Baytna, SNHR, The White Helmets, Held an Event on the Sidelines of the Syria Brussels VII Conference Entitled, ‘We know who used chemical weapons in Syria, what is next?’

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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 analyzes in Syria.
The Hague - Syrian Network for Human Rights

On Tuesday, June 13, 2023, Baytna, The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), held an in-person event entitled, ‘We know who used chemical weapons in Syria, what is next?’.

The event, held on the sidelines of the ‘Brussels VII Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region’ in Brussels, Belgium, was broadcast on SNHR’s different social media channels. It featured a number of distinguished panelists, namely Ambassador Stephen Rapp of the US Holocaust Museum who is also a former US Ambassador at large for Global Criminal Justice, Mika-Markus Leononen, EU representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Ambassador Fatou Bensouda, a former prosecutor with the International Criminal Court (ICC), Raed al-Salleh, director of The White Helmets, Lubna Kanawati, a member of the Chemical Weapons Victims association, and Fadel Abdul Ghany, SNHR Executive Director, and was moderated by Lotte Leicht, Board Chair of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR).

The panel tackled the topic of the Syrian regime’s continued impunity for chemical weapons use, despite it having been conclusively proven that chemical weapons have been used repeatedly in Syria, and despite the widespread international disapprobation and the exhaustive documentation efforts by internationally respected bodies, including SNHR, which resulted in the collection of thousands of items of evidence. To that end, the event aimed to assess the option available to tackle the impunity gap.

In the opening speech at the event, Assaad Al Achi, the Executive Director of Baytna, spoke about the aforementioned topic, emphasizing the continuing nature of the shameful impunity granted to the Syrian regime, even after the OPCW’s Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) issued its third report on the subject confirming the use of chemical weapons, before yielding the floor to Ms. Leicht.

Ms. Leicht lamented how Syrians continue to suffer more than a decade into the conflict, shedding light on the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against the Syrian people. She noted that it has now been almost 10 years since the chemical weapons attacks on the two Ghoutas which at the time created shock and outrage worldwide, leading to many demands for accountability. While few believed that such an atrocity would happen again after the Syrian regime ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) following the attack and supposedly destroyed its chemical weapons stockpile, what transpired in reality was more lies, more stalling, and most importantly repeated use of chemical weapons by the regime, taking advantage of the climate of impunity and the absence of any move to stop it.
In his speech, Mr. Abdul Ghany stressed that this event marks a legacy on which we should build. He explained that the reason behind the selection of this topic for discussion is the recent release of the third report by the IIT, which provides further confirmation that the Syrian regime, in coordination with Russia, was the party responsible for the chemical attack on Douma city on April 7, 2018.

The first two IIT reports also proved the Syrian regime’s responsibility for four chemical weapons attacks. The first report, released in 2020, assigned responsibility for three such attacks to the regime, while the second report, released on April 12, 2021, concluded that the Syrian regime was responsible for the Saraqeb attack on February 4, 2018. The third report stands out for specifically assigning responsibility to the al-Namer or ‘Tiger’ Forces, which is particularly significant since al-Namer Forces are directly supported by Russia, making it a partner in the Douma attack.

Prior to the issuance of these three reports, the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), established in accordance with Security Council resolution 2235, had assigned responsibility in six attacks – four by the Syrian regime and two by ISIS.

Mr. Abdul Ghany underlined that those are the world’s leading investigation teams on this subject, all of which are highly specialized, and all of which explicitly state, based on meticulously accurate reports that can qualify as criminal investigation, that the Syrian regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons.

He added that, despite the 2013 chemical weapons attack on the two Ghoutas, which was the largest such attack in the modern era, and despite the US’s red line, warnings from France, and every previous investigation, the progress made with regard to holding the Syrian regime accountable for repeatedly using chemical weapons, which are internationally proscribed weapons of mass destruction, is almost nonexistent. He noted that no action has been taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, even though all Security Council resolutions adopted on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, namely resolutions 2118, 2209, and 2235, have referred to this option. He also lamented the failures of the political transition process that would have paved the way for holding the standing Syrian regime accountable in national courts, and the failure to establish any tribunals to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria.
Moreover, Mr. Abdul Ghany noted that the decision of some Arab states to restore relations with the Syrian regime, despite its involvement in crimes against humanity, war crimes, and use of weapons of mass destruction, casts grave doubts on the credibility of the UN and the international community, and sends a shamefully wrong message to approximately 1,514 Syrian citizens killed by the use of chemical weapons, including 214 children, and 11,080 surviving victims who have suffered various injuries as a result of their exposure.

Mr. Abdul Ghany concluded his speech by reasserting that the international community must take action to make reparations for the victims of chemical weapons in Syria, hold the regime accountable by establishing a special tribunal and expatiating the process of political transition that would pave the way for a path of transitional justice in Syria.

At SNHR, we believe that the reports released by the OPCW’s IIT, in addition to the reports issued by the JIM and those by the OPCW, in which the Organization proved and confirmed the regime’s repeated use of chemical weapons, incorporating conclusive evidence to substantiate this, jointly comprise a solid basis for action to hold the regime accountable for these crimes under international law, and more importantly to hold it accountable politically, by rejecting any prospects of the regime being reintegrated into the international community. Instead, the regime should be treated as a rogue regime that has irrevocably broken the rules of international law. All the world’s states are obliged to combat and deter the Syrian regime for its use of weapons of mass destruction. We call on the IIT to identify the responsible individuals within the Syrian regime by name since this is also a form of accountability and to provide support for the victims of its use of chemical weapons.

To watch the event in full, please click [here](#).