

## Statement

### SNHR Holds an Event Sponsored by Seven World States on the Sidelines of the 79<sup>TH</sup> Session of the UNGA

The US, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Qatar, the UK, and Canada Emphasize Need to Hold Perpetrators of Violations in Syria Accountable



**Tuesday 8 October 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.

## New York – The Syrian Network for Human Rights:

On Thursday, September 26, 2024, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) hosted an event on the sidelines of the 79<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The event, entitled **‘Syria’s Dark Reality: Examining Systemic Torture and Exploring Justice and Accountability’**, which was sponsored by the United States, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and Canada, featured: **Dr. Dafna H. Rand**, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL); **Beth Van Schaack**, the US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice; **Natasha Franceschi**, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs; **Isabelle Rome**, France’s Ambassador at Large for Human Rights; **Guusje Korthals Altes**, the Netherlands’ Director for North Africa and the Middle East; **Luise Amtsberg**, Germany’s Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance; **Faisal bin Abdullah Al Hanzab**, Special Envoy of Qatar Minister of Foreign Affairs; **Stephen Hickey**, the UK Director of Middle East and North Africa; **Dr. Martin Larose**, Director General of the Middle East Bureau at Global Affairs Canada; **Theo Boutruche**, Head of the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice Unit for the Syria Office at the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR); **Mariam Kamalmaz**, Daughter of Forcibly Disappeared and Killed US Citizen Majd Kamalmaz; **Dr. Mahmoud Aswad**, Executive Manager of Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR); and **Fadel Abdulghany**, SNHR’s Executive Director, with **Emma Beals**, a Syria expert and independent consultant on peace and foreign policy, serving as a moderator. The event was streamed live on Zoom and SNHR’s social media channels in Arabic and English.

During the event, the participants discussed the systemic use of torture in Syria, while exploring how the international community can continue to advance justice and accountability efforts for perpetrators. The speakers also discussed the avenues through which progress can be made on the issue of forcibly disappeared persons in light of the establishment of the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP), as well as questions related to the impact of the use of torture on returning refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) both inside and outside regime-held areas, and the tools available to hold the Syrian regime accountable for torture and other abuses. Questions about the future prospects of justice and accountability efforts were also discussed, considering recent, increased diplomatic engagement with the regime.

**Fadel Abdulghany** opened the event, noting that it’s an annual event, which SNHR has been holding on the sidelines of the UNGA sessions for almost 10 years, in coordination and collaboration with the US Department of State’s DRL. While it may be true that Syria has taken a backseat in the international arena to other conflicts such as Ukraine and the War on Gaza, Mr. Abdulghany stressed that Syria remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the modern age, as more and more waves of refugees are still emerging, with about **6.5 Syrian** refugees now abroad, and 7 million internally displaced people (IDPs), meaning that half of the Syrian population has been uprooted from their homes to date. The SNHR head also stressed that the political transition process to allow Syria to progress to democratic rule, a principal demand of millions of Syrians who

paid heavily in pursuit of that goal, has so far failed. Despite this, he added, these demands are still being heard in demonstrations in Suwayda and many areas in northern Syria. He explained that the main objective of SNHR's work is to move Syria forward from the rule of the current despotic, hereditary Assad regime, which has ruled Syria since 1970, to a democratic state. Mr. Abdulghany then thanked the states sponsoring the event: the US, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Qatar, the UK, and Canada, before yielding the floor to the moderator Emma Beals.

**Emma Beals** underlined the protracted nature of the conflict in Syria that began back in 2011, noting that violence has continued for nearly 14 years to date. She stressed how disheartening it is that the same issues are still being discussed with very little progress after all these years, especially with more noise being made by governments abroad about the possibility of returning refugees and normalizing relations with the regime, even though the conflict has still not ended, and the conditions that led to it breaking out in the first place have not changed.

