

Statement

SNHR Organizes an Event Sponsored by Several World States on the 13th Anniversary of the Popular Uprising in Syria

The US, Germany, UK, Netherlands, and France Reiterate Their Position of No Lifting of Sanctions, No Reconstruction, and No Normalization With the Assad



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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 – The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)

On Friday, March 15, 2024, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) held an event marking the 13th anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria, entitled, ‘Thirteen Years of Death, Torture, and Disappearance: Examining Human Rights Abuses and Accountability Opportunities in Syria’. Sponsored by the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France, the event featured: Christopher Le Mon, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant of the US Secretary of State; Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant of the US Secretary of State; Stefan Schneck, Germany’s Special Envoy for Syria; Ann Snow, the UK’s Special Envoy for Syria; Gijs Gerlag, the Netherlands’ Special Envoy for Syria; Antoine Alheritiere, Deputy Head of Near East Department of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs; Linnea Arvidsson of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI); Maymouna Al-Ammar, an activist who also serves as the Communication & Advocacy Manager at Child Guardians; Sawsan Al-Habbali, an activist and sister of prominent activist Osama al-Habbali who is forcibly disappeared in Syrian regime detention centers; and Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR Executive Director, with Razan Brghol, Head of Program Baytna, serving as Baytna. The event was streamed live on SNHR’s various social media platforms in Arabic and English, as well as on Zoom.

Mr. Abdulghany first welcomed the state representatives and those in attendance, thanking the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) for their partnership in organizing this event, while underscoring that this nearly decade-long productive partnership has yielded many international events. Mr. Abdulghany also thanked the sponsoring states: France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and the US, calling on them to affirm their continued position of support for the rights of the Syrian people to a democratic transition, so the Syrians do not lose hope in their ongoing struggle, as the protracted Syrian conflict drags on with no tangible progress being made towards a political transition, while violations are still being committed by all parties to the conflict, but most prominently by the Syrian regime and Russia.

Then, Mr. Abdulghany yielded the floor to moderator Razan Brghol who welcomed the participants, and stressed the importance of expanding the scope of justice and accountability for human rights violations after 13 years of conflict.

Mr. Christopher Le Mon, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant of the US Secretary of State, began his address by thanking SNHR for organizing this event, and in turn stressed the profound nature of the partnership between the two sides. Mr. Le Mon noted that the date marked the 13th anniversary of the start of the Assad regime’s murderous violence against peaceful protests in Syria, with the regime continuing to this day with its practices of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and killing under torture, as well as killing dissidents, human rights activists, and medical personnel. He stressed that the regime is still perpetrating violations that amount to war crimes with no prospect of an end even after 13 years of conflict, while, also for 13 years, the Syrian people still continue to demonstrate immense courage in their demand for their fundamental rights. The US diplomat also

stressed that the US's position of support for the Syrian people remains constant and persistent. Furthermore, Mr. Le Mon underlined the US's support for the UN Mechanism for Revealing the Fate of Missing Persons, commending the efforts made by civil society organizations in documenting and sharing data, and continuing their work. He concluded his address by asserting: **"The US position on this subject is simple and clear: impunity is simply unacceptable... We will not cease our efforts to hold those who have blood on their hands to account."**

Mr. Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant of the US Secretary of State, opened his address by underlining the worsening humanitarian situation in Syria and the continuing nature of violations, with the political process reaching a deadlock. As such, Mr. Goldrich said, the need for humanitarian assistance has reached its highest levels since the beginning of the conflict. He added that although the UN supports the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all Syrians, wherever they are, since **"Russia's shameful veto on the US cross-border aid mechanism [means that the US has] worked hard to ensure that aid continues to flow."** He also lamented that **"it is unfortunate but not surprising that the Assad regime continues to ignore the effects of its recalcitrance, and its refusal to comply with the requirements of Security Council resolution 2254,"** which he noted is prolonging this crisis and the suffering of the Syrian people. Meanwhile, he stressed, the US continues to support the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, and to back UN Security Council resolution 2254 to bring about a political transition in Syria. Moreover, Mr. Goldrich noted that the US also continues to support the work of Syrian civil society organizations in documenting human rights violations to support the processes of accountability and transitional justice, including revealing the fate of the missing, while reiterating that the US government has not lost hope and continues to work to resolve this horrific conflict in a way that would ensure the realization of justice and accountability for all the atrocities that have been committed. Mr. Goldrich concluded his address by commending the perseverance of the Syrian people and called for **"all of us to recommit ourselves to the long-term goal of creating a Syria that is free, unified and at peace, and a future that can be better."**

