Additional Evidences and Investigations Prove that the Syrian Regime was Probably Implicated in Attacking Douma City Using Chemical Weapons



Friday, May 11, 2018

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.



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I. Introduction and Methodology

The Syrian regime has carried out no less than 216 chemical attacks in Syria, the most recent of which were the two attacks in Douma city. However, only a few of those attacks generated a major media fallout and international response. These attacks were carried out in civilian populated areas and resulted in a large number of victims, while the majority of the chemical attacks were of a smaller scale, so they haven't resulted in a large number of deaths and injuries in a manner that would embarrass and compel decision maker to take action.

The Syrian regime has demonstrated its utter disregard for the Security Council and the international community repeatedly, as the Syrian regime carried out approximately 183 chemical attacks after Security Council Resolution 2118, 114 chemical attacks after Resolution 2209, and 58 chemical attacks after Resolution 2235. These attacks spanned the entirety of the Syrian lands, in both areas under the control of factions from the armed opposition as well as ISIS-held areas, and resulted in the killing of 1,461 individuals who are documented in our records with names and details. The death toll is divided into:

1,397 civilians, including 185 children and 252 women (adult female).

57 armed opposition fighters.

7 Syrian regime forces captives who were being held at an opposition prison. In addition, no less than 7,469 individuals were injured.













The two attacks on Douma city took place on April 7, 2018, merely 72 hours after a meeting was held by the Security Council to discuss the matter of the chemical stockpiles and assess the implementation of Resolution 2118. The attack also came on the first anniversary of the American military strike on al Shayrat Airbase, which was the military airbase from which the Syrian regime forces warplanes that carried out Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack last year took off. This was a new statement of defiance by the Syrian regime to the international community and the Security Council.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

"The American strike that followed Khan Sheikhoun attack last year hasn't successfully deterred the Syrian regime from suffocating its people to death with poison gases, as we have documented 13 chemical attacks after Khan Sheikhoun attack. As we have seen another American-French-British strike that allegedly targeted Al Assad's chemical resources, the question remains, how many attacks we are going to document after this strike?"

<u>Methodology</u>

This report draws upon accounts from survivors, eyewitnesses, and paramedics, and contains an account from one of the observers who work on picking up radar signals from warplanes and track calls between the pilot and the airbase from which he took off. These observatories usually announce when a warplane take off from a military airbase and track its movement to alert the residents in the armed opposition-held areas, so they hide in shelters in the areas that might be targeted

This report contains six accounts that we've collected by speaking directly to the eyewitnesses, and are not cited from open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interview for the witnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in the report without offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR team tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violations as much as possible, and we concealed the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.

This report doesn't include the social, economic, mental, and demographic ramifications and damages. In addition, we couldn't take any blood or soil test samples for in light of the present circumstances. Eyewitnesses' accounts corresponded with the pictures and videos we had analyzed, which yielded a high degree of credibility.















SNHR has analyzed videos and pictures that were posted online, or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some of the pictures showed remnants of yellow cylinders that we believe were loaded with a poison gas, while other pictures and videos showed tens of dead bodies for children and women piled on top of each other, as the color of their faces turned into blue, their mouths covered in foam, and their eyes startled. We have copies of all the videos and pictures included in this report in a secret online database, as well as backup copies on hard drives. Nonetheless, we can't claim that we have documented all cases in light of the ban and pursuit by Syrian regime forces and some other armed groups. Please see SNHR methodology for <u>documenting victims</u>

In our brief report that we've released on the day following the incident, our team was able, through multiple sources, to record about 55 victims. A few days later, we found out that some of the names provided as victims were in fact injured on the verge of death but were treated later as the investigations continued. We've concluded that the verified death toll is 41 civilians, including 12 children. This report contains their names and details.

We used the website http://www.worldweatheronline.com/ to assess the weather conditions in Damascus city, in order to obtain temperature and windspeed figures at the time of the two attacks.

