

When Syrian Reconciliation Means A Death Trap For Its People

In August 2022, Turkish Foreign Minister repeatedly made official statements to signal a new approach in Turkish policy towards the Syrian situation. The statements highlighted the need of a negotiation between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition to reach a standard solution to the country's problem.

The Syrians take these statements with anxiety and fear. Many protests took place in northwest Syria, showing public's rejection of any form of reconciliation with the regime; they demanded that any proposed political solution must adhere to Security Council resolution 2254. The Syrians in particular are still traumatized by the many crimes committed against them by the Assad regime – especially the war crimes such as the use of chemical weapons on them - while the commemoration of one of the largest chemical crimes coincided with these statements.

Chemical Attacks, Nine Years Ago

On August 21, 2013, the Assad regime attacked opposition areas in the Rif-Damascus Governorate with between 8-12 rockets in eastern Ghouta's Zemelka and Ein Tarma neighborhoods from Mount Qasioun; the second attack launched seven rockets that hit Moadamiya in western Ghouta from the Mezzeh military airport. The attacks that took place between 01:20 and 02:40 am used 330 mm surface-to-surface rockets, each capable of carrying 50-60 liters of chemical agents. These types of weapons were possessed only by the Syrian regime. These attacks caused at least 1961 deaths, and 18,790 injuries due to exposure to chlorine, sarin, and sulfur mustard gazes; 71% of them (1400 civilians) were killed just in a few hours^[1].

Regarding the injured people, thousands of civilians suffered from many symptoms consistent with the exposure to sarin gas including foaming at the mouth, yellowed and bluish skin, convulsions, frozen and pinpoint pupils, itching, blurred vision, hallucinations, vomiting, loss of consciousness, and breathing difficulty. These people also had to bear the long-term effects of the agents, such lasting physical impacts and psychological trauma just to name a few.

Despite all the international statements and condemnation, the absence of a decisive action served as a green light for the Assad regime to repeat over 336 chemical weapon attacks. Between December 2012 and May 2019, 140 attacks hit the Rif Dimashq Governorate, 53 Aleppo, 52 Hama, and 46 attacks hit Idlib, according to the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute GPPI^[2].

The use of chemical weapons was part of Syria's grand strategy that also involved sieges and barrel bombs. It focused on causing maximum casualties, terrorizing civilians, and making peaceful civilian life impossible in opposition areas.

International Efforts

In September 2013, UN Security Council issued "Resolution 2118" related to the chemical weapons used by the Syrian regime in Eastern Ghouta on August 21, 2013. The resolution notes that the use of chemical weapons constitutes a threat to international peace and security and provides for establishing a committee to oversee the dismantling of the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical weapons program, subjecting it to strict verification as soon as possible.

As a result of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission, in cooperation with the Syrian government, all chemical weapons declared by Syria were removed and destroyed outside of Syrian territory^[3], but in 2014, new questions arose regarding the completeness and correctness of the Syrian regime's initial declaration, and after two years the Declaration Assessment Team (DAP) reported that it could not thoroughly verify that Syria's declaration could be considered accurate and complete^[4].

The OPCW-UN Investigative Mechanism (JIM) works by using the Fact Finding Mission's data. Many of its reports concluded that chemical weapons were very likely used in many Syrian Armed Forces-controlled areas, and the Commission of Inquiry (COI) found that the Government of Syria was responsible for 22

attacks.

Russia vetoed 17 times to block action targeting its Syrian ally at the Security Council, and Russian and Syrian officials consistently offered "alternative explanations" for the results of the regime's chemical attacks and tried to question the credibility of OPCW's reports.

Reconciliation means death

Chemical weapons are considered as one of the most horrific crimes done by the Syrian regime that have received international attention and follow-ups. Dozens of reports and documents have been submitted about it, and it has been closely monitored and evaluated. Unfortunately, these efforts have not yielded any results yet, those involved in this crime have not been held accountable, the Syrian civilians do not feel safe yet, and the chemical attacks are only recurring.

With this in mind, recent normalization efforts by some countries with the Assad regime on the one hand will only pave the way for the regime to gain international acceptance once again, evade policies that would harm the regime, and on the other hand convince the Syrians that there is no solution but reconciliation with this group of criminals.

The Syrians know well the dexterity of the Syrian regime and its allies - Russia and Iran - in playing on the political margins and making gains. They remember well that the Assad regime has not adhered to any agreement or resolution that it agreed upon, starting with the de-escalation agreements in 2017 to the Russian-Turkish Astana agreement in 2020, where the Assad regime and Russia are still bombing civilians, actively adding up the number of casualties and injuries. They also remember how the Assad regime circumvented many agreements guaranteed by its Russian ally, arrested many civilians and activists in the areas of reconciliation, and put a lot of pressure and a policy of collective punishment against those who agreed to carry out reconciliation to ensure that they would not leave their land.

The file on the Syrian government's chemical crimes is just one of the dozens of violations and other crimes committed by this regime, which the Syrians are trying to remember and remind the world of. These crimes have confirmed clearly that this regime is unreformable and cannot be dealt with as a legitimate administration, as it is a dangerous regime that can generate countless problems and cross all red lines lightly. Therefore, any unilateral political steps or attempts to resolve the Syrian crisis without international adoption is nothing but a death trap for Syrian civilians. Without launching a transitional justice process, holding those involved accountable, and offering Syrians unyielding guarantees of real political change won't be convincing enough for them, as they would rather die drowning at the sea or freezing in the forest during their asylum journey than return under the rule of these criminals.

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[1] [Visualizing chemical weapon attacks in the Middle East](#) , Aljazeera, April 2021.

[2] [Understanding the Syrian Chemical Weapons Complex](#), The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) report, published in May 2020

[3] [Syria Completes Destruction Activities to Render Inoperable Chemical Weapons Production Facilities and Mixing/Filling Plants](#), OPCW, 31/10/2013

[4] [Conclusions on the Outcome of Consultations with the Syrian Arab Republic Regarding its Chemical Weapons Declaration](#) , OPCW,06/07/2016