



Doc. 14197

10 November 2016

The situation in Aleppo

Report¹

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Rapporteur: Mr Jean-Claude MIGNON, France, Group of the European People's Party

Summary

The report deals with the tragic situation in Aleppo, which has become the epicentre of the Syrian war, one of the worst humanitarian crises since the Second World War.

The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy firmly condemns the indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian inhabited areas and regrets that the political process has stalled despite intense negotiations. In this respect, the report stresses that an inclusive Syrian-led political process leading to a genuine political transition must meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enable them independently and democratically to determine their own future, through free and fair elections, after stabilisation has been achieved in the country.

The committee fears that the escalation of violence and the magnitude of the crisis could lead to even deeper conflicts in Syria and in the whole region, in particular in Iraq, and represent a threat to worldwide security.

Therefore, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is called upon to take a number of actions and, in particular, to urge the Russian Federation, the United States of America and all parties involved in the conflict to search for a common position and take joint international action.

1. Reference to committee: Bureau Decision, Reference 4248 of 14 October 2016.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is appalled by the tragic situation in Aleppo, a Syrian city that has been partially under the control of rebel fighters and jihadist groups since 2012 and has become the epicentre of the Syrian war, now in its sixth year.
2. Throughout one of the worst humanitarian crises since the Second World War, over 300 000 Syrians have lost their lives, more than 6.5 million people have been displaced inside the country and some 4.8 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. About 70% of the population is without access to drinking water, one in three people are unable to meet their basic food needs, more than 2 million children are out of school, and four out of five people live in poverty.
3. The Assembly refers in particular to its [Resolution 1878 \(2012\)](#) and [Recommendation 2026 \(2013\)](#) on the situation in Syria, [Resolution 2016 \(2014\)](#) and [Recommendation 2055 \(2014\)](#) “Threats against humanity posed by the terrorist group known as ‘IS’: violence against Christians and other religious or ethnic communities” and [Resolution 2107 \(2016\)](#) on a stronger European response to the Syrian refugee crisis.
4. Since late March 2016, there has been a marked upsurge in the fighting, with indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian-inhabited areas, particularly through aerial bombardments. Since 21 September 2016, some of the heaviest bombardments are being inflicted on eastern Aleppo by Russian and Syrian forces.
5. The Assembly firmly condemns the indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including on medical workers and facilities, blocked humanitarian convoys, enforced disappearances, summary executions and other crimes committed by all parties to the conflict, which have left Syrians in a state of despair, with violence reaching unprecedented levels in Aleppo. It is particularly concerned about the dramatic situation of children in Aleppo, which has not received United Nations humanitarian aid since early July 2016, as many schools and hospitals have been hit (by Russian and Syrian aerial bombardments) and many children are left to die.
6. The Assembly notes that the conflict has drawn in numerous rebel groups, opposition figures, terrorist elements, international powers, and religious factions, and has even strengthened Daesh and other jihadist groups, in particular the Al-Nusra Front, now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.
7. The Assembly deeply regrets that the political process has stalled despite intense negotiations, also in the framework of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), several multilateral meetings and international conferences.
8. Fully supporting the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura, in his efforts to create the conditions for the resumption of intra-Syrian talks, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2254 and 2268 and the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, the Assembly:
 - 8.1. calls for the immediate implementation of the ceasefire agreement of September 2016 and an immediate end by Syrian and Russian forces to all aerial bombardments of Aleppo;
 - 8.2. calls on all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities and their allies, to promptly allow unhindered and sustained humanitarian access, including across conflict lines and borders;
 - 8.3. condemns all human rights violations and abuses committed by the Syrian regime and its allies, by Daesh and other terrorist groups designated as such by the United Nations, and by any other actor in the conflict, including rebels and opposition groups;
 - 8.4. strongly supports the Global Coalition to counter Daesh in Syria and Iraq;
 - 8.5. calls for all breaches of international humanitarian law and human rights law, some of which may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity, to be brought to justice, including, as appropriate, before the International Criminal Court;
 - 8.6. condemns the use of chemical weapons, which has been proved by the United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism;
 - 8.7. reiterates its message that the Syrian refugee crisis is the responsibility not only of neighbouring States and of Europe but of the international community as a whole;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 November 2016.

8.8. encourages all States to respond positively to the appeals launched by the relevant agencies of the United Nations, support humanitarian organisations as well as Syria's neighbouring countries providing assistance to refugees, and provide humanitarian pathways for the admission and resettlement of Syrian refugees;

8.9. supports the United Nations Human Rights Council's decision to request the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to conduct a special comprehensive, independent inquiry into the events in Aleppo, and identify all those responsible for alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law;

8.10. supports the European Union in imposing restrictive measures against Syria targeting Syrian individuals and entities supporting the regime, as long as the repression continues.

