The 1st Anniversary of the Syrian Regime’s Chemical Attack on al Kbaina Village in Latakia Suburbs, Which Went Unpunished

An International Civilized Alliance Must Be Formed to Hold the Syrian Regime Accountable and Deter It from Using Chemical Weapons Again

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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. Failure of Any Decisive International Response to the Khan Sheikhoun and Douma Attacks Encouraged the Syrian Regime to Repeat the Use of Chemical Weapons in al Kbaina

Today marks the first anniversary of the chemical weapon attack launched by the Syrian regime against al Kbaina village on May 19, 2019. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights’ (SNHR) database, this attack was the first chemical attack launched by the Syrian regime since its chemical attack on Douma city in April 2018. Despite that fact that the Syrian regime had been subjected to air and sea strikes by French, British and US forces, which targeted facilities working to develop the regime’s chemical weapons program in Syria as a form of punishment for its reuse of chemical weapons, the regime again dared to challenge the international community’s ‘red lines’ and the UN Security Council resolutions related to the issue of chemical weapons by using them again in Syria. We stressed in an earlier report, in which we documented the chemical weapon attack on Douma city, that if there were no decisive response to this, accompanied by a clear and serious political transition schedule, the Syrian regime would depend on the time factor and return to using chemical weapons again.

According to the report, in which we documented the incident of the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons against al Kbaina village, the attack took place on May 19, 2019, at around 08:00, where Syrian Regime forces stationed in the Jeb al Ahmar area to the south of al Kbaina village in the eastern suburbs of Latakia, used a missile launcher to fire three
missiles loaded with poison gas which targeted a base used by Hay’at Tahrir al Sham located on a hill in the southwestern outskirts of al Kbaina village, resulting in the injury of four of Hay’at Tahrir al Sham’s fighters, who exhibited symptoms of breathing difficulty, redness of the eyes and tearing.

Several months after the attack, specifically on September 26, 2019, the U.S. Department of State announced the results of its investigations regarding the attack on al Kbaina, which proved the Syrian regime's responsibility, with the announcement resulting from extensive and accurate investigations carried out by the U.S. Department of State, in which it relied on multiple sources, including the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Following the publication of the investigation's results, we called on the U.S. Government to take decisive action this time along with allied countries and others opposing the use of weapons of mass destruction worldwide. Despite this, however, there has been no response to the criminal usage of chemical weapons in al Kbaina to the present day.

II. The OPCW’s Investigation and Identification Team Should Place the Attack on al Kbaina on the List of Attacks That Should Be Investigated

On June 27, 2018, the mandate of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was expanded, with its new remit including the ability to identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. On April 12, 2020, the OPCW’s Investigation and Identification team issued its first report in which it identified the responsibility of the Syrian regime for three chemical attacks that took place in al Latamena city in Hama suburbs in March 2017, with the report outlining the attacks that the team is supposed to investigate in the coming months, which included 33 attacks, nine of which the team set out to investigate on a preliminary basis; the team has already investigated three of these attacks, with the six other attacks yet to be investigated.

This list is not final, and the team of investigators will continue to work on other incidents. The SNHR recommends that the chemical attack on al Kbaina village should be included among those incidents for several reasons, the most prominent of which are:

- On January 4, 2016, the OPCW announced that the last material of the Syrian chemical weapons had been destroyed; despite this, the attack on al Kbaina took place in the past year, 2019, that is, more than three years after this announcement, with no subsequent handing over of any additional materials or targeting of the Syrian regime’s chemical facilities or war capabilities in this regard; this indicates that the Syrian regime has retained its capabilities to use chemical weapons up to this point.
• The attack on al Kbaina occurred despite earlier punitive attacks against the Syrian regime by a number of countries, due to its use of chemical weapons. The fact that the international organization proved this attack had been carried out despite these earlier punitive attacks in response to the regime's previous uses of chemical weapons confirms that the Syrian regime constitutes a serious threat to international peace and security, and there can be no doubt that, due to the international community's limited reaction and the regime's apparent impunity serves to encourage other, similar regimes and totalitarian states to manufacture and use chemical weapons.

