

**Omar Alshogre**

**“10 Years of War: Examining the Ongoing Conflict in Syria”**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**Thursday, April 15th, 2021**

Thank you for inviting me to give my testimony. I want to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking member Wilson, Chairman Meeks, and Ranking member McCaul for their dedication to stopping the killing in Syria.

Today, I’m sitting in the most democratic institution of the United States of America - the United States Congress. And, I hope one day Syria will have one too.

Ten years ago, when I was only 15, the people of Syria began asking for democracy and representation, inspired by the United States and its ideals. We all took to the streets singing for freedom, holding flowers in our hands. For my peaceful participation, I was detained and tortured. My fingernails were pulled out.

I spent three years in prison alongside my young cousins, one of whom, Bashir, died in my arms after enduring years of torture. Months after my arrest, another cousin from my village was brought to our cell. He told me that my father and two of my brothers were dead. My village, al-Bayda, as well as the larger city nearby, Baniyas, were in ruins. The Assad regime had massacred my entire community; all of my childhood friends were dead. When Baniyas first began to protest for freedom, the Syrian regime feared they would lose control. They feared hope would spread to the surrounding cities and in order to prevent others from rising up against them, the Syrian regime killed everyone they could find in Baniyas. The regime forces filmed their brutal crimes - there are videos of them slaughtering the people of my hometown. There is even a video of my father and brothers being murdered by Assad’s forces.

Following these three years of detention - three years of torture, starvation, and loss of everyone I loved - I was finally smuggled out. The security guard who snuck me out dropped me off at a public state-run hospital because I had contracted severe tuberculosis in prison. Tuberculosis does not have the same repercussions in Syria as it does in the United States. There are no options for treatment. If someone in Syria gets sick, it is a death sentence.

At first, the doctor at the hospital was kind. He put his stethoscope under my shirt and felt the scars of my torture. He asked me: “Who did that to you?” and I replied: “I was in Saydnaya.” Saydnaya is a prison where political detainees are sent after having been “tried” unfairly in military court. At Saydnaya, one of the most notorious facilities for torture, prisoners are not informed of their sentences. Saydnaya once had white walls but, over the years, the blood of prisoners has tainted them red. Upon hearing the name, the doctor’s kindness suddenly disappeared and he kicked me in the face. He screamed for the nurses who rushed to his side.

Once they heard that I had been in Saydnaya prison, one of them started to stick needles into my face and my knees, calling me a terrorist. Assad's regime let stories spread about Saydnaya's prisoners, claiming them to be enemies of the regime and of the state - in reality, its prisoners are like me, peaceful protesters who fed security officers false confessions under torture.

To seek real medical care, I had to travel to Idlib governorate, in northwest Syria. Getting to Idlib was challenging - the border region was rife with military officers seeking to kill any young person trying to flee to Idlib. They were afraid that if young people made it to Idlib they would be able to gather enough men to rival Assad's forces. Once I successfully made it into Idlib, however, I felt safe and welcomed, yet, I could still hear constant bombing.

“Despite the perpetual aerial and ground strikes conducted by the government with Russian and Iranian support, it was the safest place for me to go. There, I knew I would be cared for and far from regime detention centers. During my time in Idlib, I was welcomed and supported by Syrians from all around the country who had also fled the regime. On the street, the play of children was frequently interrupted as they scrambled for cover anytime they heard a plane. The sky was and continues to be a constant source of danger. We do not watch blue skies for clouds - we watch them for planes. For bombs. At the time, I was still suffering from tuberculosis, but the regime had stripped Idlib of all resources, including medical infrastructure. It wanted the people of Idlib—me, the children, the kind individuals who helped me—to suffer. To give up.<sup>1</sup>”

Idlib governorate was once home to one and a half million people. Today, it houses four million civilians, about a million of them children. These people have done nothing wrong but ask for freedom and basic rights.

Since then, I have been granted asylum in Sweden and today I study at Georgetown University and work as the Director of Detainee Affairs at the Syrian Emergency Task Force.