9. The Assembly fears that the escalation of violence and the magnitude of the crisis could lead to even deeper conflicts in Syria and in the whole region, in particular in Iraq, and represent a threat to worldwide security. It urges the Russian Federation, the United States of America and all parties involved in the conflict to search for a common position and take joint international action.

10. Finally, the Assembly stresses that an inclusive Syrian-led political process leading to a genuine political transition must meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enable them independently and democratically to determine their own future, through free and fair elections, after stabilisation has been achieved in the country.

B. Draft recommendation³

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to Resolution ... (2016) on the situation in Aleppo, a Syrian city which has become the epicentre of the Syrian war, one of the worst humanitarian crises since the Second World War. The Assembly fears that the escalation of violence and the magnitude of the crisis could lead to even deeper conflicts in Syria and in the whole region, in particular in Iraq, and represent a threat to worldwide security.
2. The Assembly reiterates that an inclusive Syrian-led political process leading to a genuine political transition must meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enable them independently and democratically to determine their own future, through free and fair elections, after stabilisation has been achieved in the country.
3. Fully supporting the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura, in his efforts to create the conditions for the resumption of intra-Syrian talks, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2254 and 2268 and the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to:
 - 3.1. ask the governments of the Council of Europe member States to take action in line with the Assembly's position, as expressed in paragraph [8] of its Resolution ... (2016);
 - 3.2. urge the Russian Federation, the United States of America and all parties involved in the conflict to search for a common position and take joint international action.

3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 November 2016.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Jean-Claude Mignon, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. On 12 October 2016, together with 22 members of the Group of the European People's Party of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I tabled a request for a debate under urgent procedure on the situation in Aleppo, in accordance with Rule 52 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure. The day after, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy appointed me as rapporteur, subject to the Bureau decision and the ratification by the Assembly which took place on 14 October. This report was referred to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy with a view to a Standing Committee debate on 25 November 2016, in Nicosia.

2. The EPP group's request called for the immediate cessation of the bombing of the city of Aleppo. It deplored the fact that a common United Nations Security Council (UNSC) position had not been reached and condemned in the strongest terms the attacks on humanitarian convoys and the bombing of civilians. It also hoped that the efforts to reach a UNSC resolution would rapidly succeed so that humanitarian aid could be supplied to the population. It called on the Russian Federation, as a member of the Council of Europe and of the United Nations Security Council, to use its influence over the Syrian regime to that end. Finally, it called on all Council of Europe parliamentary delegations and governments to firmly commit to safeguarding human rights in Syria.

3. Aleppo, which has been partially under the control of rebel fighters since 2012, has become the epicentre of the Syrian crisis, now in its sixth year. Since 21 September 2016, there has been some of the heaviest aerial bombardment by Russian and Syrian forces of eastern Aleppo since the crisis began, with media reporting the use of incendiary bombs, cluster bombs and bunker busters.⁴

4. The Syrian conflict has drawn in forces from many outside players and facilitated the rise of the jihadist groups Daesh, Al-Nusra Front, now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a hard-line al-Qaeda-linked group, and others. Relations between world powers have plunged to Cold War levels and, as many have observed, the Syrian conflict could be the beginning of a third world war.

5. At the time of writing, in Iraq, Iraqi pro-government forces, including Kurdish fighters, launched an offensive to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul, which has been in the hands of Daesh since 2014 and is the last major Iraqi stronghold. 1.5 million civilians are thought to be still inside the city, basic supplies are running out and thousands of people have been forced to flee.

6. The present report focuses on the impact of the Syrian conflict and humanitarian concerns, on internal developments and international involvement as well as on the current efforts towards a diplomatic solution.

7. On 26 October 2016, I had the opportunity to discuss this matter with the Russian Ambassador in Paris and our discussions have also provided information for my report, in the absence of the Russian delegation to the Assembly.

8. The committee also organised a hearing in Paris on 7 November 2016, with the participation of Ms Florence Gaub, Senior Analyst, European Union Institute for Security Studies, and Mr Frédéric Pichon, political scientist, specialist of the Middle-East, author of a doctoral thesis on Syria and research fellow at the University of Tours.

2. The tragic impact of the Syrian war

9. The Syrian war is one of the worst humanitarian crises since the Second World War. Over 300 000 Syrians have lost their lives, more than 6.5 million people have been displaced inside the country and some 4.8 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries in five-and-a-half years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests in March 2011, and escalated into a full-scale civil war that has drawn in numerous rebel groups, opposition figures, terrorist elements, international powers and religious factions.

