



Statement

SNHR Held an Event Marking the Tenth Anniversary of the Start of the Popular Uprising for Democracy in Syria, with Participants from a Number of Leading Global Nations, on the Sidelines of the Fifth Brussels Conference

Syria: A Decade of Impunity and The Need for Accountability for Ongoing Human Rights Violations

Thursday, March 25, 2021: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) hosted an event marking the tenth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria, with participants from a number of leading global nations, on the sidelines of the [Fifth Brussels Conference](#), entitled "Syria: A Decade of Impunity and The Need for Accountability for Ongoing Human Rights Violations". The event was broadcast on the Zoom platform and the SNHR's official accounts on social media platforms, with speakers including:

Mr. Christopher Le Mon, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State; Mr. Emiel de Bont, Special Envoy for Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands; Mr. Antoine Alhérière, Deputy Consul General, Syria adviser, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Dr. Troels Gauslå Engell, Senior Stabilisation Advisor on Syria to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Mr. Kristyan Benedict, Amnesty International UK Campaigns Manager: Crisis & Tactical, Syria; Ms. Naama al Alwanni, journalist and survivor of arrest in the Syrian regime's detention centers; and Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights. The session was moderated by Ms. Emma Beals, Senior Advisor at the European Institute of Peace and Editor of Syria in Context.

Ms. Emma Beals began the session by thanking the Syrian Network for Human Rights for organizing the event, and thanking the participants, before explaining that this event was being held to mark a decade since the start of the popular uprising towards democracy in Syria. She said: **"For Syrians, it has been more than ten years because the problems that took them to the streets demanding their human rights, their fundamental freedoms and their dignity didn't begin a decade ago. We can all agree that ten years is too long; during that time, more than half of the population has been displaced, hundreds of thousands killed, and hundreds of thousands more detained, sometimes tortured or killed, and over a hundred thousand remained unaccounted for. Human rights violations have become the whole mark of the conflict, barrel bombs, chemical weapons, targeting of humanitarian structures and workers, forced displacement, arrests, executions, and the list is seemingly endless."** She emphasized **"the need for finding a political settlement that can begin to address the violations that occurred in the past decade, and to provide a road map for a safe, dignified and free and future for all Syrians."**

The next speaker was Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany. In his address, he referred to two main points: firstly, the importance and difficulty of documenting violations over a bloody decade, and the centrality of the victims' role, and secondly, the need to see real responses based on documented data. As he explained, **"Working on a daily basis on the task of documenting atrocious and continuous violations is very sensitive, difficult and psychologically exhausting work, particularly since our work is based on documenting multiple types of violations, and following up on their documentation in order to build databases for each of these violations, so we try to record and document the largest possible quantity of data so that the statistics issued are as close as possible to the terrible reality"**. Mr. Abdul Ghany provided statistics of the most notable types of human rights violations documented on the SNHR database, explaining that these statistics are based on vast quantities of work and tireless effort in gathering information, from checking and archiving, including this data in reports, as well as constantly updating this data and these reports, with the core of the work being based in its essence on victims and survivors.

He said: **"I think that one of the most important reasons for the tireless dedication and continuous hard work of our working team is that all are victims themselves, who understand and work for other victims like them."**

He added that impunity has brought Syria to this horrific situation where the country has sustained the worst human losses in the world, as the massive amount of violations documented did not take place over days or weeks, but rather over months and years, noting that documenting events is a process of accurately and objectively chronicling the reality of events, in order to preserve the true history of what happened according to the sequence and chronological context in which events took place, so that that all local and international parties must accept their historical, legal and moral responsibility. Also, this data is used by partner international organizations, the United Nations and its various departments, and friendly countries in the process of achieving transitional justice and accountability, including imposing sanctions on perpetrators of violations, prosecuting them, and exposing their true criminality to the public and thus preventing them from participating in the democratic future of Syria.

