

**Statement**

## SNHR Holds an International Panel Discussion on HLP Rights in Syria

France and The UK Assert that Returning Properties to Their Rightful Owners is Essential for a Safe and Voluntary Return for Refugees



**Friday 20 October 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.

On Thursday, October 19, 2023, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) held an international panel discussion to mark the release of its extensive report entitled, 'The Mechanisms by Which the Syrian Regime Has Used Laws to Expropriate Tens of Thousands of Homes, Properties and Areas of Land in Homs Governorate'. The event, which was held in Paris, France, featured Brigitte Curmi, France's Ambassador for Syria; Stefan Schneck, Germany's Special Envoy for Syria; Anna Burt, the Syria Lead of the UK Mission in Geneva; Fadel Abdul Ghany, SNHR Executive Director; and Marie Forestier, Senior Syria Advisor at the European Institute of Peace (EIP), with the event being moderated by Assaad Alachi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria.

The panel discussion aimed to expose the regime's practices in relation to its usurpation of HLP rights in Homs governorate by studying the outcomes of the report, which included analysis of the forced displacement and destruction that took place. The panel also submitted recommendations to stakeholders, including international organizations and governments, on how to address HLP rights violations in Syria and support affected individuals and communities, while at the same encouraging active international parties to increase their efforts in documenting violations of HLP rights in Syria, and supporting accountability and justice for the victims of these violations.

Mr. Alachi opened the event by welcoming the attendees and briefly summarizing its themes and goals, before yielding the floor to Ms. Curmi, France's ambassador to Syria.

The French diplomat began her address by underlining the vital importance of and the integral role played by SNHR's extensive reporting in this field, stressing that the Syrian regime has enacted many laws to establish a legal framework for expropriating properties, with HLP rights violations affecting over half of all Syrians. She added that it is vital to find mechanisms to help Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to preserve their rights and prove their ownership, and stressed that the Pinheiro Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons must be respected. Moreover, Ms. Curmi underlined that the international community must work together to find ways and mechanisms to protect properties, a key objective for creating the conditions for a safe and voluntary return for Syrian refugees and IDPs.

In her address, Ms. Burt, the Syria Lead of the UK Mission in Geneva, highlighted the importance of protecting HLP rights in Syria. She stressed that SNHR's report breaks down the mechanisms used by the Syrian regime to take over properties in a clear and important way. Additionally, she noted that while the conversation around ensuring a safe and voluntary return for refugees usually revolves around violations involving arbitrary arrest, murder, and the poor humanitarian situation in Syria, working on the HLP rights issue in Syria shows the complexities of the IDPs' and refugees' situation in Syria with respect to a safe return. She concluded her address by highlighting the efforts of the UK Mission in Geneva towards implementing resolution 2254 and supporting the work of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), while reiterating the importance of supporting active civil society organizations in order to bring about justice and accountability.

The next speaker, Mr. Abdul Ghany outlined the mechanisms employed by the Syrian regime to take over properties in the governorate of Homs, referencing SNHR's extensive report on the issue, which was reported on by The Guardian newspaper, which provided a critical analysis of the real estate laws and regulations promulgated by the Syrian regime before March 2011 and real estate development laws after March 2011 and the ramifications thereof on real estate ownership.

The SNHR Executive Director also explained why SNHR selected Homs governorate and tried to break down the multifaceted hybrid and sophisticated methodology adopted by the report, which draws upon hundreds of interviews with victims whose properties were expropriated by the regime. Those interviews were then cross-checked with SNHR's own database where tens of thousands of photos showing the bombardment and destruction are stored, in addition to consulting satellite imagery, and information from reputable and experienced UN and international bodies, such as the COI, the Human Rights Office (OHCHR), Human Rights Watch. The report also adopted the criteria proposed by the United Nations Satellite Center (UNOSAT) of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) to assess damage to constructions.

Mr. Abdul Ghany noted that, while those laws can potentially affect all Syrians, they primarily and directly target land and properties belonging to three main groups, namely the forcibly displaced (IDPs and refugees) estimated at 12.3 million Syrian citizens; forcibly disappeared persons estimated to number at least 112,000 Syrians according to SNHR's database, with the regime being directly responsible for the enforced disappearance of 85 percent of them; and lastly, the approximately 500,000 Syrians killed since 2011 (both civilians and military combatants), the overwhelming majority of whose deaths have not been documented in the civil registry's records.

In summarizing the report, Mr. Abdul Ghany also noted that it draws upon satellite imagery with SNHR's expert team studying a massive number of buildings that were damaged, and then classifying those buildings depending on the degree of damage into three main categories:

- Completely destroyed.
- Severely damaged.
- Partially damaged.

The SNHR founder concluded his address by noting that the Syrian regime has deliberately targeted certain areas within the cities and villages it targets in order to seize control of the properties there ahead of a reconstruction process, which is the regime's ultimate goal in all the preceding phases, regardless of the violations committed by the regime, the massive material losses, and the impoverishment of the Syrian people by seizing their properties, lands and belongings.

Following Mr. Abdul Ghany's address, Ms. Forestier, the Senior Syria Advisor at EIP, highlighted the hardships faced by Syrians and Syrian women in particular in terms of laying claim to their properties, as well as the complexities of this issue and how it is closely related to enforced disappearance. She also pointed out that displacement and evictions have led to the loss of many documents that prove ownership, further complicating the task of restoring these properties to their rightful owners. Furthermore, Ms. Forestier added that the mechanisms created by the regime regarding the properties of forcibly disappeared persons or other victims of the conflict in Syria are vastly complex, with those wishing to reclaim their properties required to take many steps to obtain an elusive security clearance from the regime. She concluded her address by reiterating the importance of restricting property laws in Syria in order to establish a fair system for compensation in the future.

At the end of the event, the panelists answered questions from audience members. You can watch the panel discussion in full on our [YouTube channel](#) or our Facebook page at this [link](#).



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*No justice without accountability*

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