

PRESS STATEMENT

Members of Syrian civil society engage high level officials, including President Volodymyr Zelensky, as well as key Ukrainian stakeholders, in Kyiv, to commemorate 10th Anniversary of Chemical Weapon attacks in Syria.

25 AUGUST 2023



On the 10th anniversary of the 2013 chemical attacks on Ghouta in Syria, and in calling for accountability for ongoing war crimes in Ukraine emboldened by the impunity for past and ongoing crimes in Syria, a group of Syrian civil society representatives visited Kyiv for a series of high-level official meetings and discussions with civil society leaders that concluded with an engagement at the Third Summit of the Crimea Platform with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Members of the delegation:

- Attended the Third Summit of the Crimea Platform, where representatives of states from across the world, including heads of states, delivered messages of solidarity with Ukraine. Members of the delegation engaged with President Zelensky at the Summit, delivering a message of solidarity for the fight against impunity in Ukraine and Syria. They affirmed that the free people of Syria stand against crimes committed in Ukraine and stand with its people, contrary to the Syrian regime's support to Russia. The delegation presented President Zelensky with two gifts. The first symbolises forced displacement and the use of chemical weapons in Syria using the colours of Ukrainian flag, which was hand made in Syria by artist and chemical weapons survivor, Akram Abo Alfoz. The second is a helmet of a fallen volunteer from the White Helmets who was killed in Syria, representing the sacrifice of Syrian heroes in the face of war crimes committed by the Syrian regime in its Russian allies.
- Had an official meeting with Prosecutor General, Andriy Kostin, and his team responsible for different war crimes, international collaboration, and victims. Mr Kostin delivered strong messages of solidarity and recognition of the chemical attack. All members of the Syrian delegation shared their messages with Mr Kostin, expressing unwavering solidarity with Ukraine's fight against impunity for crimes committed by Russia, by showcasing Russia's propensity to commit such crimes as a policy using its actions in Syria as damning evidence. Technical and advocacy collaboration methods were discussed. The delegation presented Mr Kostin with a symbolic gift from Syria.

- Met with Tamila Tasheva, Permanent Representative of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine, and Maria Tomak, the Head of the Crimea Platform Department. The meeting reasserted the solidarity between the two people and the call for freedom from authoritarian regimes.
- Met with Oleksandra Matviichuk, head of the 2022 Nobel Laureate Center for Civil Liberties. The delegation discussed efforts of civil society organisation in pursuing justice and accountability for both countries.
- Visited the large graveyard in the church of Bucha and met with the Father Andriy. The delegation paid tribute for the victims of the massacre that was committed by the Russian army in Bucha which led to the killing of around 458 civilians in February 2022. Father Andriy expressed his gratitude for the visit, recalling that Syrians know well what Ukrainians are going through.
- Visited the relocated Mariupol hospital in Kyiv. The doctors of this hospital miraculously escaped the occupation in Mariupol which had experienced the systematic attacks by Russian air and land forces. As kind of resistance this hospital was re-established in Kyiv to until they will be able to go back home. Doctors and members of the Syrian delegation who were subjected to the same Russian policy, and who advocate against the bombing of hospitals, stood with them side by side.
- Had a heartfelt exchange with families of forcibly disappeared persons and political prisoners kidnapped and detained by Russia. During which, personal experiences and learned lessons from Syria and Ukraine were shared as a basis for a joint solidarity campaign demanding justice for all political detainees around the world.
- Met with leading and award-winning Ukrainian Journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk from The Reckoning Project and Public Interest Journalist Lab. Ms Gumenyuk previously covered the Arab Spring, including the fall of Aleppo. The delegation exchanged views on building public solidarity between Syrians and Ukrainians. The delegation presented Ms Gumenyuk with a token of appreciation from Syria for her efforts in supporting the trip.
- Visited the Independence Square of Kyiv, which was a key location for Ukrainian's resistance against past authoritarian regimes. The delegation renewed its commitment to continue the fight towards a democratic Syria, premised on the rule of law and human rights.

Raed Al Saleh, the head of the White Helmets, said: "Since its intervention in Syria to support the Assad regime, Russia has continued to violate the rules of international humanitarian law, targeting infrastructure and humanitarian workers, employing a policy of collective punishment, destroying and besieging cities, and pursuing a policy of disinformation. These brutal tactics are now being applied in Ukraine. Justice must be pursued with such insistent and unwavering determination that no dictator or nation believes they can escape consequences for committing atrocities and abuses without accountability."

Taher Hijazi, a human rights defender and recipient of the Marianne award for human rights who survived and documented chemical attacks in Syria said: "Ten years ago, I was responding to and documenting the evidence of the Russian-supported chemical attack in Ghouta. Today, I am here to back the foremost efforts of our Ukrainian colleagues in holding Russia accountable for its continuous war crimes."

