

Opinion

Horrya Press's interview with Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



1- Working in documentation has its fair share of risks, seeing that it requires a high level of impartiality, what are that most notable risks SNHR encounters inside Syria in the course of its work?

Challenges and risks vary with each kind of violations. The challenges you find in the course of recording enforced-disappearance cases are different from sexual violence cases, or cases of airstrikes and so on... Generally, these challenges stem from the fact that SNHR committed itself to record a large scope of violations, such as killing, enforced-disappearance, arbitrary arrest, destruction, indiscriminate shelling, and torture among others. On the other hand, there are several violation perpetrators. At the start of the uprising for freedom, the Syrian regime and its militias were the sole party committing violations, and are still the main and major party with regard to committing violations, but more and more parties entered the scene gradually, such as extremist groups, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party forces, armed opposition factions, international coalition forces, and Russian forces. Distinguishing the violation perpetrator is an important and vital aspect in the documentation process. Lastly, there are of course the usual challenges that have been present since the start of the popular uprising: the concern for security, which obstructs access to the crime site. In light of this extraordinary scale and scope of violations in Syria, we had to hire nearly 850 employees – something that our logistic and financial resources can't withstand, in addition to severe of communication, power outages, lack of internet access, not to mention that criticizing and documenting violations by all parties make you resented, and maybe make you a target, in the eyes of many of those parties. Finally, victims are afraid of giving their accounts, are afraid for their lives, and afraid of the society itself sometimes.

However, losing hope in the meaningfulness of accountability and justice is a whole another concern, because this feeling mean that the people won't cooperate with us, and they are our most important bet. The international community has failed to hold the main criminals in Syria accountable for seven years for committing crimes against humanity and war crimes. Consequently, the people feel unmotivated to talk about the crimes that were committed against them.



2- What are the most notable challenges you face in documenting enforced-disappearances, in light of the fact that the responsible groups are unknown in the overwhelming majority of the cases?

- Usually, families don't have enough information about the circumstances of the victim's disappearance. Most of the time, the victim's identifications are lost along with them, such as their I.D. And in many cases, the families fear contacting us out of fear of the victim being subjected to torture in case their family document them as a forcibly-disappeared person.
- There are cases where none of the victim's family members and friends know who made the arrest. When you contact security branches, they all deny having the detainee.
- Difficulties to access the forcibly-disappeared person's family, and in case this was achieved, some families might refuse to contribute to the documentation out of fear and because of the pointlessness of it. In such cases, families turn to mafia networks that were created on account of this phenomenon.

3- What are the most notable challenges you face in documenting cases of rape of woman?

- In general, documenting incidents of sexual violence is one of the most complex and difficult kinds of documentation for its social and psychological ramifications with respect to the victim and their society. Usually, the victim refuses to talk about the violation they suffered, fearing stigmatization and disreputation, or even killing in case they revealed what happened. Finally, talking about what happened might cause indescribable agony when remembering this horrible situation.
- To achieve a high level of verification, medical tests have to be conducted – something that is almost non-existent in the Syrian case. First of all, the woman that was raped has to receive some sort of psychological support to overcome its distress somewhat, so she is able to come forward, talk, and take medical tests. However, psychiatric therapy is almost non-existent, and the woman would be afraid to reveal what happened in the first place, so she can't receive such support in the first place.
- The same thing almost fully applies to males as well.

4- in cases of joint bombardment or joint crime, how does SNHR identify the responsible party?

The Russian bombardment usually overlaps with the Syrian regime's bombardment, while it is rare for the international coalition's bombardment, for example, to overlap with the Syrian regime, or even the Russian bombardment even though the latter (international coalition/Russian forces) is a stronger possibility. When trying to distinguish the difference, it helps to



identify the kind of weapon used in the attack, which is possible by examining the shrapnel, and also through determining the scale and kind of the airstrike, and the model and sound of the warplane. Nonetheless, there are attacks where we can't accurately identify their perpetrators, so we point that out, or we write it down as a joint attack by the Syrian-Russian alliance. In such cases, the team continues to work on the case. Continuity is the most important aspect to an investigator's work. If we were able to acquire new evidences, we change the classification to a more specific one.

5- Are you the subject of pressure by states that you document their violations against Syrians?