I know how tough it is to be in your position, so I want to thank you. Thank you for the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. I would also like to encourage you to continue ensuring the act's full implementation, with a special focus on stopping the Assad regime, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah's war machine against Idlib.

Those four million people currently in Idlib are destined for detention, death, or displacement. Right now, they have no other choice. If we do not protect the people of Idlib, there will be mass humanitarian atrocities, surpassing the numbers of Srebrenica, and there will be significant levels of displacement, which could potentially double the number of refugees in Europe. If Idlib falls, Russia, Iran and the Assad regime will then focus their efforts on northeast Syria, increasing the challenge for US force protection and endangering US partner forces. If

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Alshogre, “10 Years on, Syrians Have not given up,” Foreign Policy, April 7, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/07/ten-years-syrian-war-idlib/>

attacks against civilians continue without protection or response from the United States and the international community as a whole, extremist actors will manipulate this lack of action for their own propaganda and recruitment efforts, presenting themselves as the only civilian defense line.

In January 2020, the Assad regime and its allies began to revamp their relentless offensive on Idlib which resulted in massacres against civilians and the displacement of almost 500 000 thousand people in a matter of a week. The Wisdom House school for orphans and Tomorrow's Dawn women's center - two institutions supported by American communities and run by my organization, the Syrian Emergency Task Force - were permanently displaced. Fearing a massive flow of refugees, Turkey intervened, standing up to Russia and fighting against Iranian-backed militias, including Hezbollah, and Assad forces. NATO troop presence in Idlib resulted in a fragile ceasefire that is on the verge of collapse today. The United States must support its NATO ally, Turkey, to ensure that the existing ceasefire in northwest Syria is maintained and made permanent.

By protecting Idlib, the United States would effectively prevent Assad's military victory and, in doing so, would be conducive to a political solution and a negotiated settlement as per UNSC 2254. As former US envoy to Syria, Ambassador Frederic Hof, said, an Assad victory would "entrench Syria as the North Korea of the Middle East." However, if the United States continues to allow Assad and its Russian and Iranian-backed allies to employ conventional and chemical weapons and slaughter, displace, or detain the remaining 4 million Syrian civilians in Idlib, any prospect of a negotiated settlement will be off the table. This would ensure that no refugee ever returns home to Syria, that crimes against humanity continue to aggravate, and that destabilization in the region increases. The following excerpt from the Syrian Emergency Task Force's 2021 report "Idlib: Syria's Last Hope,"<sup>2</sup> outlines clear policy recommendations the United States must undertake to project its interests in Syria and prevent further mass atrocities:

**1) The United States must pursue and strengthen efforts for the immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib's civilian population.**<sup>3</sup> The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies continue to escalate military operations in Idlib, including by deliberately targeting civilians—a war crime and crime against humanity. Aside from Turkish efforts, aerial attacks by Russian and Syrian forces have gone unchallenged. The United States must act to stop the further slaughter and forced displacement of civilians in Idlib. The current precarious ceasefire in Idlib was made possible by Turkey's military action against regime and Iranian-backed forces including Hezbollah in northwest Syria. That action stalled further atrocities and mass displacement. The United States must work to support its NATO ally on the ground through logistical, intelligence, and diplomatic

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<sup>2</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Idlib: Syria's Last Hope," March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice President at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

coordination. Through these efforts, coupled with continued economic sanctions under the Caesar Act, the United States can help protect Idlib without direct U.S. military intervention. Protecting Idlib is conducive to a negotiated settlement and bolsters U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

**2) The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts in Geneva.**<sup>4</sup> The United States must push for the advancement of UNSCR 2254, which calls for “an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.”<sup>5</sup> The United States, as a significant donor to humanitarian aid in Syria, must use its diplomatic efforts to hold the United Nations accountable for ensuring the safe and adequate delivery of humanitarian aid to the region. Specifically, Washington must sway Russia and China to extend the UN authorization for cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing currently authorized for humanitarian aid. This authorization is set to expire in July 2021.<sup>6</sup> Washington should also push Russia and China to reopen the three border crossings that previously carried cross-border aid but were closed at Russia’s behest: Al-Rathma and Al-Yaroubiyah, which have been closed since January 2020,<sup>7</sup> and Bab al-Salam, which has been closed since July 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the United States must develop a diplomatic strategy to achieve the full implementation of UNSCR 2254.<sup>9</sup> The United States must reaffirm and emphasize its commitment to a red line regarding the use of chemical weapons. Washington should use its influence to push the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to suspend the Syrian regime’s rights and privileges to hold the regime accountable for using chemical weapons against its own people.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the United States must send a strong message against the normalization of relations with Assad.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015.

