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President of the French Republic
François Hollande
copie to the candidates for the Presidential election

From Aleppo, open letter to François Hollande, President of the French Republic

Mr President,

Today, I question the values I have been raised with, the values of a country I love, my country: France. I am writing to you as a French citizen who arrived without any preconceived ideas in Syrian territory and lives in what was previously known as Western Aleppo, now Aleppo. I am a politically neutral humanitarian, and I have been here for a year. The situation I am in is tough. First of all, because I am the only French citizen living here, which makes me an easy target because of the testimony I offer that often goes against the official line. Second of all, because what we witness here everyday is outraging and hard to talk about. I have been the witness of a massacre and humanitarian crisis in which we, as a nation, are actors and even backers by supporting terrorism. I address this message to you, and to all the others who could have the decision making power to make peace and make all civilian populations a priority.

Every single day, I had to face death as everyone else in this city. The mission I gave myself led me to visit families living close to the ones we have been labeling as « opponents » since the beginning of the conflict. However the only elements I witnessed were black flags - and I have pictures - on all of the front-lines. These signs are the symbols used by the groups that France has been fighting against for years.

Today, the Syrian people stands united to fight not against the government but against terrorist groups, no matter what we call them to hold them accountable for their actions or the reason they have to exist. These armed groups are named Al-jaïch al-hour (Free Syrian Army), Jabhat al-Nosra (or Fatah al-Cham, branch of Al-Qaïda), Jaïch al-Islam, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Brigade Sultan Mourad, etc. An anti governmental opposition exists, as for every government. This opposition is more or less pacific, but represents a minority of the population. Since the beginning of the conflict and until now, almost all the forces on the ground that have kept bombarding Aleppo are armed fighters belonging to terrorist groups.

I use the term « terrorist » because there are no rebels in Aleppo, at least nothing that could allow us to consider them as such. It is irresponsible to continue qualifying them as rebels in Syria while we list them as terrorist organizations in France. The jihadists have been forced out with their weapons following agreements with the government and « all » went to Idlib, an area now almost entirely occupied by fighters and their families. However, many of the fighters left Idlib to come back to Aleppo to resume bombings and suicide attacks, here as everywhere else in Syria.

I have evidence for everything I am writing. For months I have been gathering the testimonies of civilians on video and on paper, independently of their religion or political opinion and without any member of the military or government around. I publish these testimonies and occasionally give them to a UN Commission of Inquiry in charge of studying « opposition » attacks and crimes, while putting the commission in contact with witnesses.

We have directed the attention of the public opinion and the bombing of zones in which were a minority of opponents but a majority of jihadists. Civilians were dying every day in these zones, without us saying that the majority of civilians in Eastern Aleppo could not run away because they were held back by the terrorists. It is by trying to run away by using the humanitarian corridors organized by the Russian and Syrian governments that many civilians were targeted and killed by armed forces (corridors indicated one to two days earlier, with precisions on the time of opening by a text message directed to all mobile phone owners using the syrian networks MTN and Syriatel, including me). Thankfully, thousands of civilians were able to make it out alive by using alternative routes, sometimes even passing through mined zones.

Few are the media which stated that these civilians were used as human shields, which the testimonies corroborate. Medias have preferred describing them as caught in the crossfire of a fight opposing revolutionary armed forces to their government, while this government was protecting its people against terrorists who are majoritarily foreign mercenaries. They came to Syria heavily armed and are fanatics for whom human lives hardly matter. To talk only about Aleppo, these mercenaries invaded the surroundings and the center of the city, bombing the population of Western Aleppo every day and allowing themselves to murder civilians in the eastern part of the city for no reason.

Armed groups on the ground have never testified for their so called «moderation » towards civilians. I saw with my own eyes that terrorists had weapons and ammunitions that had been manufactured in diverse countries including France, the United States, the United Kingdom or Saudi Arabia, to name only a few of them. These weapons are used on a daily basis against civilians of Eastern and Western Aleppo by recognized terrorist groups under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. This group is majoritarilly made of jihadists that we try to picture as fighting for freedom.