The next speaker, **Dr. Dafna H. Rand**, the US Assistant Secretary of State for DRL, began by emphasizing the importance of this event and thanking SNHR. She noted that March 2024 marked 13 long years since the Assad regime launched its ruthless oppressive crackdown against peaceful protests in Syria. She added that this long period has seen endless violations and brutality by the Assad regime that continue to this day, meaning that the people have endured over 5,000 days of arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearance, and killing. Dr. Rand stressed that these violations are not a thing of the past, but something still continuing every day. To date in 2024, she noted, SNHR has documented the killing of 551 individuals in Syria at the hands of the parties to the conflict, with over 65 of these dying due to torture, including children and women. The US diplomat added that despite the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issuing an order for provisional measures last November, the Syrian regime has continued to arrest hundreds of people and tortured dozens.

Dr. Rand also underlined the importance of the international community providing continued backing for civil society organizations that support accountability, such as SNHR. She ended her address by underscoring that more pressure must be put on the Syrian regime, and the world must not allow the restoration of the previous status quo by appeasing this brutal regime.

In her address, **Beth Van Schaack**, the US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice, spoke about torture and arbitrary arrest in Syria, noting that the Syrian regime has a long history of both, predating the start of the popular uprising in Syria in 2011. However, she noted, such torture and arbitrary arrest have been committed on a vast scale since the start of the popular uprising. She also underlined the steps taken by the Dutch and Canadian governments with the ICJ and with charges being brought against the Syrian regime's government under the UN Convention Against Torture.

Ms. Van Shaack also noted that SNHR has documented that at least **150,000 people** are still forcibly disappeared in Syria, adding that some of them may have died under torture, while those who are still alive are being subjected to various forms of psychological and physical torture. In conclusion, she stressed that Syria remains unsafe at this time for the return of IDPs and refugees who may face arrest and torture should they return.

**Isabelle Rome**, France's Ambassador at Large for Human Rights, then spoke about the significant role the international community must play to support efforts aiming at achieving justice and accountability for perpetrators of crimes in Syria. She noted that, as SNHR has documented at least **15,000 people** have been killed through torture since the start of the conflict in 2011.

Ms. Rome added that the regime's torture practices are one of the factors hindering the realization of conditions that would enable a safe, dignified, and voluntary return for refugees.

The next speaker, **Luise Amtsberg**, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance, also lamented the fact that violations are still continuing as they've done for 13 years, stressing that it is extremely important that the international community never stop its struggle for accountability, since justice and accountability are the basis for any sustainable solution in Syria. Ms. Amstberg concluded her address by noting that Germany will continue to take measures to hold criminals accountable through its national judicial authorities, noting that universal jurisdiction is still an effective instrument for seeking accountability for the most serious crimes under international law. The German diplomat stressed that the large scale of human rights violations in Syria means that all viable ways to hold criminals accountable must be tried, adding that universal jurisdiction is one of these ways, while the question remains: 'What can we do better?'

**Guusje Korthals Altes**, the Netherlands' Director for North Africa and the Middle East, noted that combating impunity, and accountability for crimes is a fundamental objective in Syria, stressing the importance of accountability for building a social fabric and sustained peace for society. There cannot be peace without justice, she added, while commending the work being done by SNHR and other civil society organizations in their ongoing struggle for accountability and justice as violations persist in Syria.

In his address, **Faisal bin Abdullah Al Hanzab**, the Special Envoy of Qatar Minister of Foreign Affairs, first thanked the sponsor states and SNHR, affirming Qatar's steadfast position in its support for the Syrian people despite many other Arab states changing their position. Mr. Al Hanzab also condemned violations, particularly the most gross violations, no matter their perpetrators and what their justifications may have been, stressing that addressing these issues is paramount and indispensable to end the conflict in Syria, and solve the issue of refugees and IDPs, especially in light of reports on returning refugees being subjected to torture. The Qatari diplomat added that the international community must continue to support justice and accountability for the crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and support the instruments available to achieve this.

**Stephen Hickey**, the UK Director of Middle East and North Africa, commended the work being done by SNHR and Syrian civil society organizations and their firm commitment to defend all of those who have suffered horrific violations since the start of the conflict. He added that we, as in the international community, must do all we can to amplify the voices of victims and defend the rule of law to ensure that all perpetrators are held accountable. He also stressed that the Assad regime has shown no signs of changing its behavior after 13 years of the conflict, with the regime continuing to detain, torture, and kill the country's people, stressing that the regime will continue to arrest the Syrian people simply for existing and exercising their fundamental human rights, such as supporting peaceful protests for as long as it has power to do so. He ended his address by calling on all parties to the Syrian conflict to end their horrific violations, to cooperate in a targeted way with the UN agencies, and to uphold their obligations to protect human rights.

