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UN admits Syria wracked by sectarian civil war

By Chris Marsden

21 December 2012

A United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry has finally admitted that a sectarian civil war is raging in Syria. Its findings are based upon extensive investigations and interviews between September 28 to December 16, 2012.

They detail massacres and gross violations of human rights that have polarised Syria between the supporters of a Sunni insurgency and those Sunnis and various minority groups that have aligned themselves with the Alawite-led Ba'athist regime out of fear that its downfall will produce a yet more brutal Sunni chauvinist alternative.

Investigators, headed by Carla del Ponte, the former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, have interviewed more than 1,200 victims and refugees.

The report produced is a devastating indictment of the United States and other western powers, who have worked with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to depose of Bashar al-Assad by recruiting and aiding a Sunni insurgency overwhelmingly made up of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, Salafist and Al Qaeda-style groups. Many are foreign fighters brought to Syria with the specific aim of waging a jihad against what they conceive of as a heretical government.

The UN panel, led by Paulo Pinheiro of Brazil, states that the conflict has evolved from being a battle for political change into one that is “overtly sectarian in nature.”

“Mounting tensions have led to armed clashes between different armed groups along a sectarian divide”, with “Some minority communities, notably the Alawites and Christians”, forming “armed self-defence groups to protect their neighbourhoods from anti-Government fighters.”

Many opposition fighters “operate independently... or are affiliated to Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra”, but still coordinate their attacks with the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

With sectarian divisions affecting Sunnis, Alawites, Armenians, Christians, Druze, Palestinians, Kurds and Turkmen, “Entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed”. The report notes as an example that almost all 80,000 Christians who once lived in Homs, where Jabhat al-Nusra has a large presence, have fled to Damascus or Beirut.

The report’s findings are proof that that the US State Department’s decision on December 11 to designate Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as the al-Nusra front, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization was little more than a damage limitation exercise, given that the entire insurgency is dominated by it and similar groups.

At a press conference in Brussels, Pinheiro declared, “We think this is a war where no military victory is possible. It is a great illusion that providing arms to one side or the other will help end it.”

Nevertheless, arming of the opposition by Washington and its allies will continue, in anticipation that Assad’s downfall will weaken Iran and further consolidate US hegemony over the oil riches of the region. The argument has already repeatedly been made by the advocates of war that only decisive intervention now can ensure that Assad’s downfall will see his regime replaced by a democracy and prevent the danger that chemical weapons will fall into the hands of jihadist groups.

On December 17, Israel’s *Haaretz* reported that US cargo airplanes carrying military equipment have landed in Jordanian airports over several days and that US military forces in the country have been significantly built up.

Yesterday, US officials accused the Syrian government of firing Scud missiles against oppositionists near Maara, north of Aleppo near the Turkish border. Syria denied the claim as “untrue rumours”. The US, Germany and the Netherlands have dispatched Patriot anti-missile systems and hundreds of troops to Turkey’s border and are clearly seeking a pretext to use them. Already on December 12, the US alleged that the Syrian military had fired six Scud missiles at the Sheikh Suleiman base north of Aleppo, which had been occupied by the FSA.

While the US military build-up takes place in Jordan and on the Turkish border, propaganda efforts will continue to portray the insurgency as a democratic movement pitched against a regime that has been repeatedly accused of lying about the influence of the Islamists while itself perpetrating sectarian atrocities alongside its supporters in various unofficial Shabiha militias.

The days leading up to the publication of the UN report saw news headlines dominated by allegations of yet another massacre by pro-government forces, only this time of Alawites in the village of Agrab in Hama. Initial reports, wholly based on opposition sources and YouTube videos of people interviewed by the FSA, alleged brutal “Alawite-on-Alawite violence.”

Everyone from the *New York Times* to the BBC reported opposition activists stating that up to 300 people had died when pro-government militiamen besieged by rebels blew up a building where they had been holding civilians hostage, after which it had been bombed by warplanes.

However, the only news channel to send reporters to Agrab, Channel 4 in the UK, found three key witnesses who independently told the same story “to the last detail” of anti-Assad “rebels” having carried out the killing of an unknown number of Alawites. In addition, “their accounts are further backed up by at least a dozen conversations with other Alawites who had fled from Aqrab”, Alex Thomsons writes.

He describes how opposition fighters attacked Aqrab on Sunday 2 December. One witness explained, “They had long beards. It was hard to understand what they said. They weren’t dressed like normal Syrians.”

They came from the opposition stronghold of al-Houla. The FSA forces then “corralled around 500 Alawite civilians in a large red-coloured two-storey house” and held them “until the early hours of Tuesday 11 December. Nine days.”

The “rebels wanted to take the women and children to al-Houla to use them as human shields against bombardment from government forces, and they believed they would kill the remaining men.”

A delegation of villagers was sent Monday to negotiate the release of the hostages, but after four hours shooting broke out. Later, around 70 of the prisoners were taken to safety in the nearest village a mile away, while others were taken to al-Houla.

The house reported to have been destroyed by government jets still stands.

Thomsons says he has no idea of the number of casualties or whether there was a massacre, but notes, “If the government really did massacre up to 250 people from President Assad’s own Alawite sect, YouTube would be 10 feet deep in rebel videos, of the bodies, of the funerals, of

the carnage. Be in no doubt about this. Yet check on YouTube—there is not a scrap of video to back their story.”

YouTube does, however, feature a number of videos of sectarian killings by the Syrian opposition, including a recent one of two allegedly Alawite men being beheaded by Syrian rebels, one of them by a child.

On the day the UN commission issued its report, the FSA also published a video report boasting of having seized control for the first time of a border crossing between the Syrian town of Rankous and the Lebanese town of Tfeil.

The aim of opening up this crossing as a key supply route pitches the FSA against Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group that supports the Assad regime, and drags Lebanon ever more decisively into the Syrian conflict.

Cross border incursions take place almost daily and have led to dozens of casualties, while clashes between pro and anti-Assad forces have seen hundreds killed in border areas. Once again divisions have taken a sectarian dimension—a pattern that can repeat itself throughout the Middle East.