Waad AlKateab, an award-winning Syrian film maker, said: "I've been documenting attacks on hospitals and health workers, which has been a Russian military strategy in Syria to destroy the resilience of the entire community; and the same strategy is being repeatedly used in Ukraine. We are here to prove that they have not won in breaking our will, and they won't. We are here to keep fighting for justice and accountability".

Fadel Abdlhgani, the head of the Syrian Human Rights Network, said: "In this visit, I handed a list of more than seven thousand of Syrian victims killed by Russian military. We are here to honour them and all Ukrainian victims through our support to the Ukrainians in their accountability efforts against Russia war crimes. Holding perpetrators accountable requires us to join efforts for justice."

Afraa Hashem, campaigner at The Syria Campaign and a displaced activist from eastern Aleppo, said: "I am a human rights defender who was forcibly displaced with my 3 kids by the Syrian regime and its Russian allies. This crime, which I will never overcome its consequences, was presented by Russia as a process of humanitarian evacuation, when in fact it was one of their war tactics to control my city. I am here to support the Ukrainian families in their fight to reach justice and live safely in their homes."

The visit was Syrian initiated, led, and funded. It was organised by Madaniya and the Syrian British Consortium at the initiative of Syrian British lawyer Ibrahim Olabi. It was made possible with the support of the White Helmets, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Syrian Legal Development Programme, the American Coalition for Syria, the Syria Campaign, the Syrian British Medical Society, Action for Sama, the Association of Victims of Chemical Weapons in Syria, and Don't Suffocate the Truth Campaign. It was facilitated by kind support of the Office of the Prosecutor General Official Protocol in Ukraine and with the assistance of The Reckoning Project: Ukraine Testifies.

Ends

List of Delegation below

LIST OF DELEGATION

- **Abdulkarim Ekzayez:** Health system and health security specialist at King's College London. He is the general secretary of the Syrian British Medical Society and the deputy chair of the Syrian Public Health Network. He established some of the first field hospitals in northern Syria where he witnessed attacks on hospitals.
- **Afraa Hashim:** Activist and human rights defender. Campaigner with the Rights group, The Syria Campaign, and a board member of Don't Suffocate the Truth; an advocacy campaign for combating the denial of chemical attacks in Syria.
- **Amneh Khouliani:** Human rights defender, vice chair of Madaniya and co-founder of Families for Freedom. She is a recipient of International Women of Courage Award by the US Secretary of State.
- **Fadel Abdulghani:** Chair of the Syrian Network of Human Rights (SNHR). SNHR's documentation is referenced in many state's country reports and rigorously documented Russian abuses in Syria.
- **Haytham Alhamwi:** Chair of the Syrian British Consortium; a UK-based award-winning Syrian-led group advocating for democracy and accountability, including in relation to Russian war crimes in Syria. The SBC engages regularly with head of states and foreign ministers.
- **Ibrahim Olabi (Head of Delegation):** Chair of the Syrian Legal Development Programme and a board member of Madaniya and the Syrian British Consortium. He is the Chief Legal Counsel of The Reckoning Project: Ukraine Testifies, and a Barrister at Guernica 37.
- **Mazen Gharibah:** Executive Director of the award-winning Syrian British Consortium. He is a researcher at London School of Economics and a member of the UN-backed Syrian Constitutional Committee representing the civil society.
- **Raed Al-Saleh:** Head of the Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets); A humanitarian organisation dedicated to helping communities in Syria, with more than 3,000 volunteers working to rescue civilians, provide essential services, help civilians settle down, and seek justice for them.
- **Salim Namour:** Forcibly displaced surgeon from Ghouta, and a survivor and documenter of its chemical attacks. He is the chief of the Association of Victims of Chemical Weapons in Syria. He was also the founder of the Cave Hospital and the Health Directorate in Ghouta.
- **Sawsan Abou Zainedin:** Chief Executive Officer of Madaniya; an umbrella of over 200 Syrian civil society organisations working across all sectors and geographies, inside Syria and in diaspora. Madaniya is aimed at enhancing the political agency of the Syrian civic space.
- **Taher Hijazi:** An award-winning human rights defender who received the Marianne award for human rights. He survived and documented the sarin gas attacks in 2013 and chlorine gas attacks in 2018 on Ghouta and co-founded the Association of Victims of Chemical Weapons in Syria.
- **Waad AlKateab,** A Syrian activist and filmmaker. Her first documentary, For Sama, received worldwide critical acclaim, winning numerous awards, including best Documentary at the BAFTAs and an OSCAR nomination at the 2020 Academy Awards. She was listed in the 2020 Time100 List of Most Influential People.
- **Zaki Lababidi M.D.,** Chair of Foreign Affairs at the Syrian American Council; the largest Syrian American grassroots organisation in the U.S. and a board member of the American Coalition for Syria. Dr. Lababidi leads the organisation's relations with regional partners and counterparts.

