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.

On Tuesday, September 21, 2021, the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies held an online forum entitled ‘The Assad Regime: Between Policy Variables and the Constants of Human Rights Condemnations’, hosting Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Ayman Abu Hashem - politician and human rights defender, and lawyer Rouba al Hamoud, with the event managed and moderated by journalist Dima Wannous.

Discussions at the forum focused on changes seen in international policy towards the Syrian regime and attempts to normalize relations with it, even in tandem with the continued international and UN condemnation of human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime. The forum guests also discussed the recent reports issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry and Amnesty International, which confirmed that Syria is still an unsafe country for the return of refugees; the speakers also discussed the reasons that forced some refugees to return to Syria, in addition to the situation facing Palestinian-Syrians and the violations they have been subjected to, as well as the policy of the Syrian regime in continuing to carry out arrests, enforced disappearances and torture, even in the absence of military operations against it. The forum concluded with discussion of the grave violations committed by the other parties to the conflict in Syria.
Mr. Abdul Ghany began his address by stressing the steadfastness of the human rights position on the Syrian regime’s violations since March 2011, stressing that this subject shouldn’t be politically exploited. In this context, Mr. Abdul Ghany referred to three international reports issued recently on Syria by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, Amnesty International, and finally the global report from the International Campaign to Ban Landmines - Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), which revealed that Syria is the only country in the world to have experienced continuous use of these weapons since 2012. Mr. Abdul Ghany also touched on the findings of the report on Syria, noting that the record of cluster munitions’ use in Syria in the year 2020 represented more than 52% of all cluster munition casualties worldwide during that year. He also emphasized the grave threat posed by the remnants of these munitions, citing the report’s findings that 44% of the total cluster munition casualties were children and 24% were female; this reaffirms that Syria is not a safe country for its residents, and a fortiori is very clearly not a safe place for the return of refugees or internally displaced persons. This point was also stressed by the latest report of the International Commission of Inquiry issued on September 14, 2021. Mr. Abdul Ghany also confirmed the findings of the latest Amnesty International report entitled “You’re going to your death”, that many violations are being practiced against refugees returning to Syrian regime-controlled areas, pointing out that those returning are routinely subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, enforced disappearance, extortion, and even cases of child rape. Mr. Abdul Ghany added that these same violations are routinely practiced against residents of Syria, not only against returnees. Mr. Abdul Ghany stated that these three reports carry a clear message to the international community, which is in essence:

- One cannot invoke a cessation of hostilities in Syria because the violations committed by the Syrian regime are not limited to bombardment and displacement, and the cessation of one certain type of violation does not mean the existence of safe areas.
- There is a continued need for the acceptance of asylum requests submitted by Syrians, and for urging refugees not to return, emphasizing that forcibly returning any refugee will expose him/ her to terrible violations, and that the state which returned him/ her should bear part of the legal and human rights-related responsibility for any subsequent violations.
- As long as the Assad regime and its brutal, repressive security apparatus remain in power, there can and will be no safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

With regard to the Syrian regime’s continuing policy of carrying out arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and torture, Mr. Abdul Ghany added that one of the most dangerous issues is that a detainee held by the Syrian regime does not know what his/ her punishment is, of what degree and extent, and when it will stop, and this in itself is a form of torture, with the Assad regime’s torture not linked to the conduct of military actions.

In the same context, Mr. Abdul Ghany noted that approximately 140,000 detainees and forcibly disappeared persons are still held by the Syrian regime, with these individuals being subjected in one way or another to one or more types of torture, meaning that deaths due to torture are continuing; consequently, the Assad regime still poses an existential threat to all detainees, especially since the number of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is steadily increasing, due to the Syrian regime’s continuing carrying out arrests on the one hand, and because the 18 amnesty decrees issued by the head of the Syrian regime since March 2011 deliberately excluded political detainees.
On another issue, Mr. Abdul Ghany expressed his disappointment that the report of the International Commission of Inquiry did not directly refer to any of the violations by the Russian forces: “This was a point of extensive discussion with colleagues at the International Commission of Inquiry, and we contributed as much as possible to this report, and hoped that incidents in which Russia clearly violated international humanitarian law would be included, as many Civil Defense centers were bombed.”

Mr. Abdul Ghany referred to the violations carried out by Hay’at Tahrir al Sham mentioned in the same report, in particular the launching of indiscriminate attacks, detention, and restrictions on public freedoms, including freedom of opinion and expression, as well as violations by Syrian Democratic Forces, including corruption and mismanagement, which caused public discontent, especially amongst Arabs, in areas under the group’s control, as well as the Manbej demonstrations and the killing of five civilians, and numerous cases of arbitrary arrest and torture, particularly the arrest of teachers, in addition to the imposition of severe restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression. Mr. Abdul Ghany pointed to the inhumane conditions referred to in the report, which amount to a war crime, against nearly 60,000 people who are still detained in al Hawl Camp, with 55,000 of those detained there being women and children, and to the detention of 27,000 children, 33% of whom are under the age of five. Mr. Abdul Ghany also referred to the violations mentioned in the report carried out by Syrian National Army/ the Armed Opposition, such as indiscriminate shelling, detention and torture, adding that some of these practices primarily targeted Kurds under the pretext of their affiliation with or support for Syrian Democratic Forces. Mr. Abdul Ghany concluded by saying, “Denying the perpetration of violations by the other parties to the conflict, and attacking the bodies that document them, indicates that we are still very far from the revolution’s demands for freedom and dignity for all Syrians. The perpetrator of the violation must first acknowledge what is being committed, and investigate and create real accountability, expel those involved in this violation, compensate the victims and apologize for the violation; the political opposition must play a prominent role in this objective to deter the perpetrators of violations, to end them, and to provide a civilized, democratic alternative for the Syrian people and international community.”

The full dialogue can be viewed at the following link.