Mr. Stefan Schneck, Germany's Special Envoy for Syria, opened his address by reiterating Germany's position of no lifting of sanctions on the regime, no reconstruction, and no unconditional normalization. For 13 years, he stated, this issue has centered on freedom, democracy, human rights, and accountability, emphasizing that this had not changed, as can be seen in the ongoing Suwayda movement. Mr. Schneck also stressed that Germany supports UN Security Council Resolution 2254, reiterating that Germany and the EU stand on the side of accountability and the legacy of the popular uprising. Mr. Schneck also stressed that Germany continues to support all available mechanisms for accountability. He concluded his address by re-asserting Germany's and its allies' commitment to supporting the goals of the popular uprising at all levels, commending the efforts made by Syrian civil society organizations over the past 13 years.

Ms. Ann Snow, the UK's Special Envoy for Syria, began her address by stressing that **“it is more important than ever that we gather together on this anniversary to remember and to pledge our commitment to continue to work together for a better future for Syria and for accountability.”** Ms. Snow also underlined the importance of realizing a political transition in line with the roadmap clearly specified in UN Security Council Resolution 2254. She also affirmed that **“we are determined to continue in our efforts. determined to continue in standing with the Syrian people in remembering and in hoping and working together for a better Syria.”** She concluded by stressing that **“accountability [is] a key to the negotiated settlement urgently needed to bring an end to this conflict which has gone on for far too long, so the UK has not forgotten Syria or Syrians and we will continue to advocate for the sustained peace which so many need and call [for].”**

Mr. Gijs Gerlag, the Netherlands' Special Envoy for Syria, opened his address by stating that strength and resolve are especially needed 13 years into the conflict, when some have begun feeling hopelessness over its seemingly unending nature, stemming from a feeling of exhaustion at no progress being made. Despite this, he stressed, it is essential to remain as vital and motivated, if not more so, as we were at the beginning of our battle against this evil, adding, **“Recent reports from the Commission of Inquiry, the OHCHR, SNHR, and many others show us that these violations of human rights continue to this day.”** Mr. Gerlag further noted that, in 2020, the government of the Netherlands felt the need to intensify its efforts to combat impunity, which culminated in the case brought by the governments of the Netherlands and Canada against Syria before the main court of the UN, namely the International Court of Justice (ICJ), that was submitted in June of last year over violations to the Conventions Against Torture. Mr. Gerlag also recalled that, in November of last year, the ICJ indicated provisional measures binding Syria to end acts of torture and violations, and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in a way that would ensure that regime officials and those under their command are compelled not to commit such acts again, as well as to preserve evidence. In this context, Mr. Gerlag pointed out that those measures are binding on Syria, as the case proceeds. The Netherlands and Canada, he added, believe that the Syrian people's voices must be listened to in the course of the case and the needs of as many Syrians victims and survivors as possible must be addressed, because such an initiative must reflect the voice of surviving victims, defenders, and eyewitnesses as much as possible. In conclusion, he stressed that accountability and victim compensation are key to bringing about any form of transitional justice, stressing that **“Provisional measures are only a first step towards much needed accountability and justice for the people of Syria, and the Netherlands believes the lasting political solution in Syria is only possible when perpetrators are held accountable and victims obtain justice. We therefore call on all states and the international community to support accountability efforts for Syrians.”**

Mr. Antoine Alheritiere, Deputy Head of Near East Department of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, opened his speech by recalling that it has been 13 years since the Syrians rose up peacefully to demand freedom and dignity. However, he lamented, **“hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians have been killed the vast majority of them by the Assad regime, which met its people’s rightful demands with ruthless repression and atrocities some of which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.”** He further noted that **“every year, reports from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, the United Nations Human Rights Office, and many Syrian and international civil society organizations such as SNHR remind us that grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continue across Syria.”** Furthermore, he stressed, Syria is still unsafe for the return of 13 million displaced Syrians due to the regime’s systematic use of torture and sexual violence against children, women, and men in its prisons where over 100,000 people are arbitrarily detained. Meanwhile, Mr. Alheritiere said, **“we commend the landmark order issued by the International Court of Justice last November directing the Syrian regime to prevent acts of torture against its own citizens. The recent crimes committed in Ukraine by Russia using the same methods used by the regime in Syria remind us of the absolute imperative to fight relentlessly against impunity.”** He further reiterated France’s long-term commitment to fight against impunity in Syria. Additionally, Mr. Alheritiere highlighted France’s support for the work of the COI, and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) in working to document the crimes committed in Syria, underlining the imperative need to assist investigate and try said crimes, **“The fight against impunity is a matter of justice for the victim. it is also an essential prerequisite for building a lasting peace in Syria along with a political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254.”** He concluded his address by reiterating **“France and the EU’s long-standing position on the Syrian conflict [which is that] there will be no normalization no reconstruction and no lifting of sanctions until there is an authentic and enduring progress towards a political solution”** praising the work of all Syrian civil society organizations, including SNHR.