II. Douma Chemical Attacks

Background

Douma city, in Damascus suburbs governorate, is Eastern Ghouta's largest city. Prior to the most recent military campaign, it had a population of 180,000 people, including IDPs from other areas in Eastern Ghouta, such as the cities of Irbeen, Zamalka, and Ein Tarma. As with the other areas in Eastern Ghouta, the city faced a vicious military campaign led by Russian-Syrian alliance forces that began on February 18, 2018, in order to seize control of the region of Eastern Ghouta.

On March 25, 2018, Douma city talks were initiated and the agreement included provisions for a ceasefire that would be the basis of an agreement to evacuate some civilians and fighters with their light weapons, while those who wish to stay and settle their matters can do so. The agreement also stated that some of Jaish al Islam gunmen can stay and work as civilian policemen. The agreement resulted in the evacuation of no less than 4,500 individuals on four rounds.













On April 6, 2018, Russian-Syrian alliance forces resumed the bombing on Douma city, as negotiations were halted. The Russian-Syrian air forces carried out about 350 airstrikes over the course of two days, while Syrian government helicopters used no less than 75 barrel bombs which resulted in the killing of 55 civilians, including seven children and two women (these numbers don't include the death toll of the chemical attack).

It seems to us that the two chemical attacks on April 7 were a retaliatory act to mount pressure on the popular base in Douma city and factions from the armed opposition, which are a party in the agreement in order to coerce them to agree to displace the city's residents, which what eventually happened.

The two attacks came in light of a catastrophic medical situation, as Douma city lost four medical personnel and civil defense members in the recent military campaign, while Russian-Syrian forces had carried out three attacks that targeted medical facilities. These forces deliberately destroyed medical facilities in a systematic manner even though the UN had provided Russian forces with the coordinates for hospitals in early-March, as the Telegraph reported.

Just a few hours before the two chemical attacks on Douma, we recorded that Russian-Syrian alliance forces targeted Douma Specialized Hospital and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent office, while other airstrikes targeted ambulances and the roads leading to the remaining medical centers in the wake of the attack, which significantly hindered the transfer and evacuation processes. Additionally, a large number of doctors and paramedics had left Douma city with the convoys that fled the city a few days before the attack, which caused even more pressure on the paramedics that stayed in the city.

Details

Saturday, April 7, 2018, Syrian regime carried out two chemical attacks in northern Douma city. The attack was carried out by helicopters using poison gases-loaded barrel bombs most likely. The distance between the two attack sites is approximately 300 meters.

Determining the exact time of the two attacks proved difficult since most of the residents and eyewitnesses were hiding in bunkers, while the heavy bombing never stopped. By crossing our work with most of the accounts, we can say that the first attack took place between 14:00 and 15:00, while our estimations suggest that the second attack took place around 20:00.

The first attack: the Syrian regime carried out this chemical attack near Sa'da Bakery building. No less than 15 people were injured and exhibited breathing difficulties symptoms.

The second attack: a helicopter dropped at least two barrel bombs that were loaded with a poison gas on two residential buildings near al Shuhada Square in al Nu'man area. One of the two barrel bombs landed on the roof of the building, while the other went through the roof of the second building.

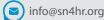
















Impact location for a poison gas-loaded cylinder in the aftermath of an attack by Syrian regime helicopters on Douma city, Damascus suburbs -**April 7, 2018**















visited the same construction

www.sn4hr.org

















SNHR team has recorded the killing of 41 civilians who suffocated to death, including 12 children and 15 women (adult female). In addition, about 550 individuals were injured in the second attack. The World Health Organization said that it was able to pinpoint the symptoms exhibited by about 500 individuals through a number of reports presented to them. The injured exhibited symptoms that included severe irritation of mucous membrane and disruption to the central nervous system. These symptoms are consistent with exposure to chemicals.

