



Special Report on the 56th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, And the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) Activities

Summary:



The activities and events of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council were launched from 18 June to 12 July 2024. During this session, the Council discussed a range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) organized a webinar on the sidelines of the session to launch the second edition of the report “[Shadow Armies](#)” on the use of mercenaries during the conflict in Syria. Additionally, it prepared and delivered seven oral interventions independently and in collaboration with several victim associations, groups, and Syrian civil society organizations. Six of these interventions were submitted under Item 3, and one under Item 4.

Agenda and Annotations

During this session, according to the permanent agenda of the Council, the following were addressed:

Under **Item 1** on the agenda concerning “**Organizational and Procedural Matters**”, the council discussed the “Date and venue”, the “Composition of the Human Rights Council”, and the “Bureau of the Human Rights Council” for this session, as well as the “Selection and Appointment of Mandate Holders”.

While under **Item 2** of the agenda dedicated to “**The Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**”, -and in accordance with the President’s Statement [PRST OS/17/1](#) dated 8 December 2023-, no general discussion sessions were held during this session. Consequently, the Council postponed the consideration of reports and oral updates on several issues to the next session (the 57th session of the Council). These issues include the promotion and protection of human rights in Nicaragua, the human rights situation in Sudan, Iran, the Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, Eritrea, and Afghanistan, as well as ensuring respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel. Additionally, the Council deferred the consideration of the annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and the report on the efficiency of the Human Rights Council in addressing financial constraints and time limitations.

Under **Item 3**, which focuses on “**The Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development**”, no general discussion sessions were held during this session, according to the President’s Statement [PRST OS/17/1](#) dated 8 December 2023. As a result, the Council postponed the consideration of reports and oral updates on several issues to the next session (the 57th session of the Council). During the current session, the Council reviewed only the annual reports requested by special procedures.

Regarding “**economic, social, and cultural rights**”, the Council reviewed the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

Regarding “**Civil and Political Rights**”, the Council reviewed the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to peaceful assembly and association, the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, and the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

Regarding “**Rights of Peoples and Specific Groups and Individuals**”, among the issues and special procedures discussed during this session, the Council heard the oral report of the High Commissioner on the participation of persons with disabilities in sports and the collection of statistics and data. In the context of eliminating discrimination against women and girls and according to Council resolution 30/6, the Council dedicated a full day to discussing human rights related to women. The Council reviewed the High Commissioner’s report on human rights challenges and new practices related to international and regional cooperation efforts, the implementation of laws, policies, programs, and sub-national initiatives aimed at combating female genital mutilation outside the country and across borders. The Council also reviewed the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, on “the specific ways girls are affected by violence,” and the report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls on “the specific forms of discrimination faced by girls.”

And regarding “**Human Rights Related to Internally Displaced Persons**”, the Council reviewed the annual report and recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. The Council also reviewed the annual reports of the former and current

Independent Experts on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, and three reports by the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children.

Under **Item 4**, which focuses on “**Human Rights Situations that require the Council’s Attention**”, the human rights situation in several countries was addressed, including Belarus, Burundi, Myanmar, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

The human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic was also addressed during the oral update session of the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI Syria). The Council listened to the oral update requested from the Commission under Council resolution 22/55. The member states concerned with the human rights situation delivered a joint statement during the dialogue session.

Under **item 5**, on “**Human Rights Bodies and Mechanisms**”, the Council listened to a presentation of the report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises and presentation of the High Commissioner’s reports on Operations of the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the Universal Periodic Review and the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review.

No general debate was held pursuant to the President’s statement PRST OS/17/1 of 8 December 2023. The Council will consider the reports and oral updates at the next session (57th session of the Council).

Under **Item 6**, concerning the “**Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of States**”, the Working Group on the UPR held its 45th session from 22 January to 2 February 2022. During its 56th session, the Council reviewed and adopted the outcomes of the UPRs for the following countries: Saudi Arabia, Senegal, China, Nigeria, Mauritius, Mexico, Jordan, Malaysia, the Central African Republic, Monaco, Belize, Chad, Congo, and Malta. According to the President’s Statement [PRST OS/17/1](#) dated 8 December 2023, no general discussion sessions were held during this session. Consequently, the Council will consider the Working Group’s operations regarding the Voluntary Fund for Participation in the UPR and the Voluntary Fund for Financial and Technical Assistance in Implementing the UPR.

