

Statement



SNHR Holds an Online Event on the 11th Anniversary of the Start of the Popular Uprising in Syria, with Participants from Many Countries Worldwide

US, France, UK, and Germany Stress the Importance of Holding the Syrian Regime, Which Is Involved in Atrocious Violations, Accountable and Preventing Its Return to the International Arena

On Thursday, March 17, 2021, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) held an event to commemorate the eleventh anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria, entitled **'Seeking Safety: Forced Displacement in the Syria Conflict.'** with the participation of Mr. Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; Mr. Russ Schiebel, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the US Department of State; Ambassador Robert Rohde, Ambassador for the Negotiations on Syria and Head of Division for Syria, Iraq, Lebanon & Anti ISIS Strategy at the German Federal Foreign Office; Mr. Jonathan Hargreaves, the UK Special Representative for Syria; Ambassador Brigitte Curmi, France's Special Envoy for Syria; Ms. Batoul Hdaifeh, a forcibly displaced survivor of al Bayda massacre; Ms. Nadia Hardman, a researcher with Human Rights Watch's Refugee and Migrant Rights Division, and Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, the SNHR's Director. The session, which was moderated by Ms. Naomi Kikoler, the Director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, was broadcast on Zoom and social media platforms.

Mr. Abdul Ghany opened the session, welcoming the representatives of countries and participants, and then passed the floor to the event's moderator, Ms. Naomi Kikoler, who began by recalling the continuing suffering of the Syrian people from crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian regime, noting the existence of more than 6 million internally displaced persons, saying: **"We are deeply humbled and ashamed to 11 years into the crisis find ourselves into this moment. We feel this way because we've all collectively been bystanders to atrocities that have happened in real-time. These crimes have unfolded before our eyes in vivid detail."** She added: **"Today, civilians continue to be intentional targets of mass atrocities and crimes perpetrated primarily by their own government, enabled by Russia and Iran, and this includes ongoing detention and threats of detention, a key deterrent as one of the main reasons why many Syrians cannot return home."**

Ms. Kikoler then introduced Mr. Ethan Goldrich, who began by thanking the SNHR for organizing the event and stressed the importance of the work by this and other civil society organizations in documenting the numerous and grave violations committed in Syria in order to hold all the perpetrators of violations accountable, most notably the Syrian regime. Mr. Goldrich said: **"Last Tuesday marked eleven years since the Syrian people courageously and peacefully took to the streets to demand freedom, political reform, and an end to the government's human rights violations. The Assad regime met those demands with innumerable atrocities, some of which rise to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity."** Mr. Goldrich stressed that **"the regime and its Russian and Iranian supporters must halt their ruthless attacks on Syrians. They have repeatedly struck sites where civilians live and work, including hospitals and schools, many of which were included in the UN de-confliction lists."** He added: **"The Biden administration has made it a priority to achieve accountability and justice for the crimes committed against all Syrians. Perpetrators of these abuses must be held accountable."** Mr. Goldrich stressed that the United States of America would continue to use sanctions, including the Caesar Act, to press for accountability for Bashar al Assad, his regime, and other perpetrators.

In his address, the next speaker, Mr. Russ Schiebel, recalled that the Syrian people peacefully rose up to demand their rights be respected and have subsequently struggled to safeguard their communities from the Assad regime's brutality, as well as highlighting the catastrophic humanitarian situation and the deterioration of the standard of living in Syria. Mr. Schiebel said: **"The need for humanitarian assistance is greater than ever before, with more than half of the population unable to feed their families and one-third internally displaced, most displaced more than once."** Mr. Schiebel continued: **"Only half of the health care facilities across the country are partially functioning."** He went on: **"More than 6.6 million Syrians have sought refuge outside of Syria, the largest forced displacement crisis since World War II,"** further adding, **"In Lebanon, 9 out of 10 Syrian refugee households are living in extreme poverty. In Jordan, 83% of refugees rely on World Food Program aid to meet their basic needs."** Mr. Schiebel stressed that Syria is still not safe for the voluntary return of refugees.

