

French Magistrates Issue Arrest Warrants for Syria's President Al-Assad and Three Associates for Chemical Weapons Attacks

PARIS, November 15, 2023—French criminal investigative judges have issued arrest warrants for Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, his brother Maher al-Assad, and two other senior officials over the use of banned chemical weapons against civilians in the town of Douma and the district of Eastern Ghouta in August 2013, in attacks which killed more than 1,000 people.

“The French judiciary's issuance of arrest warrants against the head of state, Bashar al-Assad, and his associates constitutes a historic judicial precedent. It is a new victory for the victims, their families, and the survivors and a step on the path to justice and sustainable peace in Syria,” said lawyer Mazen Darwish, founder and director general of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM).

He added, “The investigative judges in France have had their say regarding this type of crime; no one is immune. And we expect the French authorities to respect the victims' suffering and rights along with the decision of the French judiciary.”

In addition to Bashar al-Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic and head of the armed forces, and Maher al-Assad, *de facto* leader of the 4th Armored Division, warrants have been issued against General Ghassan Abbas, Director of Branch 450 of the Syrian [Scientific Studies and Research Center](#) (SSRC), and General Bassam al-Hassan, Presidential Advisor for Strategic Affairs and liaison officer between the Presidential Palace and the SSRC.

These arrest warrants refer to the legal qualifications of complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The judicial action by the French investigative judges follows a criminal investigation into the two chemical weapons attacks in August 2013 by the Specialized Unit for Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes of the Paris Judicial Court.

The investigation was opened in response to a criminal complaint based on the testimony of survivors of the August 2013 attacks, filed in March 2021 by the [Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression](#) (SCM) and by Syrian victims. The complaint was supported by the [Syrian Archive](#) and the [Open Society Justice Initiative](#), which together

with [Civil Rights Defenders](#) have joined the investigation as civil parties, as well as members of the Association of the Victims of Chemical Weapons (AVCW).

In addition to extensive first-hand testimonies from numerous victims, the criminal complaint, which takes the form of a civil party application, contained a thorough analysis of the Syrian military chains of command, the Syrian government's chemical weapons program, and hundreds of items of documentary evidence, including photos and videos. "With these arrest warrants, France is taking a firm stand that the horrific crimes that happened ten years ago cannot and will not be left unaccounted for. We see France, and hopefully other countries soon, taking the strong evidence that we have gathered over years and finally demanding criminal responsibility from the highest-level officials," said Hadi al Khatib, founder of [Syrian Archive](#) and Managing Director of the project's host organisation, [Mnemonic](#).

Steve Kostas, Senior Managing Lawyer at the Open Society Justice Initiative, noted that "this is the first time a sitting head of state has been the subject of an arrest warrant in another country for war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is a historic moment—with this case, France has an opportunity to establish the principle that there is no immunity for the most serious international crimes, even at the highest level."

"We hope that the arrest warrants will send a message loud and clear to the survivors, and everyone affected by the attacks and other atrocity crimes in Syria, that the world has not forgotten them and that the fight for justice will continue." said Aida Samani, Senior Legal Adviser at Civil Rights Defenders.

The principle of extraterritorial jurisdiction can be used by courts to investigate and prosecute international atrocity crimes committed on foreign territory under certain circumstances.

In other Syrian cases, the Paris court's Specialized Unit for Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes has previously issued seven arrest warrants in different distinct cases, for seven other senior officials in the Syrian regime, including this March for the current head of Syria's National Security Bureau, Ali Mamlouk.

In October 2020, SCM, Syrian Archive, and the Open Society Justice Initiative filed a similar complaint before the Office of the German Federal Public Prosecutor, on the Syrian government's sarin attacks on al Ghouta in 2013 and on Khan Shaykhun in 2017. A further legal complaint has been filed by the three NGOs in April 2021 in Sweden, together with Civil Rights Defenders. Together, the French, German and Swedish complaints include evidence from the most detailed investigations carried out into these attacks to date.

The NGO civil parties and several victims in the current case are represented by Paris-based lawyers Jeanne Sulzer and Clémence Witt. Additional victims--members of the Association of the Victims of Chemical Weapons--are represented by Clémence Bectarte.

About the NGOs

The [Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression](#) (SCM) was founded in Damascus and registered in France in 2004. At the beginning of 2011, the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) was launched as one of SCM's projects. With its headquarters located in Eastern Ghouta, the VDC team--led by lawyer Razan Zaitouneh--was documenting the chemical attacks when the sarin chemical attacks occurred in 2013. In 2016, SCM launched its Strategic Litigation Project (SLP) to ensure that there is no impunity in Syria and to protect victims' rights from all parties.

[Mnemonic](#) is a global organisation promoting human rights and accountability through the preservation and verification of online open-source digital information. Mnemonic began its work when the [Syrian Archive](#) project was established in 2014, working to preserve digital information of the Syrian conflict: images, videos, and other postings that are invaluable historical artifacts and potential evidence of international crimes and human rights abuses.

The [Open Society Justice Initiative](#) is the strategic litigation program of the Open Society Foundations. Its lawyers, advocates, and staff specialize in documenting human rights violations, building complex cases, and pursuing strategic litigation in support of the broader mission and values of Open Society.

[Civil Rights Defenders](#) is a politically and religiously independent human rights organization based in Sweden, who partners with and supports human rights defenders who work in some of the world's most repressive regions. Through legal means, Civil Rights Defenders works to hold perpetrators of core international crimes accountable and to achieve justice for the victims of such crimes.

Members of the [Association of Victims of Chemical Weapons](#) (AVCW), which is a group of victims, families of victims, and survivors of chemical attacks allegedly committed by Bashar al-Assad's regime against unarmed civilians, that aims to achieve the prosecution of all those responsible.

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