

Interview

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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.



The Wave of Change Is Coming Despite the Bleakness of the Scene

Arabi21 Interviews the Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights

The Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Fadel Abdul Ghany, talked about the country being affected by the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the regime's incompetence in dealing with the pandemic, and its continuous violations to prevent aid from the most affected areas, specifically in northern Syria.

In [a video](#) interview on the 'Arabi21 Guest' program, Abdul Ghany also touched on the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons held in various detention centers in Syria, as well as the international community's role in confronting the violations of Bashar al Assad's regime, and the effects of the US elections on the Syrian file.

Here is the text of the interview with 'Arabi21 Guest':

How has Syria been affected so far by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic? How do you evaluate the Syrian regime's handling of the Coronavirus pandemic?

Syria, which is one of the countries in the world worst affected by COVID-19, has been greatly affected for several reasons, including that since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the regime and its Russian ally have brutally targeted medical facilities, targeting more than 200 hospitals and dozens of additional medical points, in addition to killing many medical personnel, not to mention the migration of thousands of medical personnel, whether as IDPs or refugees abroad.

Consequently, this has resulted in [the pandemic having] a more serious impact on Syrian society, in addition to the fact that there are 3,200 medical personnel who are still detained and have not been released so far even though the regime is in dire need of them, because it does not care at all about what is happening with the Syrian people

The regime has dealt with the pandemic very negligently and recklessly, initially denying the infections, and there has been no transparency at all; it did not provide sufficient swabs and examinations, and argued that [this was because] there were sanctions imposed on it, but the truth is that it is harnessing the state resources for military operations and the security services that absorb a great deal of the state budget, not the medical sector.

What is the situation of the residents of northwest Syria and the places controlled by the opposition? How does humanitarian aid reach these places?

With regard to the areas of northwest Syria, which are controlled by the opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, the humanitarian conditions there are very bad, because most of the residents of these areas are IDPs and homeless, and therefore the available water for washing hands and eliminating the virus is very limited.

Also, the regime and the Russians very intensively bombed the medical facilities in these areas, in addition to closing the Bab al Salama crossing, maintaining a single crossing, namely Bab al Hawa. Therefore, aid is delivered through only one crossing, which has greatly affected the flow of aid to northwest Syria.

Meanwhile, in the areas of northeast Syria that are controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces, there are IDPs, with the Civil Administration there being very weak, because it emerged from military forces, and thus the population residing in the areas of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Raqqa, have been greatly affected by COVID-19 as a result of the closure of the crossing, with aid coming only through the regime.

Foreign ministers of seven Arab and Western countries have emphasized the necessity of delivering humanitarian aid to the Syrian people in northern and southern Syria in light of the worsening of COVID-19 infections... Are there obstacles that prevent the delivery of this humanitarian aid?

There are some obstacles, but non-UN international organizations are allowed to enter from all crossings, and they have flexibility to support places that serve Syrians even in areas under the control of extremist groups, and therefore these obstacles can be easily overcome, so the humanitarian aid must be increased; this can be achieved by countries through dealing with local Syrian institutions that have proven effective in this regard, and we are talking about the need to deliver aid to the most affected places.

There are human rights reports accusing the Syrian regime of looting a large part of the humanitarian aid that arrived in Damascus, and stating that it is controlling the quantities to be sent to areas outside its control, and deliberately delaying the issuance of permits for the departure of aid convoys... How accurate is this?

Certainly, the regime's control of aid is very much categorically proven through many international and local documents and reports issued since 2015 to date; the regime is delaying aid, controlling its quantities, and returning medical aid, and redirecting it to the areas that support it [the regime], or looting and reselling it, which is done through its affiliated organizations.

How do you see the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in various detention centers in Syria? How do you think it can be solved?

More than 90% of the detainees and forcibly disappeared persons are held by the regime, which has not made any concessions whatsoever in this issue, and all pressure has failed to even merely reveal their fate. Therefore, there is no solution to this issue except with the departure of the regime - it is impossible that there can be any solution with the survival of this regime that negotiates using detainees as a card within the negotiations for a political solution; the international community has unfortunately failed to secure the release of detainees, and to protect them from the systematic torture they have been subjected to, which constitutes crimes against humanity.

What is your vision for the optimal handling of the issue of ISIS prisoners? Are they really a ticking time bomb?

It is their right to have a fair trial, and the countries of these prisoners must take them back and prosecute them. We believe that they have not been dealt with properly, especially since they are treated badly by Syrian Democratic Forces.

Of course, these detainees are time bombs, so they must be tried, held accountable, and dispersed, rather than being gathered in one place, to ensure that they do not join the organization again.

There is controversy and mutual accusations regarding responsibility for the outbreak of a large number of forest fires in Syria... How did you follow this controversy? Who do you think is responsible for it?

Determining the perpetrator is difficult, but unfortunately we have not heard that the regime has opened any investigation, and it has no interest in looking into these fires; also its planes were late in extinguishing them, and did so in a very limited way. The regime's neglect towards them confirms its involvement in them, and therefore the regime bears full responsibility for these fires, because it controls these areas.

What are the repercussions of those fires?

The repercussions of the fires have contributed to increasing poverty for the owners of these crops, and the Syrian people, under the leadership of this regime, have reached a terrible level of global poverty, and have become one of the poorest peoples on earth.