Even though the symptoms noted by the paramedics and civil defense are largely similar to the signs of exposure to nerve agents, and correspond with the symptoms exhibited by the injured in the Two Ghoutas Attack of August 2013 and Khan Sheikhoun attack in April 2017, there have been a number of accounts that confirmed that a distinct chlorine scents spread in the attack site. Based on this, our team is led to believe that there is a possibility that a mixture of gases was used.

Most of Douma city's residents were hiding in bunkers at the time of the attack in light of the heavy airstrikes, which amplified the concentration of the gas as its concentration increases in bunkers and lower levels.

According to worldweatheronline, the average temperature was 24 Celsius in Damascus city on April 7, while windspeed was 6 m/h.

Samer¹, an operator at the central signal, told us that he monitored around 20:30 a government helicopter with a line on it that reads 'Dika 427' as it took off from al Dumayr Military Airport. Samer said that he heard the pilot talking about a special cargo loaded on the helicopter. The airstrike was 30 minutes after the take-off.



A child's dead body laying on the ground, with foam covering his mouth, found in a bunker in Douma city in the aftermath of the chemical attack - April 7, 2018

















¹ We contacted him via Facebook on April 12, 2018.

Samer didn't say that he monitored a similar warplane at some time close to the first attack, but he told us that he monitored tens of planes taking off throughout that day. He wasn't able to track any call from the pilot as the one he tracked in the second attack.

Ahmad al Islam², a civil defense volunteer, took part in aiding the injured. He told us,

"It was around 20:30 when I was with an ambulance surveying the sites that have been bombed. There were helicopters soaring in the sky, and rocket launchers were targeting most of the city's areas. When we got near the city center, I sensed a strong scent that I couldn't identify, so I asked the driver to close the windows. We proceeded to al Shuhada Square and I saw people running in panic, as they were shouting 'chemicals..' I saw three dead bodies laid on the ground in front of a bunker. There was no blood on any of them." Ahmad added that he was able to recognize the strong scent of chlorine when they got near the bunker, as he said it was overwhelming, "I went down the bunker, and the sight of the massacre started becoming clearer. There were dead bodies of children tossed around and the foam covering their mouths. I couldn't last more than three second, as my nose started running and my eyes tearing, and I lost my balance. My friend pulled me out quickly, and we went to the medical point where I received first-aid. I washed my face with water and was sprayed."



A father and his son suffocated to death in the aftermath of the chemical attack on Douma city - April 7, 2018







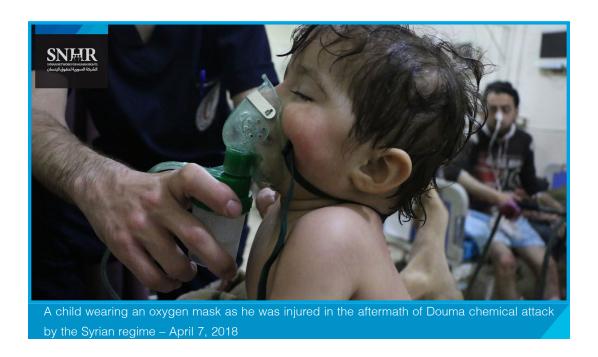








 $^{^{\}rm 2}\,$ We contacted him via WhatsApp on April 12, 2018



According to Moayad al Dierani³, a photographer, Douma city saw three chemical attacks on April 7, "The first one was in the morning around 08:00. The second one was at noon, while the third attack followed at 21:00, and it was the largest one. The bombing didn't cause loud noises as with regular barrel bombs. I accompanied the civil defense teams 30 minutes after the attack. We put on protection masks. The piled dead bodies were the first thing I saw. 10 dead bodies tossed on the side of the road, and five at a building entrance, and another five on the stairs of the same building." Moayad described the building on which the barrel bomb landed. He said that it is composed of multiple floors and a basement that was repurposed as an equipped bunker. Moayad counted 40 dead bodies in the lower levels, and said that the barrel bomb went through the building's third floor, "the bombing didn't stop during the aiding of the wounded. The bombing was extreme. I started exhibiting symptoms of exposure to gases after the aiding was complete. Even though I took precautions, I felt my eyes burning and I suffered from breathing difficulties." Moayad notes that three poison gas-loaded barrel bombs were used by the Syrian regime in the second attack. He added that he examined the site where one of the barrel bomb landed, but couldn't visit the other two sites.