**Theo Boutruche**, Head of the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice Unit for the Syria Office at the OHCHR, spoke about the systemic torture being used in Syria by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict. He stressed that what we have seen in Syria for the past 13 years has included all case typologies formulated in the definition of torture provided by the 1984 UN Convention Against Torture, whether for the purpose of obtaining information, punishment, intimidation, or discrimination, which demonstrates the large scale of torture in Syria.

In the states' closing address, **Natasha Franceschi**, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, stressed that SNHR's endeavors and efforts to promote human rights in Syria, as well as justice and accountability, and to establish a foundation for a democratic change inspire hope in the victims of human rights violations and their families.

**Mariam Kamalmaz**, the daughter of the forcibly disappeared and killed US citizen Majd Kamalmaz, spoke movingly about her father's arrest, torture and death at the hands of regime forces. Ms. Kamalmaz stressed that her father's case is not unique in Syria, with hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children, having met the same grim fate. She added that what made her father's case stand out is his US citizenship, which enabled the family to raise their voices. She noted that her father was a psychotherapist and trauma expert who had travelled to and worked in many countries that suffered extreme forms of traumas generated by war or natural disasters, including Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, and New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Aside from his work with refugees in Lebanon, she revealed, Dr. Majd was not very involved in the events in Syria. Ms. Kamalmaz said that her family grieves both for her father and the many other innocent Syrians who have suffered torture and murder. Speaking about his death, she said that, on February 14, 2017, her father had travelled to Syria to visit family members, explaining that he was considering opening a branch for his International Institute for Psychosocial Development to treat people in Syria. She added that Dr. Majd had checked with lawyers in Syria beforehand to make sure that he was permitted to enter Syria and was not wanted by the Syrian government, at which point he felt secure enough to make the trip. However, she went on, within less than 24 hours, he was stopped at a temporary checkpoint, despite feeling confident that there would be no problems with his visit since he had US citizenship and had obtained permission to enter the country. What Dr. Majd did not know, his daughter explained, was that this checkpoint had been erected specifically to abduct him, and that he would never again walk away as a free man. She added that the family immediately feared the worst in the hours after receiving news of his arrest, and that what made things so much worse was the fact that the Syrian regime's government had detained him with no just cause, with the family knowing all too well about the horrific accounts of torture and death in regime prisons.

Ms. Mariam also spoke about her personal turmoil and that of her family over what happened to her father. She noted that the last few years had been truly difficult, so much so that she had realized that she endured chronic stress, with the family hearing horrifying stories about the torture and death of prisoners in regime custody who had virtually no chance of survival. She revealed that the family immediately called the UN and the US Department of State, and that they were willing to pay whatever price might be demanded to secure her father's freedom and bring him back home. She recalled some of the steps taken by her and her desperately worried family to try and find out Dr. Majd's fate and get him freed. One of these steps was meeting with an ambassador in Washington who told them that she was planning a trip to Syria the following week, promising to find him during her trip. However, shortly after leaving Syria, the ambassador had stopped replying to the family's e-mails, without the family ever finding out why. That ambassador also never told the family about Dr. Majd's whereabouts or his fate. Ms. Mariam said that the family realized that they had made no progress and were back where they started after two years of secret efforts to find him and secure his freedom. Her father literally vanished into the regime's prisons without



