

Statement

On the Sidelines of the 78th Session of the UNGA, SNHR Holds an Event Sponsored by Five Key World States

The US, France, UK, Germany, Qatar Reiterate that Conditions for Refugees' Safe and Dignified Return to Syria are Nonexistent



Friday, 22 September , 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 analyses in Syria.

Thursday, September 21, 2023: The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) held an event on this date on the sidelines of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in collaboration with the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). Sponsored by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Qatar, the event, entitled, 'Twelve Years of Suffering: Examining Human Rights Abuses and Opportunities for Accountability in Syria', featured Erin Barclay, Acting Assistant Secretary for the DRL, Beth Van Schaack, Ambassador-at-Large for the US Department of State's Office of Global Criminal Justice, Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the US Department of State, Stephen Hickey, Director of Middle East and North Africa at the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Luise Amtsberg, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance, Delphine Borione, France's Ambassador at-Large for Human Rights, H.E. Almuhammad Ali Hassan Alhammadi, Director of the U.S. and Americas Department at Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Linnea Arvidsson of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI), Fadel Abdul Ghany, SNHR Executive Director, Dr. Talal Sunbulli of the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD), and Ahed Fistouk, a Syrian activist who works with the Multifaith Alliance. The panel discussion, which was moderated by Qutaiba Idlbi of the Atlantic Council, was broadcast via zoom and SNHR's media channels.

During the event, the speakers discussed the ongoing human rights violations and abuses faced by Syrians and explored how the international community can advance justice and accountability efforts for perpetrators, as well as discussing issues related to displacement, refugees, and enforced disappearance.

Mr. Abdul Ghany began the event by thanking the DRL for its role in organizing the event in the past few weeks, as well as thanking the US, UK, France, Germany, and Qatar. The SNHR head noted that this annual international event on the state of human rights in Syria, which despite being classified as the worst nation globally in terms of multiple human rights indicators does not receive its due attention, is an attempt to remind the world of the suffering of the Syrian people and to bring the issue of Syria back to the center of the international community's attention, with the panel discussion having been held on the sidelines of the UNGA's sessions every year since 2014. Mr. Abdul Ghany concluded by thanking the other panelists before yielding the floor to Qutaiba Idlbi.

Idlbi highlighted how the Syrian regime still far exceeds all parties to the conflict, individually or collectively, in terms of human rights violations, stressing that the continued absence of any accountability in the 12-year long conflict is the most significant reason why the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict continue to feel emboldened to commit various types of violation.

The next speaker, Erin Barkley, Acting Assistant Secretary for the DRL, opened her address by reiterating that the continued oppression of the Syrians' demands for democracy and dignity still continues 12 years into the conflict, stressing that when talking about the Syrian regime's various human rights violations, including extrajudicial killing, lethal torture, arbitrary arrest, and enforced disappearance, one must not forget that the Syrian regime has committed these violations since the first years of the Syrian conflict and continues to commit these violations to this day.

She noted that despite Bashar Assad's claims that Syria welcomes the return of refugees from neighboring countries, it is clear that the conditions for a safe and dignified return for refugees are still absent. The US diplomat further underlined that displaced persons in Syria face multiple serious violations upon returning to their original areas, even in those places with settlement agreements, while many others cannot return due to the massive destruction of because their properties have been seized.

Moreover, Ms. Barkley noted that SNHR has documented the arrest of no fewer than 112 returnees, including children and women so far in 2023 alone. Of these, 24 were subsequently classified as forcibly disappeared persons.

She added that Syrians continue to face numerous violations, as the Syrian regime's allies continue to afford it the cover of impunity, while stressing that the US will continue to support the Syrian people, will not normalize relations with the regime, and will always seek to ensure that all Syrians have dignity and human rights. Ms. Barkley also welcomed the establishment of the UN independent body on the missing in Syria, concluding her address by reiterating that the international community must find better ways to support the efforts to hold the perpetrators of violations accountable in Syria.

Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the US Department of State, began his address by reiterating the US' commitment to achieve justice and accountability in Syria. He noted that the use of chemical weapons, extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and forced displacement are just some of the violations that the Syrian people have endured for over 12 years. Mr. Goldrich underlined that the perpetrators of those violations cannot be allowed to continue to have impunity, as justice and accountability are the foundations for establishing the sustainable peace which Syrians deserve. In this context, the US official affirmed that the US will continue to seek accountability, further confirming that it will not normalize relations with the Syrian regime, and will continue to support the Syrian people in their aspirations for freedom, since the Syrian people will never give up on their rightful demands, noting that this is best demonstrated by the peaceful movement taking place at present in Daraa and Suwayda. Furthermore, he clarified that there will be no lifting of sanctions or normalizing of relations with the regime until serious, genuine and continuous action is taken towards bringing about a political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254. Mr. Goldrich ended his address by asserting that the US will continue to call on other states' government to continue to boycott the Syrian regime, and to underline the importance of such a stance in bringing about accountability and justice for the Syrian people.