There is a human rights report that spoke about 11 countries that voted against the Human Rights Council resolutions condemning the violations against the Syrian people since March 2011 to date... How do you see this vote in support of the Syrian regime at the UN Human Rights Council?

These countries are totalitarian, rogue and undemocratic states, namely Russia, China, Algeria, Egypt, Venezuela, Cuba and Iraq, but often the UN resolutions are issued with an overwhelming majority in favor of the Syrian people.

These countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes, which is why they voted in favor of the Syrian regime, and that is why we exposed them; conversely, we aim to identify which countries voted in favor of our grieving people and in order to stop these tragic violations, and this is a very important matter for the history of Syria.

Is the election of Russia and China to the Human Rights Council membership in its next session a boost for the Syrian regime and its continuous violations?

Certainly, this will constitute support for the Syrian regime, but I am sure that the other countries that support us are far more than the totalitarian rogue countries that support the Bashar al Assad's regime.

How do you see the redrafting of the Syrian constitution, which is taking place through a body consisting of 150 members divided equally between the opposition, the regime and civil society organizations? Will the Constitutional Committee actually prepare for free presidential elections, or not?

Our position is clear on the political process, that there must be a political transition in accordance with Security Council resolutions, but this transition is not happening, and we are still in the pre-negotiations stage, and there is no movement or real pressure to make the political transition successful, as there is clear obstruction by the regime, because it feels it's in a position of strength. The political process has become dwarfed, restricted and embodied in the Constitutional Committee, in addition to the absence of a reference for this committee; over the course of a year and a half, no progress has been made.

How did you follow the legislative elections in Syria that took place months ago, in which the ruling Ba'ath Party and its allies won the majority of the People's Assembly seats amid the absence of the opposition?

The elections that took place are a sham and a ceremonial process, and are considered a blow to the constitutional process, since they coincided with the path of the Constitutional Committee, and show, therefore, that the regime does not recognize the outputs of this committee.

These elections are illegal and fraudulent, and contravene international human rights law, as they were held under the supervision of the security services, and the Ba'ath Party won them again.

Bashar al Assad described the Geneva talks as a “political game”, stressing that within a few months he would decide his position on running for the next presidential elections in 2021... What is your comment on the position of ‘Assad’ on the Geneva talks and the presidential elections?

Al Assad is procrastinating on this because he knows that its end is his departure and getting rid of his rule, so he is not concerned with it; unfortunately, the international community helps him in this matter, and therefore Assad succeeded in this because there is no real pressure on him.

How do you see the impacts and results achieved by the “Syria Civilian Protection Act”, known as “Caesar Act”, which was approved by the United States to impose sanctions on Syria? Was its goal to bring down the Syrian regime, as some say? Will it succeed in that or will it fail to end Bashar al Assad’s rule?

The Civilian Protection Act achieved its primary objective, as many countries were preparing for and supporting the restoration of the regime, such as Italy, Greece and Egypt, but the Caesar Act destroyed this objective, clearly stating that whoever deals with the regime will be subject to US sanctions.

The foreign ministers of the so-called Small Group on Syria held a meeting a few days ago, during which they affirmed their support for a political solution in Syria, while US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged the Syrian regime to “end its brutal war or face its ongoing isolation.” What are the chances of reaching a political solution in Syria at the present time?

We believe that there is no political solution currently in Syria, nor any serious negotiations on political transition, and this course of action has been overshadowed in the Constitutional Committee, with the main reason being that there are no pressures on the Syrian regime, because the success of this course of action would mean the end of the regime.

Also, the end of the regime represents a loss for Russia and Iran, so it is expected that these two countries will obstruct any political solution, and if there is no American will to end the Syrian disaster, the crisis will not be solved, and will continue for years to come.

The Economist magazine said that what it described as the victory of Bashar al Assad has meant more suffering for the Syrians and his regime is getting fiercer... Do you agree with the British magazine’s conclusions?

Certainly - this is what really happened, and dozens of villages and cities controlled by the regime remain empty of their inhabitants after their displacement, which exacerbates their suffering, and the regime’s military victory and its control of more areas means that the inhabitants of these areas will be displaced, under the claim that they are “terrorists”, and this is not true at all, but Bashar is the biggest terrorist in Syria.

How do you see the impact of the US election results on the human rights situation in Syria?

Democrats in America during the era of former President Barack Obama sold Syria in favor of the nuclear agreement with Iran; although their slogans claimed that they stood for human rights, in practice they have largely let Syria down, and have failed to ensure any accountability for the Syrian issue and to rid the people of the regime.

Therefore, there was a stronger tendency in favor of the Republicans who imposed harsh sanctions on the Iranian regime, as well as sanctions on the Syrian regime and the activation of the “Caesar Act”.

What is the future of human rights in Syria in your opinion?

We hope that the future of human rights in Syria will be better, because the awareness that has arisen did not exist before, which is a first step to demanding these rights, and the wave of change is coming despite experiencing major setbacks.

In addition, the future is in favor of the human rights movement in the medium and long terms, although the path of accountability is long, and the path to achieving justice is very long - but there is faith in reaching this goal, despite the bleakness of the current scene.

[Published on the Arabi21 website in Arabic.](#)



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