The event also featured Linnea Arvidsson of the COI. Ms. Arvidsson first thanked SNHR for its collaboration and focused on the findings of [the most recent COI report](#), released on March 11, 2024. In this regard, she noted that Syrians countrywide are still enduring more violations, underlining that the recent escalation since last October, the first in four years, has had a tangible impact on Syrian civilians on six fronts, most notably in northwestern Syria, where Syrian and Russian forces have yet again bombed markets, health facilities, schools, and camps housing internally displaced persons (IDPs). **“[Syrian] government forces again used internationally banned cluster munitions in densely populated urban areas,”** she noted. She further stated that Syrian regime forces continue torture practice and mistreatment of arbitrarily arrested detainees. Ms. Arvidsson also revealed that the COI has documented more deaths in regime detention centers. Four months after the ICJ’s order on ending and prohibiting torture and destroying of evidence, she said, **“Syrian authorities are still deliberately obstructing families’ efforts to locate their detained loved ones and also profiting from this through extortion which we’re seeing increasingly.”** On the other hand, she talked about the movement in Suwayda, which, as

she noted, reminds us that the grievances that led to the countrywide protests in 2011 remain unaddressed 13 years later. She also talked about how Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to torture detainees in Idlib, in addition to revealing that the COI is still receiving reports of executions based on summary trials. In another cause for concern, she noted, **“Several women’s rights organizations have had to suspend their activities in Idlib owing to threats denials or delays of permits required by the HTS”**, while **“Syrian Democratic forces continues to hold nearly 30,000 innocent children in the Al-Hol and other internment camps.”** She concluded her address by reiterating that the humanitarian situation is increasingly worsening, **“The UN now estimates that three out of four people in Syria (16.7 million people) now need humanitarian aid such as food, water, and medical care.”**

The next speaker, Ms. Maymouna Al-Ammar, a Syrian activist who also serves as the Communication & Advocacy Manager at Child Guardians, began her address by noting that the date of the event marked the 13th anniversary of the peaceful popular uprising. She recounted how she and her husband were arrested together in the first demonstrations in March 2011, at which time she was five months pregnant. She further revealed that her husband was arrested again in May 2011. When Ms. Al-Ammar started to work with her colleague Nabil on documenting human rights violations, she had to endure a double pain, from the absence of her husband and from giving birth. She recalled that her daughter was 17 days old when her father, Osama, saw her for the first time after he was released. However, she went on, her colleague Nabil was not so lucky, being forcibly disappeared and killed under torture in May 2015. **“Several of my relatives were arbitrarily arrested and subjected to torture for advocating freedom and Justice including my father and my mother,”** she said, adding, **“Both of my brothers have been detained and continue to be forcibly disappeared until today.”** Ms. Al-Ammar emphasized that her story as a woman is not unlike that of thousands of other Syrian women who simply called for freedom, democracy, and dignity, and those who are still heartbroken over their missing or disappeared children, siblings, and husbands. Despite the international calls to end violence in Syria, she added, not to mention the devastating impact of the 2023 earthquake in the northwest of the country, children are still facing death, injury, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian areas. In this context, Ms. Al-Ammar pointed out that SNHR has documented that over 3,000 children and 6,500 women remain arbitrarily arrested since March 2011. As such, she shed light on the dangerous failure to protect human rights, especially those of children, and of the devastating effects of this on children and their families, including a severe socio-psychological crisis, with children suffering from trauma and depression, as well as sleep disorders and educational struggles.