Mr. Abdul Ghany said: **"We greatly appreciate the interest of partner and friendly countries, international organizations and the United Nations in the reports and statistics they've issued, and in the inclusion of these in the data and reports; we hope that this data will be employed in taking serious steps towards stopping crimes against humanity and war crimes, and including them in the process of transitional justice, and the achievement of a political transition under Security Council Resolution 2254 towards a democratic state that respects human rights."**

Mr. Abdul Ghany's address was followed by that of Ms. Naama al Alwanni, in which she spoke about her experience at the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria, her participation in the peaceful activity and documentation of demonstrations, and her arrest by the Syrian regime's security forces, recalling some of the harrowing details of her suffering and torture at the hands of Syrian regime forces and the inhuman conditions of detention in detention centers of the Syrian regime. She said: **"Upon my arrest, I spent nearly 18 consecutive days in the solitary cell, which I didn't leave except to be taken out for interrogation. I was mentally exhausted, and I repeatedly had bouts of screaming and banging my head against the wall."** Ms. Alwanni added, **"I spent two months in the central prison in Tartous - the prison conditions there were so bad that I wished to return to the solitary cell; after that I was transferred to the Political Security Branch in Damascus, and the transfer was carried out by trucks used to transport meat."** Speaking about the conditions of detention at the Political Security Branch in Damascus, she said: **"I saw naked detainees at the entrances, and we used to hear news of those who were tortured and killed. I saw detainees who were tortured by the al shabeh method" [suspended by their hands from the ceiling and beaten],** adding, **"I feel guilty for not being able to influence and support the cause of the detainees to be released."** She further added: **"The detention issue is a real disaster. The detainees are not just numbers, they are human beings, and I am one of them before you."**

Mr. Christopher Le Mon, began his address by voicing a wish that the event didn't have to take place at all, saying he wished that instead, **"we were sitting together in Damascus, or in Aleppo or in Homs and marking with happiness the tenth anniversary of the end of the Assad regime's brutality and the beginning of a more hopeful new chapter in Syria's long and rich history."** Unfortunately, he added, **"As we all know, this isn't how the last decade has unfolded. It's been ten years this month since women, men and young people peacefully took to the streets in cities and towns across Syria demanding an end to human rights violations and government corruption; their courage in rising up for their rights was met by the Assad regime's inhumanity. That war on Syria's people - and that what the Syrian war is, let's be honest, it is a war on civilians - that has now persisted for 10 years, even as the United States, other governments, the United Nations and civil society have worked during that time to try secure a sustainable peace for Syria; we have seen in the conflict both the best and worst of humanity. The best of humanity we have seen in Syrian human rights defenders who have risked their own lives to protect the rights of civilians."** He added: **"To make progress towards sustainable peace in Syria, the Assad regime must end its inhuman military campaign, it must meaningfully politically participate in the political process, and it must provide information on the more than one hundred thousand Syrians who remain missing after being unjustly detained. Sadly, this number of detainees and of the disappeared Syrians continues to grow, as the regime arbitrarily detains individual returning to areas under government control, including where reconciliation agreements supposedly protect returnees."** Mr. Le Mon also noted that poor detention conditions increase the likelihood of the spread of the COVID-19, which he said makes securing the immediate release of detainees all the more urgent. He added that the United States will continue to keep the detainees' issue at the forefront of the cases until they are released. He added: **"The United States has and will continue to use the Caesar Act as an economic tool to advocate for human rights and to limit the ability of Assad and his benefactors to profit from the ongoing conflict, and from the reconstruction, and from the ability to seize property from Syrians who have been forced to flee".**

In the next address, Mr. Emiel de Bont said that he believes that the popular uprising in Syria “poses searing questions about the underlying norms of international law; now, one basic fundamental is that nation states do not interfere in the domestic affairs of one another, unless so clearly mandated by the Security Council, and this is essentially the argument behind which some permanent members of the Security Council hide. But in the course of the second half of the last century, member states have taken upon themselves many additional obligations under international law, in the field of international humanitarian law, the laws of warfare, crimes against humanity, the Convention Against Torture, to name but a few. I don’t want to enumerate the countless acts of transgression against these international norms perpetrated by many parties to the Syrian conflict, but mainly, overwhelmingly, by the regime and some of its backers. The international system belongs to all of us, so we have responsibility to uphold and protect it; but what happens when a group of government decides that these norms no longer apply to them, or at least they have a very different interpretation of it? Well - Syria! This is what happens. Ten years of bloody conflict, unspeakable crimes, and the suffering of tens of millions of people, and utter gridlock and deadlock at the international level.” He continued: “Syria shames us all, but regrettably some governments and regimes seem to have lost all sense of shame. So, we are resigned to continue providing humanitarian assistance, and pressure on those most responsible to alter their behavior.”

