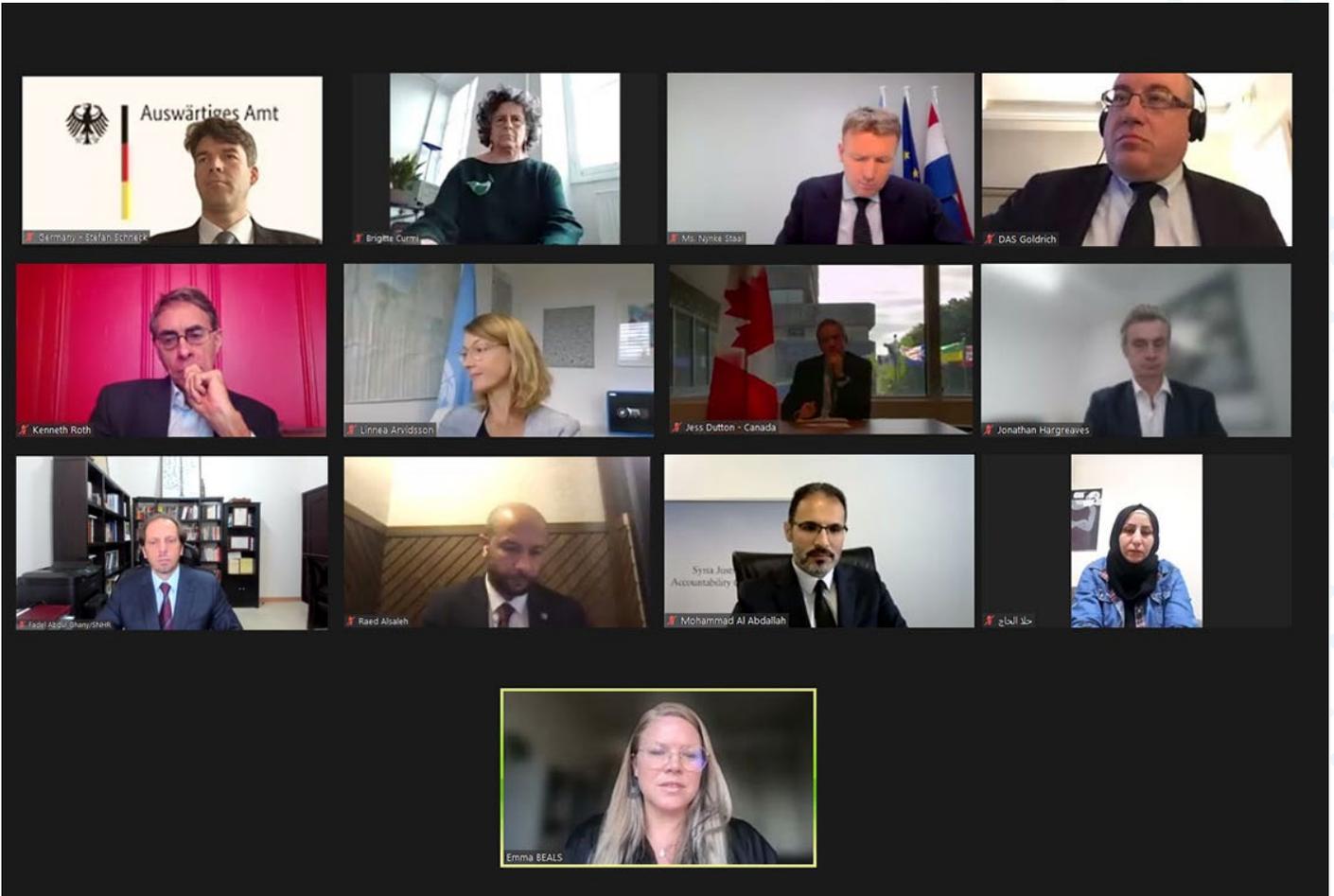


Statement



SNHR held an event, sponsored by six countries, on the sidelines of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly

USA, France, UK, Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands stress that accountability is the only way to build sustainable peace in Syria

