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Situation in Syria, in particular in Palmyra and the case of Mazen Darwish

Greens/EFA motion for resolution

Tabled by ***Barbara Lochbihler, Davor Skrlec, Karima Delli, Ernest Urtasun, Eva Joly, Bronis Rope, Bodil Ceballos, Reinhard Butikofer*** *on behalf of the Greens/EFA group*

The European Parliament,

– having regard to its previous resolutions on Syria, including on the destruction of cultural sites perpetrated by ISIS/Da'esh, as well as on the situation of the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, both adopted on 30 April 2015,

- having regard to the statements on Syria by the Vice President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, including on the situation in Palmyra of 21 May 2015, and by her spokesperson condemning the arrest of Mazen Darwish of 17 February 2012

- having regard to the local EU Statement on the continued detention of Mazen Darwish and seven other human rights defenders of 3 April 2012,

- having regard to United Nations Security Council resolutions 2139, 2165 and 2191 (2014),

- having regard to the UN General Assembly resolution 67/262 of 15 May 2013,

- having regard to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention statement of January 2014,

- having regard to a joint statement of 71 international, regional and national NGOs calling for the release of Mazen Darwish, Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir on 16 February 2015,

- having regard to the reports of the International Commission of Inquiry in Syria, established by the United Nations Human Rights Council,

- having regard to Rule 135 of its Rules of Procedure,

A. Whereas since 2011, the conflict in Syria has led to a humanitarian catastrophe of an unprecedented scale, with more than 220.000 people killed, including mostly civilians, and millions forced to flee;

B. Whereas massive and recurrent violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continue to be committed by all sides in the conflict; whereas there has been no accountability for these crimes;

C. Whereas the month of May has been the bloodiest month for the Syrian conflict in 2015, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; whereas in May, more than 6,600 people including at least 1,200 civilians were killed, more than half of whom were killed in Assad regime air raids; whereas the so-called Islamic State (hereafter IS) killed 197 civilians and 104 combatants, according to the same source;

D. Whereas on 21 May 2015, IS successfully captured the ancient city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, from pro-Assad forces; whereas the nine-day IS offensive had led to global alarm that the jihadist group would destroy the antique ruins; whereas IS has since seemingly pledged to spare the culture heritage sites and the feared destruction has not taken place to date; whereas the actual situation in Palmyra remains unclear in the absence of independent and verifiable sources of information;

E. Whereas on 30 May, IS destroyed the military prison in Palmyra, an infamous and longstanding symbol of the Assad regime's repression; whereas the prisoners would have been transferred by the regime before IS took over the city; whereas IS reportedly executed about 240 people, mostly soldiers and government officials and including children, in Palmyra since its capture of the town; whereas according to the UN, one-third of the city's 200,000-strong population has fled as a result of the May offensive;

F. Whereas the capture of the city of Palmyra was followed by scathing air strikes by pro-Assad forces, which killed more than a dozen civilians and led to many remaining inhabitants fleeing;

G. Whereas Palmyra is situated in a strategically important hub between Damascus and the eastern city of Deir al-Zour and has important gas fields and phosphate mines in its vicinity; whereas the capture of Palmyra coincided with IS' conquest of Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar province, but also came shortly after IS territorial losses around Tikrit;

H. Whereas numerous archaeological, religious and cultural sites in Syria and Iraq have recently been subject to targeted destruction perpetrated by extremist groups, notably IS; whereas, according to UNESCO and others, the looting and smuggling of cultural and religious sites and objects by the Assad regime and by IS and other groups involved in the conflict are being used to help fund conflict-related activities;

I. Whereas on 16 February 2015, members of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence detained Syrian human rights defenders Mazen Darwish, Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir, alongside twelve other colleagues from the Syrian Centre for Media Freedom (SCM), during a raid on their office in Damascus; whereas the SCM, of which Mazen Darwish has been the President for over a decade, had been working on documenting violations of the right to freedom of expression and media freedom, as well as the overall human rights situation in Syria;

J. Whereas Mazen Darwish and his two colleagues were held incommunicado in various security branches where, according to released detainees, they were tortured and otherwise ill-treated; whereas they were subsequently charged with "promoting acts of terrorism";

K. Whereas in late November, they were transferred to Adra Prison pending the verdict of their trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court; whereas on or around 6 May 2015, they were reportedly transferred from this prison, yet their current whereabouts are unknown; whereas they were scheduled to appear in court in Damascus on 1 June but were not presented; whereas the next audience is planned for 22 June;