They used to aim at Western Aleppo from the most densely populated areas of the east and even from hospitals to limit backfires. This did not prevent fights between the jihadists and the Syrian army. I obtained these testimonies from the surviving eastern Aleppo civilians I take care of, as other international organisations here. Eastern Aleppo had 120 000 people caught in crossfires (among them 15 to 20 000 fighters). Most of these people were families who refused to leave their house by fear of having it occupied, destroyed or robbed. In Syria, few people rent their house or apartment. It takes time to become a homeowner. This is a deeply cultural feature because the house is the symbol of the family here. The main point is that we have chosen to occult a reality, the one of 1 300 000 Syrians of all confessions living in the West who tried to keep their institutions working and kept sending their children to school and to the university, even with the shadow of death all around. We have erased them by pursuing a political goal, because they were living in a zone controlled by the Syrian government. By doing so, we have forgotten a number of civilians representing ten times the population of the eastern part of the city, and we have done so because of a minority fighting for a cause that involves only a very thin part of the population.

Not a day went by without us being the targets - and victims - of snipers and shell fires, explosive bullets, rocket launchers or gaz bottles and water boilers transformed in order to be used as rockets. These were used on streets, on homes, hospitals and schools. Not a day went by without tens of people dying, or being evacuated in a critical state to the nearby overflowed hospitals. The overflow was due to the attacks continuously conducted against us, even if there was no army in the city except for a few checkpoints as the army was protecting the battlefield. Every day adults, children and families were crushed and shattered by deadly projectiles. If I write this letter using « we », it is because I have also been confronted to this war on a daily basis. I am lucky to be alive because Aleppo was a battlefield: rockets do not warn before they hit. Being a first-aid rescue worker, I tried to save lives and was not always able to do so. People had legs, arms, and body parts torn apart, melted, burnt or even burning... I do not have the words to describe what the population has gone through here, and it is hard to share. I saw too many people die, and we were waking up every morning without knowing if we would be alive at the end of the day.

I have met civilians who were displaced within the borders of the country, and their testimonies are unanimous. In Eastern Aleppo, sharia law was enforced through « islamic courts » conducted by fighters and Sheikhs who felt free to detain, torture, execute arbitrarily, and marry children relying on the most appropriate fatwa (religious decree) for the occasion. After the liberation of Eastern Aleppo, it became clear that the terrorists had an enormous food stock available. I saw piles of humanitarian kits and packages that would have been enough for a year-long siege. Families can testify of the fact that they were not able to access them and they had to go through a period of famine, due to the siege of the city by the army. However the main responsible for the famine were the monopoly of prices and the harsh trocs put in place by the armed groups that could go to 50 times the normal price. Those accepting to fight with them had a preferential treatment. However, as some of their sympathizers who chose to stay in the eastern part of the city recently told me: « we do not like this government, but if someone criticizes the fighters of the Free Syrian Army or other armed groups, he gets killed. Where is the freedom? »

Infrastructures, hospitals and schools were often used by these groups as headquarters along with prisons and warehouses to station weapons. In one of those schools, I was able to see that they were making chemical weapons with products imported from foreign countries. In the past few months, when combats were raging, I saw people who had been wounded by chlorine and their skin was literally burning. In Eastern Aleppo, hospitals were mainly helping the fighters and their families, or those who were able to pay. After the liberation of Aleppo, I also saw the enormous amounts of drugs and medications that had been upheld along with two operative hospitals, even with their façade and some of their services partially damaged. These hospitals had been declared as entirely destroyed several times.

The « White Helmets » the French government financed and that we received at the Élysée are, for most of them, first aid workers by day and terrorists by night, or vice versa. They pledge allegiance to Jabhat al-Nosra (Al-Qaeda), as shown by documents found after their departure and as civilians testify. The majority of their teams rescued fighters first, and civilians every once in a while. A noteworthy feature is that each team had a cameraman, and the team of rescuers helped only while the camera was filming. A lot of civilians have told me that others had stayed under the rubbles because the rescuers refused to go there. Others told me the rescuers even staged fake attacks, fake bombings, fake wounds and interventions. Our government also finances associations such as « Syria Charity » that has as an emblem the three star flag, and that was originally called the « league for a Free Syria ». This association, even if providing humanitarian aid, has crossed the thin red line by taking part in an opinion war to justify the overthrowing of the government by hiding the reality on the field and their proximity with belligerent groups and by providing constant medical relief to jihadists forces (their presence is carefully erased from all available videos).