On Friday, September 23, 2022: The Syrian Network for Human Rights, in cooperation with the US State Department's Office of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), co-hosted an event on the sidelines of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly. The event, entitled 'Closing the Gap: The Pursuit for Accountability in Syria,' was sponsored by: the USA, France, UK, Germany, Canada and the Netherlands, with participation by Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the US State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; Marcel de Vink, the Netherlands' Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs; Brigitte Curmi, France's Special Envoy for Syria; Stefan Schneck, Germany's Special Envoy for Syria; Jonathan Hargreaves, the UK's Special Envoy for Syria; Jess Dutton, Director General of Canada's Global Affairs Middle East Bureau, and Linnea Arvidsson of the Commission of Inquiry in Syria (COI).

Other participants were Kenneth Roth, former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Hala Hazza, Director of Women Survivors, Mohammad Al-Abdullah, Executive Director of Syria Justice and Accountability Center, Raed Al Saleh, Head of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), and Fadel Abdul Ghany, Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), with the event moderated by Emma Beals, Senior Advisor at the European Institute of Peace. The event was broadcast live on zoom and SNHR's social media platforms.

Mr. Fadel Abdel Ghany opened the event by thanking the US State Department's DRL Bureau for co-organizing the event over the past weeks. He thanked the six sponsoring countries, noting that this coordination and cooperation dates back to 2015, and that this event has become one of the largest international events about Syria, adding that It is particularly special because it is open to the public, with many Syrians wishing to hear directly from national representatives, and to be reassured that these nations' political and legal positions have not changed with regards to the Syrian regime, which has perpetrated crimes against humanity and war crimes against them, and that ending the conflict, holding perpetrators accountable, and achieving political transition in Syria towards democracy, and human rights are still among the priorities of these countries. Abdul Ghany concluded his opening remarks by thanking the other participants, before handing over to the session's moderator, Ms. Emma Beals.

Mrs. Beals pointed out that despite the decline in the level of military operations, violations continue to take place and that more than half of the Syrian people are internally displaced persons and refugees, who suffer from extremely difficult living conditions. **“Hundreds of thousands have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, and the video of the Tadamoun massacre was a reminder of the death of many in massacres, with many also killed as a result of torture and neglect of health care in prisons. There are more than 100,000 forcibly disappeared people, as well as detainees in Syria. Only a few hundred of them have been released, their features bearing the signs of the horrific violations they were subjected to.”** Mrs. Beals noted, adding **“It’s all because of one person, Bashar al-Assad”**.

In his address, Mr. Ethan Goldrich, the United States’ Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, said: **“It has been more than 11 years since the start of the conflict in Syria and the Assad regime continues to commit egregious crimes, some of which include the use of chemical weapons, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, attacks on medical personnel and hospitals and other violations that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, against its own people.”** Mr. Goldrich stressed that **“Justice and accountability are the basis for building the sustainable peace that Syrians deserve,”** adding, **“Assad’s impunity will encourage others to commit similar violations.”** In this context, Mr. Goldrich stressed that the United States of America will continue to exert efforts to achieve accountability, including the continuation of sanctions to impose pressure to ensure that Bashar al-Assad, his regime and other perpetrators are held accountable. He pointed out that **“Trials held under the principle of universal jurisdiction are an important reminder of the possibility of achieving a kind of accountability despite the continuing difficulties and challenges,”** explaining that criminal justice procedures are only part of the accountability process, and stressing the importance of continuing the processes of documenting violations and preserving evidence. He concluded his speech by emphasizing the essential nature of **“continued pressure on the perpetrators of violations, seeking to reveal the fate of thousands of forcibly disappeared, and working to bridge the gap to achieve accountability in Syria.”**

This was followed by an address by Mr. Marcel de Fink, Netherlands' Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, intervention, who spoke about the importance of seeking justice and accountability in Syria, stressing the need for accountability in Syria to remain on the list of priorities. He referred to the efforts of the Netherlands and Canada, which began to jointly take measures against the Assad regime two years ago, with regard to holding the Syrian regime accountable for violations of the Convention on the Prevention of All Forms of Torture. Mr. De Fink also welcomed the efforts of states in holding trials under the principle of universal jurisdiction, adding, **"It is very important that these trials reflect the voices of the victims,"** and stressing that **"the path of justice and accountability requires prolonged effort and cooperation with our partners such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, as well as the mechanisms that have been established, such as the International Impartial Independent Mechanism (IIIM)."**