We face some kind of condemnation, accusation, disreputation, and attacks that lack respect and decency, as what happened when the Kurdish People's Protection Units issued two statements in the wake of reports we released that documented their crimes, where we were accused of carrying out agendas for some countries and all that nonsensical rhetoric. The Russians as well, as we were slammed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who described us as a false source, while our website was the subject of relentless attacks from Russia as well as our account on Twitter.

6- Do you have any information on the fate of ISIS detainees in Raqqa?

We are working on this file in particular. The situation is extremely complex and unstable, and there are so many contradicting accounts. We need more evidences and accounts, and we need to conduct secret visits, which means that we need more time. We will be releasing a report addressing this exact question in the near future.

7- Since Assad forces' offensive started in Deir Ez-Zour two months ago, reports of mass violations by those forces and sectarian militias, including field-executions and enforced-disappearance, have been circulating. Was SNHR able to document these violations?

That is true. We have received a lot of reports about instant killings, arrest, enforced-disappearance, and lootings by the attacking forces: the Syrian regime and its pro-regime Shiite militias. Verifying these reports is usually particularly difficult, because most of the area residents have been displaced. Verification is still ongoing, and we also need more time to find evidences and eyewitnesses who survived.



8- How does SNHR look at the possibilities of documenting violations by ISIS fighters, and how would they be tried in the future? Does SNHR have any information on an approach to try ISIS fighters who were arrested by SDF or opposition factions?

We documented hundreds of violations that this terrorist group have committed in a care-less manner without any regard for any laws or accountability and in different patterns of crimes, such as killing, torture, rape, sexual violence, and enforced displacement among others. As for holding them accountable, those criminals have a right to a fair trial, the same way Bashar al Assad regime and the Iranian militias have a right to a fair trial. Bashar al Assad has killed 20 times more people than Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the same option for a trial remains legitimate for all people who perpetrated crimes against humanity and war crimes.

9- SNHR is active in the media and the human rights scene on the international level, where you try to shed light on the violations in Syria. Can you tell us a little bit about this important role, and what kind of response are you getting from U.N. organs and the relevant organizations?

The response by the human rights organ at the U.N., represented in the Commission of Inquiry and the OHCHR, is fairly good. Cooperation and Coordination has been ongoing for seven years. We send reports and information continuously, and when it is requested. This long-sustained, cooperative relation has created a high level of mutual trust, which is reflected in the outcome, including reports, statements, and statistics on the victims of the armed conflict in Syria. A similar relationship exists with many international organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Cluster Munition Monitor among others. We also took part in many bilateral meetings, talks, events, and joint seminars. I personally believe, however, that the OHCHR, in particular, needs to make more effort to shed more light on the human rights situation in Syria.

On the media front, SNHR has become an established source and reference to a great number of media outlets thanks to continuity and sustained relationships that has been in existence for seven years - especially Arabic media outlets. This plays a vital role in keeping Syria relevant and prominent, because the situation on the ground still is, as killing, torture, destruction, and other crimes haven't stopped. Therefore, we need to give all we can to honestly and accurately broadcast what the Syrian people are still suffering. We would like to take this chance to thank "Horrya Press" for its continued coverage and for this extensive interview which was part of that.



10- What about SNHR's funding sources? Can you say that SNHR has been able to maintain its independence and views work-wise in light of it needing funding from various parties?

This is something we made sure of since day one - trying to diversify our sources of income, and try to sustain a steady source for self-financing. At the start, this only covered 5% of our expenses and was expanding with time. We accept unconditional individual and international donations, and we have a bank account in the U.S. to receive these donations, in addition to the projects we work on with some of our donors. We, however, don't take or accept any form of financial compensation for our reports and researches that we send to the U.N. organs, as well as international organizations and media outlets.

11- The revolution delegation at Astana said that it agreed with the Turks that making progress with the detention file is of the utmost importance. To what extent is this achievable at Astana or even Geneva?

The issue of detainees has been addressed in the course of Geneva talks in the early rounds. While there was hardly any progress, it was present in the discussion and on the agenda. However, the last three rounds are almost completely devoid of a mere mention or discussion of this critical file. We even at SNHR, after we attended a number of Geneva rounds either in an advisory capacity or in the civil society room, sensed a deliberate omission of this file under the pretext of it being complex or it might hinder the political process, even though we have reiterated in many reports and statements that the key to making progress in the political process and approach a solution starts with revealing the fates of the missing and forcibly-disappeared persons. The same scenario has been repeating itself since the first meeting in January 2017, as of the start of round 7. In fact, we said in a paper that was recently released that Geneva and Astana have failed to reveal the fate of one missing person.

