



## Statement

### **The SNHR and the Syria Campaign Hold a Side Event on the Sidelines of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly**

#### **US, France and UK Emphasize Their Absolute Estrangement from the Syrian Regime, Which Is Involved in Committing Heinous Violations, Stressing That It Must Be Held Accountable**

On Tuesday, October 5, 2021, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and the Syria Campaign jointly held an event on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, with the participation of Ms. Uzra Zeya, the U.S. Department of State's Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Ambassador François Sénémaud, the Personal Representative of the President of the French Republic for Syria, and Mr. Jonathan Hargreaves, the UK Special Representative for Syria, along with other distinguished participants representing two organizations belonging to the Truth and Justice Charter organization, Ms. Yasmin al Mashaan, a founding member of the Caesar Families Association, who's also the head of the organization's Communication and Coordination section, and Mr. Khalil al Haj Saleh, from the Massar organization (Coalition of Families of Persons Kidnapped by ISIS). The session, which was moderated by Ms. Naomi Kikoler, Director of the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, was broadcast on Zoom and social media platforms.

Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany opened the session, welcoming the ambassadors, diplomats, and other participants, and explaining the context of this high-level event, and its eminent seven-year history beginning in 2014, since when it's been held annually in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meetings. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has been a key participant in the event since it began, with each of these annual forums dealing with various topics, such as: barrel bombs; chemical weapons; attacks on hospitals and Civil Defense centers; detainees and forcibly disappeared persons; torture, accountability, and other issues: **"Last year, 2020, and this year, due to the nature of the exceptional circumstances due to the emerging coronavirus, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, in coordination with the United States Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, was honored to organize the event, as we did not want there to be any interruption in this connected chain, and because the interruption would send a negative message to the Syrian people, especially in light of the tendency of some dictatorial countries to normalize relations with the Syrian regime."**

Following Mr. Abdul Ghany's address, the moderator, Ms. Naomi Kikoler, spoke, beginning by thanking the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Syria Campaign for organizing the event, as well as thanking the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France, and Syrian human rights defenders for their participation. Ms. Kikoler continued: **"Today as we gather, there are tens of thousands of Syrians who are in detention, enduring torture and facing death; hundreds of thousands of families yearning for any information about the whereabouts of their loved ones, while airstrikes on Idlib and elsewhere continue to be carried out by the Syrian-Russian alliance,"** She added, **"A nation whose social fabric has been destroyed continues to be governed by an individual who has perpetrated heinous crimes against humanity against his own people, thus far impunity has prevailed."**

Ms. Kikoler added: **"Over 149,862 people have been arbitrarily detained since 2011; behind each number is a person, a young man, a pregnant woman or a small child. These are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable today in Syria, especially as COVID-19 continues to spread. This is not a conflict or crisis that has ended. This is not the time to speak of normalization [with the Syrian regime]."**

Following Ms. Kikoler's speech, she gave the floor to Ms. Uzra Zeya, who said: **"As US Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, I oversee the State Department's efforts to promote civilian security and advance democracy and respect for human rights all over the world, including in Syria. Our work would not be possible if it weren't for the incredible human rights defenders here today. So, I want to take a moment to recognize Yasmine, Khalil, and the many others, sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers and friends of the missing and detained Syrians, who are joining us here today; your tireless effort to fight for the freedom of your loved ones and thousands of others is simply inspiring."**

Ms. Zeya pointed to the passage of the tenth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria, which the Syrian regime met from the very beginning with killings, arrests and torture that continue to this day, saying, **"There can be no lasting peace in Syria without justice and accountability for the regime's atrocities, some of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity."**

She continued, **"The plight of these detainees must remain at the forefront of the international community's**

efforts to mitigate the suffering of the Syrian people and work toward a political solution. That's why, as you've heard from the United States time and time again, we demand that the Assad regime immediately release all arbitrarily detained Syrians, most urgently women, children and those most vulnerable to COVID-19. In addition, it's imperative that the regime grant impartial and independent entities unfettered access to its detention facilities. It's also crucial that the regime provide information on the missing persons to their families and return the bodies of the deceased to their loved ones."

