

# Survivor guide on responding to chemical denialists



**Don't  
Suffocate Truth**  
لا تخنقوا الحقيقة

## **The impact of denial on survivors**

Denial has negative effects, not only on achieving accountability and justice, but also on the lives of survivors and families of victims, and their ability for psychological recovery and social integration. Survivors and families of victims are often overcome by an acute sense of betrayal and injustice. Consequently, they feel isolated from society and the world, and they refrain from appearing in public, which in turn deprives them of opportunities to reintegrate into society and develop their abilities. This is why our campaign, Do Not Suffocate Truth, has decided to confront the systematic denial aimed at distorting the truth and exonerating the Syrian regime and its Russian ally, from accountability and justice. We will do that by previewing the most common, overt or covert, denialist questions, and answering them one by one.

## **What is denial?**

Genocide and massacre denial is the attempt to negate the occurrence of systematic violations of human rights and the commission of war crimes, or the attempt to mitigate their brutality or scale. Denial is an integral part of the perpetration of genocide. Covert planning for genocide includes broadcasting propaganda throughout its enactment, the destruction of evidence and the intimidation of witnesses after the perpetration of mass killings, and lastly, the denial of the occurrence of genocide itself.

Denial may be either direct (denying that an attack took place), or indirect (framing other parties; casting doubt on the number of victims, the scale and form of the attack, or the accuracy of the available information).

## Denial in the Syrian context

The Syrian regime used chemical weapons, with the support of its Russian ally, 222 times. It denied committing those massacres by:

- 1- Absolutely denying the occurrence of those attacks;
- 2- Accusing the opposition of carrying out those attacks;
- 3- Doubting the available information about the attacks;
- 4- Doubting the parties that collect and analyze evidence and information.

The Syrian regime and its Russian denied the occurrence of these attacks and attempted to distort and stifle the truth. Moreover, they sought after each chemical weapon attack to hide, tamper, or remove evidence of their crimes. To achieve this, they used several means, including:

- 1- Tampering with evidence directly and indirectly;
- 2- Obstructing the work of commissions of inquiry;
- 3- Intimidating the witnesses.
- 4- Using false testimonies.
- 5- Spreading disinformation.



## Key questions faced by survivors

### 1- Absolute denial

#### **"Chemical weapons were not used in Syria"**

The Syrian civil war is the one of the most documented in history, thanks to the internet and its information flow, as well as the emergence of documentation and verification tools, beside the courageous and continuous Syrian efforts to document. Tens of professional media and human rights organizations reported the usage of chemical weapons in detail, including the number of victims, testimonies of survivors, and sample materials that were transferred and examined in laboratories. It is impossible that all of these highly detailed and overlapping news articles are completely fabricated.

#### **"The Syrian government cannot use chemical weapons against its citizens"**

This statement assumes that the Syrian government is elected or works in the interests of its people, whereas the de facto rule consists of a web of intelligence agencies that control all state bodies, managed by a number of influential families and billionaire kleptocrats. The "Syrian government" is only present as a facade for these intelligence agencies. Its relationship with citizens is entirely based on intimidation, humiliation, and surveillance in times of peace, and detention, displacement, and genocide in times of war.

#### **"Russian soldiers visited the site of the alleged attack and found nothing"**

An allegation made by a military party to the Syrian civil war is inadmissible, especially when it concerns war crimes committed by its ally, the Syrian regime. Statements made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state-controlled media outlets serve as the diplomatic and information front of the Russian intervention in Syria. They are proven false by the photos, clips, and documented reports and numbers available. Moreover, there is evidence that Russia has engaged in threats and abuse against witnesses to force them to confirm its official accounts.

## 2- Doubting the responsibility of the Syrian regime for the chemical attacks

### **"How was it determined which party is responsible for the chemical attacks?"**

The reports of media and human rights organizations, international organizations such as the UN and Human Rights Watch, as well as US and French intelligence agencies, and the reports of the international investigation committees, in addition to the reports of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, all confirm that the Syrian regime is solely responsible for the chemical attacks. No counter-claims have been reasonably made to prove otherwise.

### **"Terrorists are responsible for the chemical attacks"**

"Terrorists" is a vague term, often used to sow confusion and spread false information. Most opposition factions consist of local fighters from the areas they live and combat in. It is impossible for them to launch an attack on this scale against their own families and neighbors.

### **"The opposition used chemical weapons as catalyst for external intervention"**

This is pure speculation. There is no solid evidence that any opposition faction has ever used chemical weapons. Moreover, the armed opposition does not have the military, scientific, or technical ability to execute a chemical attack, let alone remove all evidence for their responsibility for it, and then fabricate all the available data denoting the Syrian regime's responsibility.

### **"What interest does the Syrian regime have in using internationally prohibited weapons?"**

The Syrian regime has indiscriminately targeted civilians throughout the war. It has used chemical weapons to target shelters, cellars, and tunnels, aiming to inflict mass casualties, displace entire populations, and force opposition factions to retreat. The Syrian regime tried to take control of the area it targeted in the chemical attack, striving to remove any evidence.

