

**Testimony of Dr. Radwan Ziadeh**  
**Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**  
**Hearing on the Human Rights Crisis in Syria**  
**March 27, 2012**

Chairman McGovern and other distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for holding this very important hearing at a time when the human rights situation in Syria has become more dire than ever, and thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify.

Over the course of the past year, the perpetration of human rights abuses by the regime in Syria has increased exponentially and has also spread geographically throughout the country. Indeed, before the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, there were frequent abuses of human rights by the regime in order to target political opponents and quash dissent. But when the popular revolution began to challenge Bashar al-Assad's control, the regime steadily increased its brutality. The surge in intensity of the crackdown is corroborated by the fact that the number of deaths doubled between December and January. Amnesty International states that "the scale of torture and other ill-treatment in Syria has risen to a level not witnessed for years and is reminiscent of the dark era of the 1970s and 1980s."

A recent report issued by Human Rights Watch finds that armed opposition groups have been committing human rights abuses, including kidnappings, torture, and executions aimed at shabiha and security forces. The Syrian National Council unequivocally condemns any violations of human rights committed by armed opposition groups, and urges the Free Syria Army and any other unaffiliated groups to immediately cease any such violations and to uphold international human rights standards in every aspect of conduct and engagement. The leadership of the SNC recognizes that no sustainable, just peace can be reached in Syria so long as human rights abuses are being committed.

As the most recent report by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic states, the abuses committed by armed opposition groups are "not comparable in scale and organization to those carried out by the State. Amnesty International has also published a comprehensive study of torture, which found that "people caught up in the massive wave of arrests in the wake of the Syrian uprising have been thrust into a nightmarish world of systemic torture," a torture which has been not only systematic but also widespread. The most recent report by the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry asserts that there was knowledge of and control over the orders given to commit human rights abuses at the highest levels of leadership, in some cases implicating President Bashar al-Assad as well as high ranking security officials. The UN Report writes that "orders to commit such violations originated from policies and directives issued at the highest levels of the armed forces and the Government. The perpetration of crimes against humanity has by and large been intentional and coordinated. The UN Report also found that "most crimes against humanity and gross human rights violations were carried out in complex operations that involved the entire security apparatus, and therefore would have required superior directives." In order to minimize dissent and defections, the military has systematically scrambled and

reorganized deployments “when orders to commit crimes were received.”

The most recent brutal assaults have been carried out by elite units of the army closest to the leadership. In addition to official military operations, state officials, in cooperation with elite businessmen, have hired and organized groups of shabiha, who “were strategically employed to commit crimes against humanity and other gross violations.” Often, members of the shabiha dress in plain clothes, complicating the rules of engagement for armed opposition groups while also making it difficult to hold those responsible for violations accountable.

The recent UN report also finds that “large-scale operations conducted in different governorates” often involved similar modus operandi, “which suggests that they were based on uniform directives from the State.” For instance, over the last several months the army conducted similar operations in at least four governorates wherein the military surrounded entire neighborhoods where anti-government forces were present, and then proceeded to shell “these residential areas with heavy weapons, with complete disregard for potential civilian casualties,” the most glaring examples being the government assaults on Homs and Hama.

According to the Independent Commission, high and mid-ranking military officials at times gave “explicit orders to commit crimes,” including to “shoot at unarmed protestors, kill soldiers who refused to obey such orders, arrest persons without cause, mistreat detained persons and attack civilian neighborhoods with indiscriminate tank and machine gun fire. Officers shot unarmed protestors, including children, as well as medical doctors, ambulance drivers, and mourners at funerals” in multiple cities. The UN report states that “furthermore, military officers and commanders of security forces often stationed their units at checkpoints and other strategic locations in urban areas so that other units could attack neighborhoods to loot homes and arrest residents. In addition, security force commanders managed detention centers throughout the country where prisoners were subjected to torture, sexual assaults and other inhumane acts.” Amnesty International’s recent report entitled “I Wanted to Die” documents “31 methods of torture or other ill-treatment by security forces, army and pro-government armed shabiha gangs, described by witnesses or victims to Amnesty International researchers in Jordan in February 2012.”

The UN report states that “military commanders and civilian superiors may reasonably be suspected of responsibility for crimes against humanity,” and that the President himself has publicly revealed his knowledge of the events documented by the Independent Commission’s first report. In fact, “some officers who directly participated in crimes against humanity were promoted or commended.” In an attempt to restore the wall of fear that has been cracked by the revolution, the government has targeted the families of victims of state crimes, forcing them to sign “declarations attributing responsibility to armed groups before they would allow the body of the person killed to be released.” This blatant attempt to cover up crimes against humanity reveals the state of utter corruption under which the regime functions. In order to influence public opinion both inside Syria and abroad, pro-state media has obscured violations or attributed them to armed

opposition groups. The structure of the state encourages impunity for those who have committed such crimes against humanity, and the UN report finds that the Syrian judiciary is, in its current state, incapable of addressing these crimes “committed on the basis of State policy.”