a trace, she added. After that, she continued, the family focused their efforts on requesting help from the US government, which also led nowhere; although the US government sent several diplomatic memorandums to the Syrian regime, it received no reply. In Ms. Mariam's view, this was the best strategy for the US government to keep the family busy. Still, the family continued pressuring the US government to make greater effort and do whatever was necessary to set her father free and bring him back home. In May 2024, however, the family received the tragic news from what was described as a credible source that Dr. Majd had died in a regime prison. Ms. Mariam noted that her father had never faced any criminal charges, been tried or had any lawsuit brought against him, and yet he was never allowed to call his family or receive visits. The gravest injustice, she added, was the fact that Dr. Majd's family did not even receive his body to allow them to hold a proper burial, noting that his body may have been incinerated or buried in a mass grave. She asked how the family can be expected to remain silent about her father's death when the Syrian regime, which claims to have sovereignty over the country, denied him every basic human right. His detention was wholly corrupt, immoral, and baseless, Ms. Mariam went on, calling on the US Department of Justice and the US government to launch a criminal case against the head of the Syrian regime and to continue to investigate her father's unlawful arrest and murder at its hands. She stressed that hundreds of thousands of people in Syria have suffered serious human rights violations at the regime's hands, with her father's case not being an isolated incident, but a blatant example of a far larger crisis that demands urgent action. Ms. Mariam ended her address by underlining that the US must pass the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act, and work to block any form of international recognition of this evil and corrupt regime. The death of Dr. Majd, in his daughter's words, was not only a deep personal loss, but a poignant reminder of the urgent need to address these human rights violations by facing these issues head on.

In his address, the next speaker, **Dr. Mahmoud Aswad**, Executive Manager of Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR), shed light on sexual violence against detainees in Syria, stressing the need to support the organizations working to support victims by providing treatment for the psychological traumas they have sustained through experiencing sexual violence. Dr. Aswad concluded his address by calling for greater support for the victims to empower them to speak about their experiences, support their families, and help themselves and others.

**Fadel Abdulghany**, SNHR Executive Director, then spoke about the continuing torture in Syria, noting that there's no indication that it has stopped. Torture, Mr. Abdulghany stressed, is organically connected to arbitrary arrest, with every arbitrarily arrested detainee being subjected to torture. He also stressed that most detainees - as many as 70 percent - go on to be classified as forcibly disappeared persons. The SNHR head further explained that SNHR has evidence that the Syrian regime is killing forcibly disappeared persons and registering them as dead in the civil registry records without notifying their families.

Moreover, Mr. Abdulghany revealed that SNHR has documented the deaths of **15,393** Syrian citizens as a result of torture since March 2011 to date at the hands of the parties to the conflict, including 199 children and 115 women. The Syrian regime, he noted, is responsible for 98 percent of all of these deaths.


Furthermore, he went on, between the start of 2014 and June 2024, SNHR documented no fewer than **4,714 cases** of arbitrary arrest/detention by Syrian regime forces of returning IDPs and refugees. Of these, 2,402 have been released, while 2,312 remain under arrest, including 1,521 returnees who have subsequently been classified as forcibly disappeared persons. In addition, he said, of the 4,714 returnees, 3,532 were refugees, who returned from their countries of asylum or residence to their original areas in Syria, including 251 children and 214 women (adult female). These include individuals who had received what's known as a 'settlement card' from the regime, he explained, adding that this card was not enough to spare them arrest and torture at the regime's hands.

Following the ICJ's issuance of its order on November 16, 2023, which compels the Syrian regime take provisional measures, Mr Abdulghany went on, SNHR began monitoring the Syrian regime's compliance, or lack thereof, with this order. To that end, we released three reports on the events in the period since the order was issued, [with the third report](#) released nine months after its issuance; in this, we stressed that the Syrian regime has been responsible for at least **756 arbitrary arrests** since the ICJ order's release, with those arrested, including nine children and 24 women, being held in regime detention centers. Of these, the regime has released 97, while the remaining 659 have subsequently been classified as forcibly disappeared persons.

Mr. Abdulghany concluded his address by stressing that states restoring relations with the Syrian regime will not help resolve the refugee crisis and displacement crisis in Syria, since the main reason driving Syrians to flee in the first place was the absence of any fair judicial and legislative authorities, and the regime's continued oppression and torture. He emphasized that the only solution and way to end the crises in Syria remains to implement a political transition towards a democratic system of governance that respects human rights. Only then, he concluded, will there be a voluntary return to a state with a democratic government, leaving behind the current monstrous regime that kills the country's citizens under torture.

The event received extensive media coverage from several outlets. To watch it in full on SNHR's YouTube channel, click [here](#). You can also watch it on Facebook by clicking [here](#).



↑  Event held on the sidelines of the 79th UNGA session entitled, 'Syria's Dark Reality: Examining Systemic Torture and Exploring Justice and Accountability' in New York, US - September 26, 2024 ©SNHR





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