L. Whereas UN bodies, including the UN General Assembly and the Working Group on Arbitrary

Detention, have called for the release of the three human rights activists; whereas they have been designated as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International and their continued detention has been the object of a wide international campaign;

M. Whereas hundreds of human rights defenders have been subjected to threats, violence, arbitrary arrest or disappearance in Syria; whereas this includes human rights lawyer and Sakharov Prize 2011 Laureate Razan Zeitouneh who was abducted in Duma on 9 December 2013, alongside three other human rights defenders, Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hamada, and Nazem Hammadi, and whose whereabouts remain unknown to this date;

N. Whereas so far, only 10 EU Member States have ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, namely Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain;

1. Remains profoundly dismayed by the harrowing level of human suffering and loss of life in the Syrian conflict; denounces, once again, the continued, criminal onslaught by the Syrian regime against its own population;

2. Expresses its grave concern about the continued expansion of IS and other extremist groups, which further compounds the plight of the Syrian people;

3. Reiterates its condemnation, in the harshest terms, of the crimes perpetrated by the Assad regime on its population, including the use of chemical weapons, incendiary weapons, cluster bombs, barrel bombs and ongoing sieges against thousands of civilians across Syria;

4. Denounces the gross, systematic and widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law also committed by the other conflicting parties, notably IS; stresses the need to end impunity and hold to account all those responsible for these crimes; calls for an immediate lifting of all sieges and an end to all attacks on the civilian population;

5. Remains convinced that there can be neither effective conflict resolution nor sustainable peace in Syria without accountability for the crimes committed by all sides during the conflict, including by Bashar al-Assad and his closest associates;

6. Believes that the latest developments demonstrate that IS will not be defeated nor will the Syria conflict be brought to an end merely through military confrontation; reiterates its call for a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process on the basis of the Geneva communiqué of June 2012;

7. Calls on the EU Member States to heed the plea of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for much stronger commitment to responsibility-sharing, allowing refugees fleeing the Syrian war zones, to find protection beyond the immediate neighbouring region through legal ways, such as resettlement, humanitarian admission schemes, simplified family reunification, more flexible visa regulations and humanitarian visas;

8. Strongly condemns the destruction of cultural, archaeological and religious sites perpetrated by conflicting parties, notably IS and government forces, in Syria; consequently urges the EU and Member States to develop awareness-campaigns in order to discourage the traffic around the purchase and sale of cultural goods from the conflict areas;

Palmyra

9. Condemns the arbitrary detention and summary executions of hundreds of soldiers and residents in Palmyra by IS forces after the capture of the town, as well as the killing of numerous civilians through indiscriminate air strikes by the Assad regime;

10. Remains deeply concerned by the risk of destruction of the unique cultural heritage of Palmyra by the IS forces or by the Assad regime; calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities at and around the site and reminds all parties to strictly respect international obligations to protect cultural heritage during conflict;

Darwish

11. Calls on the Syrian regime to immediately and unconditionally release human rights defenders Mazen Darwish, Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir, and to drop all charges against them;

12. Urges the Syrian authorities to disclose the fate and the whereabouts of the three men immediately, and to ensure that they are protected from torture and ill-treatment, allowed immediate contact with their families and lawyers, and provided with any medical attention they may require;

13. Underlines with grave concern that the case of Mazen Darwish and his colleagues is set against a pattern of systematic and large-scale practice by the Assad regime of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance against peaceful activists, human rights defenders, journalists and more broadly of the Syrian population;

14. Calls for the immediate release of all persons who have been arbitrarily detained or victim of enforced disappearance in relation to their peaceful activities; calls on the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan De Mistura, and on the EU High Representative and its services to make the release of peaceful activists a key priority;

15. Expresses its deepest admiration and solidarity for all the Syrian activists who continue tirelessly to monitor, document and report on the human rights situation in their war-torn country, at the risk of their own lives;

16. Remains profoundly concerned by the fate of human rights lawyer and Sakharov Prize 2011 Laureate Razan Zeitouneh, who was kidnapped with three other human rights defenders in December 2013 and whose whereabouts remain unknown; calls for their immediate release; decides to set up an inter-institutional task force to spearhead and coordinate EU efforts to gather information and to secure the release of Razan Zeitouneh;

17. Urges all EU Member States to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, as a matter of priority; calls on the EEAS and the Member States to promote universal ratification and the implementation of this key human rights instrument and to support the work of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, established under this Convention;

18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Vice-President / High Representative, the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, the Secretary-General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, and all the parties involved in the conflict in Syria.

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