 $^{^{}m 3}$ We contacted him via WhatsApp on April 15, 2018



A cylinder believed to be loaded with a poison gas found in the aftermath of an chemical air attack carried out by the Syrian regime on Douma city, Eastern Ghouta - April 7, 2018.



An injured child wearing an oxygen mask in the aftermath of the chemical attack carried out by the Syrian regime on Douma city - April 7, 2018













Ahmad⁴, a doctor from Eastern Ghouta who told us that he contacted his colleagues at the medical center that received the injured in the aftermath of the attack in Douma city. Ahmad revealed to us of the symptoms he was told about, "The doctors described to me the blueness they noticed on the lips, as well as the respiratory issues, miosis, and foaming. This led them to think a nerve agent was used in this attack. They told me that the clothes on the injured were reeking of chlorine scent, which made them suspect that a mixture of gas was used."

"The aiding process was laborious as they told me. The bombing never stopped before and after the chemical attack. Movement and aiding the injured were difficult, not to mention the shortage in manpower, as most specialist doctors left Douma with the groups that headed for north Syria before the attack. Those doctors could have given a more accurate diagnosis."



aftermath of the chemical attack carried out by the Syrian regime on Douma city - April 7, 2018

III. Russia, a Permanent Member State of the Security Council, Lies Time after Time to **Deny the Attack**

Initially, and before conducting any investigations or even entering Douma city, Russia denied any chemical attacks, before changing its statement quite quickly, as its representative to the Security Council, Vassily A. Nebenzia, hinted in his statement on the evening of April 9 that armed opposition forces were the ones who carried out the attack, noting that Russian forces had found remnants of chemicals in al Shifouniya area, Eastern Ghouta, which was taken over recently by Syrian regime forces.















⁴ We contacted him via WhatsApp on April 9, 2018

However, Russia's rambling continued, as Alexander Shulgin, Russia's permanent representative to the OPCW said that the Russian experts who visited Douma didn't find any remnants of chemical ammunitions, or any injured or eyewitness to the incident.

Lastly, the Russian news agency Sputnik uploaded a report on April 16, that said that Russian forces discovered a factory for manufacturing chemical attacks. The factory, the report claimed, belongs to Jaish al Islam.

All of these contradicting statements reflect the seriousness of the crisis that Russia is having as it tries to justify why its ally the Syrian regime has carried out this catastrophic attack, between denying the attack altogether by stressing that all evidences, including the pictures and videos, are mere fabrications and acknowledging and accusing factions from the armed opposition of carrying out the attack.

IV. Syrian and Russian Forces Tried to Obstruct and Distort the Investigation Process

This can be demonstrated by analyzing five main elements:

1- The branch of Russian forces named Russian Military Police entered Douma city on the morning of April 9. These forces headed for the site of the second attack. However, instead of enclosing the incident site and prevent anyone from getting close, they stormed the area and tampered with the contents, and even took samples even though Russian forces are a party siding with the Syrian regime in the internal armed conflict, meaning that they are completely biased. We have monitored tens of attempts to lie and misguide at the Security Council, as well as defend the Syrian regime's violations. 2- Additionally, Russia has used 12 vetoes. In this case, Russia invoked its veto powers to hinder the formulation of a UN investigation mechanism that was charged with determining the party who carried out the chemical attack. If Russia claims that there was no attack, or that opposition forces were the ones who carried out the attack and killed their own people, then why did it have to hinder the establishment of a mechanism to identify the culprit – namely the armed opposition according to the Russian claims.

The OPCW's mission is limited to determine whether there has been a chemical attack or not. Consequently, Russia's invitation for the committee to enter Douma and it hindering the formulation of a mechanism to identify the perpetrator explicitly signal the involvement of its ally, the Syrian regime, in this attack and Russia's fears over exposing the truth and imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime.