10. The conflict has been labelled in different ways: a civil war of the Syrian Government against its people; a religious war opposing President Bashar al-Assad's minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shiite fighters from Iran and Hezbollah from Lebanon, against Sunni rebel groups; a proxy war featuring Russia and Iran against the United States and its allies; and an attempt by foreign-sponsored and foreign-armed Islamist rebels to

4. UNSC – October 2016 Monthly Forecast – Syria.

overthrow the secular Assad government and take control of transit corridors to deliver Saudi and Qatari hydrocarbons to Europe. Whatever we want to call it, this deadly conflict has killed thousands of people, displaced half of the country's population, and even strengthened Daesh and affiliated terrorist groups.

11. Daesh grew out of what was al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was formed by Sunni militants after the US-led invasion in 2003, and became a major force in the country's sectarian insurgency. In 2011, Daesh joined the rebellion against President Assad in Syria, where it found a safe haven and easy access to weapons.⁵

12. A *de facto* international coalition has informally brought together the Syrian Government, the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Kurds and the European Union, all focusing on defeating Daesh. A Global Coalition against Daesh was formed by 67 members in September 2014. In October 2016, a report by IHS Conflict Monitor said the territory controlled by Daesh shrank by 16% in the first nine months of 2016, and that overall it had lost just over a quarter of the territory it controlled in January 2015.⁶

13. Our committee was the first to react to the threats posed by Daesh when, on 19 August 2014, its then Chairperson, Ms Theodora Bakoyannis, issued a statement condemning the violence and urging the international community to do more in support of persecuted Christian minorities and other religious or ethnic communities.⁷ A couple of months later, the Parliamentary Assembly adopted [Resolution 13618 \(2014\)](#) "Threats against humanity posed by the terrorist group known as 'IS': violence against Christians and other religious or ethnic communities" following an urgent procedure debate, on the basis of a report by Ms Bakoyannis ([Doc. 13618](#)). The Assembly rightly underlined that persecution of religious and ethnic communities had steadily transformed into a full-scale lethal onslaught. Our colleague Mr Phil Wilson is currently preparing a report on the funding of Daesh.

14. On the Syrian conflict itself, our Assembly, a year after the 2011 anti-government protests, took a clear and firm position in [Resolution 1878 \(2012\)](#) on the situation in Syria, based on a report by the rapporteur and former Chairperson of our committee, Mr Pietro Marcenaro ([Doc. 12906](#)). The Assembly firmly condemned the widespread, systematic and gross human rights violations amounting to crimes against humanity committed by Syrian military and security forces. It equally condemned the human rights violations committed by armed groups combating the regime. It also supported Kofi Annan's peace plan and ultimately the creation of a space where democratic changes could be brought about in Syria in a peaceful manner through a "Syrian-led political process" and eventually free and fair elections. The report by Mr Marcenaro also analysed in great detail the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of Syria, which has to be preserved together with its territorial integrity and I wish to refer to this text for a thorough analysis of the Syrian political landscape following the uprising.

15. Following the so-called Syrian "elections" in 2012, organised by the Assad regime against the backdrop of continuing violence and numerous violations of Kofi Annan's peace plan, the former rapporteur issued a statement saying that those "elections" merely added yet another obstacle to the search for a peaceful political outcome to the conflict.⁸

16. On 3 October 2013, the Assembly adopted [Recommendation 2026 \(2013\)](#) and expressed frustration that UNSC Resolution 2118, adopted unanimously on 27 September 2013, in regard to the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons during the Syrian civil war, did not refer to war crimes or warfare laws, or to the International Criminal Court, and nobody was blamed for the August 2013 chemical attacks. However, the Assembly also welcomed the agreement on United Nations complex disarmament procedures and strict regular reviews.

17. Since then, the situation has dramatically degenerated into a fully-fledged war and has made the prospects for peace ever more remote with dramatic consequences both inside and outside Syria, in particular for Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which have made tremendous efforts in hosting and assisting Syrian refugees.

18. On 30 September 2016, the number of registered Syrian refugees was almost 4.8 million, including 2.1 million Syrians registered by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, 2.7 million Syrians registered by the Government of Turkey, as well as more than 29 000 Syrian refugees registered in North Africa.⁹ Turkey, in particular, is one of the most affected

5. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034.

6. <http://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-caliphate-shrinks-16-percent-2016-ihs-markit->

7. [Statement, Ms Bakoyannis, 19 August 2014](#).

8. <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1938709&Site=COE&direct=true>.

9. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

countries and has mobilised all its resources to embrace all Syrians fleeing from Syria, regardless of gender, ethnic or religious background. About 10% of Syrian refugees have fled to Europe, creating political divisions as countries argue over sharing the burden.

19. In [Resolution 2107 \(2016\)](#) on a stronger European response to the Syrian refugee crisis, based on a report by Ms Annette Groth ([Doc. 14014](#)), our Assembly stressed that the Syrian refugee crisis is the responsibility “not only of neighbouring States and of Europe but of the international community as a whole” and called for extensive external support for Syria’s neighbouring countries, including sufficient financial assistance and humanitarian pathways for admission and resettlement of refugees.¹⁰

20. According to United Nations data, about 70% of the population is without access to drinking water, one in three people are unable to meet their basic food needs, more than 2 million children are out of school, and four out of five people live in poverty.¹¹ The situation is particularly dramatic for the children in Aleppo. UNICEF’s representative in Syria called for an end to violence, saying the situation in eastern Aleppo was dire. Many schools and hospitals have been hit. Because of the lack of services and lack of health facilities many children are left to die. East Aleppo has not received United Nations humanitarian aid since early July 2016.¹²

21. The Syrian war has also had a direct and dramatic impact on all Council of Europe member States as many young people have left their home countries in Europe to join Daesh and other violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, as analysed by our colleague, Dirk Van der Maelen, rapporteur on “Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq”, which led to the adoption of [Resolution 2091](#) and [Recommendation 2084](#) in January 2016. As rightly pointed out by the rapporteur, there is a risk that those “foreign fighters”, upon their return to Europe, will have both the skills and the motivation to carry out terrorist attacks, as proven by the series of terrorist attacks that have struck Europe, and my country in particular, over the past three years.

3. International involvement

22. It is now clear that the Syrian conflict is more than a civil war between those for and those against the Assad regime. However, the country’s Sunni majority is allegedly now against President Assad’s Shia Alawite sect, with the complex involvement of regional and world powers. The jihadists exploited the chaos and divisions within both Syria and Iraq and have added a further dimension.

23. Initially, some political opposition factions came together into the “National Syrian Coalition” with the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime.

24. Others have tried to influence the situation, often based on their own agendas, with Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah supporting the Assad regime; Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates supporting the Sunni-dominated opposition; and Kurdish fighters supporting the People’s Protection Units, a secular armed faction, in control of most of the Kurdish areas of northern Syria.

25. Several countries have participated in air strikes led by the United States against Daesh in Syria, including Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, though without any international mandate.

10. The Assembly also adopted a number of resolutions relating to Syrian refugees, including [Resolution 1878 \(2012\)](#) on the situation on Syria, which urged Council of Europe member States to respond positively to United Nations agencies’ appeals relating to humanitarian aid to refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq and to those affected within Syria; [Resolution 1902 \(2012\)](#) on the European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which invited the international community to show solidarity with the Syrian victims of the conflict and with neighbouring States taking the brunt of refugees; [Resolution 1940 \(2013\)](#) on the situation in the Middle East, which called for an increase in financial assistance to Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon in order to meet the needs of Syrian refugees; [Resolution 1971 \(2014\)](#) “Syrian refugees: how to organise and support international assistance?”, which noted that the refugee situation in neighbouring countries was steadily worsening and called on States to show generosity and solidarity; [Resolution 2025 \(2014\)](#) “Resettlement of refugees: promoting greater solidarity”, which included specific recommendations on the situation of Syrian refugees; [Resolution 2047 \(2015\)](#) on the humanitarian consequences of the actions of the terrorist group known as “Islamic State”, which reiterated the Assembly’s appeal to States to show solidarity and a sense of responsibility; and [Resolution 2073 \(2015\)](#) “Countries of transit: meeting new migration and asylum challenges”, which, whilst not explicitly mentioning Syrian refugees, did address the situation in Turkey.

11. [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), 2016 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Needs Overview.

12. UNICEF, Syria Crisis, September 2016 humanitarian results.

26. At the invitation of the Syrian authorities, Russia is conducting its own fight against Daesh, Al Nusra Front and other rebel groups, in co-ordination with ground operations by the Syrian army and Iranian and Hezbollah fighters. President Putin claimed to have reached an agreement with President Assad, who accepted to adopt a new constitution and hold elections¹³.

27. Iran supports the Alawite-dominated government, providing military advisers and subsidised weapons, as well as lines of credit and oil transfers. Syria is also the main transit point for shipments of Iranian weapons to the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement Hezbollah, which has sent thousands of fighters to support government forces.