Ms. Zeya added: "As a former US Embassy Human Rights Officer in Damascus and later as Acting Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, I had the great privilege of living among and working closely with Syrian people and civil society leaders. Against the backdrop of the Assad family regime's brutality, I have seen firsthand the best of humanity shine through in human rights defenders, such as Fadel, whose efforts to document abuses have been critical to the drafting of the United States' human rights reports and countless other reports by other governments and UN bodies."

She also welcomed the formation of the Truth and Justice Charter to form a common Syrian vision around how to address the issue of detainees and missing persons, and indicated that the United States is working to elevate international attention to address the plight of detained and missing Syrians, stressing that "We [the United States of America] will not normalize relations with the Assad regime, nor provide support for reconstruction in Syria until the regime demonstrates irreversible progress on the political process as outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We support UN-Syria Envoy Pedersen's work to advance a political resolution to the conflict, and his focus on promoting large-scale and unconditional detainee releases, in coordination with the Independent Commission of Inquiry in Syria (COI), the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the families of the missing."

Ms. Zeya noted: "In July, in the spirit of the Caesar Act, the United States imposed sanctions on Assad regime's prisons and officials in connection with grave human rights abuses. Efforts to promote accountability must be accompanied by support for Syrian survivors of the atrocities we've witnessed over the last decade." She concluded by thanking the participants for sharing their stories and emphasizing that the United States remains a steadfast partner of the Syrian people.

The French Ambassador, Mr. François Sénémaud, stressed in his intervention the importance of the commitment of civil society organizations and work on the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons by the Syrian regime, and pointed out that enforced disappearance has been hallmark of the Syrian conflict over the past ten years, "The [Syrian] regime, which bears the major responsibility, has refused any releases; even worse, it has committed and continues to this day commit grave violations of human rights, including arbitrary detention, sexual violence as well as enforced disappearance of detainees."

Regarding the return of refugees to Syria, Mr. Sénémaud said that the conditions for a safe and dignified return have not been met: "As evidenced by innumerable reports, notably those of the UN Commission of Inquiry, and recently by several NGOs, this is further proof, if needed, that the conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees are not met. The regime discourages them from returning rather than the opposite."

Mr. Sénémaud emphasized, "Impunity for the perpetrators of the crimes committed and being committed in Syria

has to stop. We reiterate our unwavering support for international investigative and evidence-collection bodies (the International Commission of Inquiry and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism).”

Mr. Sénémaud noted that national courts are offering avenues to accountability, and said that the French judicial authorities are currently conducting about 40 proceedings related to crimes committed in Iraq and Syria and have issued arrest warrants. He continued, “We support the establishment of a mechanism dedicated to helping track and identify those missing and disappeared. We echo the call by the UNSG Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen, for mass humanitarian releases. Sadly, those demands have so far been shrugged off by the regime and its backers; the regime has clearly refused to cease enforced disappearance and to transparently investigate cases of missing persons, which is the regime’s primary responsibility; we cannot regard the one-for-one prisoner exchanges a plausible solution.”

Mr. Sénémaud concluded by emphasizing that: “There will be no peace without justice and no justice without peace, and peace in Syria can only be achieved through a comprehensive and genuine political solution. UN Security Council Resolution 2254 remains the centerpiece of such a solution, as it calls for genuine confidence-building measures, the first of all being the release of detainees.”

This was followed by an address by the UK Representative for Syria, Mr. Jonathan Hargreaves, in which the most prominent statement was: “The Syrian conflict, contrary to hints which some are keen to propagate, is not frozen and certainly isn’t over. The [Syrian] regime continues to be at war with its own civilian population. The vast number of detainees and missing persons is one of the most egregious casualties of this war. It is an ongoing scandal and a plight on all of us that so many innocent Syrians remain missing or illegally detained. Dealing with the detained and the missing has to be a crucial part of the 2254 political process.”

