

## Statement

# The Twelfth Anniversary of the **Largest Chemical Attack in Syria:** Justice and Accountability are Priorities in the Transitional Process

Thursday 21 August 2025



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.

Today marks the twelfth anniversary of the largest [chemical weapons attack](#) in Syria, which targeted Eastern and Western Ghouta in the Damascus countryside at dawn on Wednesday, August 21, 2013. Bashar al-Assad's forces carried out a coordinated attack using missiles loaded with sarin gas, as part of a systematic policy of using chemical weapons against civilians, with clear targeting of women and children, with the intent of terrorizing society and imposing control by force.

This anniversary comes at a pivotal moment in Syria's history, as the country enters a transitional phase marked by a growing government commitment to cooperating with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). This opens a real window for achieving justice, uncovering the full facts, and ensuring that all those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented this attack from its first minutes, and we issued the first human rights report on this horrific incident on August 26, 2013. On the night of August 21, 2013, Assad regime forces launched four simultaneous chemical attacks on populated areas in Eastern and Western Ghouta, including the town of Moadamiyeh al-Sham, using at least ten rockets loaded with sarin gas, with a total estimated quantity of approximately 200 liters. The rockets were launched from designated launchers after midnight, taking advantage of weather conditions that kept the toxic gases close to the ground, resulting in the largest possible number of victims while they slept, a clear indication of a premeditated intent to target civilians demanding political change. This was compounded by a stifling blockade imposed since the end of 2012, which prevented the entry of fuel, medicine, and medical supplies needed to treat the wounded, exacerbating the humanitarian catastrophe.

### **The Human Toll: Nearly 80% of Syria's Chemical Weapons Victims Fell in the Ghouta Attack**

The Syrian Network for Human Rights recorded the deaths of 1,144 people due to suffocation, equivalent to approximately 76% of the total victims of chemical attacks carried out by the regime between December 2012 and May 2019. The toll of this attack was distributed as follows: 1,119 civilians were killed, including 99 children and 194 women (adult females), proving the direct targeting of civilians; in addition, 25 armed-opposition fighters were killed. Approximately 5,935 people, the majority of whom were civilians, suffered respiratory symptoms and suffocation due to exposure to toxic gases.

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## Ongoing Repercussions

The effects of the attacks on Ghouta continue to manifest in chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as birth defects and developmental problems in children born to parents who were attacked. The social and economic impacts have been exacerbated by the loss of breadwinners and the deterioration of the productive capacity of those affected. Together, these repercussions underscore the urgent need for comprehensive compensation and long-term rehabilitation programs for victims and their families.

## Record of Chemical Attacks between 2012 and the Fall of the Bashar al-Assad Regime

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 222 chemical attacks in Syria from the first use of chemical weapons on December 23, 2012, to December 8, 2024. Approximately 98% of these attacks were carried out by Bashar al-Assad regime forces, and approximately 2% by ISIS.

The attacks and resulting casualties were distributed according to the perpetrators as follows: Regime forces carried out 217 chemical attacks, resulting in the deaths of 1,514 people, including 1,413 civilians (including 214 children and 262 women), 94 armed-opposition fighters, and 7 regime forces' prisoners held by the opposition. 11,080 people were injured, including 5 regime forces' prisoners held by the opposition. Meanwhile, ISIS carried out five chemical attacks in Aleppo Governorate, resulting in 132 injuries.



# 222

chemical attacks

Regime forces carried out



# 217

chemical attacks

ISIS carried out



# 5

chemical attacks

## SNHR's Call for the Destruction of Remaining Chemical Stockpiles After the Fall of the Assad Regime

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Network emphasized in [its statement issued on December 17, 2024](#), the necessity of full cooperation with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to identify all remaining chemical weapons sites in Syria and ensure their complete destruction, preventing any future use, given the grave threat these weapons pose to civilian lives. SNHR has continued to monitor this issue by documenting attacks, issuing detailed reports and statements, and cooperating with relevant international teams and organizations, most notably the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Reports from the Investigation and Attribution Team (IAT) [issued on April 8, 2020, April 12, 2021, and January 27, 2023](#), revealed the regime's responsibility for five chemical attacks. Meanwhile, the OPCW's progress reports, [the most recent of which was dated July 24, 2024](#), confirmed that the former regime's declaration of its stockpile was inaccurate or incomplete due to unresolved gaps and inconsistencies. Accordingly, it is clear that the regime has not declared its entire stockpile or all the facilities used to produce or possess it, and it is likely that new facilities will be allocated or established after the destruction of the facilities declared upon its accession to the Convention in September 2013.