28. Saudi Arabia, which is seeking to counter the influence of its rival Iran, and topple a secular government in Syria, has been a major provider of military and financial assistance to the rebels, including the jihadists.

29. Turkey, another supporter of the rebels, has sought to expand its influence in northern Syria and to limit US support for Kurdish forces battling Daesh militants in northern Syria, accusing them of being affiliated to the banned Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹⁴

30. The divide among those who are fighting or claiming to fight Daesh and Al Nusra Front is whether they explicitly support the Assad regime, such as Russia and Iran, or maintain that Assad must leave power while, for the moment, they focus on the Daesh fight (as a common goal), namely the US-led coalition.

31. During its 33rd session in September 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council considered the latest report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. Among the report's findings is that since late March 2016 there has been a marked upsurge in fighting, with indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian-inhabited areas, particularly through aerial bombardments. Recent indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including on medical workers and facilities, blocked humanitarian convoys, enforced disappearances, summary executions and other crimes committed by all parties to the conflict, have left Syrians in a state of despair, with violence reaching unprecedented levels in Aleppo. The Commission of Inquiry reiterated its recommendation that the Security Council refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or an ad hoc tribunal¹⁵.

32. On 12 October 2016, the Assembly, in [Resolution 2134 \(2016\)](#) "Co-operation with the international Criminal Court: towards a concrete and expanded commitment", called on the ICC Prosecutor to recognise her jurisdiction over the authors of war crimes in Syria and Iraq. In his opening statement at the Human Rights Council's 33rd session on 13 September 2016, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said that Syria "is a State led by a medical doctor and yet is believed to have gassed its own people; has attacked hospitals and bombed civilian neighbourhoods with indiscriminate explosive weapons; and maintains tens of thousands of detainees in inhuman conditions ... The government, which is responsible for some of the gravest violations on record in the history of this Council, has regularly sent notes verbales to my office reporting abuses by armed groups. But it offers no possibility whatsoever for independent scrutiny".

33. Daesh has been accused by the United Nations of conducting a campaign of terror, inflicting severe punishments on those who transgress or refuse to accept its rules, including hundreds of public executions and amputations. Its fighters have also carried out mass killings of rival armed groups, members of the security forces, civilians and religious minorities, and beheaded hostages, including several Westerners.

4. Recent developments and political talks

34. Peace talks between the Assad regime and the opposition in early 2014, known as Geneva II, broke down after two rounds and, according to United Nations reports, the Assad government refused to discuss an agenda with the opposition for a further round of talks that would focus first on ending the violence and then cover the modalities of creating a transitional governing body.¹⁶

13. <http://tass.com/politics/906173>.

14. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229.

15. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic – A/HRC/33/55, 6 September 2016.

16. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47152#_WAnKjcluPYY.

35. In 2015, the fight against Daesh gave impetus to the political process and the United States and Russia persuaded representatives of the warring parties to attend “proximity talks” in Geneva, in January 2016, to discuss a Security Council-endorsed road map for peace, including a ceasefire and a transitional period ending with elections. The first round broke down as government forces continued to regain control over territories held by the rebels, and launched a major offensive to the northern city of Aleppo.¹⁷

36. Over the past year, the political process has been stalling despite intense negotiations. Also in the framework of the International Syria Support Group¹⁸ (ISSG), several multilateral meetings and the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura, to create the conditions for resumption of intra-Syrian talks have not yet succeeded.

37. A majority of the members of the United Nations Security Council believe that if Russia and the United States cannot agree bilaterally, it will be almost impossible to achieve agreement in a multilateral setting.¹⁹

38. On 9 September 2016 in Geneva, Russia and the United States agreed to create the conditions necessary for the resumption of political talks, through a cessation of hostilities. This would include the grounding of Syrian air assets and humanitarian access, in exchange for greater counterterrorism co-operation against Al Nusra Front.

39. Although the full text of the 9 September agreements between Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Kerry was not made public at the request of the latter, it appears that the United States committed itself to making a distinction between Al Nusra Front and other terrorists on the one hand, and “moderate” opposition forces on the other, in exchange for a ceasefire.

40. On 12 September, the two parties declared a day of silence and cessation of hostilities. Both Syrian and Russian air forces stopped flying combat missions over Aleppo and the Syrian army retreated from the separation line, including along “Castello Road”, the main transport corridor leading to East Aleppo. At the same time, however, the rebel fighters did not stop shelling West Aleppo and used the retreat of Syrian troops to retake ground previously lost to the Syrian Army. They also reportedly used the ceasefire to redeploy forces and to receive support in arms and personnel.