The next speaker, Mrs. Brigitte Curmi, France' Special Envoy for Syria, said, **"Given the event title Closing the Gap: The Pursuit of Accountability in Syria, more than a decade after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, we cannot fail to acknowledge that the gap between the mass atrocities committed in Syria and the accountability for the perpetrators of those crimes remains enormous, and it seems that this gap is widening day by day. We were also reminded in the recent report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which indicated that arbitrary detention and torture are still systematic in regime-controlled areas, that Syria remains an unsafe place for return."** She said that there are several ways to achieve justice and accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and France is determined to use all of these methods. **"Last July, my country completed the last step in enacting a law for international judicial cooperation between France and the international, impartial and independent mechanism on efforts to reveal the fate of the missing in Syria, including the disappeared."** Ms. Curmi pointed to France's support for courts under the principle of universal jurisdiction, such as the Koblenz Court, and pointed out that judicial procedures are also taking place in France **"Last month, France received many photos and videos that represent evidence of atrocities and massacres committed in Damascus in 2013. The alleged atrocities are among the most heinous international crimes, especially war crimes and crimes against humanity."**

She added, **“France is committed to condemning the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons against its own people, and therefore supported the decision of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to suspend the rights and privileges of Syria,”** Ms. Brigitte concluded by thanking civil society organizations for their efforts in exposing the atrocities committed, stressing at the end of her speech, concluding **“It is our responsibility to ensure that the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity are fulfilled.”**

Mr. Jess Dutton, Canada’s Director General of Global Affairs Middle East Bureau, spoke next emphasizing that **“We must continue to seek a political settlement to end the devastation in Syria, and to do so we must bear in mind that sustainable peace will only be possible if it includes accountability for the terrible injustice done to Syrians at the hands of the regime. These violations include repeated use of chemical weapons, torture, summary executions, arbitrary arrest and much more”**. He added that the international community must continue to condemn the ongoing human rights violations, emphasizing, **“We are concerned about any normalization of relations with Syria and Damascus because this will only strengthen the regime and impede our efforts towards [achieving] lasting peace and achieving justice and accountability.”**

This was followed by Mr. Stefan Schneck, Germany’s Special Envoy for Syria, who said in his address: **“In order to end the war in Syria and implement a lasting political solution for all Syrians, accountability is the right and necessary prerequisite.”** He added, **“Universal jurisdiction can be an effective tool to pursue accountability for the most serious crimes and given the massive scale of human rights violations in Syria, we must continue to impose pressure, by all means, to hold the perpetrators accountable. In this context, Germany supports the international, impartial and independent investigation mechanism for Syria, the International Commission of Inquiry, civil society organizations and the relatives of all victims to ensure that those responsible for torture and killings and all perpetrators of atrocities in Syria eventually face justice.”** Mr. Schneck also spoke about the new mechanism related to the disappeared in Syria presented in the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, noting that **“Germany is working closely with its international partners with the aim of pressing for a strong and effective mechanism to reveal the fate of the disappeared.”**

The next speaker, Jonathan Hargreaves, the United Kingdom's Special Representative to Syria, said in his address: **"There is a risk of a perception in the world with what is happening now that the war in Syria is over, and of course our job is to remind people that this is far from the truth, and that the suffering of millions of Syrians, especially women and girls, in Syria is not over and is still going on."** Mr. Hargreaves added: **"The UK is pleased with the proposal of the UN Secretary-General's recent report on a mechanism to address the issue of the missing,"** noting that: **"Justice for the Ukrainians will be similar to justice for the Syrians; the crimes committed by Russia and the tactics they use in Ukraine are all very familiar to people in Syria."** He further emphasized that **"We must continue to highlight the violence and systematic violations committed by Russia and ensure that there is no impunity and that the Syrian regime, and other parties who commit human rights violations, are held accountable. The people of Syria deserve justice."**