([https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf))

<sup>6</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Meeting Coverage SC/14127, “Greater Cross-Border, Cross-Line Access Needed for Assistance to Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council,” February 27, 2020.

(<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14127.doc.htm>)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, *Press Release SC/14268*, “Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council,” 29 July 2020,

(<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14268.doc.htm>); Jacob Kurtzer and Will Todman, “The Possible End of Cross-border Aid in Syria,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 6, 2020.

(<https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria>)

<sup>9</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

**3) The United States must step up support for existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib province.**<sup>12</sup> Existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib is not operating at full capacity, due to limited international support. The United States must engage with and support existing and additional civilian programming, including schools, medical facilities, and local governing councils to stabilize the region and develop a strong democratic civil society. Strengthening civilian infrastructure and civil society will help counter the influence of VEOs in Idlib by providing people with alternatives to, and the means to resist, VEOs such as HTS.

**4) The United States must intensify and broaden 2019 Caesar Act accountability efforts.**<sup>13</sup> Strict enforcement of Caesar and other U.S. sanctions are crucial for “limiting the resources available to the Assad regime for military offensives.” According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the Caesar Act went into effect in June 2020, the departments of State and Treasury have imposed sanctions on 113 individuals and entities for supporting the Assad regime or preventing a resolution of the war in Syria.<sup>14</sup> The Biden administration must continue this effort and ensure that the United States will make no exception for allies or partners who evade sanctions.<sup>15</sup>

Today everyone in Syria is suffering.

In **Rukban camp**, there are ten thousand civilians, half of them children, besieged by Russia and the Assad regime, while Jordan and Iraq keep their border crossings closed to humanitarian aid. Although this internally displaced persons camp is less than ten miles away from the US-led coalition’s al-Tanf garrison, they remain in dire need of sustained aid. Rukban has no schools or hospitals, although the Syrian Emergency Task Force runs a no-cost Hope Pharmacy. Through Voice of Rukban<sup>16</sup> - a series of videos made by the camps’ residents - many explain the fear of leaving the camp which would result in forced detention and death at the hands of the Assad regime. The US coalition’s partner forces that lead the fight against ISIS, keep Iran at bay and protect the fifty-five mile zone surrounding al-Tanf, are recruited from the camp, and their families continue to reside there. The US State Department and USAID, as well as the United Nations have failed in providing aid to Rukban.

Resolve humanitarian crisis in Rukban.

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<sup>12</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020; virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> According to a document provided by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan think tank focused on national security issues that has tracked the announcement of Caesar-related sanctions, there have been 119 Treasury and 34 State Department designations since June 17, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/voiceofrukban?lang=en>, <https://www.facebook.com/voiceofrukban/>

- a. Provide direct humanitarian aid from al-Tanf Garrison to those most vulnerable amongst the camp's 10,000 civilians. The UN, ICRC, USAID and State Department have all failed to provide direct aid to the people of Rukban due to the Assad regime and Russian siege of Rukban IDP camp. Jordan and Iraq have closed their borders to direct humanitarian aid to the camp.
- b. Provide direct sustained humanitarian aid via the Al Walid road connecting Syria and Iraq by negotiating with the Iraqi government on potentially opening that border point for humanitarian aid .
- c. Transfer the willing civilian population of Rukban to a non-regime controlled location.
- d. Work through a US-led coalition based at al-Tanf Garrison to help facilitate the establishment of a hospital and educational facility that can cater to the camp's civilians. There are multiple NGOs able and willing to provide the manpower and funding, but they need logistical support and access.<sup>17</sup>

In **Northeastern Syria**, specifically in Deir Ezzor, civilians are vulnerable to ISIS attacks, as well as other security risks due to Assad regime and Iranian activities in eastern Syria. Today, the United States-led international coalition's presence in Deir Ezzor is key to ensuring that ISIS does not resurge and keeps hundreds of thousands of civilians safe from Iran and the Assad regime. Our counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in northeast Syria also provide the United States with leverage over the Assad regime, Iran, Russia in any negotiation.