The next speaker, Delphine Borione, France's Ambassador at-Large for Human Rights, spoke about how the Syrian regime continues to commit human rights violations just as Russia continues to commit similar violations in Ukraine, stressing at the same time that impunity must be brought to an end and the perpetrators of such crimes must be held accountable. She also asserted that France is still committed to fighting impunity in Syria, highlighting France's work with the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and Syrian civil society organizations. Ms. Borione additionally welcomed the establishment of the UN independent mechanism for the missing in Syria. Furthermore, the French ambassador stated that France has been following the accountability efforts at a number of international courts, such as the Koblenz trials in Germany, and the trial scheduled to take place in France next May. She added that the France's Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs has handed the French judiciary hundreds of photos and videos that can serve as evidence of atrocities being committed by pro-regime forces in al-Tadamun Massacre. On a related note, Ms. Borione stressed that France is committed to ensuring the conviction of the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons against its people, which she

said is why France supported the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW) decision to suspend Syria's rights and privileges as a member state. Ms. Borione also welcomed the steps taken by Canada and the Netherlands to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its breaches of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The French diplomat concluded her address by thanking civil society organizations for their efforts to expose the atrocities committed in Syria, declaring that there is a responsibility to ensure that the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom, dignity, and justice are met.

In his address, H.E. Almuhammad Ali Hassan Alhammadi, Director of the U.S. and Americas Department at Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed that Qatar is making efforts to achieve justice and accountability in Syria, and fully supports the work of the IIIM. He underlined the importance of implementing trust-building measures, so that IDPs and refugees can return under genuinely safe and dignified conditions, clarifying that these measures should be part of actual progressive steps towards bringing about a political transition in line with the outcome of the Geneva Conference and Security Council resolution 2254, which would make the goals and aspiration of the Syrian people a reality.

The next speaker, Luise Amtsberg, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance, reiterated in her address that human rights violation continue in Syria, reaffirming Germany's position of abstaining from normalizing relations, working on reconstruction, or lifting sanctions on the regime, until genuine progress is made in the political transition process. Ms. Amtsberg also lamented that impunity is still a reality even after 12 years of violations and despite the abundance of documentation and available evidence. She highlighted, however, that international courts have begun to take some action towards bringing about accountability within their set jurisdictions, such as the case heard in Koblenz in Germany. In this context, Ms. Amtsberg stressed that universal jurisdiction is an effective tool to achieve accountability for the gross violations committed in Syria. She concluded her address by welcoming the establishment of the independent mechanism for the missing in Syria, stressing that the body must begin working as soon as possible.

In his address, Stephen Hickey, Director of Middle East and North Africa at the UK's FCO, stressed that, after 12 years of continuing violations, the international community must assert that it has not forgotten the Syrian people, and that it will stand by them, and exert every effort to achieve justice and accountability, noting that conditions for a safe and dignified return are not present. He also stressed that the UK will not normalize relations with the Syrian regime, and that the only natural course of event is for the Syrian regime to be held accountable for killing hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Mr. Hickey ended his address by welcoming the establishment of the independent mechanism on the missing in Syria, and underlining the importance of working on accountability through universal jurisdiction and international courts.

The next speaker, Linnea Arvidsson, of the COI, shed light on the COI's work, while underlining the vital role played by Syrian civil society organization in the Commission's work. Ms. Arvidsson revealed that the COI's report, to be released during the UNGA meetings, note that human rights violations; including but not limited to extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, and torture; are still being perpetrated by the parties the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. She also recalled that Syrian regime forces and Russia bombed areas in northwestern Syria only one week after the devastating earthquake that hit the area in February of this year. Finally, Ms. Arvidsson concluded her address by welcoming the actions taken to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its torture crimes at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, which is set to start next month.

In her address at the event, Ahed Fistouk, of the Multifaiht Alliance, noted that Syrian women have demonstrated massive amounts of strength and resolve in the face of hardship and violations committed against them despite the international community's neglect, stressing that Syrian women have faced many horrific abuses against their dignity and suffered numerous physical and psychological violations. She described prisons as tombs for detainees where they cannot even find a peaceful death. Ms. Fistouk also addressed the massive magnitude of violations against women and how they are routinely subjected to extortion simply to obtain humanitarian relief aid, underlining that all of this happened because the international community has failed to remove Assad from power.