However, it failed numerous times, and its crimes were uncovered. It is in the interest of the Syrian regime to test international responses gradually, and to repeat such an attack while sowing doubts everywhere, thus making mass destruction normal news in Syria, thereby expanding its military options.

### 3- Doubting the available information

#### **"How was the presence of chemical agents confirmed?"**

This is confirmed with the admission of Russia, which tried to deny responsibility for the Syrian regime while confirming that a chemical attack had taken place. Several reports were issued by the United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism, all of which confirmed the existence of chemical agents. Yet, the Russian delegate to the Security Council continued to question the results of the investigation, stressing that the party responsible for the crime could not be ascertained. His aim was to deflect the conversation further from any accountability.

In addition, according to the testimonies of doctors, paramedics, and survivors, the symptoms reported by Ghouta residents and doctors to Human Rights Watch included:

Headache, nausea, the spread of the smell of vinegar and rotten eggs, the blueness of the bodies, the emission of a smell like cooking gas, redness and itching in the eyes, unconsciousness, hallucinations among the survivors, suffocation, muscle spasms and foam coming out of the mouths and noses of the victims, which occur as a result of poisoning with nerve gas.

In addition to the symptoms, according to the testimonies of witnesses, the missiles used in the attack were unusual, as no sound of explosion of these chemical shells could be heard, and no obvious damage was caused to buildings.

### **"Why were the numbers of victims and survivors not consistent from one attack to another?"**

There are many difficulties related to collecting and documenting information and matching testimonies from different sources, not to mention overcoming the repression practiced by the Syrian regime and the policies of sowing doubts and intimidating witnesses practiced especially by Russia. However, the intersection of information indicates high credibility and great research effort in most reports, contrasted with the repression and suspicion of the Syrian regime and its lack of providing any reliable information.

### **"These are old photos or numbers"**

The investigation committees studied the attack and examined all relevant information - such as documents, recordings, photos, and satellite documentation. The Guardian newspaper published a French intelligence report that includes 47 videos, filmed by satellite, of the moment the chemical missiles launched from the areas of the Syrian regime towards Eastern Ghouta. The investigation committees spoke with as many witnesses as possible, visited the places of the attack, took environmental and biological samples, and described the crime scene, from the site to the buildings, to the temperature and even wind speed at the moment of the attack. They analyzed the shape of the shells and their potential for carrying chemical agents, comparing witness accounts with available photos and clips, analyzed the positions of the regime and opposition forces, and looked at medical evidence such as reception records, personnel, first aid kits, and medical samples.

### **"The parties that collect and analyze evidence and information have a political agenda"**

This claim ignores that it is itself politicized, attempting to play impartial and apolitical, yet implicitly claiming that objective truth is untenable. It is part of a Russian obfuscation strategy that aims to impede the accountability process and promote impunity. This is, by definition, a form of politicization. No attempt is made by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally to gather evidence and information, excel their infliction of repression, intimidation, and suspicion. On the other hand, residents of targeted areas are documenting the truth,

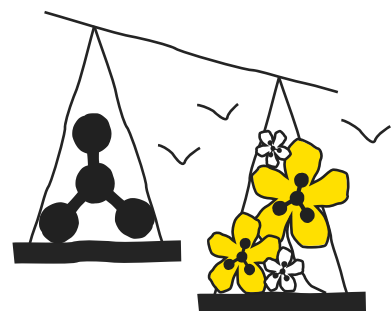
defending themselves against crimes and impunity by conveying what has befallen them. As for international bodies, they have no direct political and economic interest in Syria.

## Conclusion:

It is important to remember that we are the rightful, that we are survivors of the use of unlimited and exterminating violence. We do not have to enter into an argument about our right to life. We do not have to turn to technical experts in the symptoms of the use of chemical weapons and types of gases, in order to be the rightful owners and campaigners for justice.

It is important that we seek to spread the truth, but it is also important for us as survivors to be protected, and not to allow the dilution of human rights violations to turn them into arguable matters. Our right to life is indisputable.

There are no people anywhere in the world where the use of chemical weapons against them is a matter of debate and viewpoint.





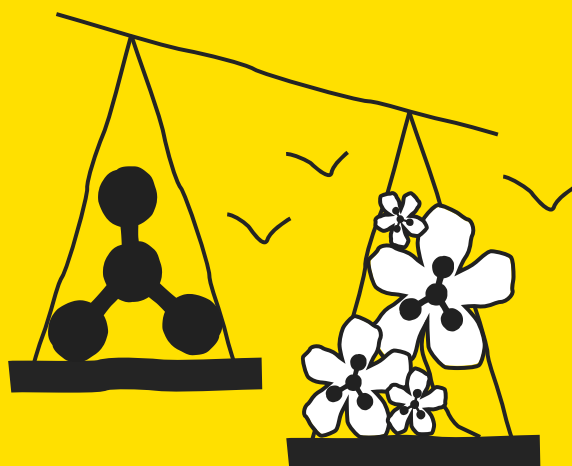
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