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Advancement of women

Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Promotion and protection of human rights

Letter dated 25 September 2013 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

On behalf of my country's Government, I have the honour to transmit herewith a report compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates on the crime of "marriage jihad" (see annex).

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly under agenda items 28 (a), 65 (a) and 69.

(Signed) Bashar Ja'afari
Ambassador
Permanent Representative



Annex to the letter dated 25 September 2013 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Secretary-General

The current crisis in Syria has given rise to some unnatural and inhumane practices that contravene the values that the Syrian people holds dear, the conventions to which Syria is a party, the country's efforts to promote the rights of women and children, all human rights conventions, the principles of the pure Islamic religion and, indeed, the most basic rules of human decency. These practices have been brought about by the mercenaries and *takfirists* who have infiltrated the country from all around the world to propagate obscurantist Wahhabi ideas that debase women, relegating them to the status of slaves or objects on which men can vent their own psychological complexes.

The most prominent instance, and one whose effect on women has been particularly acute, is the fatwa on "marriage jihad" issued by a preacher linked to an armed terrorist group. The fatwa provides for women to accompany terrorists into combat zones and "assist them in jihad" by making themselves available to the terrorists. In such cases, a "marriage" can last for as little as an hour, and a woman can perform marriage jihad several times a day with several different men.

There are many documented cases of women and girls, particularly from Syria and Tunisia, who were duped into participating in that crime in Syria. It is obvious that such practices endanger the mental and physical health of women and of society in general, especially when the "mujahidin women" become pregnant.

In order to preserve such dignity as is left to the women, the report does not give the victims' full names. To ensure credibility, the Ministry has specified where the accounts are based on media reports or have not been properly documented.

The source of the fatwa has not yet been confirmed, but there are numerous reports that it was issued by one of the Wahhabi sheikhs in Saudi Arabia who provide religious cover for terrorist crimes and spread heinous rhetoric of sectarian incitement. There is evidence that Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi issued the fatwa, which authorizes women to sell their bodies for the combatants to enjoy. Its text runs as follows:

"It is licit under religious law for Muslim women aged 14 or over and who are chaste, divorced or widowed to enter into a consummated marriage with mujahidin in Syria. Such a marriage is limited to a few hours, so that other mujahidin can marry in the same way. It strengthens the resolve of mujahidin and allows those who perform it to enter paradise.... It is the best form of jihad that women can perform against the Syrian regime".

In other words, the fatwa gives a dispensation to practise prostitution, in return for a promise from someone who has the self-proclaimed right to decide who may or may not enter paradise.

This horrific fatwa has hurt the numerous Arab women and minor girls from Syria, Tunisia, Libya and the Gulf States who have fallen prey to it. Case after case of "mujahid women" have emerged. Some travelled willingly to Syria owing to religious incitement; others were forced into the degrading practice. Several returned to Tunisia after becoming pregnant by a terrorist from the Nusra Front or another group. There has been at least one recorded case of AIDS among returnees.

So chilling and irrational is the fatwa that it has often not been given credence. In early 2013, the Tunisian Minister of Religious Affairs refused to recognize the problem, saying that any fatwa issued at home or abroad was binding only on the individual in question, and not on the Tunisian people or the State institutions.

However, in February 2013, a woman whose initials are *ra'-'ayn* returned home to Tunisia in answer to an appeal from her parents. She did not talk about what she saw, and the tragedy continued until other strands emerged, casting light on the true, frightening dimensions of the fatwa.

Momentum continued to gather as Tunisians returnees said they had seen at least 13 young Tunisian women who were dedicated to marriage jihad under the supervision of a woman called Umm Ja'far, a former dancer for a satellite television channel. Media reports relate that the women were recruited from working-class neighbourhoods by religious associations in Tunisia.

On 19 April 2013, the then mufti of Tunisia, Uthman Battikh, said that more than 13 Tunisian women had gone to Syria for marriage jihad. He described the practice as a scam against young Tunisian women, and said that so-called marriage jihad was prostitution and moral corruption. He was removed from his post shortly thereafter.

In April 2013, a Libyan national whose initials are *alif-alif* was killed in a Syrian Arab Army operation in the village of Bayda, in the countryside outside Ladhqiyyah. His wife, whose initials are *mim-dal*, was also killed. He had brought her to Syria to perform marriage jihad with Al-Qaida personnel at a Nusrah Front base.

After the terrorists fled Qusayr, an inscription was found on the wall of a house that they had used as a terrorist base. It was a timetable for marriage jihad, including the names of the men and women mujahidin and the "marriage times" for each one.

The case of A'ishah, a Tunisian girl, is typical of the young girls who have been deceived into committing this abominable crime. She stated that she became acquainted with a woman who convinced her to forsake reading texts on general subject matters and to focus on reading religious texts only and performing jihad. The woman then convinced her to wear the *niqab* and travel to Syria to "help" the mujahidin by performing marriage jihad. She did in fact travel to Syria, where she found her self among 13 other women mujahidin. She was overcome with despair when she discovered that she had been deceived and that religion had been used as a pretext to achieve other aims.

In a similar case, a religious leader in Tunisia deceived 19-year-old Lamya'. He convinced her to perform "jihad" in Syria and "defeat the enemies of Islam" by comforting the mujahidin after each battle. He persuaded her to leave her home in Tunisia and travel to Benghazi, Libya. From there, she went to Turkey and ultimately arrived in Aleppo.