He added: “The UK fervently believes in the importance of protecting the rules-based international order and upholding human rights in Syria. We call repeatedly for meaningful action on the issue of detainees and the missing at the UN Security Council and other international forum.” In this context, Mr. Hargreaves welcomed the report of the International Commission of Inquiry issued in early 2021 on a decade of detention and related violations. Mr. Hargreaves noted: “As we continue to press progress on the political process, led by Syrians, facilitated by the UN under Resolution 2254, we must continue to prioritize accountability in Syria more broadly, and seek to ensure that all parties to the conflict are held accountable for grave violations of international law, most notably the [Syrian] regime and its allies are responsible for the majority and most grave violations. The UK continues to believe that there cannot be lasting peace in Syria without addressing impunity.”

He continued: “The UK also supports accountability efforts toward prosecuting perpetrators of gross human rights and international humanitarian law violations, and supporting the capability to gather evidence to support ongoing investigations and trials.” Mr. Hargreaves pointed out that: “The verdict in Koblenz this year was in part a result of these efforts and sent an important message to the regime and its allies that they will not enjoy impunity forever.” adding, “The UK has imposed sanctions on the Assad regime to end the violent repressions of civilians in Syria. UK sanctions send a clear message to the regime and its supporters that we will not stand by whilst the regime continues to commit serious human rights abuses. The UK continues to support the Investigation and identification team under the OPCW [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons], and fact-finding missions; as a consequence, the UK led a mission to suspend Syria’s voting rights under the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Optional Protocol.”

Mr. Hargreaves concluded: “The UK, like others, does not believe it is possible to make meaningful progress on a

political settlement, or to normalize or upgrade our relations without significant progress on these issues. In the end of course, it's only a sustainable and inclusive political process within the rule of law and international standards on human rights that can safeguard the rights of all Syrians."

Ms. Yasmin al Mashaan recounted the story of her own and her family's suffering: **"Syrian regime forces arrested my brother Uqba on March 28, 2012, because he, like many other young men, demanded his right to freedom and a decent life; since his arrest, we have not heard any news about him, and we have searched and asked about him in the branches and detention centers, but in vain. After a short period of time, our city was besieged and the bombing intensified, but we did not leave it in anticipation of Uqba's return, who must have needed us to be by his side upon his return. While we were waiting for Uqba's return, we lost three of my brothers by sniper shots, one of them after ISIS took control of the area; it always comes to my mind that we would not have lost them if we had known the fate of Uqba, if we were in a place that respected our right to know the truth, we would not have lost my brother Uqba."**

Yasmin added: **"The right to know the truth can be a reason for saving detainees from torture, and saving their families from a slow death in the absence of any news about their loved ones, so the truth is important and has an urgent need."**

Ms. al Mashaan spoke about the formation of the Truth and Justice Charter to once again demand urgent action by the international community, explaining that it reflects a common vision to promote the rights of victims, and the cause of justice and truth, and continued by talking about the basic recommendations of the Charter: **"Immediate halt of arbitrary arrest, torture, inhuman treatment and sexual crimes. First comes the immediate release of detainees and the fate of the male and female missing and disappeared persons revealed, handing over the remains of the deceased as a result of the conditions of enforced disappearance and detention, abolishing field and exceptional courts, providing fair trials, compensation and reparation, recognition of the [need for] truth and rehabilitation, reform in security and judicial institutions and their practices, and ensuring that persons involved committing violation must have no role in the process of justice and accountability."**

This was followed by an address by Mr. Khalil al Haj Saleh, who spoke about the experience of his family members and friends of arrest by the Syrian regime, ISIS and Jaish al Islam. He said: **"The issue of the forcibly disappeared at the hands of ISIS was formed due to the resistance of local communities to the organization's ideology and project that contradicts the aspirations of all Syrians. We are talking about more than 8,640 individuals, according to statistics of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, who were arrested, kidnapped or captured by ISIS."** Mr. al Haj Saleh pointed out that the year 2019 was a turning point, as the course of events weakened hopes that the victims disappeared by the organization might return alive. He also spoke about the importance of having neutral and competent bodies to identify the identities of the victims in the mass graves, and concluded his speech by emphasizing that: **"There will be no peace or stability in Syria unless everyone's wounds are healed."**

Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany focused in his closing address on two main points; the first was that the number of enforced disappearances is extremely large compared to the population of Syria, which makes Syria the worst country in the world in this century in terms of enforced disappearance of citizens. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has recorded that nearly 102,000 of the Syrian citizens arrested since March 2011 are still subjected to enforced disappearance until now, with the Syrian regime being responsible for nearly 85% of the cases, or about 86,792

individuals, tens of thousands of whom have disappeared in the Syrian regime's detention centers for eight or nine years; meanwhile, he said, ISIS is responsible for more than 8% of the cases, or about 8,648 individuals, followed by Armed Opposition factions, Syrian Democratic Forces, and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. He added: **"All the controlling forces and parties to the conflict benefit from the practice of enforced disappearance in three main forms: destroying and terrorizing opponents, material benefits by blackmailing the people, and through the detainees/disappeared being hostages and a bargaining chip."**

Mr. Abdul Ghany said that even while discussions about the issue of detainees have been going on for years, the number of forcibly disappeared persons continues increasing, because the arrest campaigns are still continuing. He pointed out: **"We issue a monthly report on the record of arrest cases, and most of these cases are classified as enforced disappearances, and some of these cases die due to torture, which has not stopped either, mainly due to the poor conditions of detention. I believe that the Syrian regime will not release the detainees and will not reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared."**

Mr. Abdul Ghany made extensive recommendations, summarizing them in six main points, and stressed that the Syrian regime must be notified that there is serious pressure on it to release detainees and stop grave violations: **"These pressures include preventing any state, and at a minimum, allies, from restoring relations with the Syrian regime, because the Syrian regime will consider restoring relations as a green light to continue committing crimes against humanity."**

Mr. Abdul Ghany added: **"Additional deterrence mechanisms must be found, as it has been evidenced that the political and economic boycott is insufficient, and that ending and fighting crimes against humanity in accordance with Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions is the responsibility of all countries in the world, especially the civilized and democratic countries, especially after the failure of the Security Council, which has been sustained for ten years, to end the atrocious crimes in Syria."**

Mr. Abdul Ghany further added: **"There must also be serious pressure on the allies of the Syrian regime, especially Russia and Iran, who provide the Syrian regime with all the necessities of survival, and therefore the regime does not feel that it needs to make any concessions, whether on the issue of detainees or other issues."**

Speaking about the need to revive the process of political transition from dictatorship to democracy in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2245, Mr. Abdul Ghany stressed the importance of ensuring that this be done according to a strict timetable, because the length of the political process extending from the Geneva Communiqué issued in June 2012 to date without achieving any concrete progress has made the Syrian people lose faith in it [the political process]. Mr. Abdul Ghany also called for increasing the assistance provided to the forcibly displaced, especially the families of the forcibly disappeared, adding: **"The Russian blackmail for extending the Security Council's resolution for cross-border humanitarian aid must be eliminated, and we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights prefer the legal opinion that UN aid is impartial and that the decision to prevent its entry is arbitrary, and therefore it does not need permission from the Security Council."**

Regarding the issue of detainees in particular, Mr. Abdul Ghany said: **"We have repeatedly demanded, through**

our participation in dozens of advocacy activities, and through our communication with representatives of states, that a state adopts the issue of detainees with all that this file requires on the human rights level and legally, including the UN call to create a mechanism to reveal the fate of the disappeared, providing aid and assistance to the families of the forcibly disappeared, rehabilitating survivors, especially women, and supporting civil society organizations working on this issue."

Mr. Abdul Ghany called for the international community to intervene in accordance with the principle of the Responsibility to Protect to stop violations that constitute crimes against humanity in Syria.

He concluded by saying: "All the countries that voted in favor of the Syrian regime at the Human Rights Council and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons are oppressive dictatorships, such as: Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, China, and those similar to them, and we hope that the Syrian regime and the axis of evil will not triumph. We also hope that the support of civilized democratic countries will help us move Syria from the axis of evil to the axis of democracy and human rights."

The event received attention and coverage from many media outlets and press sites; the entire event is available on our YouTube channel at [the following link](#), and on our Facebook page via [the following link](#).