



Special report on the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council, And the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) Activities

Summary:



The 54th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) activities and events was launched on 11 September and continued until 13 October 2023, in which the Council discussed a range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

On the margins of the session's activities, and in the context of communication and interaction with states concerned with the situation of human rights in Syria, especially the member states of the Human Rights Council and non-governmental organisations (NGO), The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) held several bilateral meetings with representatives of States Permanent Mission in Geneva in addition to international NGOs in consultative status with the Social and Economic Council (ECOSOC).

In cooperation with several partner organizations, SCM also organized a side event on the margins of this session to re-shed light on the situation of Syrian refugees in countries of asylum and the issue of refoulement. The SCM team also prepared and submitted six Oral Interventions in collaboration with several Syrian victim groups and associations (VA) and Syrian civil society organizations (CSO), five of which were on item /3/ and one on item /4/.

It is worth noting that during this session, no resolution regarding the state of human rights in Syria was issued. Furthermore, no reports about the state of human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories have been filed and published under item /7/.

Agenda and Annotations

During this session and according to the Council's standing agenda, the following was addressed:

Under the **2nd item** on the agenda dedicated for the “**Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) and the Reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**”, the Council considered the reports of the human rights situation in Sudan, Afghanistan, the Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nicaragua.

Under the **3rd item**, which focuses on “**the promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural, including the right to development**”, the Council discussed the environmentally sound management and disposal of materials and waste, the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, the issue of preventable maternal mortality and morbidity, as well as human rights and the promotion and protection of economic, social and cultural rights in the context of addressing inequalities in the recovery of the Coronavirus disease pandemic

As for civil and political rights, enforced or involuntary disappearances, truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence, contemporary forms of slavery, the question of the death penalty, equal participation in political and public affairs, freedom of opinion and expression, arbitrary detention, the right to development, the rights of peoples and specific groups and individuals such as indigenous peoples, children, the elderly and migrants were addressed, Combating cyberbullying, countering religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and other topics and issues were also discussed.

Under the **4th item**, which focuses on “**human rights situations requiring the Council's attention**”, the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic was addressed as well as several states, such as Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Belarus, Burundi, Myanmar and Venezuela.

In regards to the remaining agenda items, the **1st item**, “**Organizational and procedural matters**”, included decisions to **extend the mandate for a period of three years for**: the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, the Working Group on People of African Descent, and the Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group with a mandate to further formulate the content of an international regulatory framework in human protection efforts.

In addition to that, there was a **two-year extension** of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, and the **renewal for one year of the mandate** of the independent expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia, the Group of International Experts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation.

It was also decided to **establish a three-year working group on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas**, composed of five independent experts, with balanced geographical representation, appointed by the HRC at its fifty-fifth session.

The **6th item**, on the **universal periodic review**, included consideration of the final results of the review of several countries, including France, the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

It is worth mentioning that no reports or resolutions were submitted under the **7th item** of the agenda of this session, which concerns the “**situation of human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories.**”

The Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic

In an unusual matter, this session did not issue a resolution on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

SCM activities during this session, in cooperation with Syrian civil society organizations and victim associations:



Within its plan and focusing on two basic issues, namely the enforced disappearance and the forced return of refugees, SCM organized several activities on the Margin of this session's activities. These activities included:

1- Visits and Meetings: Holding several meetings (individually and/or in cooperation with partner Syrian and international human rights and Civil Society NGOs, and Victims groups) in the context of communication and interaction with states concerned with the situation of human rights in Syria, especially the member states of the Human Rights Council, and United Nations' mechanism and special procedures, SCM's team held several bilateral meetings with representatives of States Permanent Mission in Geneva, and United Nations' Working Group, in addition to international NGOs in consultative status with the Social and Economic Council (ECOSOC).

2- Oral Interventions: Formulating and presenting oral interventions on several items on the session's agenda, individually and/or in cooperation with partner Syrian human rights and Civil Society NGOs, and Victims groups.

