



# Event Report

## Indiscriminate attacks on civilians as a war tactic in Syria and Ukraine

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مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الانساني  
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) hosted Fadel Abdelghany, Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and Oleksandra Matviichuk, Head of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, for the symposium, **“Indiscriminate attacks on civilians as a war tactic in Syria and Ukraine.”**

Moderated by a former U.N. official and current researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Dr. Aicha Elbasri, the discussion focused on the use of indiscriminate attacks as a warfare tactic in Syria and Ukraine and possible avenues for pursuing accountability for war crimes. It saw the wide attendance of diplomats, humanitarian practitioners, scholars, and students.

Following a brief introduction to the event, Abdelghany began by making clear that indiscriminate attacks violate the international obligation for conflict parties to refrain from attacking civilian targets. Though all conflict parties in Syria are responsible for civilian casualties, the Syrian government and its allies are responsible for over 70% of them based on data gathered by the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

He urged for the establishment of an independent investigatory mechanism under the International Criminal Court into war crimes committed by the Syrian government, Russia, and other parties – a proposal that has thus far been blocked by Russia’s permanent membership on the Security Council.

Oleksandra Matviichuk provided an account of the three main trends of Russia’s indiscriminate attacks in Ukraine: the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure using human shields; the imposition of sieges, most notably in Mariupol; and carrying out arbitrary killings and forced disappearances in order to undermine Ukrainians’ ability to peacefully resist. These trends make evident the fact that Russia is using war crimes as a method of illegal intimidation in order to occupy Ukraine by crushing the spirit of its people.

She emphasised that, based on her extensive experience working in international and regional legal organizations, the law “does not work” when it comes to Russia.

Following the panel discussion, the Ambassador of Ukraine to Qatar, Andrii Kuzmenko, remarked that Russia’s outdated military tactics and weaponry systems lack the sophistication to discriminate between civilian and military targets, and that the state should be subject to necessary sanctions. The Charge d’Affaires of the Syrian Embassy in Qatar, Bilal Turkiah, underscored the criminality of the violence executed by the Syrian government in response to the peaceful Syrian protests in 2011 and that, in the years since, accountability for war crimes should be extended to Russia’s military intervention that provided a lifeline to the Syrian regime.

In a Q&A session with a live audience, the panel engaged with the audience on questions surrounding: the effectiveness of sanctions; pathways for justice in a context marked by the decreasing significance of international institutions such as the U.N.; comparisons between Syria and Palestine in terms of war crimes and the lack of accountability; the inability of the



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deconfliction mechanisms to stop the targeting of civilian infrastructure; and hope for official accountability.

Overall, the session highlighted the failure of international legal mechanisms and the international community more generally to effectively put an end to the employment of indiscriminate attacks in both contexts, including by punishing its main perpetrators, the Syrian regime, Russia, and its allies in Ukraine. Though evidence for the crimes and the perpetrators is clear, achieving accountability for the systematic indiscriminate targeting in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere requires that international legal mechanisms be creatively reformed in order to fulfil their responsibility of providing justice.

To that end, Dr. Elbasri cited the most recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967, which stated that the crimes committed by Israel along with the U.N. Security Council's refusal to enforce its own resolutions is responsible for the complete lack of accountability that has created the system of apartheid in Palestine today.

The conversation is available to watch in English and Arabic on CHS' [website](#) and on its [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [YouTube](#) pages.