Numerous French and international associations or humanitarian organisations intervening in « rebel » zones have done more harm than good through an instrumentalisation of the suffering of the local populations and the public opinion in the name of an oriented cause, and through wrongfully directed donations. They are also responsible for taking civilians as

hostages of this war, and enabling the conflict to continue by « legitimizing it » in a dishonest manner, enabling the fightings to continue and death to stay a daily preoccupation.

We have, as a nation, placed the syrian three star flag on top of the Élysée when we received the (fake) mayor of Aleppo with all of the honors. This man was never elected by the Syrian people. He does not come from Aleppo and was elected and recognized by the leaders of terrorist groups, several partisans and foreigners. This flag is not the symbol of liberty in Syria, it is a symbol of death as it is now associated with the Free Syrian Army, which is a conglomerate of jihadists groups close to Al-Qaïda that acknowledges the importance of democracy only in front of the medias. We, as a country, support them. We must not confuse the 2011 civic movement with those who have used it, here and everywhere in the world, to create this war.

Yes, a lot of people died. No war is just, and I am not here to negate or defend the extreme violence of the bombings of Eastern Aleppo to make not its fall but rather its liberation possible. It is a reality.

Another reality is that except for the wounded children, the bombings or the cries, we have erased the presence of armed groups and, most importantly, the presence of civilians and life. We have taken these voices away by letting people wrongfully interpret the situation basing themselves on their own emotions while facing a situation continuously pictured as catastrophic, through the instrumentalisation of images of children most of the time. How can one question what is happening in Aleppo, no matter the arguments and proofs available when the only available images are the ones of a burning Syria supposedly unilaterally destroyed by its government? How can one question the situation when everything that does not correspond to this erroneous simplification is qualified as being propaganda? That the priority is to put in place « no fly zones » (which, thank God, have never been installed)? Yes, they would have enabled the conflict to continue and increased the number of deaths, and they would have enabled terrorists to take Aleppo instead of freeing it from war and death. The people who have escaped from the East have gone through hell but live their arrival here, on the Western side, as a liberation for most of them, not a physical deportation. Most of them have returned to their home by now. Nobody has talked about the fact that 85% of the civilians have willingly come to seek refuge on the Western side of Aleppo, that is to say on the government side, even if buses were ready and available to take them to Idlib. The legitimacy granted to the armed groups and their cause by the medias and foreign actors have enabled them to gain ground around the city, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians to leave their homes. I remember that for weeks we were sleeping with our clothes on and with bags ready next to our beds. The terrorists and fightings were so close that sometimes bullets were whistling across the streets and the more they made progress, the more I could hear them shout « Allah Akbar » before and after shell fires burst on the city.

No matter the country where they have been used, videos and contents created by the jihadists and partisans, sometimes entirely staged, have been broadcasted in prime time by our media, manipulating the death and suffering of those living in the middle of the fightings to use the compassion and love of those watching. Just as the terrorists, we have sold so much fear that no one realized that these contents all had a political purpose and were created to reach this purpose without ever letting the civilians speak, and by giving a voice only to partisans or fighters (I want to draw your attention upon the fact that civilians could barely afford bread, which makes a camera and a 3G connection completely out of reach, as it costs the equivalent of 5kg of meat). Failing to have the adequate troops to crush the government, we have completed our impact on the conflict by playing on emotions to influence the public opinion and its tacit consent in this war.

