

Statement



SNHR Holds a Forum Cosponsored by Multiple 12th Anniversary of the World States on the Popular Uprising in Syria

The US, Germany, Qatar, and the Netherlands Condemn
the Syrian Regime's Violations and Reiterate Their
Position of non-Normalization With the Regime

Wednesday 16 March 2023

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 analyzes in Syria.

Paris - SNHR:

On Wednesday March 15, 2023, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) hosted an online forum marking the 12th anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria, entitled '12 Years and More: Human Rights Violations Continue in an Unsafe Syria'.

The forum, which was cosponsored by the US, Germany, Qatar, and the Netherlands, featured **Erin Barclay**, Acting Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL); **Ethan Goldrich**, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; **Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi**, Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs of the State of Qatar; **Stefan Schneck**, Germany's Special Envoy for Syria, and **Gijs Gerlag**, the Netherlands's Special Envoy for Syria. Other distinguished speakers participating in the forum were **Linnea Arvidsson** of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI); **Sawsan Abou Zainedin**, CEO of Madaniya; **Raed Saleh**, Director of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), and **Fadel Abdul Ghany**, Executive Director of SNHR. The forum, which was streamed live on SNHR's social media channels and on Zoom, was moderated by **Marie Forestier** of the European Institute for Peace.

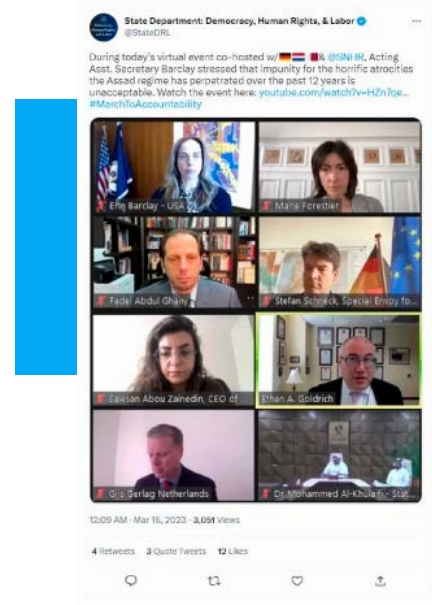
The participants discussed the ongoing human rights violations and abuses against Syrians during the course of the 12 years to date of the Syrian uprising, and how the international community can promote the efforts aimed at ensuring justice and accountability, specifically with regard to ensuring that perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity which are still taking place in Syria at the hands of the parties to the conflict, most notably the Syrian regime, are held fully accountable.

Mr. Abdul Ghany opened the forum by welcoming the state representatives and other speakers, stressing that it is vital to keep emphasizing support for Syrians' basic rights in the struggle for democracy. He stressed that we must never lose hope, despite the protracted nature of the Syrian catastrophe, the so-far failed efforts to bring about political transition, and the constant and continuing violations that are still being committed by all parties to the conflict, most notably the Syrian regime and Russia.

After Mr. Abdul Ghany's opening address, Ms. Froestier welcomed the speakers, highlighting that violations are still going on 12 years into the conflict, and stressing the vital importance of devising effective accountability mechanisms.

In her address, Ms. Barclay, Acting Assistant Secretary of the US Department of State's DRL, noted that, 12 years ago on this date, the Syrian regime first began its brutal oppression of the peaceful protests in Syria. She hailed the Syrian human rights defenders for still valiantly demanding their human rights despite the horrific violations that have taken place since then. Moreover, she affirmed that the US has stood with, and still stands with the Syrian people against the violations perpetrated by the Syrian regime which have touched every Syrian family, with some of these violations qualifying as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ms. Barclay also said that, even after 12 years, the brutal Syrian regime continues to carry out arbitrary arrests, killings under torture, and the killing of dissidents and human rights activists and medical personnel, as well as enforced disappearances. She also noted that the US supports the establishment of an UN mechanism with the mandate of addressing the issue of missing persons in the manner outlined by the UN Secretary-General, adding that the US is working with a number of partners to actualize this mechanism.

Moreover, she stressed that the US will continue its steady support, in coordination with allies and partners, to hold the Syrian regime and its backers, Russia and Iran, accountable, as well as any other party that violates human rights in Syria, while underscoring that impunity is simply unacceptable. She closed her address by praising the civil society organization's efforts as relates to documentation, sharing of information, and their continued work.



