Africa, pro-democracy protests began in Syria in early March 2011. Violent repression followed quickly when official *mukhabarat* security forces opened fire on non-violent political protesters in the city of Daraa on March 18th, killing at least four people. The eruption of mass anti-government protests quickly spread throughout the country, and violent attacks on civilians by the al-Assad regime have continued to escalate in brutality throughout the past year. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, as of January 2012, the death toll in Syria now exceeds 5,400- over five times more than the estimated deaths in July 2011, when Genocide Watch issued its first Genocide Alert for Syria. Thousands more have fled as refugees to neighboring countries like Jordan and Lebanon.

As the intense struggle for power continues between the al-Assad regime and opposition fighters, the government has resorted to the extreme measures of closing off borders and shutting 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 have also surfaced on the internet.

The evidence is now 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, rape of detainees, widespread torture- including torture and murder of children- and denial of food, medicines and other essential resources to civilians.

If the Alawite government of al-Assad believes it is about to lose all power in a zero-sum, winner take all revolution, its massacres could turn 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 violations;
- 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 of committing crimes against humanity, blaming “foreign-inspired terrorist gangs” for the armed conflict.

In February 2012, a UN Security Council resolution proposed by the Arab League, calling for the resignation of President Assad and supporting an Arab League peace plan, was vetoed by Russia and China. A nearly identical UN General Assembly Resolution was then passed by a vote of 137 to 12 and the U.N. Secretary General denounced the al-Assad regime's crimes against humanity. Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, has issued a recommendation that the U.N. Security Council refer evidence of atrocities committed by government forces in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

President al-Assad announced plans for a constitutional referendum to remove the clause that makes the Baath Party the sole party permitted in Syria, but it will have no impact on the intensifying violence.

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 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 full protected access for UN and international aid workers and journalists to all areas of Syria;