III. The Record of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, According to the SNHR Database

According to the SNHR's database documenting chemical attacks carried out in Syria, the total number of chemical weapons attacks documented to date amounts to at least 222 since December 23, 2012, the date of the first use of chemical weapons in Syria which SNHR documented up to May 19, 2020. These attacks are distributed according to the perpetrator party as follows:

A. The Syrian regime has carried out 217 chemical attacks since its first documented use of this form of weapon in December 2012 up until May 2020, distributed according to the Security Council resolutions as follows:

Fourth: After the formation of the United Nations mechanism and Security Council Resolution 2235 of August 7, 2015: 59 attacks

These attacks resulted in the deaths of at least 1,510 individuals, distributed as follows:

• 1,409 civilians, including 205 children and 260 women (adult female).
• 94 Armed Opposition fighters.
• Seven prisoners from Syrian regime forces who were being held in an opposition prison.

These attacks also caused the injury of at least 11,080 individuals, including five prisoners from Syrian regime forces who were being held in an opposition prison.

B. We documented five attacks in which ISIS used chemical weapons in Aleppo governorate, causing the injury of at least 132 individuals.
IV. The Global Spread of the Coronavirus Pandemic Should Strengthen Our Resolve to Deter the Use of Chemical Weapons of Mass Destruction

The manufacture and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime has contributed to the contamination of large areas of the Syrian territory, and the injury of tens of thousands of Syrians, with the impact of the use of these horrific weapons set to extend to future generations until they are fully disposed of. The fact that the entire world has suffered from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic means that the world should be more collectively assertive in opposing the manufacture of chemical weapons, with the Syrian regime’s use of these weapons last year confirming that it seriously intends to continue manufacturing and using them later; in light of the regime banning all UN investigative committees from freedom of inspection and movement in Syria, we are extremely concerned at the possibility that the Syrian regime will be able to even partially restore the system which enabled its use of chemical weapons, with the help of its Russian ally.

Russia continues to provide various forms of military and political support to the Syrian regime, and constantly calls for the lifting of sanctions against it without condemning it even once for its use of chemical weapons. Rather, Russia has consistently denied all reports condemning the Syrian regime over this issue, with the organs of the Syrian regime that committed the crime of chemical weapons use being the same ones that still govern Syria today. This situation also makes it clear that the regime, which has routinely used chemical weapons against the Syrian people, cannot be trusted to protect the same people from any pandemics or diseases except insofar as doing so accords with its own interest.

V. Recommendations

The United Nations and the Security Council:
- Impose economic, political and military sanctions on the Syrian regime on the anniversary of its use of chemical weapons against al Kbaina village.
- Call on the Syrian regime’s allies to condemn its use of chemical weapons, work with the rest of the world to hold the Syrian regime accountable, and pressure it to enter into a political process that leads to a real political transition, which would contribute to lifting sanctions and moving towards democracy and stability.

The European Union, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and the rest of the world that imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime:
- Insist on a permanent link between the issue of sanctions and achievement of a real political transition because easing the sanctions in the presence of the same leadership and organs involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes means providing support to these repressive entities.
• Increase the provision of humanitarian assistance to the World Health Organization to work in Syria in all regions, and ensure that its work is practiced freely away from the influence of local organizations affiliated with the Syrian regime in the areas under its control.
• Continue to work to hold the Syrian regime to account for its use of weapons of mass destruction.
• In light of the continued failure of the UN Security Council, it is imperative to consider establishing a civilizational and humanitarian alliance in accordance with clear criteria aimed at providing urgent protection for civilians from brutal regimes in the event of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Condolences
To all the families of the victims, who were killed by the Syrian regime through use of chemical weapons, and to all their friends and loved ones, we pledge that we will not abandon our persistence or falter in our efforts to ensure that all those involved in using chemical weapons in Syria are held accountable until this is achieved.