

## Statement

### The 11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Two Ghoutas Attack

Despite Perpetrating its Largest, Most Lethal Chemical Weapons Attack on Syrian Citizens, the Syrian Regime Is Still Protected by its Impunity

A Case Must be Brought Before the ICJ Against the Syrian Regime for Violating the CWC



Tuesday 20 August 2024

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.

August 21, 2024, marks 11 years since the Syrian regime carried out its most notorious and unconscionable chemical weapons attack against civilians, in the Eastern and Western Ghoutas in Rural Damascus on August 21, 2013. A profound and pervasive sense of grief and mourning overcomes the Syrian people at this time every year, as we are reminded by the terrible memories and images of the victims and their suffering, and the unimaginable panic and terror these barbaric attacks created. The ghastly scent of death remains horribly fresh in our memories to this day. Even though more than a decade has passed since that terrible day, time has not eased the horrific memories of that monstrous and barbaric attack. Many of the survivors, especially those who were children at the time, continue to suffer the agonizing consequences in pain and trauma, all of which are made even more horrendous and heartbreaking by the fact that, despite the passage of so many years, the Syrian regime's leadership and others involved have still not been held accountable in any way for perpetrating such unimaginable evil.

### **What happened on August 21, 2013?**

[On the night of Wednesday, August 21, 2013](#), the Syrian regime carried out roughly four separate attacks using chemical weapons against densely populated areas in the Eastern Ghouta and Western Ghouta (including Mu'adamiyet Al Sham town) of Rural Damascus. In these coordinated attacks, the regime used 10 rockets loaded with lethal poison gases; with each rocket having an estimated capacity of 20 liters, this means the 10 rockets carried a total deadly payload of 200 liters. The rockets, all loaded with large quantities of internationally outlawed Sarin gas, were fired using a rocket launcher after midnight as the civilians targeted were sleeping. Both factors signal that the Syrian regime had a premeditated and deliberate objective of killing as many residents as possible, with the calculated aim of silently, fatally gassing them in their sleep, thereby minimizing any chance of survival. Additionally, the weather in the region had been forecast to be relatively cool and calm between 02:00 and 05:00 that night, meaning those responsible knew that due to the stillness of the air, the heavy poisonous gas would naturally drift downwards rather than blowing away and would remain close to the ground, further increasing its lethality and providing an opportunity for the regime to kill and injure as many victims as possible. All of these factors lead us at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) to believe that the Syrian regime had conceived a deliberately and meticulously orchestrated plan before that night to exterminate as many of the Syrian people as possible, including women and children, in one coordinated attack, knowing that the only 'crime' committed by those targeted was to have called for freedom and for an end to the regime's despotic hereditary rule, and to have dared to reject its iron-fisted control and to disobey the orders of its security apparatus.

It is also important to remember that the area of the two Ghoutas was at that time under a crippling siege that had been imposed by the Syrian regime since the end of 2012, which blocked the entry of fuel and medical supplies. The resulting severe shortages of medicine and medical equipment also contributed to the massive casualty numbers from the chemical weapons attack.

All these factors outlined above led to many people being killed or injured. SNHR documented the killing of **1,144 individuals** in that night's attack, all of whom were asphyxiated by the chemical weapons used. The victims, whose names and personal details we have recorded, are divided into:



**1,119**



**Civilians**

including 99 children and 194 women (adult female).

**25**

**Armed  
opposition  
fighters.**

We also documented that

**5,935**

**Survivors**

of these unspeakable attacks suffered severe respiratory problems and suffocation.

The death toll from the Two Ghoutas attack accounts for 76 percent of all the victims killed in the chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Syrian regime between December 2012 and the last documented chemical weapons attack on SNHR's database, which took place in May 2019 in al-Kbeina in rural Latakia.

**The fallout of the chemical weapons attack on the two Ghoutas still persist, and the psychological agony still haunts the memories of the survivors and the collective memory of the Syrian people:**

The Syrian regime's chemical weapons attack on the two Ghoutas of Damascus left a profound and indelible mark, not only on the residents of the areas targeted, but on all Syrians, though of course the residents of the two Ghoutas who suffered these horrors at first hand have been worst affected. These effects include debilitating psychological conditions, with survivors and eyewitnesses suffering for years from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Those issues are most intensely felt by those who were children at the time, as well as through intergenerational trauma.

The nature of chemical weapons also leads to long-term negative effects on physical health which also persist for years. In fact, to this day, some of the survivors still suffer respiratory and nerve-related conditions, as well as memory-related and cognitive disorders. We have also received reports about birth defects and growth problems found in children born to parents who survived the attack.

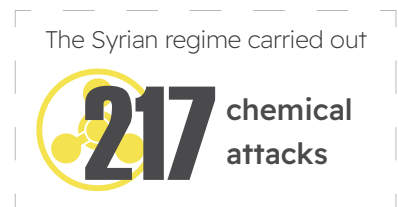
In addition to these effects, there are also the social, societal, economic, and political consequences.