41. On 16 September, four combat aircraft from the US-led coalition launched a strike against Syrian army forces near Dayr-az-Zawr, a town held by the Syrian army and besieged by Daesh for several months. The attack, which killed 80 and wounded over 200 people, was reported as a “target error” by the United States and was then followed by a Daesh offensive.

42. Following this incident, the Syrian authorities declared that they would no longer observe the ceasefire unilaterally, arguing that the opposite side had not adhered to it for a minute.

43. The deal collapsed and the conflict massively escalated with a ferocious offensive by the Syrian Government, supported by Russia, along with Iranian-sponsored ground forces, to capture the eastern zone of the city of Aleppo, one of the few major urban areas partially held by rebels, in particular Al Nusra Front militants. Aleppo was Syria’s great commercial centre and a UNESCO World Heritage site, and represents a key strategic objective, which would also allow the Assad regime to halt the rebellion’s existence in North-West Syria.

44. In September 2016, the United Nations special envoy specifically called on Al Nusra Front fighters, estimated to number about 1 000, to leave the city of Aleppo in exchange for an end to government and Russian bombardments, warning that thousands of civilians could be killed and the historic city destroyed by the year end if conditions did not change soon. He also urged Russian and Syrian forces to immediately stop their aerial bombing of Aleppo, if Al Nusra Front militants left the city. Moreover, he added that the presence of 900 terrorist fighters should not be used as an excuse to besiege and bombard over a quarter of a million people.²⁰

45. In October 2016, Amnesty International released satellite imagery illustrating the scale of destruction, as well as testimony from civilians trapped in the city, providing evidence that Syrian Government forces, with Russian support, have attacked residential homes, medical facilities, schools, markets and mosques as part

17. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229.

18. The Arab League, Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, the Netherlands, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the United States.

19. UNSC – October 2016 Monthly Forecast – Syria.

20. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55228#.WA3WCsluPYY.

of a deliberate military strategy to empty the city of its inhabitants and seize control. At least 600 aerial attacks were carried out in the space of three weeks in the period up until 10 October, according to the Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability, a local monitoring group. Aleppo's Health Directorate estimates that around 400 civilians were killed in these attacks.²¹

46. During an interview, President Assad denied reports by opposition activists and international relief agencies that his government was targeting hospitals and civilian infrastructure. Syria and Russia also accuse the United States of not respecting their part of the deal, in particular the commitment to distinguish "moderate" opposition from terrorists, of not obtaining a ceasefire from rebels and of actually breaking the ceasefire by bombing Syrian troops fighting Islamic State insurgents.

47. On 2 October 2016, the European Union also launched an emergency humanitarian initiative in close co-ordination with United Nations agencies, to deliver humanitarian relief to eastern Aleppo.

48. On 8 October 2016, Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution, tabled by France and Spain, which would have demanded an immediate end to air strikes and military flights over Aleppo. It also called for a truce and humanitarian aid access throughout Syria. In introducing the resolution, Jean-Marc Ayrault, Minister for Foreign Affairs of France, compared Aleppo to Guernica, Sarajevo and Grozny, and said that the rejection of this text would mean more deaths, more refugees and more displaced persons.²²

49. It is the fifth time Russia has vetoed a United Nations resolution on Syria during the more than five-year conflict. The previous four times Russia was backed by China, but this last time China abstained from the vote. Russia's own draft resolution, which prioritised the counterterrorism aspects of the Syrian conflict, in particular separating Al Nusra Front from other armed opposition groups, and supported the UN Special Envoy's plan to allow rebels to leave Aleppo, received only four positive votes from China, Egypt, Russia and Venezuela, and was not adopted.²³

50. On 15 October 2016, ministerial level talks were held in Lausanne. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and US Secretary of State, John Kerry, met, along with regional actors Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but failed to agree on a common strategy to end the conflict.

51. On 17 October 2016, the EU Foreign Affairs Council stressed that "there can be no military solution to the conflict" and concluded that Russia's involvement, along with Syrian Government forces, may amount to war crimes, stressing that "the intensity and scale of the aerial bombardment of eastern Aleppo is clearly disproportionate" and citing "the deliberate targeting of hospitals, medical personnel, schools and essential infrastructure, as well as the use of barrel bombs, cluster bombs, and chemical weapons".²⁴ The Ministers added that the use of starvation of civilians as a tactic of war and forced population transfers by the Syrian regime are a clear breach of international humanitarian law. On 27 October 2016, the EU Council added 10 persons to the list of those targeted by EU restrictive measures against the Syrian regime for being responsible for the violent repression against the civilian population in Syria, benefiting from or supporting the regime, and/or being associated with such persons. These measures were last extended on 27 May 2016 and are in place until 1 June 2017.