3- Russia's persistence in demanding the immediate evacuation of residents and deploying Russian forces, in addition to detaining, blackmailing, and threatening the doctors and nurses that treated the injured or saw the chemical strike and stayed in Douma expose a Russian eagerness to undermine and complicate the OPCW's mission before it enters Douma. Moreover, the residents who opted to stay in Douma after it was taken over by the Syrian regime and Russian forces won't certainly dare to present any testimonies that contradict the Russia's denial-based narrative with regard to the chemical attack.

Tayem al Sayyoufi⁵, a local media worker who was injured in Douma attack and fled the city with the displaced convoys on the day following the attack told us, "We couldn't stay in Douma any longer. After the chemical attack, the residents and Jaish al Islam were explicitly threatened. I was told by a Jaish al Islam fighter that the Syrian regime's negotiation committee said that the barrel bomb is a message, and that the city would be exterminated if the negotiation halted again."

4- while the OPCW mission arrived in Damascus on Saturday, April 14, their work didn't begin until seven days later - about two weeks after the attack. It seems to us that the obstruction in the last seven days by the Syrian-Russian alliance was indeed deliberate in order to tamper with the crime scene and threaten as many eyewitnesses and doctors as possible. The OPCW Director General announced on April 18, that they will have to delay the mission, calling for affording the inspectors team unfettered access to Douma. This came after the city, which has become completely under the control of Russian and Syrian forces, saw a number of car bombings on Monday, April 16. In addition, a UN team came under arms fire on Tuesday, April 17.

On April 21, the OPCW announced that their team in Douma has managed to acquire samples after visiting one of the sites. On April 25, the OPCW revealed that another site has been visited.

5- A full, direct, and immediate access to the attack site should surely be the perfect opportunity to gather documenting evidences in any investigation process, let alone in the case of chemical weapons. Any hindering or delay to such a visit may risk evidences' corruption or fading, particularly considering that the case in question here is







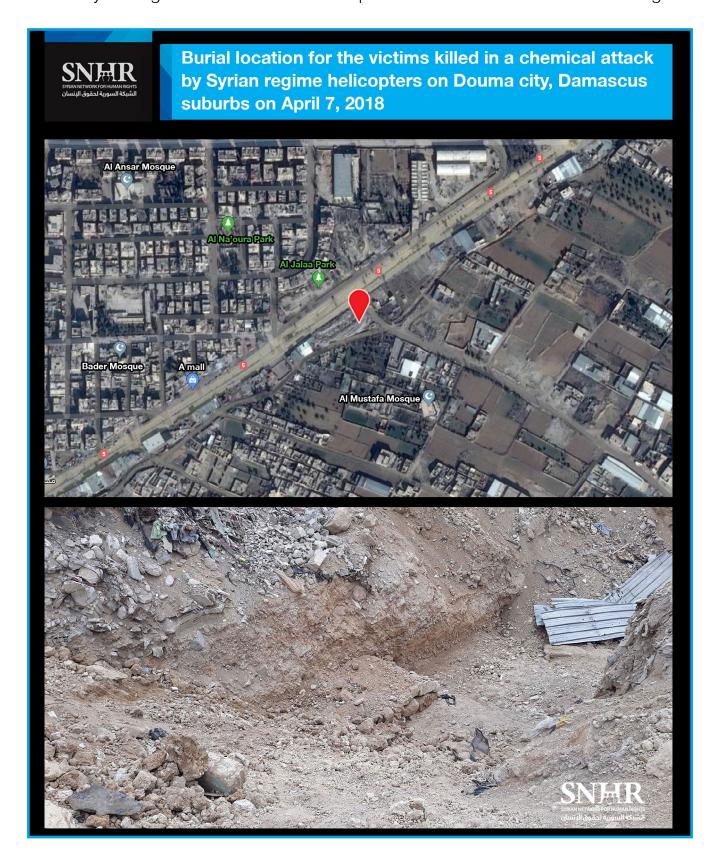






 $^{^{5}\,}$ We contacted him via WhatsApp on April 12, 2018

a chemical attack where it is suspected that gases with high volatility such as sarin has been used in light of moderate and relatively high temperatures which Syria recorded in those days. Even dead bodies, which are a vital evidence in any case when dissected and sampled, as some accounts from residents who stayed in Douma suggested that Syrian regime forces extracted and pulled a number of dead bodies from graves.

