Ambassador Brigitte Curmi said: **"The [Syrian] regime has been putting high pressure on the displaced people in areas out of its control by preventing the delivery of humanitarian aid to them, while only two across-line operations took place from the regime's areas towards the northwest. It is obvious that humanitarian aid barely reaches the northeast. The international community, the UN, and NGOs should remain highly mobilized by advocating for those displaced persons' protection and for respect for their fundamental human rights."** The ambassador stressed: **"It is important to keep this issue high on the agenda and to make sure that any progress towards a political solution duly includes the future of these 6.7 million [displaced] people."**

Ambassador Robert Rohde stressed in his speech that the time had not yet come for normalization with the Syrian regime, saying: **"We remain extremely concerned about premature normalization tendencies. It is clearly not the time to rehabilitate Assad without anything in return, and the U27 have reaffirmed their unified stands on this in January. We believe that efforts for peace in Syria must go hand in hand with accountability."** He further emphasized that **"This is a priority topic for our government. Let me be clear; accountability is non-negotiable, cannot be part of the transactional trade-off."** Ambassador Rohde added: **"Damascus continues to be responsible for serious violations of international law and of international humanitarian law. The civilian population remains subject to discriminate, widespread and systematic attacks that may even amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."**

The event also included the participation of Ms. Batoul Hdaifeh, a survivor of al Bayda massacre who has also been forcibly displaced. Ms. Hdaifeh spoke about some of the violations she was subjected to or witnessed, saying: **"On May 2, 2013, my cities of Banyas and al Bayda village witnessed a horrific massacre, the death toll of which reached about 800 martyrs. The statistics only documented about 456 of them because the Syrian regime tried to conceal the victims' identities by burning, disfiguring, and mutilating the bodies."** She added: **"My son and I moved to Antakya city in Turkey, and my husband stayed in Syria to help the displaced. During that time, we got the news of the death of my brothers, Rashad and Bashir, under torture in the prisons of the Syrian regime."** She added: **"After a while, I moved with my husband to Istanbul, and at that time we received strange news that our house in Damascus was sold with documents forged by lawyers affiliated with the Syrian regime, and a few months ago we received news of the sale of our house in Banyas in the same way."** Ms. Hdaifeh also spoke that she is still suffering from violations by the Syrian regime in the country of asylum, **"I wanted to apply here to study to obtain a master's degree, but I was unable to obtain my official documents from Damascus University because the officials there responded to those who went and asked for my documents**

that it was not possible to obtain documents for this name without security clearance. What is worse is that I cannot communicate with my relatives in Syria because merely talking to me poses a danger to their lives.” Ms. Hdaifeh pointed out that her story is similar to the accounts of many Syrians, stating: **“We all want to return to our homeland and our homes, but this is impossible with a regime that kills, displaces, tortures and deprives us of the most fundamental rights, and even steals our property.”**

The next speaker, Jonathan Hargreaves, the UK Special Representative for Syria, underlined the importance of listening to the stories of survivors and victims, emphasizing that the UK stands behind its humanitarian commitments: **“We are committing once again, of course, to do everything in our power to make sure that the UN can continue to lead that work of cross-border [humanitarian] support into northwest Syria, where so many internally displaced people are living. And with our colleagues, in the Security Council and in Turkey, we will continue to do everything we can to make sure that that resolution is passed and that we can continue to work cross-border, as well as across-line, inasmuch as that is possible into the future.”**

The next speaker, Ms. Nadia Hardman, a researcher at the Human Rights Watch’s Refugee and Migrant Rights Division, said that people should not be forced to return when the country is difficult for anyone to sustain a dignified life, noting that the information documented in the organization’s report, entitled ‘Our Lives Are Like Death,’ confirms that refugees do not want to return, stressing that safety and security remain the main reasons why Syrians do not want to go back to Syria. Ms. Hardman explained: **“Our major findings is that people [Syrian refugees who returned to Syria] relied on misinformation or unavailability of information of the reality on the ground. Everyone we spoke to went back to government-controlled areas. We decided not to parcel out our reports to say ‘This is what happens if you go back to Homs,’ or ‘This is what happens if you go back to Damascus,’ because that’s playing into the playbook of trying to parcel out parts of Syria to declare they’re safe, and so we really wanted to move away from that.”**

Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany concluded the event by emphasizing that violations and atrocities are still being committed in Syria up to the current moment and are increasing rather than decreasing in number, meaning that they inevitably generate more forcibly displaced people. Mr. Abdul Ghany stressed that these violations, which have been ongoing for eleven years, especially violations by the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies, are behind the displacement of nearly 14 million people and stressed the importance of taking action to prevent Russia’s interference and its use of the veto in the Security Council against draft resolutions related to humanitarian aid. Mr. Abdul Ghany added: **“Support for the forcibly displaced inside Syria, especially the women and children in the camps, must be increased, due to, as I mentioned, the generating of more IDPs fleeing from the regime-controlled areas, and working on delivering the UN cross-border aid.”** Mr. Abdul Ghany also stressed: **“Serious efforts must be made to achieve a political transition towards democracy. Only then will millions of displaced people and refugees be able to return in dignity and freedom to their homes.”**

The event received attention and coverage from many media outlets and press sites; the entire event is available on our YouTube channel at [the following link](#) and our Facebook page via [the following link](#).