52. On 17 October 2016, Russia announced a so-called "humanitarian pause" in Aleppo on 20 October, to allow civilians to escape and for militants to leave the city, and expressed its readiness to extend the humanitarian ceasefire for as long as needed, provided that the rebels would not use it for launching new attacks. This was considered by the opposition, the National Syrian Coalition, as a gimmick aimed at quashing the revolution. Anas al-Abdah, President of the National Syrian Coalition, called on the international community to impose a no-fly zone to stop the massacre.²⁵

53. On 20 October 2016, Islamist militants shelled a "humanitarian corridor" set up to allow civilians to escape from eastern Aleppo. There are eight corridors in eastern Aleppo, two of which have been established for rebels willing to leave, who would be allowed exit the city with their arms. The six others are intended for civilians and humanitarian aid deliveries. Syrian forces have already pulled back from those routes, while Russian and Syrian aircraft will stay at least 10 kilometres away from Aleppo.²⁶

21. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/10/syria-un-must-act-to-end-onslaught-aimed-at-purging-civilians-from-eastern-aleppo/>.

22. www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12545.doc.htm.

23. UNSC – Syria: Special Envoy to Brief after Lausanne Talks, 14 October 2016.

24. EU Council conclusions on Syria, 17 October 2016.

25. www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/10/19/pour-une-diplomatie-coercitive-en-syrie_5016115_3232.html?xtmc=syrie&xtcr=1.

26. <https://www.rt.com/news/363318-aleppo-humanitarian-corridor-russia/>.

54. Unfortunately, during the three-day pause in fighting, United Nations agencies were unable to evacuate wounded civilians and the Syrian State media and Russian authorities have accused rebel forces of preventing civilians from leaving and of using them as human shields. No Al Nusra Front fighters left the city, which had been a key demand of the Russian Government. According to United Nations data, there are about 8 000 moderate opposition fighters in Aleppo and about 900 Al Nusra Front militants.²⁷

55. On 19 October 2016, leaders of France, Germany and Russia, gathering in Berlin in “Normandy format” to discuss the situation in Ukraine, also held talks on the situation in Syria. Germany alleged that distinguishing terrorists from moderate rebels in Aleppo was an impossible task without a complete ceasefire. For his part, President Putin insisted that the western counterparts, first of all the United States, should deliver on their long-stated commitments to distinguish terrorists from so-called “moderate” opposition. The German and French leaders did not exclude that they may discuss new sanctions against Russia during the upcoming European Union Summit, on EU relations with Russia, including sanctions over Ukraine, which come up for renewal at the end of the year. The Summit is also expected to cover Russia’s role in Syria.

56. Recently, President Putin postponed a planned visit to France after President Hollande insisted that talks would be confined to Syria.

57. President Hollande, speaking before the Parliamentary Assembly on 11 October 2016, stressed that “Syria is a monumental challenge in the international community. Our very honour is at stake. Either we can live up to our honour by finding a solution or we will have to face the eternal shame of watching millions of Syrians leave their homes and suffer massacres, and allow terrorism, which has found a new breeding ground there, to put down deeper roots. That terrorism comes to us from Syria, both through its ideology and the terrorists which are sent here from Syria. In Aleppo, the very conscience of humanity is at stake. We have to do our utmost to ensure that Aleppo does not join the terrible list of martyred cities”.²⁸ He added that the Russian veto on the French Security Council resolution prevented a truce and an end to the bombing, stressed a profound need for a “firm and honest” dialogue with Russia and reiterated his willingness to meet President Putin whenever he deemed necessary. During his address in plenary, he underlined that humanitarian aid must get through to Aleppo and that negotiations will have to include all the parties involved in the conflict, including Russia, Turkey and Iran.

58. One day later, on 12 October 2016, President Putin, speaking at France’s TF1 television channel, said that Russia would pursue “terrorists” even if they hid among civilians and that civilian deaths were the “sad reality of war” and that “we cannot allow them to blackmail the entire world when they take hostages, kill or behead people”. Responding to claims that Russian air strikes on civilian areas amounted to war crimes he said: “It’s political rhetoric that does not mean much and does not take into account the realities in Syria.” He blamed his western partners, above all the United States and its allies, for contributing to the creation of the current situation in Syria and also Libya and Iraq, following the Arab Spring. Those societies and their State organisations showed no sign of terrorism in the past and there was a need and the possibility to influence them in a different way before the war.²⁹

59. On 21 October 2016, speaking before a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, stressed that “the collective failure of the international community to protect civilians and halt this bloodshed should haunt every one of us ... its costs will be borne by our children, and future generations” and added that “no hypothetical advantage in global gamesmanship could possibly outweigh this pain and horror”. He further urged the United Nations Security Council to set aside rivalries and act as one.³⁰

5. Conclusions

60. After more than five and half years, it is becoming clear that there cannot simply be a military solution to the Syrian crisis and that the fall of Aleppo may not mean the end of the conflict and of the internal divisions, which are fuelled by foreign powers’ interests.

27. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-10-06/note-correspondents-transcript-press-conference-un-special>.

28. See the *Verbatim record of the debates on 11 October 2016* (morning), Fourth part of the 2016 Ordinary Session (10-14 October 2016).

29. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53081>; www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37633256.

30. <http://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/HRCTacklesAleppoCrisis.aspx>.

61. At the same time, finding a diplomatic solution is not an easy task. As it was rightly noted, the nature of the conflict is networked, fragmented and of a “multiplayer” nature and cannot easily be ended in one top-down diplomatic move, because of several cross-cutting, multilateral relationships between the various players, who each fight for themselves and not just against Daesh.³¹

62. The escalation of violence and the magnitude of the crisis could lead to even deeper conflicts in Syria and in the whole region, including Iraq, and become a threat to worldwide security.

63. The Assembly must condemn the indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including on medical workers and facilities, blocked humanitarian convoys, enforced disappearances, summary executions and other crimes committed by all parties to the conflict, which have left Syrians in a state of despair, with violence reaching unprecedented levels in Aleppo.

64. We must deeply regret that the political process has stalled despite intense negotiations, also in the framework of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), several multilateral meetings and international conferences.

65. Fully supporting the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura, in his efforts to create the conditions for resumption of intra-Syrian talks, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2254, 2268 and the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, the Assembly could:

- calls for the immediate implementation of the ceasefire agreement of September 2016 and an immediate end by Syrian and Russian forces to all aerial bombardments of Aleppo;
- call on all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities and their allies, to promptly allow unhindered and sustained humanitarian access, including across conflict lines and borders, to alleviate the suffering of the people, particularly given that winter is approaching;
- condemn all human rights violations and abuses committed by the Syrian regime and its allies, by Daesh and other terrorist groups designated as such by the United Nations, and by any other actor in the conflict, including rebels and opposition groups;
- strongly support the Global Coalition to counter Daesh in Syria and Iraq;
- call for all breaches of international humanitarian law and human rights law, some of which may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity, to be brought to justice, including, as appropriate, before the International Criminal Court;
- deplore the use of chemical weapons, which was proved by the United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism;
- reiterate its message that the Syrian refugee crisis is the responsibility not only of neighbouring States and of Europe but of the international community as a whole;
- encourage all States to respond positively to the appeals launched by the relevant agencies of the United Nations to increase emergency aid to the region, support humanitarian organisations as well as Syria’s neighbouring countries providing assistance to refugees, and provide humanitarian pathways for admission and resettlement of Syrian refugees;
- support the United Nations Human Rights Council’s decision to request the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to conduct a comprehensive, independent special inquiry into the events in Aleppo, and identify all those responsible for alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law;
- support the European Union in imposing restrictive measures against Syria targeting Syrian individuals and entities supporting the regime, as long as the repression continues.

66. Moreover, the Assembly should show support for an inclusive Syrian-led political process leading to a genuine political transition, which needs to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enable them independently and democratically to determine their own future, through free and fair elections.

67. As was rightly pointed out, we should avoid pessimistic thinking and defeatism. Everything can be solved in international relations, but national vested interests can act as a deterrent to peace. President Putin is defending the Russian Federation’s strategic interests to bring his country back into the international scene, after its exclusion in the 1990s. President Obama’s action is limited in its scope by the US presidential election

31. Mosul and Aleppo are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, Foreign Policy, 17 October 2016.

and by internal conflicts within his own Administration, and the lack of effective control over the rebels. The United Nations Security Council is the arena where divergences must be resolved and where the two main actors, Russia and the United States, must find an agreement.³²

68. As pointed out by Chancellor Merkel prior to the Berlin talks in October, “[w]e cannot expect miracles but it is essential to talk, even if the views are far apart”. I very much agree with that statement and I deeply regret that the Assembly has not had the opportunity over the past two years to discuss the situation in Syria with our colleagues from the Russian Duma. Governments talk to each other and meet regularly and parliaments should do the same, especially when it comes to deadly conflicts and humanitarian tragedies like the one we are witnessing today.

32. Interview de Didier Billion, La Russie et les Etats-Unis peuvent imposer la paix, *L'Humanité dimanche*, 6 October 2016.