3- A Side Event: Organizing and holding a side event to shed light on the issue of the conditions of Syrian refugees in countries of asylum and the issue of refoulement.

4- Facilitating access: Cooperating with and providing the necessary administrative and logistical support to colleagues from Syrian human rights/ Civil Society NGOs, and Victims groups to secure their access to the "Palais des Nations" in Geneva to hold bilateral meetings, delivering oral interventions, attending HRC sessions, and/or participating in and attending side events on the margin of the HRC activities.

1-Visits and meetings

SCM cooperated with Caesar Families Association, Families for Freedom, Ta'afi Initiative, the Coalition of Families of Persons Kidnapped by ISIS (Massar), We Exist Coalition, the Syrian Civil Society Networking Platform (SCNP) and Refugee International to arrange and carry out two visits to Geneva to hold /5/ official meetings with representatives of States' Permanent missions to the UN in Geneva, UN Working Groups at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and others according to the following:

18 and 19 September 2023 Visits:



A meeting with the Permanent Mission of the European Union to the United Nations in Geneva and representatives of /12/ Permanent Missions of European Countries

In the presence of representatives of SCM's Advocacy and Communication Team, Caesar Families Association, Ta'afi Initiative, and Families for Freedom. The meeting was held at the office of the Permanent Mission of the European Union in Geneva, with the representative of the Permanent Mission of the European Union, and representatives of the Permanent Missions of Cyprus, Austria, Romania, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Sweden, France, and Belgium.

In its interventions, the delegation focused on the issue of enforced disappearance in Syria as one of the humanitarian issues that involve all parties of the conflict, and on the importance of supporting the process of establishing the International Institution on Missing Persons, which came as a result of the efforts of Syrian Victims' Groups and Human Rights/Civil Society NGOs. In addition to answering questions from representatives of state missions regarding the proposals that they intend to share with OHCHR regarding the Independent Institution's terms of reference draft.

A meeting with members of the Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances

The meeting took place in the "Palais des Nations" building in Geneva, with members of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, in the presence of representatives SCM's Advocacy and Communication Team, Caesar Families Association, Ta'afi Initiative, and Families for Freedom.

The delegation discussed the issue of enforced disappearance on two levels: 1- The challenges and fears that families face in communicating with United Nations teams and institutions, and 2- The humanitarian aspect

of the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, which is an aspect that crosses lines of the conflict and divisions.

While the head of the working group expressed the group's full support for Syrian Victims Groups and the establishment of the Independent Institution on missing persons in Syria during and after the establishment phase, and that the working group was assigned by the United Nations as an advisory team in the establishment phase. The group members also provided answers to several questions from the delegation members.

SCM affirmed its full readiness to cooperate and demanded a precise methodology and action plan to work and cooperate on the issue of the forcibly disappearing in Syria, which extends for decades before the year 2011 and includes different nationalities.

21 and 22 September 2023 Visits:



Meeting with the Permanent Mission of the European Union to the United Nations in Geneva

The meeting was held at the office of the Permanent Mission of the European Union in Geneva, in the presence of representatives of the European Union delegation on the one hand, and representatives from SCM, Refugees International, and the Syrian Civil Society Network Platform (SCNP) on the other.

The representative of the European Union mission at the meeting, Mattia Toldo, presented an introduction recalling the previous resolution related to Syria of the Human Rights Council at its 53rd session, then moved on to talk about the conditions of refugees and forced returns, and stressed that the European Union's position adheres to the rights and dignity of refugees.

SCM's representative presented a summary of SCM's work regarding the issues of Syrian refugees and forced returns in neighbouring countries in particular. During his presentation, he referred to the conditions of Syrians in Bulgaria and Greece through testimonies on the treatment of border guards in the two countries, and the detention of women and children in centers, and violence against refugees. Calling for this type of violence and mistreatment to stop and the need for clear European policies to protect refugees.