Shadi al Abdullah,⁶ a local media worker who was present in Douma city on the day Russian forces entered the attack site, told us that three individuals entered the site – an officer, a military photographer, and an interpreter, "They saw the barrel bomb and the site in which it landed, but they didn't see the victims, as more than 36 hours had passed since the incident. They interviewed some survivors, including a man who lost his wife and children, and someone who lost his parents and siblings. I accompanied Russian forces to the targeted site and they told me to stop recording. Afterwards, they met three survivors and one of them explicitly held the Assad regime responsible for the chemical attack. At the time, the city was still under the control of the Free Army and there was no pressure or fear of any retaliatory acts. Their visit didn't last more than 10 minutes. They only took pictures, and didn't take any samples from the cylinder, the dirt, or anything else."

V. The Syrian Regime's Responsibility for Chemical Attacks

The Syrian regime's history of chemical weapon use is nothing short of shameful. The last two attacks on Douma come after 214 documented chemical attacks, according to SNHR database, that the Syrian regime has carried out throughout Syria and across the Syrian governorates regardless of the party in control of these areas where Syrian regime carried out its chemical attacks. This long history of chemical attacks suggests, according to the details of past investigations, that the perpetrator of those two attacks is the same who carried out the previous attacks, and they most likely won't hesitate to carry out more attacks in the future, maybe even in a few months. Further, the munitions shown in the videos, which were evidently loaded with a poison gas, are the same munitions used by the Syrian regime in 12 past attacks, as our team was able to compare the details of those two attacks with our archives, which contains 214 attacks, to come to these findings.













 $^{^{6}\,}$ We contacted him via Facebook on April 16, 2018



Comparison between ammunitions found in Douma city, Damascus suburbs and ammunitions owned by the Syrian regime



Cylinder suspected of being loaded with poison gases in Douma city, Damascus suburbs in the aftermath of an air attack by Syrian regime forces on April 7, 2018



Image taken from a video that shows members of OPCW convoy examining the chemical weapons stockpile in Syria, October 2013

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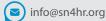














The Syrian regime's attempts to disavow any responsibility for the chemical attacks is not a new precedent, as the Syrian regime tried to achieve that in all of the past attacks we have documented, particularly Khan Sheikhoun attack in April 2017, where the Joint Investigative Mechanism has established the Syrian regime's responsibility for that attack and released its report in October 2017. We have pointed out in past reports that the Syrian regime has intensified its chemical attacks in 2017 and 2018 after the international community's underwhelming response.

The French government and the White House both revealed that they are in possession of evidences that prove the Syrian regime's responsibility for Douma chemical attack.

The two attacks on Douma share the same characteristics and adopted tactics of the previous attacks, including timing and choosing a civilian populated area. Evidently, the Syrian regime's chemical attack was an attempt to evacuate the city almost completely, as using this kind of weapons spread panic and fear among residents.

VI. Attachments

Victims' names



Pictures showing some of the victims killed in the two chemical attacks on Douma

An analysis of the <u>alleged chemical munitions laboratory</u> found by Russian forces in Douma by the blog Bellingcat

An analysis of the chemical munitions used in the two attacks on Douma by the blog Bellingcat

The <u>US Department of State</u>: Russia and Syria are trying to prevent and delay the arrival of the OPCW inspectors













VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Syrian regime has, through the use of chemical weapons in Douma, violated the customary international humanitarian law, which prohibits the use of chemical weapons under any circumstances. Secondly, the Syrian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated the CWC, to which the Syrian government had acceded in September 2013. The CWC prohibits the use of poison gases and provides for their destruction. Thirdly, the Syrian regime has breached all relevant Security Council Resolutions - particularly 2118, in 2013, 2209, in 2015, and 2235, in 2015. Also, the use of chemical weapons constitutes a war crime according to the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute.