Lamya', together with a number of other girls, was brought to a hospital that the terrorists had turned into a camp for a group that calls itself the Umar Brigade, which is headed by a Yemeni. There, Lamya' performed marriage jihad with a number of Pakistani, Afghan, Libyan, Tunisian, Iraqi, Somali and Saudi Arabian mujahidin. She cannot remember the exact number because there were so many. However, she remembers that they would beat her if she did not respond to them.

Lamya' was not the only girl to endure such suffering. At the camp, she met Tunisian girls from Qasrayn, Kaf, Hay al-Tahrir, Muruj, Bizerte and Sfax, one of whom died because of the torture she had endured after she had attempted to escape.

Lamya' became pregnant, but she does not know who the father is. She returned to Tunisia, where she was detained on the basis of a missing-person report that her parents had filed. Lamya' underwent medical tests, which confirmed that she was five months pregnant. Those tests also confirmed that she had contracted AIDS, which had been passed on to the foetus.

In mid-July 2013, information was received indicating that the leader of the Nusrah Front in the area north of Aleppo had ordered his men to kill 25 women who had performed marriage jihad with Nusrah Front personnel. The massacre was carried out; the women were stripped of their clothing and shot dead in a house north of Aleppo. Their bodies were then dumped in order to remove any traces of the massacre. This information is currently being verified.

There are varying estimates regarding the number of girls who have gone to Syria for marriage jihad. While some put the number in the hundreds, other sources say that the number is far lower. There have also been press reports that state the terrorists boast of the women mujahidin, naming, inter alia, Umm Mit'ab, a national of a Gulf country, as being the foremost in performing marriage jihad, followed by Umm al-Barra', a 13-year-old Tunisian.

The competent Syrian authorities were able to apprehend three Syrian women who confessed to having performed marriage jihad in Rif Dimashq with a number of Syrian, Libyan and Saudi Arabian fighters. One of the women, whose initials are *sin-'ayn*, confessed to having created a cell of girls in one the eastern governorates of Syria and exploiting the girls in marriage jihad, in cooperation with head of the terrorist group with which she is affiliated. When she was admitted to study at Damascus University, she moved to the capital and continued her work with the terrorists cells there. She enlisted another group of girls to engage in that same practice with the terrorists. The girls also transported car bombs, explosives and weapons to and from rebels. Together with the other members of her cell, she plotted to burn and destroy the files of the student affairs office and the examinations sections at Damascus University, in order to prevent the administration of examinations. However, the authorities arrested the woman and her cell members one day before they were to carry out their terrorist operations.

After this fatwa and its grave implications had provoked an outcry in Arab societies and among organizations that defend human rights and the rights of women and children, the sheikh who issued the fatwa back away from his proclamation and disavowed the fatwa. The Tunisian authorities also condemned the fatwas that are being issued by certain extremist preachers encouraging Tunisian girls to travel to Syria in order to perform marriage jihad.

Officially confirming this crime, on 19 September 2013, the Tunisian Minister of the Interior declared before the Tunisian Parliament that each of the Tunisian girls who had travelled to Syria for marriage jihad had engaged in sexual relations with some 20 or 30 or 100 fighters.

The Tunisian authorities took action and prohibited young men and women under the age of 35 from travelling to Syria. From March to September 2013 alone, the authorities prevented 6,000 Tunisians from travelling to Syria. They also

detained 86 persons who had formed networks to send Tunisian youths to Syria, where the terrorist groups would put them in the front lines in conflict zones and teach them how to pillage and raid villages.

On 20 September 2013, the Tunisian Ministry for Women's and Family Affairs issued a communiqué deploring the rising number of Tunisian girls who are travelling to Syria for that purpose. The Ministry affirmed that these practices violated religious and moral values and all international human rights instruments. The Ministry established a crisis unit to address this practice.

The statement made in September 2013 by the Tunisian Ministry for Women's and Family Affairs echoes the warnings Syria had made months before about the practice and its destructive consequences for Arab societies. Yet, those warnings went unheeded and the result was the moral destitution of a number of girls and the birth of children whose fathers are unknown.

This fatwa threatens the structure of the family, which is the cornerstone of society, and undermines decades of diligent work by Arab women to gain their rights in the face of the view, which still prevails in some Arab States, that women are mere chattels of their guardians. This fatwa is in fact a form of slavery, which is a practice the world has rejected since the previous century, as well as a form of violence against women that most States of the world have repudiated. It is also a clear violation of the rights of children. Females less than 18 years old form a large proportion of the girls who came to Syria for this purpose. Their children will not know their fathers and will bear the shame of their parentage all their lives in a society that has no mercy for such vulnerable children. The latter will become time bombs in the future.

Syria has informed the relevant United Nations officials of these facts in a number of letters and reports, including the report concerning the effects of the crisis in Syria on children that was issued in March 2013 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, a section of which focuses on this matter. This report contains detailed and documented information regarding this practice. Regrettably, the United Nations ignored the tenor of this report and failed to play the important role it could have played to raise awareness of and curb this repugnant practice. Syria has become accustomed to fact that certain parties who work at the United Nations will ignore such extremely important matters for political considerations that have no relation to women's or children's rights.