Refugee International's Representatives addressed the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the absence of identification documents, and the escalation of forced returns to Syria since 2020. They also highlighted the challenges faced by CSOs, and that the policies adopted by countries against refugees cannot fall under the name of "voluntary return", especially with the lack of security in Syria and renewed waves of protest there.

As for SCNP's representative, she pointed out the continuous deterioration of the situation of Syrians in Turkey, and that finding a solution is the responsibility of everyone, especially the relevant United Nations agencies, and not the responsibility of Syrian CSOs alone.

Meeting with representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The meeting was held at the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)'s headquarters in Geneva between Mr. Mohammed Ensour, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department at the Commission, and his two assistants on one hand, and the SCM's, Refugees International, and SCNP representatives on the other.

The delegation talked about the conditions of refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, the discriminatory campaigns they face, and forced return operations into Syrian territory, some of which end with the returnees being handed over to the Syrian government directly, especially those who were returned from Lebanon. They also discussed the conditions of families whose members were separated as a result of the father's forced return to Syria, in which the mother and children to remain in Lebanon or Turkey.

Mr. Ensour spoke about the importance of continuing advocacy activities towards European countries regarding refugee issues, as they are primarily concerned with it, especially in light of donor restlessness and the varying statements that indicate the possibility of some countries stopping providing financial support to refugees.

Meeting with representatives of the Permanent Mission of the United States to the United Nations in Geneva

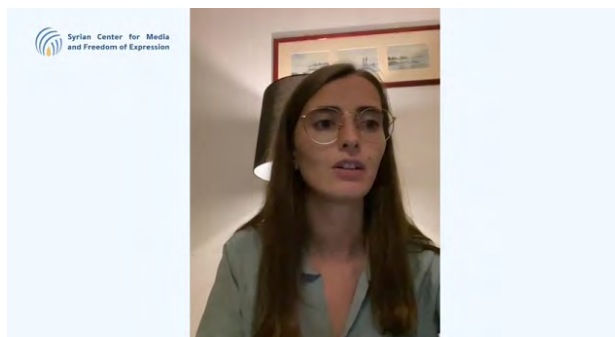
The meeting was held at the "Palais des Nations" in Geneva in the presence of Mr. Robert H. McCutchen, Syrian Affairs Advisor at the Permanent Mission of the United States to the United Nations in Geneva on one hand, and representatives from SCM, Refugees International, and SCNP on the other.

The delegation shed light on the conditions of refugees in Syria's neighboring countries, especially Turkey and Lebanon, where cases of forced returns are escalating and the resulting subsequent violations of the rights of those forcibly returned to Syria such as arbitrary arrest or enforced disappearance. They pointed to the difficulties faced by the Syrians in the absence of deterrent laws that guarantee that they are not used as a political pressure tool by the host countries and the failure of the international community to shoulder its responsibilities towards them as it should.

2-Oral interventions

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence - item /3/ :

In an Oral Intervention via video, during the interactive dialogue session on truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence, prepared and recorded by Ms. Hiba AL-HAMED from Massar - the coalition of families of persons kidnapped by ISIS - Da'esh, Ms AL-HAMED emphasized the demand of families of the coalition that the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, not be merely an item in formal peace procedures in Syria but rather an effective and independent body specialized in uncovering the fate of the missing and capable of providing answers to all families of the missing in Syria, regardless of the party that committed the violation, and including the missing persons inside and outside Syria.



*The intervention was not broadcast during the session due to the limited time granted to CSOs during interactive dialogue sessions.

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation - item /3/:

In a video Oral Intervention prepared and recorded by Ms. Barin SHARAF from Synergy Association For Victims "Hevdesti" to be broadcast during the interactive dialogue session with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water and Sanitation, Ms. SHARAF focused on the use of water as a weapon of war in Syria by multiple parties, and how the Turkish government and its affiliated factions are depriving the population in northeast Syria of their water right, while the Syrian government is targeting and disabling water stations that supply large parts of northwest Syria.