No reports were submitted under **Item 7** and **Item 8** of this session’s agenda, which concern “**The Human Rights Situation in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories**” and “**The Follow-up and Implementation of The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action**”. Therefore, no general discussion sessions or oral dialogues were allocated for these items.

Regarding **Item 9**, which focuses on “**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action](#)**”, the Council reviewed the report of the Special Rapporteur on combating the glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and other practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, which was commissioned in the previous session. The Council also reviewed the annual report on all activities under this mandate.

Human Rights Council Resolution on “The Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic”

No resolution was issued regarding the human rights situation in Syria. The member states of the Core Group responsible for drafting resolutions on the human rights situation in Syria delivered a joint oral statement during the interactive dialogue session with the International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria.

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) in collaboration with the Syrian Legal Development Program (SLDP), Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), and International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), submitted a letter to the member states of the Core Group. This letter urged the penholder state and members of the Core Group to prioritize the issue of non-refoulement in their joint oral statement during the interactive dialogue with the International Commission of Inquiry (COI). The focus of the letter included:

- * Reiterate that individuals returning to Syria have been arbitrarily detained, tortured, forcibly disappeared, and killed as a result of torture or following extrajudicial and arbitrary executions, as documented by UN bodies and international organizations.
- * Reiterate that the principle of non-refoulement is a binding customary rule of international law that all States are bound to oblige to.
- * Reiterating that no part of Syria is currently safe for return, as already documented by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI Syrian) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The penholder state in the Core Group responded that the member states recognize the importance of this issue and will work to highlight it in the resolution on the human rights situation at the next session of the Council (the 57th session).

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



SCM undertook several activities on the sidelines of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council. These activities included:

1. Oral Interventions:

Drafting and delivering seven oral interventions on various agenda items of the session, either individually or in collaboration with Syrian human rights organizations, civil society, and partner victim associations and groups.

2. A Side Event:

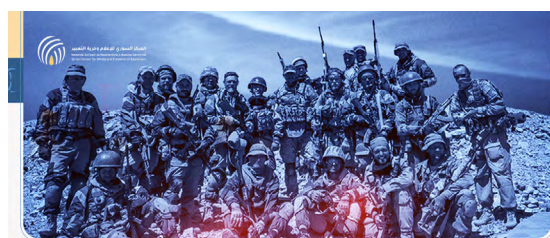
Organizing a side event to launch the second edition of the “[Shadow Armies](#)” report, which addresses the issue of mercenary use. During the side event, speakers provided an in-depth analysis of foreign fighting groups in Syria that qualify as mercenary forces, discussed private security and military companies, and examined their roles in armed conflicts, particularly in the Syrian conflict, and their impact on prolonging the war and obstructing settlement opportunities and conflict resolutions.

3. Facilitating Access:

Collaborating and providing the necessary administrative and logistical support to colleagues from Syrian human rights and civil society organizations, and partner victim associations and groups to ensure their access to deliver oral interventions, and/or participate in and attend side events on the sidelines of the session activities.



UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré



“Shadow Armies (2)” report



1-Oral Interventions

Oral interventions during the interactive dialogues at the 56th session of the Human Rights Council:

1. Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), the Syrian Legal Development Program (SLDP), and the Charter for Truth and Justice (CTJ) delivered an oral intervention addressing the rise in discrimination and hate speech against Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and the alarming increase in illegal deportations. The intervention called on the Council to remind states of their obligations towards Syrian refugees under international law.



The intervention was recorded by lawyer Anas DELLO, a co-founder of the Charter for Truth and Justice, but was not broadcast due to the limited time allocated to civil society. It was saved to the session archive and shared with the relevant special procedures

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

2. Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and the Syrian Legal Development Program (SLDP) presented an oral intervention expressing their joint concerns with the Special Rapporteur's about the continued lack of fair trials, judicial independence, and the rule of law in Syria. They urged the Council to press the Syrian government to repeal several laws and decrees that undermine judicial independence.



The intervention was recorded by lawyer Mouhanad SHARABATI, from the Syrian Legal Development Program, but was not broadcast due to the limited time allocated to civil society. It was saved to the session archive and shared with the relevant special procedures.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

3. Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and the Syrian Forum-USA (SF) delivered a joint oral intervention urging the Special Rapporteur to address the educational challenges faced by internally displaced Syrians and refugees in neighboring countries in her upcoming report. They emphasized the crucial role of education in early recovery, social stability, and peacebuilding.