The following speaker, Ms. Linnea Arvidsson, from the International Commission of Inquiry, spoke about the nature of the COI's work and the importance of finding a political solution to the events in Syria, saying: **"The ICRC must be allowed to enter all detention centers without barriers, and basic civil rights such as birth registration and property registration and others must be facilitated. We must work to reveal the fate of thousands of disappeared, and we know perfectly well that the Syrian government and to a lesser extent the rest of the parties to the conflict are deliberately prolonging the suffering of hundreds of thousands of family members of the disappeared by not revealing the fate of the disappeared, and that all evidence indicates that the government of the Syrian regime knows exactly the whereabouts of the disappeared, the existence of these disappeared, and what are their names"** Ms. Arvidsson further affirmed, **"Condoning and not punishing these violations is not an option. Acceptance of these crimes remains non-existent and must remain so, otherwise impunity will continue and increase."**

The next speaker, a Raed Al-Saleh, Director of the Syrian Civil Defense organization, in which he spoke about the importance of accountability and bridging the gap. He added: **“We do not have a lack of documentation, but we undoubtedly have a lack of accountability. What we miss the most today in Syria is the absence of an accountability mechanism. What we fear the most is that dictators in the world will feel secure from accountability, as is happening in Syria.”** He emphasized the importance of creating mechanisms for delivering humanitarian aid free from any Syrian regime involvement due to its political exploitation of such aid, and to prevent its being used as another weapon against the Syrian people.

Following this, Mr. Kenneth Roth, the former director of Human Rights Watch, also underlined the vital importance of criminal accountability and the documentation processes required, addressing the efforts made by investigative bodies and civil society organizations concerned with documentation in the collection of evidence and the chain of preservation, in extraordinary circumstances, regarding the conflict in Syria. He said: **“The place where accountability for violations should be is the International Criminal Court, but the Russian-Chinese veto made this impossible, and this made the only option for trials universal jurisdiction in national courts, which makes the work of the International Commission of Inquiry and the international and impartial independent mechanism very important.”** He added, **“These trials demonstrated the need for states to review their own laws relating to universal jurisdiction.”** Mr. Roth explained the importance of conducting trials in absentia for people who are not currently on the territory of the state, which is the next step, in the absence of other forms of accountability, for the main perpetrators of violations in the International Criminal Court. He further touched on the issue of refugees, noting that there are many glaring contradictions between the international community’s rhetoric about justice and the way in which asylum seekers are treated in reality. **“Many countries talk about returning Syrian refugees, and this is actually being worked on in Turkey, Lebanon and even Denmark, one of the European Union countries, and therefore it is important to clarify that not only are the horrific violations not held accountable, but they are still continuing, Syria is not safe, and it cannot be considered as such just because military operations have stopped in some parts of Syria.”**

The next speaker, Ms. Hala Hazaa, a detention survivor and director of the Women Survivors organization, spoke about some of the violations she was subjected to or witnessed: **“I was a witness to the massacre of al Joura and al Qusour neighborhoods on September 25, 2012, and miraculously survived it with my family, and on November 7, 2013 my family’s house was raided by military security forces in Deir Ez-Zour.”** She added: **“I was taken to the branch and spent seven months and 20 days in detention, 46 days in military security, then I was placed in a cell that lacked the requirements for any human being, and was subjected to physical and psychological torture and direct threat of rape, to force me to confess to charges that were brought against all detainees, such as financing terrorism and others without any evidence, I was beaten with clubs and cables all over my body, kicked with feet, as well as being subjected to sexual insults. I often lost consciousness after this torture, and what hurt me the most was the psychological shattering that was practiced on me in every interrogation session. On one occasion, they brought one of the arrested young men in front of me and they smashed his head on the ground to frighten me and force me to confess. They arrested my father and my mother. I remember that night when the interrogator took me out of my cell to watch my mother being dragged into a cell to be pressured during the interrogation. My mother was released after 15 days. After being told that I had caused my father’s death under torture because I denied all the charges, I had no choice but to put my fingerprint on seven pages of white paper on which nothing was written.”** Mrs. Hazaa also spoke about what she witnessed while she was in that branch recalling, **“I saw other women and girls who were being beaten and tortured. They were forced to confess in order to end the horrifying torture sessions, and above all we suffered from skin diseases and were deprived of medicine and the most basic health and sanitary requirements.”**