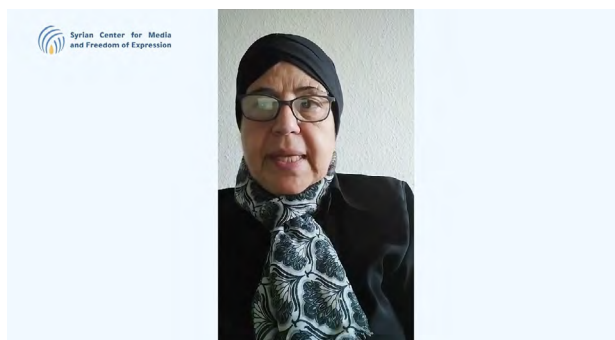
In her intervention, she called for the necessary measures to be taken to pressure the Turkish government, the Syrian government, and other parties to fulfil their responsibilities towards the right of all Syrians to access safe drinking and utility water, and to depoliticize water resources

The intervention was uploaded through the official platform for NGO participation in the HRC 54th session, on behalf of SCM, Synergy Association For Victims "Hevdesti", and the Malva Organization.

*The intervention was not broadcast during the session due to the limited time granted to CSOs during interactive dialogue sessions.

Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention - item /3/ :

In a video intervention prepared and recorded by Ms. Mariam ALHALLAK, head of Caesar Families Association, she emphasized that arbitrary detention - which has been a constant feature of the conflict in Syria - is often a prelude to the loss of victims and their forced disappearance, and in other cases it is the first step towards the deaths of victims due to torture in detention centers. It also focused on the struggle of the families of the victims and survivors to establish an international institution concerned with revealing their fate. Finally, it appealed to the Council and the member states to exert pressure for the release of detainees and the revelation of the fate of those who have forcibly disappeared, putting an end to the suffering endured by thousands of Syrian families. This action will contribute to the path of justice for the victims and the promotion of peace efforts in Syria.



*The intervention was not broadcast during the session due to the limited time granted to CSOs during interactive dialogue sessions.

Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances - item /3/ :

From inside the “Palais des Nations” and during the interactive dialogue session with the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Ms. Bayan REHAN, from Families for Freedom, shared the story of her brother who was arrested and forcibly disappeared at the hands of Syrian government forces. She explained in her intervention, saying: “This is not just the case of my brother; it is the situation of more than a hundred thousand Syrians who have been forcibly disappeared. Their families know nothing about them”.



The intervention concluded by reminding the attendees of their humanitarian duty towards the detainees and disappeared people in Syria, welcoming international efforts to end their suffering, including the UN General Assembly resolution on establishing an Independent Institution for Missing Persons in Syria, and emphasizing that delivering justice to the victims is the only path to restoring civil peace and peace in Syria.

Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination - item /3/ :

Omar AL ASAAD, SCM's Policy, Advocacy and Communication Manager, delivered an Oral Intervention via video during the interactive dialogue session with the Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries, in which he welcomed the Working Group's report and supported the recommendations contained therein. In his intervention, he touched on the literal application of predatory recruitment referred to in the report in the Syrian context, exploiting the deteriorated economic and social



conditions the Syrian youth have been living under by a third-party state to recruit them for proxy wars, and deploying some of them on the frontlines, despite inadequate equipment and training, and the recruitment of Syrian mercenaries by the Russian government in 2022 to fight in Ukraine and Libya. The Turkish government continues to recruit groups of Syrians to fight alongside the Libyan Government of National Accord. He concluded his intervention by calling on the countries involved in recruiting mercenaries in the Syrian conflict to immediately halt recruitment operations and investigate the violations committed by mercenary groups or private military and security companies associated with them.