**A total of 222 chemical attacks are documented on SNHR's database. The Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Armed Forces Bashar Assad bears direct responsibility for all these attacks:**

SNHR has worked extensively on the chemical weapons attacks dossier, releasing approximately 54 reports on this subject to date. [SNHR has also signed a Principles of Cooperation Agreement with the Investigation and Identification Team \(IIT\) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons \(OPCW\)](#) and has been cited as a reference in all the IIT's reports on Syria. [The group is also a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention Coalition \(CWC Coalition\).](#)

As SNHR's database attests, a total of 222 chemical attacks have been documented in Syria since the first documented use of chemical weapons on December 23, 2012, up until August 20, 2024. Approximately 98 percent of all these attacks have been carried out by Syrian regime forces, while approximately two percent were by ISIS. These attacks and their resultant toll are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

- 1,413 civilians, including 214 children and 262 women (adult female).
- 94 armed opposition fighters.
- Seven Syrian regime troops who were being held in armed opposition prisons.



**A. The Syrian regime** carried out 217 chemical attacks across Syria between the first documented use of chemical weapons in Syria on December 23, 2012, and August 20, in which a total of 1,514 individuals were killed. The death toll from the chemical attacks carried out by Syrian regime forces is divided into:

These attacks have also resulted in **11,080** injuries, including of five Syrian regime troops who were being held in armed opposition prisons.

**B. ISIS** carried out five chemical attacks between April 9, 2013, when the group first emerged in Syria, and August 20, 2024, all of which took place in Aleppo governorate. A total of 132 individuals were injured in the chemical attacks carried out by ISIS.





**We can also divide the attacks according to the UN Security Council resolutions that addressed the use of chemical weapons in Syria:**

**A. The Syrian regime** has carried out 217 chemical attacks, divided according to UN Security Council resolution as follows:

1. Before Security Council Resolution 2118, issued on September 27, 2013: **33 attacks.**
2. Since Security Council Resolution 2118, issued on September 27, 2013: **184 attacks.**
3. Since Security Council Resolution 2209, issued on March 6, 2015: **115 attacks.**
4. Since the establishment of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) and Security Council Resolution 2235, issued on August 7, 2015: **59 attacks.**

**B. ISIS** has carried out five chemical attacks, all of which were in Aleppo governorate, all of which constituted violations of Security Council resolutions 2118, 2209, and 2235.

A task such as carrying out attacks involving the use of chemical weapons is one of great complexity. The Syrian regime's highly centralized operational structure means that none of these attacks could have been carried out without the knowledge and approval of regime head Bashar Assad. Using chemical weapons is a calculated policy for the Syrian regime based on a central, executive decision, in which the institutions of the military and intelligence are incriminated, in particular the leaders of the General Military Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, the National Security Bureau, and the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (especially Institute 1000 and Branch 450). Our data shows that no fewer than 387 high-ranking military officers, security officials, and civilian and military personnel, were involved in perpetrating these attacks, with all of these individuals having rightfully earned their place on the US and EU sanction lists as a result.

We have included a list providing details of some of the most notable individuals involved in the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapon in [previous reports](#), all of which we hope will be precursors in exposing these individuals' crimes more widely and ensuring they're added to international sanction lists.

As confirmed by our database and in light of the findings of the three exhaustive reports released by the OPCW's IIT ([the first of which was released on April 8, 2020](#), [the second on April 12, 2021](#), and [the third and most recent on January 27, 2023](#)), it can be conclusively stated that the Syrian regime is responsible for the five chemical weapons attacks analyzed therein. These findings are also supported by the OPCW Executive Council's reports on 'Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme,' [the most recent of which, released on July 24, 2024](#), stated that "Considering the identified gaps, inconsistencies, and discrepancies that remain unresolved, the Secretariat assesses that the declaration submitted by the Syrian Arab Republic still cannot be considered accurate and complete..." SNHR can state with absolute certainty that the Syrian regime has not disclosed its full chemical stockpile, nor has it disclosed all the facilities used to produce or store chemical weapons, while it's possible that it has planned or built new facilities since destroying those which it disclosed when joining the CWC in September 2013. Therefore, we remain gravely concerned that the Syrian regime may again use chemical weapons against the Syrian people in the future.

Finally, on the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons attack on the Two Ghoutas of Damascus, SNHR again calls on the UN Security Council and the UN to impose economic, political, and military sanctions on the Syrian regime under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, which would serve as a symbolic compensation for the families of the victims. SNHR also calls on the UN Security Council and the UN to prosecute the individuals whose names and details we have published, and to investigate the extent of their involvement in the use of chemical weapons and add them to the lists of sanctioned figures and terror sponsors.

We also reiterate that the Syrian case must be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and that all those involved must be held accountable. An alternative option would be to establish a special tribunal to try those involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people, to help put an end to the shameful impunity that has now continued for over a decade. Action must be also taken at all levels to deter and completely end all forms of collaboration with the regime.

Moreover, we call for steps to be taken to bring a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the Syrian regime over violating the CWC, similar to the case brought against the regime by Canada and the Netherlands before the ICJ for violating the UN Convention Against Torture.



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*No justice without accountability*

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August 2024