The Syrian activist also recounted the heartbreaking story of her meeting with a woman, a mother of three, who told her, "My husband was forcibly disappeared into a regime prison, and I have three children. I will never let my children starve and die, because they deserve life, even if the price to pay is with my body." Ms. Fistouk added that, in light of the massive magnitude of violations and atrocities in Syria, it is clearly imperative upon civil society organizations worldwide to take action to support humanitarian assistance for women in Syria. She concluded her address by asserting that Syria's women remain steadfast and even have hope for a better future despite all the violations and abuses.

The next speaker, Fadel Abdul Ghany, noted that SNHR has been documenting arbitrary arrest cases on a daily basis for nearly 13 years, revealing that the group has developed a detailed database containing the names of approximately **155,000** people who are still arbitrarily arrested and/or forcibly disappeared by all the parties to the conflict. Of these, **112,000** individuals are classified as forcibly disappeared persons, including **96,000** forcibly disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime, meaning that the regime is responsible for **85** percent of all enforced disappearance cases. He also revealed that **5,700** of those forcibly disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime are women.

Moreover, Mr. Abdul Ghany noted that, while the Syrian regime issues amnesty decrees, upon closer examination, one discovers that those amnesty decrees have collectively only led to the release of **7,400** individuals, with **135,000** still imprisoned or disappeared.

Mr. Abdul Ghany then shed light on a crucial aspect of this issue, namely that SNHR has proven beyond doubt that the Syrian regime kills many of the forcibly disappeared in a systematic manner on a large scale without even notifying their families, revealing that the group has acquired **1,200** death certificates from a source within the Syrian regime's civil registry office for individuals forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime.

The SNHR head also revealed that the Syrian regime had dissolved its infamous Military Field Courts a few days before the event, adding that he believes this decision was not primarily motivated to the case filed by the Netherlands and Canada at the ICJ, but was an effort by the Syrian regime to enable it to dismiss the issue of enforced disappearance. It should be noted, in this context, that SNHR has recently released [a report](#) on the Military Field Court, in which it revealed that the Court had ordered the executions of approximately **7,800** Syrian citizens who were executed as a result.

Mr. Abdul Ghany further noted that of these **7,800** executed individuals, **110** were found among the death certificates received from a source within the civil registry office, which further confirms that the Syrian regime is killing forcibly disappeared persons, or in other words that it cannot reveal their fate or release them, since there are strong indications that it has already killed them. He stressed that without a political transition process, the surviving arbitrarily arrested people will not be released and the fate of the forcibly disappeared will not be revealed, while also reiterating that the mechanism for the missing that was recently established by the UNGA is a step in the right direction, and will have an instrumental role to play in advocating for the issue of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

Mr. Abdul Ghany concluded his address by underlining the vital importance of rejecting any attempt to rehabilitate the Syrian regime, and of continuing to support change for democracy in Syria, since there is no other tolerable alternative. He also highlighted the importance of increasing support for Syrian civil society organizations because their work in documenting violations and releasing reports exposes perpetrators of violations and supports the victims' testimony, with these being essential cornerstones for ensuring accountability and laying a solid foundation for the transitional justice process in Syria.

Dr. Talal Sunbulli, of the SADC, noted that most Syrians in Syria do not feel safe and do not trust the settlements and reconciliation agreements with the regime, even those carried out under Russian sponsorship. He also reiterated that Syria remains wholly unsafe for the return of IDPs and refugees as long as the current Syrian regime is in power. Furthermore, Dr. Sunbulli shed light on the issue of the Syrian regime's seizing properties and holding public auctions to sell these off.

The last speaker, Beth Van Schaack, Ambassador-at-Large for the US Department of State's Office of Global Criminal Justice, noted that, despite the continued violations and the disheartening impunity, there are developments that call for optimism, such as the efforts made by Germany through universal jurisdiction. Ms. Van Schaack said that those efforts enhance the capabilities of the international community towards achieving justice and accountability worldwide, not only in Syria. Additionally, the US diplomat underlined the importance of the actions taken by Canada and the Netherlands against the Syrian regime at the ICJ. She pointed out that the case filed also mentions the use of chemical weapons as a form of torture, which is integral to achieve accountability for all the violations that have been and are still being committed by the Syrian regime. Ms. Van Schaack ended her address by noting that, even though the Syrian regime will not stop its torture practices just because of a ruling by the ICJ, there is great symbolic importance in the ICJ convicting the Syrian regime of committing torture on a large scale at The Hague.

The event, which received extensive media coverage from many media outlets, is available to watch on SNHR's YouTube channel [here](#), or on our Facebook page [here](#).



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