

## **UN Watch - a moral authority for human rights and democracy**

### **Syria Exhibition at the Washington Holocaust Museum**

In January, I had the good fortune to participate in this year's UN Watch Summit for Human Rights and Democracy in Geneva as the political representative of WIZO Germany.

The event takes place on a yearly basis shortly before the foreign ministers conference at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. The aim of UN Watch is to raise awareness about current human rights violations taking place throughout the world.

Each year, dissidents from different countries are invited to present the situation in their respective countries. The aim being to increase the pressure on the UNHRC and remind member states of their obligations to protect and promote civil rights worldwide



Owing to its composition and voting behavior, often rated as partisan, the UN Human Rights Council is highly controversial. The UN Human Rights Council has been criticized by some for not acting effectively to protect human rights. States accused of human rights abuses provide mutual protection in the Commission. Many Council resolutions seem to be politically motivated and are not passed from the perspective of human rights. To date, for example, Israel has been condemned in 78 resolutions. There have thus been more resolutions against one particular country than against all other member countries.

It was against this background that the UN Watch was founded in 1993 as a non-governmental organization (NGO). The activities and decisions of the UN should be critically examined and the general public should be made aware of the shortcomings of the UNHCR.

The UN Watch summit was opened with a speech by Hillel Neuer, Executive Director. He briefly described the background of the UNHRC, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year

following Eleanor Roosevelt's first Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Hillel Neuer pointed out that the UNHRC has, up till today, not passed any resolutions against human rights violations by states such as China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Russia.



Dissidents, activists and former political prisoners from China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Turkey, Venezuela and Vietnam were invited to report on the current situation in their respective countries at this year's UN Watch meeting.

I was deeply moved by each of the excellently presented speeches at the conference. The respective presentations conveyed to me quite clearly the struggle and suffering involved with each particular individual situation. Each one was a highly impressive example of the courage required to stand up for press freedom and human dignity and, hopefully, to liberate future generations from the scourge of oppression and war.

Out of all of the highly inspiring discussions that took place there, I would like to highlight in particular the discussion with the Iranian-Canadian Newsweek journalist, film producer and human rights activist Maziar Bahari.

Mr. Bahari spent 118 days incarcerated in Evin prison Tehran, one of the world's most brutal and notorious detention centres. Mr. Bahari has written The New York Times Best Seller, 'Then They Came for Me' based on his experience there. His account is the basis for Jon Stewart's 2014 film 'Rosewater'. During his detention, Mr. Bahari was also interrogated for criticizing the Holocaust denial in his film as well as his Jewish connections.

Mr. Bahari is currently working on a film about the Washington Holocaust Museum and the exhibition 'Syria - Please don't forget us'. In his film titled '82 Names', produced in cooperation with the Holocaust Museum, he tells the story of Mansour Omari, a Syrian human rights activist, detained and tortured by the Assad government.

Mr Bahari: "As an Iranian, I am ashamed of how the Iranian government is lending support to the Assad regime's killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the displacement of millions of people. The best way to express my anger was to make a film about Mansour Omari's exhibition in the Holocaust Museum."



The project comprises two phases. First, 15 short videos in Arabic and English dealing with the visit of Bahari, together with Mansour, to Berlin and Washington. In Berlin, both visited various Holocaust memorial sites such as the Wannsee Haus, the Holocaust Memorial and Sachsenhausen. Each video proved valuable in helping them to better understand the tragedy taking place in Syria and, at the same time, the relevance of remembering the Holocaust today. In March, a one-hour documentary film is planned about of Mansour's story as well as various interviews with Mansour, other victims of the Assad regime and Holocaust historians.

"In Syria, we are taught that the Holocaust is a lie," says Mansour. The enormity of the evidence provided by the Holocaust sites in Germany acted as a motivating factor to create a memory for the victims in Syria.

"The international community considers the victims in Syria simply as a number. If the victims do not have a face and personal story, then there is always the danger of a repetition of such horrors," says Mansour. In order not to forget the individual names, he recorded in writing the names of his prison inmates in Syria and smuggled them out risking his own life in the process.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Holocaust Museum director Sara Bloomfield describes how, with the aid of Mansour's exhibition on Syria, she wants to give the victims a voice and raise awareness of the consequences of the conflict.

**It is the aim of the Museum to use the exhibition to provide a voice for the victims - something which Jews never had during the Holocaust.**

*Details can be found on the Website of the Holocaust Museum <https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/syria>.*

*The Videos about Mansour Omar's visit to the German Holocaust Sites can be found in YouTube under ,82 Names United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Chapter 6'.*

*On Mr. Baharies Website <https://iranwire.com/en/search?q=holocaust> further information can be found.*