Mr. Goldrich, the Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, began his address by emphasizing the US's commitment to bringing about justice and accountability in Syria on the 12th anniversary of the popular uprising. Mr. Goldrich extended his condolences to all those affected by the earthquake that hit northwestern Syria and southern Turkey on February 6, stressing that the US believes that stability cannot become a reality in Syria except through a political process that reflect the will of all Syrians, a process, he added, which incorporates justice and accountability, which are both essential for securing a sustained peace. Moreover, Mr. Goldrich said that the US supports prosecuting the perpetrators of horrific crimes in Syria, as has happened in a number of cases in France, Germany, and Sweden, under the universal jurisdiction principle. He revealed that the US is making progress with respect to trying crimes in the US with US President Joe Biden signing the 'Justice for Victims of War Crimes' Act. Those efforts, he noted, are a reminder of the methods through which accountability can be

promoted despite the existing challenges, including the obstacles put in place by the allies of the Syrian regime. He closed his address by reiterating that the US will not normalize relationships with the Syrian regime or lift sanctions on Syria until a real and sustained progress has been actualized towards a political resolution to the conflict. Moreover, she stressed that the US will continue its steady support, in coordination with allies and partners, to hold the Syrian regime and its backers, Russia and Iran, accountable, as well as any other party that violates human rights in Syria, while underscoring that impunity is simply unacceptable. She closed her address by praising the civil society organization's efforts as relates to documentation, sharing of information, and their continued work.



Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs of the State of Qatar, said in his address that 12 years ago, the Syrian people went out to valiantly and peacefully demand justice, freedom, dignity, and equality, all of which are legitimate basic rights. He added that the State of Qatar is committed to its position that the only resolution to this crisis is a political resolution on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué and Security Council resolution 2254, in a way that preserves the integrity and sovereignty of Syrian territory, and meet the aspirations of the country's people for security and stability.

Furthermore, he noted, the State of Qatar will continue to support all efforts in support of the Syrian people and to ensure their legitimate basic rights as a priority for the international community. He continued by saying that Qatar encourages all of its international partners to continue supporting this cause, and to redouble their efforts, in the humanitarian and political spheres because, he said, the general environment has complications that do a grave disservice to those worst affected.

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a [statement](#) on the event.



The next speaker was Mr. Schneck, Germany's Special Envoy for Syria, who stated in his address that there is a pressing need for a political resolution in line with Security Council resolution 2254. As such, he added, Germany supports Geir Pedersen, the UN special envoy to Syria, and his efforts to rejuvenate the faltering political process. He also called on the Syrian regime and its Russian backers to stop undermining any progress in this regard, which he described as a key requirement. Moreover, he added that as long as there is no progress, Germany will maintain its stance of no normalization, no support for reconstruction that would benefit the regime, and no lifting of the sanctions imposed with no accountability. He lamented the fact that, even after 12 years of the conflict, none of the perpetrators of horrific crimes have been brought to justice at the international level despite the copious evidence against them. On the other hand, he praised the final sentence of life imprisonment issued by the Koblenz Court in January of this year against former colonel Anwar Raslan, who, was linked to the torture of over 4,000 people in an Assad regime torture facility, saying that this trial and verdict have come to symbolize the effectiveness of universal jurisdiction in implementing international law, revealing that public prosecutors in Germany, as well as in other states, are working under the mandate of universal jurisdiction and submitting new cases to the courts. He stressed that we have to keep applying pressure through all possible means to realize accountability in light of the massive scale of human rights violations.

Mr. Schneck also highlighted the importance of ongoing documentation of such crimes by civil society and human rights organizations, and of the international mechanisms, with respect to preserving the rights of victims and bringing about justice and accountability. He closed his address by noting that Germany supports the establishment of an UN mechanism with the mandate of revealing the fate of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.



Mr. Gerlag, the Netherlands's Special Envoy for Syria, noted in his address that it is difficult to imagine and truly put into perspective what the Syrian people have been enduring for far too long. He added that the report by the COI, which was released a few days ago, confirms that violations amounting to crimes against humanity are still being

perpetrated, further stressing that it is recognized that the international community should keep exerting efforts to try and improve the conditions of the victims, which he said means that, besides continuing humanitarian support, combating impunity is a key issue and is the reason why the Netherlands has been working with Canada to hold the Syrian regime specifically responsible in accordance with the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The senior Dutch diplomat said that all of our efforts to bring justice for Syria need one common factor, namely to reflect the will and voices of the survivors and victims. He closed his address by saying that, for the Syrians that have been affected by the atrocities of the last 12 years, accountability is overdue, encouraging everyone to stay the course and keep working towards bringing justice for all who have and are still suffering.