In addition, the Russian government had ratified the CWC which strictly prohibits any form of assistance or encouragement on the contribution to any prohibited activity by any member state. However, a number of evidences suggest that Russian forces were involved in providing an assistance to the Syrian regime before and after the attack.

Hindering the inspectors' arrival in Douma city and the measures taken by Syrian and Russian forces that followed, which included storming the attack site and evacuating the city from most of the witnesses and survivors, might reflect explicit intentions on the Syrian-Russian alliance's part to conceal the details of the crime and disavow responsibility.

Security Council

- The Syrian regime has repeatedly violated three Security Council Resolutions, 2118, 2209, and 2235, even though they refer to Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations.
- The four permanent members should apply pressure on the Russian government in order to cease its support for the Syrian regime, who is using chemical weapons, and expose its implications in this regard.
- The Security Council should take further and practical action after Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces have violated all of the Security Council Resolutions.

Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council should shed more light on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime.

Commission of Inquiry (COI)

The Commission of Inquiry should start investigating these two attacks immediately, as well as the bombing incidents that preceded and the ones that followed and identify their perpetrators.













International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

Address the two attacks highlighted in this report, as well as past reports. SNHR is prepared to cooperate and provide more evidences and data.

European Union and United States of America

- Support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism that was established in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 71/248, adopted on December 21, 2016. And establish local tribunals that enjoy a universal jurisdiction, and address the war crimes that were perpetrated in Syria.
- Bar Syria from chairing the UN disarmament forum on chemical weapons which is slated for late-May 2018 in light of the Syrian regime's repeated use of chemical weapons.

International Community

- States of the world should demonstrate a better unity against the Syrian regime, the main and primary user of chemical weapons in this century, and take serious, joint action to impose deterring, strict, real sanctions immediately.
- Establish a humanitarian alliance that aims to protect civilians in Syria from chemical weapons and barrel bombs since Russia will keep hindering the Security Council and using veto countless times.

Russian government

- Stop using veto in order to shield the Syrian regime who is involved in perpetrating crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as using chemical weapons.
- Launch an investigation into the support provided by Russian forces in Syria for the Syrian regime in the two attacks on Douma and the attacks before that.
- Stop hindering the referral of the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Friends of Syria Group

Provide the areas that are under the threat of being bombed with chemical weapons (in light of the Security Council's failure to put an end to the attacks) with protective masks. SNHR estimates that no less than 20,000 protective masks are needed in these areas, in addition to the necessary equipment to get rid of the impact of the chemical pollution.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank all the victims, injured, and their families, as well as the residents and activists who contributed effectively to this report.



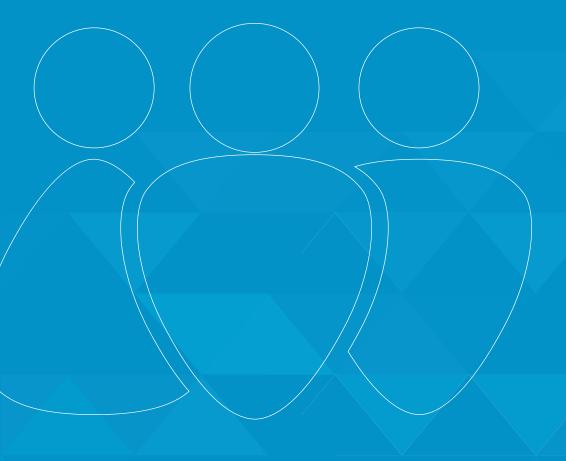












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