After the Military Security branch, Hala was transferred to the regime's infamous Palestine Branch in Damascus with a number of other females, as well as male, detainees, all of whom were subjected to beatings, insults and harassment. Ms. Hazaa said: **"All the time I kept thinking about my mother and dead father, but thank God my father was alive and I didn't know that until I got to Adra Prison."** Speaking about her experience in the Palestine Branch, she said: **"In the Palestine Branch, we were searched in one of the bathrooms after we were completely stripped of our clothes, and then I was taken to a cell, and there I met women from all regions and of other nationalities as well, from Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Ethiopia and America. There, I was tortured and threatened that they would bring my brother and kill him. The interrogator was unable to get any confessions from me. He told me that he would not summon me for interrogation again and that my case had become a military field case, meaning that I would be taken for execution at any moment and no one would know anything about my fate. I kept waiting for death while watching my detained friends suffer from illness, torture, amnesia, and suppurations in the body, and I fell ill which made me unconscious for about 22 days. I got out of the hell of the Palestine Branch hardly walking, to Adra prison and there I learned, as I mentioned before, that my father is still alive. On June 15, 2014, I was brought before the terrorism court and I was released while I was still on trial, forcing me to leave my home and my city for Turkey."**

Ms. Hazaa concluded her participation by recounting the continuing suffering of male and female detainees and their families in the prisons of the Syrian regime and the other parties to the conflict, and called on the countries of the world to assume their international responsibilities and pressure the Syrian regime to release all detainees and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared.

After this, Mr. Muhammad Al-Abdullah, Executive Director of the Syrian Center for Justice and Accountability spoke, emphasizing the importance of finding an effective political solution to achieve progress in implementing Security Council Resolution 2254, and explaining that impunity encouraged delays in progress and concessions from the parties to the conflict, and also led to the repetition of violations elsewhere, such as Ukraine. Mr. Al-Abdullah also spoke about the importance of working to find effective mechanisms to reveal the fate of the disappeared and to secure the release of detainees. He concluded his address by emphasizing that **"the role of the families of the disappeared and the mechanism presented by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his report is a starting step, not a solution. It is only the beginning of revealing the fate of the detainees and the disappeared, and this will not be achieved without a leadership that does not currently exist."**

In his closing address, Mr. Fadul Abdul Ghany stressed “The egregious violations committed by the Syrian regime for almost 12 years to date, many of which, such as; extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, torture, forced displacement, the use of chemical weapons, and others, amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, show that the regime is undeterred by the current restrictions against it. The Syrian regime has committed these monstrous crimes on a massive scale continuously since 2011, repeating them in 2012, 2013, 2014, and every year since. The regime has not stopped or been deterred in any way by any of the international mechanisms imposed on it to date. It has seen no need to fear the reports of the COI nor those of the Joint Investigation Mechanism established by UN Security Council Resolution 2235 on chemical weapons, which proved its responsibility for three attacks. Similarly, the regime has seen no need to fear the establishment of the IIM at the end of 2016, nor the reports of the Investigation and Identification Team of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, nor the trials and convictions of the universal jurisdiction, nor the reports of human rights organizations. I believe that this clearly shows that we all must consider introducing new mechanisms for accountability, which put serious pressure on brutal dictatorships.”

He added: “The Syrian regime has been able to continue with this impunity due to the support of similar dictatorships in Russia and Iran. In a few days, it will be the seventh anniversary of the start of Russia’s military intervention in Syria that began on September 30, 2015. This intervention received no adequate condemnation or sanctions from the West against Russia. The West has imposed no sanctions on Russia over its military intervention in Syria. That is why we are still suffering in Syria and Ukraine.” He concluded by noting the importance of “rejecting any attempt to rehabilitate the Syrian regime, and instead continuing to support change toward democracy in Syria,” adding, “There is no alternative option.”

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](#).



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