On the western side of Aleppo, documenting the situation in real time was never a viable option as it was simply too dangerous and that the information was not leaving Syria anyways. Doing a Facebook live or publishing a news story showing the places where the fightings took place enabled the terrorists to aim more precisely, and to target densely populated zones. In a speech on their own TV Channel here in Syrian, « Free Syrian Army*** » held a dual discourse talking about coming to free the population and, on the other hand, presenting the attacks as our punishment for having been « unfaithful and living on Bashar Al-Assad's side ». This TV channel is available to everyone here. When Aleppo was liberated, Russian news reports and testimonies of Syrians who had lived under jihadists occupation were immediately labeled as being propaganda, destroying the credibility of all that could emanate from Syria itself and from those living here.

This past year has truly been the year of disinformation.

A fight for the « freedom » of the Syrian people. We use this catch-all word without ever having defined or justified it. What freedom? Which Syrian people? Destroying the government, suffocating the country under sanctions for what? Our great knowledge and expertise of democracy? Have French people asked what tomorrow will be made of, in Syria? No! Freedom, that is all. Easy to say. The political and social programs of these terrorist groups is in complete opposition with freedom, democracy and our values or those of the majority of countries around the world. It is because of our interests, not because of freedom that we manipulate those groups that call for the creation of an Islamic state in Syria. Do not ask yourself what they want to give to the Syrian people, ask yourself what they want to impose and take away. All the civilians I meet everyday refuse to imagine this option for a single minute, and those who do try to forget the option might become their reality in a near future.

Mr President, we have, as other countries, a big responsibility in this war we have attempted to end - term used to signify the overthrowing of the Syrian government at all costs. These past few years we have, along with other countries, taken part in the destruction of Syria, a country that is for a large part francophone and whose people loves France. As far from perfection its government might be, even if it made many mistakes across time - and remember we did too - we are at the moment supporting the installation of a true dictatorship in a country where a real opposition exists while armed factions are motivated only by bigotry, frustration, resentment and hate. Using those groups to reach geopolitical or economic goals is undemocratic and condemns the Syrian people. Having travelled across the country, I was able to witness that, despite the critics, the very large majority of the Syrian population honestly and sincerely supports their government and the one they call their president, and not their dictator, Bashar Al Assad.

I consider this message as a duty. I am a humanitarian and I created my own association that is non political and non religious, and that I have been financing myself until now. I live in a war zone and I pay the price of doing so. I have taken the necessary risks to help civilians here, and even if the help I provide is limited I do as much as I can. Trying to explain the true situation here has resulted in attacks from mainstream medias and their partisans who try to prevent me from speaking, and now target me when I attempt to raise my voice. I take even more risks by taking the responsibility to write this letter to you, but I know it is important for me to do so in order to denounce a situation I have been observing everyday and investigating further every time. I have nothing to win, no personal interest, and I have been taking those risks for months to fight against terrorism by exposing the truth and the reality that Syrians live here, what they testify by denouncing the jihadists groups and the manipulation by the media that takes lives away, everyday.

Let's ask the Syrian people what it wants for its country instead of talking in its name, instead of stealing its voice, its liberties, its present and future. It is the Syrian people who must decide of its future, and not for us to decide. It is a form of dictatorship more outrageous than our illegitimate meddling until now. Democracy starts with ourselves abiding by its principles, and further than our responsibility towards the Syrian people, it would be the time to ask the French people on its willingness to intervene in the conflict, considering the danger it represents for its safety today and tomorrow.

I call my country, the country I love and I have grown up in to stop condemning the population of Syria remotely and to stop encouraging terrorist groups who already target our families, our children, our citizens, and this no matter the economic or geopolitical goals at hand. We cannot side with or support armed forces who hope to lead a revolution to go back to an age of ignorance.

Mr President, with all my heart, I call and beg France, which values I have grown up with and make me continue my action here everyday, to lift sanctions against Syria. They harm the population, not the government. I beg France to start finding alternative diplomatic solutions to this war, solutions that would represent peace for the Syrian people but also for us, French people, who risk being the target of backfires as an entity supporting armed forces who spread terror and violence, and whose ambitions are clearly international.

I wish you courage, Mr President, to you and to the one who will follow you in office. I send you my best regards,

Pierre Le Corf.