The intervention was recorded by Tasnim HITTO, from the Syrian Forum- USA, but was not broadcast due to the limited time allocated to civil society. It was saved to the session archive and shared with the relevant special procedures.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

4. Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) highlighted the need to abolish exceptional courts in Syria (including the Anti-Terrorism Court), halt executions, release arbitrarily detained individuals, and disclose the archives of military field courts.



The intervention was recorded by Omar ALASAAD, SCM's Policies, Advocacy, and Communication Manager, but was not broadcast due to the limited time allocated to civil society.

It was saved to the session archive and shared with the relevant special procedures.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

5. Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) called on member states to pressure parties to the conflict in Syria, especially the Syrian government, to immediately cease all forms of restrictions on freedom of expression and to repeal legislation and decrees that contravene the right to freedom of expression and media freedoms.

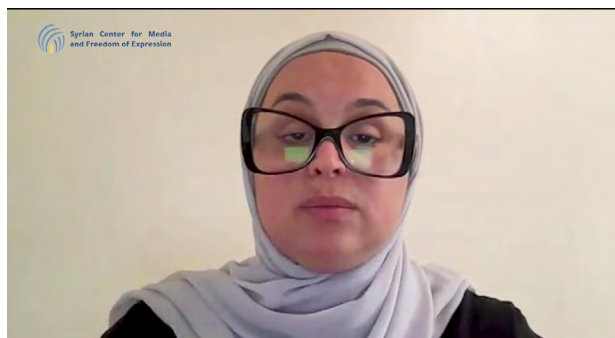


The intervention was recorded by Omar ALASAAD, SCM's Policies, Advocacy, and Communication Manager, but was not broadcast due to the limited time allocated to civil society. It was saved to the session archive and shared with the relevant special procedures.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

6. Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls - Item 3:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and Release Me delivered a joint oral intervention asserting that ending entrenched discrimination against women in Syria requires a comprehensive political solution under UN Security Council resolutions and gender-sensitive transitional justice mechanisms. They called for the end of legal and institutional violations impacting women before and during the conflict.



The intervention was recorded by Thuraya HEJAZI, Director of Release Me, but was not broadcast during the session due to time constraints for civil society organizations. The recording has been archived and distributed to the relevant special procedures.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

7. Interactive Dialogue with the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria - Item 4:

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) delivered an oral intervention praising the Commission's efforts in justice and accountability for human rights violations in Syria. It reiterated that the first step towards resolving the crisis and achieving safe, voluntary, and dignified return for Syrian refugees is holding all perpetrators of violations accountable.



The intervention was presented by Omar ALASAAD, SCM's Policies, Advocacy, and Communication Manager, and was shown during the dialogue session with the Commission on the 3rd of July 2024.

*Video recording of the intervention can be accessed [here](#).

2-A side Event

Side Event to Launch the second edition of the "Shadow Armies" Report



"Shadow Armies (2)" report

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) organized a side event to launch the "Shadow Armies 2" report in conjunction with the 56th session of the Human Rights Council. The event was held virtually via Zoom on Tuesday, 18 June 2024.

Moderated by Bassam ALAHMAD, Co-Founder & Executive Director of Syrians For Truth and Justice-STJ,

The panel featured:

Dr. Ayman Hoda MENEM, a Syrian Academic & Researcher, holds a doctorate in constitutional law. Legal Office Manager at the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, author of the report.

Dr. Iva VUKUSIC, Historian and a genocide scholar. Assistant Professor in International History at Utrecht University, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London.

Mohanad HAGE ALI, Deputy Director for Research Affairs at the Malcolm Kerr-Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut.

The side event, conducted in both Arabic and English, focused on introducing the concept of mercenaries, explaining the legal framework surrounding mercenaries and mercenary groups in Syria, and discussing the role of security-military companies in Syria, with particular emphasis on Russian companies.

3-Facilitating Access

During the 56th session of the Human Rights Council, SCM provided necessary administrative support to colleagues from partner Syrian human rights and civil society organizations to ensure their access to the Palais des Nations in Geneva. This included securing Access permits/temporary accreditations for /8/ NGO representatives to:

- * Hold bilateral meetings, deliver oral interventions, attend session meetings and participate in and attend side events on the margin of the HRC56.

Special Thanks

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

[Families for Truth And Justice \(FTJ\)](#)

[Release me Organisation](#)

[Syrians for Truth and Justice \(STJ\)](#)

[Syrian Legal Development Program \(SLDP\)](#)

[The Syrian Forum -USA \(SF\)](#)

Truth and Justice Charter (TJC)