Ensure security and stability in N.E Syria (particularly Deir Ezzor).

- a. Ensure that all democratic processes/structures of governance are free of corruption and are representative of the communities they serve.
- b. Ensure inclusivity of all Arab and Kurdish actors into the structure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).
- c. Rid the AANES of PKK elements that have ties to Iran, Russia and the Assad regime.
- d. Work towards an eventual bridging between NE & NW Syria politically and economically to leverage against the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran, opening up the possibility of a place where refugees can return and offering a stable and free alternative to regime-controlled areas of Syria.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", updated April 13, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", updated April 13, 2021.

In **regime-controlled areas**, security forces continue to arbitrarily detain and torture civilians to death. In Assad's torture chambers, there are over one hundred and fifty thousand men, women, children and elderly. I was one of the thousands of children in these detention centers where I witnessed the most nightmarish scenes anyone could imagine. It is the responsibility of the United States and the international community to put an end to the machinery of death existing in Assad regime prisons. It should be non-negotiable for children and innocent civilians to be released immediately. One must only look at the Caesar photos to understand the urgency of addressing detainees in Syria and let us not forget that six American citizens remain in these hellish dungeons, including Austin Tice and Majd Kamalmaz.

Addressing the release of the over 200,000 men, women and children detained by the Assad regime, including American citizens.

- a. Establish a clear and strong stance emphasizing that the immediate release of detainees is non-negotiable, and will not be accepted as part of a negotiated settlement.
- b. Politically and financially support the creation of a mechanism to account for all the missing and disappeared around Syria. There is currently no unified database or cross system data comparison.
- c. Use targeted and Caesar Act sanctions on anyone associated with the detention apparatus in Syria, as a deterrent for those working within the Assad intelligence and detention apparatus.<sup>19</sup>

The Assad regime has obliterated the Syrian economy. Bashar al-Assad has chosen to buy and manufacture weapons of mass destruction to be used on his own people, as opposed to procuring medicine and food. Assad and his corrupt regime have continued to instill terror in the hearts of civilians, including allowing the COVID-19 pandemic to spread unabated. Assad has paid and borrowed enormous sums to Russia and Iran in exchange for their military backing. He has prioritized keeping his position of power over feeding even those loyal to him.

Full implementation of the Caesar Act and other targeted sanctions aimed at protecting civilians.

- e. Expand the Caesar Act implementation to go beyond previously sanctioned individuals, as a majority of those sanctions have come on entities and individuals that are already sanctioned.
- f. Prioritize sanctioning individuals based on who is most actively responsible for the current violence against civilians [particularly in Idlib], including detention and military mid-level personnel, over symbolic sanctions. These sanctions should act as a deterrence measure, targeting

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<sup>19</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", April 13, 2021.

chemical weapons, detention facilities, business facilitators outside Syria currently providing fuel and energy.<sup>20</sup>

I am honored today to be sitting in the hallowed halls of the United States Congress, but I sit here today with an enormous responsibility on my shoulders: the responsibility to convey to you the voices of those who are not able to be before you today. The thousands of civilians tortured to death in the Caesar photos, many of whose lifeless bodies I was forced to number are gone. We must achieve justice for them and their families, but we have failed in saving their lives. It is incumbent upon us that we save the rest, including the hundreds of thousands of detainees, the four million civilians in Idlib, the ten thousand in Rukban and the millions of others suffering under Assad's tyranny in my home Syria.

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<sup>20</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, "Policy Recommendations to End the Killing in Syria", April 13, 2021.