Interactive dialogue with the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria - item /4/ :

From inside the “Palace of Nations” in Geneva and during the interactive dialogue session with the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Mr. Issam KHATIB, Deputy Director of SCM, delivered his Oral Intervention commending the efforts of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry in monitoring and documenting the human rights situation in Syria and emphasizes the importance of supporting the recommendations outlined in its latest report. Mr. KHATIB also called for all possible efforts to urge the Syrian government and all parties to the conflict to immediately cease indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects, halt arbitrary arrests, torture, mistreatment, forced disappearances, and sexual violence in various detention center and to release all those arbitrarily detained. And he reiterated his appeal to the Council to call again on the Syrian government to grant the Investigation Commission and other United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms and Experts, and Civil Society Activists free access to all parts of the country to monitor and document the human rights situation.



3-A Side Event



SCM, We Exist coalition, Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF), Syrian Civil Society Networks Platform (SCNP) and Refugees International organized a side event titled **“The Rights of Syrian Refugees in Refoulement Case”** to shed light on the situation of Syrian refugees in asylum countries and the issue of refoulement.

The side event was held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on the 22nd of September 2023, and was facilitated by **Rand Sukhaila**, coordinator of SCNP. The speakers’ panel of the event were: **Nizar Ayoub**, founder and director of the Arab Center for Human Rights in the Golan (Al-Marsad) and coordinator of the United Nations mechanisms at SCM; **Wadih Al-Asmar**, human rights and social activist and co-founder and president of the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH); and **Jesse Marks**, Senior Advocate on Middle East Issues at Refugees International.

The event discussed the definition of refoulement, its types, and government responsibilities, the human rights situation in Syria, the risks of refoulement for Syrians, and the rights of Syrians within the refugee host countries and the Syrian diaspora. It also sheds light on the risks of the host countries’ governments’ decisions and the repercussions for the Syrians’ situation and on the practices of countries that host Syrians, refoulements, and its impact on those who have been forcibly returned and their families.



A Side Event to the Human Rights Council 54th Session On

“The Rights of Syrian Refugees in Refoulement Case”

Date: Friday 22 September 2023. Language: Arabic, with instant interpretation to English.
Time: 16:00 CET (Geneva). Duration: 60 minutes (one hour).
Location: Palais des Nations in Geneva, Room No. XXV

Speakers

Nizar Ayoub

Advocate/ Founder & Director of The Arab Centre for Human Rights in the Golan (Al-Marsad). UN Mechanisms Coordinator at the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM).

Wadih Al-Asmar

Human Rights & Social Activist, co-founder & President of Lebanese Centre for Human Rights (CLDH), and co-founder & president of Euromed Rights.

Jesse Marks

Senior advocate for the Middle East at Refugees International.

Moderator

Rand Sukhaila

Coordinator of the Syrian Civil Society Network’s Platform (SCNP).



4-Securing access

SCM cooperated with partner Syrian Victims Groups and Human Rights/ Civil Society NGOs to implement activities during the HRC 54th session, which took place between September 11 to October 13, 2023.

Due to the in-person nature of this session, SCM Provided the necessary administrative and logistical support to individuals from partner NGOs and associations to secure their access to the “Palais des Nations” in Geneva, to hold bilateral meetings, give oral interventions, attend HRC sessions, and/or participating in side events on the margins of the session’s activities. In addition to obtaining /15/ entry permits to the Palais des Nations and temporary accreditations.



Special thanks

SCM would like to extend its sincere gratitude to all the partner organizations, associations, and coalitions for their cooperation in planning and implementing the aforementioned activities, and in particular thanks to:

Families for Freedom

Synergy Association For Victims “Hevdestî”

Caesar Families Association

Ta’afi Initiative

Massar - the coalition of families of persons kidnapped by ISIS - Da’esh

Syrian Civil Society Networks Platform (SCNP)

We Exist Coalition

Refugees International

The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)

Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF)

Malva Organization