Mr. de Bont added: “Meanwhile, we collect and bear witness; we document and we store; we research and we verify, with the help of so many brave Syrians on the ground who provide testimony. My government [the Netherlands] has been at the forefront in many ways of building an architecture of accountability, by supporting the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and now lately by calling out the regime in Damascus on its international obligations under the Convention Against Torture. Now, interestingly enough, the regime has agreed to take up this challenge and is to hold consultations with us and Canada on this matter. This initiative may end up well at the International Court of Justice.” At the end of his speech, he stated: “There will be a day of reckoning.”

The next speaker, Dr. Troels Gauslå Engell, began his speech by saying, “The situation in Syria is a human rights crisis, it is a man-made disaster, and it must be stopped as such. According to SNHR’s database, more than 227,000 civilians have been killed, of whom more than 16,000 are women and 29,000 are children.”

He added: “The current situation in Syria is a consequence of previous human rights violations, because the peaceful uprising in 2011 started as a protest against discrimination and marginalization. The protesters were met with excessive force, which then spiraled into a civil war, which then became fueled by outside military support for the regime.”

Dr. Engell emphasized the responsibility borne by the regime and its foreign allies for more than 90% of the violations committed in Syria. He added: “The Syrian regime and its allies have not engaged meaningfully in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and they are blocking a political solution to the conflict, which is the only way to achieve sustainable peace and stability.”

He also quoted a statement issued by Denmark’s Minister of Foreign Affairs on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising, saying, “We combat impunity of all types. A person like Assad, who is suspected and rightfully accused of documented violations against humanity, belongs before the war crimes court. He does not belong as the leader of the country which he has destroyed for a decade.”

This was followed by Mr. Antoine Alhériitière’s address, in which he said: “Ten years ago, peaceful protests began throughout Syria and I would like to remember and pay tribute to the courage of the people who protested for freedom, for dignity, for justice - and the demands remain unchanged today. Since then, a horrific number of violations and abuses of human rights, for which the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility, have caused enormous human suffering. The scale of these violations is unmatched in recent history.”

He added: "These crimes must not go unpunished - putting an end to the impunity of perpetrators of these atrocious crimes is key to achieve sustainable peace and genuine reconciliation in Syria." Mr. Alhéritière referred to the fact that "The French judicial system also takes its share in the fight against impunity. The judicial authorities are currently conducting about 40 proceedings related to crimes committed in Syria. France will tirelessly seek to hold to account those responsible for the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime."

He concluded his intervention by affirming: "Only a credible and inclusive Syrian-led political process facilitated by the United Nations in accordance with all elements of Resolution 2254 - which remains our roadmap - will put an end to the Syria conflict and to the Syrian people suffering."

Mr. Kristyan Benedict spoke about accountability in general, and said: "We know the regime and other criminals do not want to accept responsibility for the crimes that are still going on and the crisis that is still going on. We also know that there has been a significant lack of adequate punishment for these crimes." He stressed the importance of continuing and increasing financial support for accountability mechanisms and civil society organizations working in the field of accountability, as well as increasing support for mechanisms working on the issue of the missing people and detainees, adding: "As the justice and accountability efforts increase and momentum builds, and we see more people like E. al Gharib be sentenced, hopefully Anwar R. coming up and others. Without a doubt, the regime and its partners will target Syrian human rights defenders who are working on these issues not just in Syria but in Europe and wider. So, at Amnesty, we are increasing our investment in security training for some key partners, but we would like to see more of that as well at the state level, to ensure those organizations that are doing the investigations, doing the documentation, finding witnesses, etc. are protected, because the risks and the threats are certainly increasing against them, and we saw that at Koblenz, we saw witnesses being intimidated by the regime or its proxies."

The event concluded with a question and answer session featuring the participants and an interactive discussion. You can listen to the full content of the event via the [following link to our YouTube channel](#).

As part of its advocacy activities to organize or participate in international, regional and local events, the Syrian Network for Human Rights aims to keep friendly states and organizations informed of the most prominent developments, and to listen to their proposed strategies for the next stage in order to initiate greater coordination and cooperation, to mobilize more efforts towards ending the conflict Syrian, which has spanned more than a decade, and to achieve the long-denied democratic transition.