These systematic atrocities committed by the state by no means give license to armed opposition groups to violate human rights. The Syrian National Council urges all opposition groups to uphold and respect the standards of international human rights and international law. The dire situation on the ground coupled with a lack of adequate technology, tools, and capability has made communication, command, and control more challenging, and the Free Syria Army has said that its “commanders in the field currently made their own rules of engagement in accordance with the training received in the Syrian Armed Forces.” In order to halt this cycle, the leadership of the Free Syria Army has “requested guidance in shaping rules of engagement consistent” with human rights and international law.

In the wake of such violence, there is certainly a risk that communities or individuals will be targeted in reprisal. The UN report found that “some armed civilians in Homs, including armed civilians belonging to the FSA, sought to exact blood revenge for abuses by killing family members of security personnel or *Shabbiha*.” The FSA leadership and local coordinating committee in Homs “denounced such collective reprisals and tried to contain them.” The opposition, both the SNC and the FSA, recognize that such reprisals, and any violation of human rights or international law, jeopardize the prospects for a lasting peace in future free Syria, and they run counter to our goals and ideals. The opposition is entirely committed to upholding justice and human rights in Syria, even under such extreme conditions, and has repeatedly planned for transitional justice.

The violence combined with a worsening socioeconomic situation has created a humanitarian crisis in the country, and “meeting basic needs to sustain everyday life has become increasingly difficult for the population at large. The continuation of the crisis carries the risk of radicalizing the population, deepening inter-communal tensions and eroding the fabric of society.” Everyday that this violence and impasse continue, the fabric of Syrian society unravels, jeopardizing the freedom and right to livelihood the Syrian people deserve.

As the UN report suggests, the only way to end the violence and reach a sustainable, just peace for the Syrian people is to begin a dialogue “leading to a negotiated settlement that effectively ensures the human rights of all people in the country.” While this revolution and the crackdown have escalated and amplified the level of human rights violations committed in Syria, I have dedicated my life’s work to documenting and calling for reform of the systems that allow and even encourage the abuse of human rights. The state apparatus is rife with practices and institutions that obstruct and actively violate human rights, and a comprehensive reform process must be undertaken. As the UN report states, the crimes against humanity have been committed “within a system of impunity;” therefore, “profound structural reforms in the political, justice, and security sectors are necessary to break the culture of impunity and to deliver justice to the victims.”

In order to achieve reform, reconciliation, and accountability, we must begin an “urgent, inclusive political dialogue bringing together the Government, opposition and anti-Government actors to negotiate an end to the violence, to ensure respect for human rights and to address the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. A contact group composed of States with diverse positions on the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic should be established to initiate a process leading to such a political dialogue. An international peace conference should be convened as soon as possible to facilitate this process.” In the meantime, as the report contends, we must ensure transparent and thorough monitoring of the human rights situation in Syria in order to facilitate justice and accountability.

So long as violence continues, the opposition pledges to respect human rights in the interests of a future free Syria. The opposition is committed to fostering an open, inclusive dialogue in which reparations and “effective remedies” can be provided for victims and reconciliation and accountability can be reached. Indeed, the international stalemate on what to do about Syria has effectively emboldened the regime while disheartening those calling for respect of human rights. The recent report by the UN Independent Commission, as well as a Presidential Statement from the Security Council endorsing envoy Kofi Annan’s six-point plan “to bring an end to all violence and human rights violations, secure humanitarian access and facilitate a Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, plural political system,” are very positive steps forward and indicate growing support from the international community. Despite the plan’s call for a ceasefire, however, government assaults and subsequent clashes have ensued, further highlighting the need for increased international monitoring and assistance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Presidential Statement, 21 March 2012

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/sc10583.doc.htm>

UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry Report, 22 February 2012

[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-69\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-69_en.pdf)

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Since the Syrian uprising started in March 15, 2011 he was involved in documenting all the human rights violations and testifying at the UN Human rights council in Geneva twice, also he involved in the opposition activities where he elected in October as director of Foreign relation office for the Syrian National Council SNC the main umbrella for the Syrian opposition.

He was most recently a Visiting Scholar at Dubai Initiative at Kennedy school of Government at Harvard University, visiting scholar at The Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES) at Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Prins Global Fellow at Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University and Visiting Scholar at The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) at Georgetown University.

Before that he was Reagan–Fascell Fellow at National Endowment for Democracy (NED) at Washington D,C and Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University in New York City, he was also a Visiting Fellow at Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs) in London and a visiting scholar at Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard University (2008–2009). In 2007–2008 he was a Senior Fellow at United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, D.C.

He is the founder and director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies in Syria and co-founder and executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington, D.C. He is the managing editor of the Transitional Justice in the Arab World Project.

He is a frequent political commentator on several U.S., European, and Middle Eastern media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, B.B.C. and Al-Hurra. He also writes a bi-monthly op-ed for the leading Arab daily, *Al-Hayat*.