## Legal Implications of Chemical Attacks in Syria

- 1. Direct Responsibility of the Bashar al-Assad Regime:** The chemical attacks carried out by the Bashar al-Assad regime constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Furthermore, the execution of chemical attacks is a complex operation requiring extensive technical and logistical capabilities that cannot be carried out without the direct knowledge and approval of the head of the regime, given its highly centralized nature. Accordingly, the use of these weapons reflects a centralized decision and a recurring policy adopted by the previous leadership, implicating military and security institutions, particularly the leadership of the Military Intelligence Directorate, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, and the National Security Bureau, in addition to the Center for Scientific Studies and Research, particularly Institute 1000 and Branch 450.

2. Senior officials escape accountability: Despite documenting more than 217 chemical attacks, no accountability measures have been implemented for Bashar al-Assad or senior military and security officials, in flagrant violation of states' obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and general rules of international law.
3. Identifying those involved and imposing sanctions: The Syrian Network for Human Rights' database indicates the involvement of at least 387 senior military and security officers, as well as civilian and military personnel, warranting their inclusion on US and European sanctions lists. In two previous reports, the network has previously provided samples of the most prominent individuals involved with the aim of exposing them and paving the way for their inclusion on international sanctions lists.
4. Involvement of security and military institutions: It has been proven that the attacks were carried out with the planning and approval of senior military and security institutions, including Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, the National Security Bureau, and the Center for Scientific Studies and Research. This confirms the centralized nature of decision-making and the difficulty of such attacks occurring without direct guidance from the head of the regime.
5. Violation of international resolutions: Attacks have been repeated since the issuance of Security Council Resolutions 2118, 2209, and 2235, demonstrating the international community's failure to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction and protect civilians, and highlighting the shortcomings of available enforcement and deterrence mechanisms.
6. Ongoing impacts on civilians: The attacks have left long-term health consequences, including chronic illnesses, psychological disorders, and birth defects in children born to parents who were subjected to the attacks. This creates a firm right for victims to receive full compensation and specialized medical and psychological treatment and recovery programs.

## Legal Recommendations for the Transitional Phase

1. Taking a sovereign step by joining the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and submitting a declaration under Article 12(3) accepting the Court's jurisdiction over crimes committed in Syria since 1 March 2011, including crimes involving the use of chemical weapons, to be complemented by issuing national legislation incorporating international crimes (war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide) into the domestic legal system, and establishing a national office for international judicial cooperation to preserve relevant evidence and archives, provide international mechanisms with what is necessary, protect witnesses and victims, and coordinate requests for extradition and mutual legal assistance.

- 2. Victim Compensation and Rehabilitation:** Develop comprehensive programs for material and moral compensation, including specialized medical treatment, psychological support, and rehabilitation, as well as care for affected children. Establish an official database for victims to ensure the transparency of compensation distribution and follow-up of health cases.
- 3. Reforming security and military institutions:** Excluding anyone proven responsible for chemical crimes or serious violations from the new state institutions, and training security and military personnel to respect international humanitarian law and human rights, thus enhancing trust between the state and society.
- 4. Strengthening international cooperation:** Continuing close cooperation between the Syrian transitional government and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to access relevant archives and sites and document violations, while requesting technical and legal support from the international community to ensure follow-up investigations and hold those responsible accountable, while preserving the state's sovereignty and transitional process.
- 5. National awareness and memory:** Incorporating chemical crimes into educational curricula and national media plans to promote awareness of human rights and respect for international law, and establishing documentation centers and a field hospital dedicated to victims to maintain a complete and reliable record of attacks and their effects.
- 6. Ensuring non-recurrence:** Develop a national prevention strategy that includes early warning mechanisms, an effective arms control system, and civil preventive measures, while activating the role of civil society organizations in monitoring and documentation to enhance accountability at the local and international levels



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*No justice without accountability*

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