The next speaker, Ms. Arvidsson of the COI, opened her address by summarizing the most prominent findings of the [COI's most recent report](#), released on March 13, 2023. She revealed that the report was written before the February 6 earthquake, adding that an astounding fact that should never be forgotten is that the areas that were affected by the earthquake a few weeks later were exactly the same ones that had already witnessed dozens of attacks that led to hundreds of casualties and damaged the civilian infrastructure in the months predating the earthquake. According to the COI's investigations, she added, these attacks include crimes against humanity and possibly war crimes by different active parties. She also highlighted the suffering and harsh conditions under which IDPs are living in camps, in addition to underscoring the many violations against IDPs and refugees on their return to their original areas under regime control. Ms. Arvidsson also stressed that human rights violations are still taking place albeit to a lesser degree compared to previous years. She closed her address by reiterating the importance of establishing a mechanism with an international mandate to coordinate and bolster change with respect to the missing and documenting the forcibly disappeared persons, which she emphasized is an important opportunity to do something for the Syrian families who have waited too long for any action in this regard.

Ms. Abou Zainedin, the CEO of Madaniya, spoke in her address about the issue of the pillaging of properties, noting that the Syrian regime is usually largely dismissive when dealing with this issue, despite the fact that half the Syrian population have been displaced, while millions are forced to live in non-regime areas, and hundreds of thousands are detained in regime prisons. All of these people, she noted, have no means to demand their property rights due to the sensitive security-related nature of this issue. She also shed light on some of the abusive laws imposed by the Syrian in relation to this issue. She

closed her address by reiterating that she appreciates the commitment to supporting the political process that aim to bring about justice and accountability in all regards, as she hopes that collaboration can be built upon to implement tangible policies and strategies that would actualize a political transition to Syria beyond the currently suspended political process.

The next speaker was Mr. Saleh, the director of the Syrian Civil Defense, who stressed that the Syrian people have been fighting for 12 years, and it is essential that the Syrian people attain their rights, including the victims whose are due to attain their rights and receive justice and accountability. Mr. Saleh's address focused on the difficulties and challenges the Syrian Civil Defense is facing in light of the harsh conditions made worse by the earthquake that hit northwestern Syria on February 6, 2023. He also touched upon the efforts made to preserve the rights of the victims.

Mr. Abdul Ghany closed the forum by reiterating that normalizing goes against accountability. Normalization of the Syrian regime, he added, means that the regime has successfully realized impunity, despite still committing crimes against humanity against the Syrian people, as confirmed by the COI's most recent report. He noted that cutting political and economic ties with the Syrian regime and imposing sanctions on it is essential due to the horrific violations committed by the regime, which are corroborated by the texts of the international law, Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions which states that states "...undertake to respect and ensure respect for the present convention." He said that "ensuring respect" entails imposing sanctions and condemning violations, as well as protecting civilians. Mr. Abdul Ghany added that the UN failing to impose any economic or military sanctions on the Syrian regime for years has sent the wrong message to the Syrian people. It is because of the failure to deter the Syrian regime, he stressed, by the UN or the world states that the Syrian regime feels emboldened to commit further violations. He also noted that we need to warn the states, corporations, and individuals that normalize relations with the Syrian regime that such acts may constitute supporting the Syrian regime, whether politically, in the media, or militarily, and therefore they may be seen by the international law as complicit to the regime's violations against its people. Moreover, Mr. Abdul Ghany reiterated that accountability must include the backers of the Syrian regime, namely Russia and Iran, since their support was the main reason that enabled the Syrian regime to reject political transition and enjoy impunity. He also underscored that no international sanctions have been imposed on Russia because of its practices in Syria, unlike those imposed on Russia due to its unlawful intervention in Ukraine. This has emboldened Russia to commit hundreds of war crimes in Syria,

including assisting the Syrian regime in using chemical weapons, which are a weapon of mass destruction, where he referred to the most recent report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that proved Russia's involvement in the chemical attack on Douma. Mr. Abdul Ghany expressed hope that sanctions are to be imposed on Russia and Iran for their backing of a regime that is involved in crimes against humanity. He closed his address by stating that the parties to the conflict, most notably the Syrian regime that has committed the most violations, are responsible for millions of victims and all should be held accountable. He asserted that there is no choice but to continue documenting and condemning the violations of the Syrian regime and the other parties to the conflict, and to apply pressure to its allies in order to abandon the regime, affirming the fact that as long as the current Syrian regime stays in power, there will be no stability and no accountability.

The forum garnered wide traction by many media outlets and news websites. To watch the forum in full on our YouTube channel, please click on this [link](#), or on our Facebook page on this [link](#).



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