12- Is there any coordination between SNHR and the revolution's negotiating delegation, as to presenting lists of detainees and forcibly-disappeared persons who fell victim to the crimes of Syrian regime?

There is some sort of coordination. We believe that the issue of detainees and other human rights matters should be addressed by people of expertise in this field, while military individuals stay on top of military matters, and politicians on political matters.



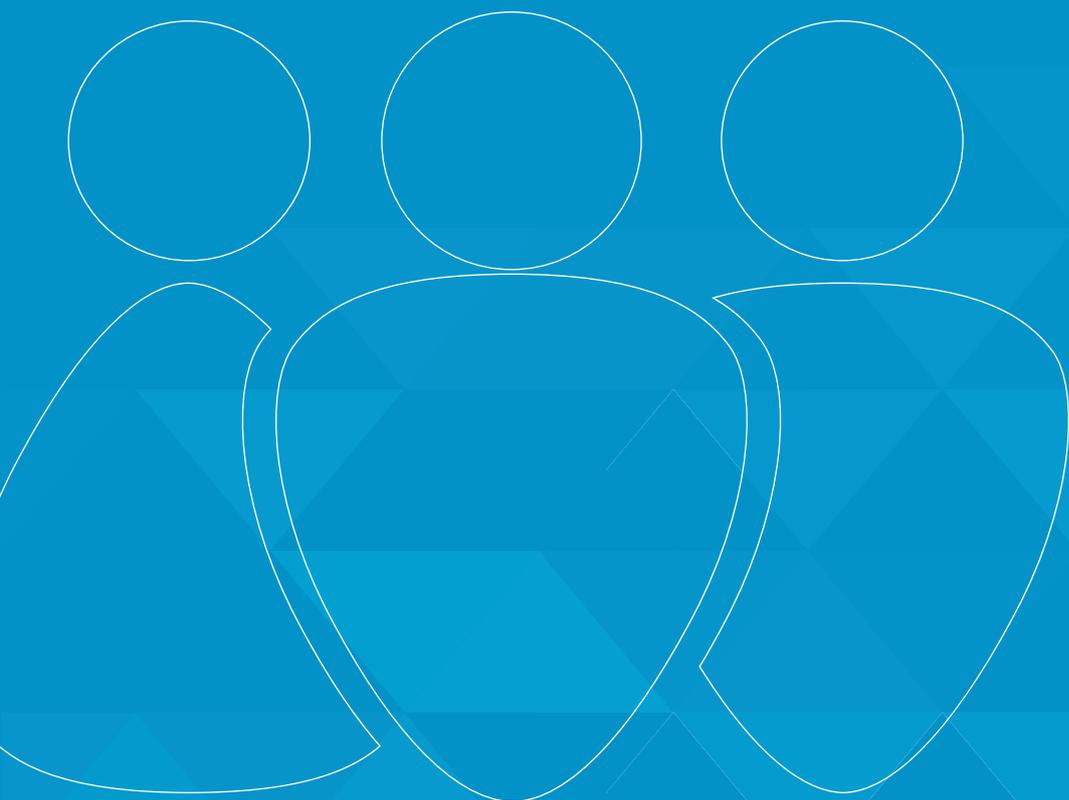
13- What would SNHR like to say to the victims' families?

We hope that the families of the victims don't get desperate, drained, or bored and keep trying and trying in order to expose the people who committed a crime against their beloved ones. This is only possible by gathering evidences, and giving out information and accounts. All of our resources and capabilities are at their disposal, and we hope we can contribute to that. We urge any Syrian who was ever subjected to a violation in Syria to contact us via e-mail or social media to record what they suffered from and expose the people who violated their rights.

The path for justice is a long one, and we have to work, as we need to memorialize the victims, besides documentation and accountability of course as we mentioned earlier. All of this can't be done without the cooperation of the victims' families. We are profoundly aware of and understand their hopelessness in the policies of the international community and the Security Council towards our "Justice" cause, and they are undoubtedly right, and they have our most heartfelt condolences and solidarity.

The original URL for the [interview](#), containing the questions in Arabic





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