SYRIA AFTER TYRANNY: ACHIEVING A
DEMOCRATIC AND PLURALISTIC FUTURE

25 June 2015, 13:00 – 15:00
Room XXI, Palais des Nations
United Nations Headquarters in Geneva

Welcome remarks
Co-Chairs: Hussein Sabbagh, Secretary General of Euro-Syrian Democratic Forum
Niccolò Figà-Talamanca, Secretary General No Peace Without Justice

Keynote speech: Hisham Marwah, Vice President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

Panel Discussion:
- Reclaiming Civic Space: Bassma Kodmani, Arab Reform Initiative
- Justice and Redress for Victims: Amir Kazkaz, Violations Documentation Center in Syria
- Dynamics of Accountability in Peacebuilding: L. Alison A. Smith, Legal Counsel, No Peace Without Justice
- Dismantling Extremism: Imad Al-Din Al-Rashid, Chair of the Political Bureau, Syrian National Movement

Interventions from the floor

Co-Chairs’ Conclusions and end of session
With the fourth anniversary of the inception of the Syrian uprising, the future of that country and its citizens continues to grow bleaker. In addition to findings by Syrian non-governmental actors monitoring the violations since November 2011, the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry (CoI) has documented patterns of summary executions, enforced disappearance, torture, rape and other sexual and gender-based violence, starvation sieges, forced displacement, and deliberate bombardment of civilians, including with the continued use of chemical weapons.

Crushed between the mass atrocities of Al-Assad regime’s forces and the fanatical savagery of terrorist groups and foreign militias, Syria’s people are looking both for an end to violence, and for justice and redress as concrete alternatives to the dual tyranny of extremism and dictatorship.

To envisage a democratic and pluralist future for Syria, it is critical to act now to reclaim and protect a civic space for Syrian civil society, democracy advocates and transitional bodies to work together and to find ways to achieving political transition.

There has been some movement towards this end. In May 2014, the international community was called to vote on a resolution submitted by France and sponsored by 62 UN Member States to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. The support expressed for the resolution by all Security Council members, except Russia and China, signalled a growing willingness to take action aimed at ending impunity and preparing for the prosecution of those who bear the greatest responsibility for the appalling atrocities committed against the civilian population in Syria. In its last report, of 20 February 2015, the CoI indicated a willingness to expose the names of perpetrators of these crimes, stating that “[i]t is the Commission’s hope that putting alleged perpetrators on notice will serve to maximize the potential deterrent effect of the findings of the Commission and help to protect people at risk of abuse”.

Despite these efforts, the inability to achieve any type of accountability for anyone for what is happening in Syria has created a situation where impunity is the norm, breeding extremism, terrorism and widespread violence. Violations continue to increase in scope and intensity as perpetrators see an “easy” way to reach their objectives. The consequences currently do not fall on those who are breaking the law, but on those whom the law should protect, namely the civilian population of Syria, particularly in areas that are unreachable by aid efforts. According to the UN Refugee Agency, over the past three years, 2.8 million people have fled the civil war in Syria: nearly four in five of them are women and children. There are now more than 145,000 Syrian refugee families in neighbouring countries living in refugee camps and shelters, with constants threat of sexual violence, forced marriage and prostitution and daily humiliation.

This side event in the margins of the United Nations Human Rights Council looks at the role of civic engagement, victims’ rights and accountability as fundamental requirements to ensure there can be a democratic process in Syria that can break the dual tyranny of extremism and dictatorship. Accountability can act as a beacon, shining a light through the horrors of Syria’s past and current realities, to illuminate a path towards peace, prosperity and the enjoyment of human rights for all of Syria’s people. The meeting serves as a reminder that to achieve a lasting political solution to the Syrian war, the international community must overcome obstacles to accountability and instead act upon it as a necessity for the future of Syria.