She further added that “[children] also grapple with feelings of guilt and insecurity. Families endure economic hardships, social isolation, and trauma leading to anxiety, depression, and strained relationships. This impact extends to [the rest of] society, fostering fear, distrust, and instability, with inter-generational repercussions hindering community well-being. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to sexual assault and gender-based violence.” She concluded by noting that the “constant attacks on education and civilian populations have deepened the educational and economic marginalization of children, especially girls, women, and children with disabilities, [who] continue to face challenges accessing essential healthcare services due to the overburdened healthcare system and shortages of resources, particularly those needed for chronic issues.” She concluded by underlining the indispensable importance of education, with many families going over and beyond to maintain education for their children, since it plays a crucial path to re-establishing a normal life for children and ensuring their access to their full rights, which she noted is also crucial in supporting children.

Activist Sawsan Al-Habbali, whose brother was a prominent activist, Osama al-Habbali, began her address by talking about her brother who was arrested by regime forces and killed under torture in retaliation for participating in the peaceful popular movement in Homs governorate. Osama, she said, had called for his rights and the rights of his fellow Syrians to freedom and democracy. Then, Ms. Al-Habbali went on to talk about the important role of Syrian civil society organizations and Syrian activists in revealing the fate of the people forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers, holding those responsible for these violations accountable, and fighting impunity. She also stressed that pressure must be applied on the Syrian regime to allow UN observers to enter detention centers without obstruction and to secure reparations and compensation for detainees.

Lastly, Mr. Fadel Abdulghany opened his address by talking about the possibilities of expanding the scope of accountability and justice for human rights violations. He stressed that universal jurisdiction is one of the vital instruments of judicial accountability. **“We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have contributed to many cases in European courts by providing large amount of data... some directly and some through our partners such as IIIM,”** he explained, continuing, **“Still, universal jurisdiction is limited by many restrictions. such as the requirement of the accused person to be on the territory”** as well as other requirements related to trial in absentia. Despite these limitations, Mr. Abdulghany stated, these trials send an important message. **“For example, the verdict issued against Anwar Raslan stated that he was convicted of crimes against humanity. This cannot be committed by one individual alone. Therefore, the verdict simultaneously has a condemnation against the Syrian regime, similar to how the Frankfurt Court accused Dr Alaa”** who was also accused of being involved in crimes against humanity, which, in the same vein, implies that the regime is systematically involved in crimes against humanity. Mr. Abdulghany also cited the case brought against the Syrian regime by Canada and the Netherlands before the ICJ, a UN court. Mr. Abdulghany revealed that this case was based on a number of UN resources and on SNHR’s data and reports, [which were cited 14 times](#). He further revealed that SNHR is working on assembling large quantities of data and evidence to supply the Dutch and Canadian prosecutors in the case, which should be achieved in the next few months.

Furthermore, Mr. Abdulghany noted that, on November 16, 2023, the ICJ issued a binding order compelling the Syrian regime to take provisional measures, including ending torture and preserving evidence. As part of SNHR's work on documenting the violations taking place in Syria on a daily basis, he stressed, it has monitored the Syrian regime's commitment to the ordered measures. Subsequently, on [February 22, 2024](#), three months after the ICJ's order, SNHR confirmed that it had documented 246 cases of arbitrary arrest, including of six children and 17 women in this period, with 217 of those **246 cases** having been reclassified as enforced disappearance, and all the detainees still being subjected to torture.

On a related note, Mr. Abdulghany revealed that the group documented the deaths of no fewer than **16 individuals died** due to torture in regime detention centers in the same period, adding that all of this means that the Syrian regime has failed to abide by the ICJ's order.

He added that **the ICJ is currently assessing the regime's commitment to the provisional measures, and will issue its findings in the near future. Most probably, he stated, the court will find that the regime has not adhered to the measures, and will accordingly speak to the UN Security Council about this. Therefore, he called on the states participating in this event and on all the world's states to act against the Syrian regime over its failure to abide by the ICJ's order. Such action, he noted, can be taken at the level of the UN General Assembly so as to ensure it can't be blocked by a Russian or Chinese veto.**

Mr. Abdulghany also stressed that the Syrian regime does not care about international law or the ICJ, adding that the only solution to stop violation is to seriously support a political transition in line with Security Council resolution 2254 that was issued over eight years ago.

Mr. Abdulghany concluded his address by thanking the sponsoring states and Syrian organizations attending the event, and called on the sponsoring states to act on the recommendations given during it.

The event be watched in full [on this link](#), or on our Facebook page [on this link](#).



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No justice without accountability

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