

The Gravedigger

Witness to Mass Graves in Syria

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

4/18/2023 - 12 Years of Terror: Assad's War Crimes and US Policy for Seeking Accountability in
Syria

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Thank you, Chairman Wilson and Ranking Member Philips for your dedication to ending the suffering of the Syrian people and pursuing accountability for millions of civilians. Thank you also for inviting me here today and allowing me to share my testimony with you and the American people you represent.

I cannot share my face or my name with you today, because doing so would be too dangerous for me and my family. I am known as “the Gravedigger,” because I have been a witness to mass graves in Syria from 2011 to 2018. Men and women, children and elderly were tortured in the most sadistic ways and executed by the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia and then callously thrown into trenches, their fate unknown to their loved ones. Their lives have been lost; they cannot be saved. And they demand justice, while tens of thousands of others await liberation as they languish in Assad’s dungeons.

I am a civilian. Before the war, I was an administrative employee of the Damascus municipality. In early 2011, at the beginning of the revolution, my office was visited by regime intelligence officials, and I was ordered to work for them. When the regime asks for something, you don’t say no.

I was not prepared for the horror of my new duties. Every week, twice a week, three trailer trucks arrived, packed with 300 to 600 bodies of victims of torture, starvation, and execution from military hospitals and intelligence branches around Damascus. Twice a week, we received three or four pickup trucks with 30 to 40 bodies, still warm, of civilians that had been executed in Saydnaya Prison.

After seven years of bearing witness to these atrocities, I was able to escape Syria and follow my family to Europe. There, it was my duty to testify in the Koblenz Trial in Germany and seek some semblance of justice by holding two war criminals accountable for atrocities in Syria. I have dedicated my life to exposing the evil of the Assad regime and its allies. There are no words that can capture the scene I was subjected to every day. Men, women, children, babies, elderly- all countless civilians with marks on their bodies that tell the story of an excruciatingly painful death. I often found myself wondering how much each person suffered before they were finally allowed to die the signs of torture on their bodies is something I will never forget.

I want to share with you just one of the stories that keep me up at night. One day, one of the trailer trucks dumped its contents of several hundred dead, mangled corpses into the trench in front of us. Sometimes bodies would fall on the ledge of the mass grave and I was taken aback when I saw that a young mother's lifeless body with clear signs of torture was still holding onto her infant baby hugging him to her chest. I didn't want her to be buried with the mass of mostly male bodies in the trench and wanted her and her baby to at least be buried to the side or to the top of the mass grave. I tried to ask the Assad regime's intelligence officer if it would be ok to bury her alone next to the mass grave, he quickly scolded me and ordered that she be thrown into the mass grave. One day as the trailer trucks were unloading hundreds of bodies Unexpectedly, we saw a flicker of movement. There was a man near death desperately using his last reserve of energy to signal to us that somehow, he was still alive. One of the civilian workers, crying, said that we had to do something. The intelligence officer supervising us quickly ordered the murder of the man. As for the young man who had dared to shed tears over the victim of Assad's regime, we never saw him again. You see my colleagues and I charged with burying the innocent in mass graves were expendable. If we showed any sympathy, it meant certain death, if we were late or

missed a day it meant arrest in the very same dungeons that produce these tortured bodies we put to rest.

Every single week on multiple days the drivers of the excavators and the bulldozers would dig trenches 23 feet deep, 9 to 10 feet wide, and 400 to 600 feet long parallel to each other and every week we filled these massive trenches with bodies of countless civilians. This systematic machinery of death continues to this day. The bulldozer driver who dug the mass graves at the site in southern Damascus was arrested for an entire year to keep him from ever sharing what he witnessed and was tortured and left to die but survived through the grace of God. Miraculously he has since escaped Syria, and is here with us today. He cannot share his face or his name with you either, but his presence should serve as a reminder of the inhumane brutality of this regime, the same regime that some countries have shamefully decided to normalize with, a regime that the United States government continues to recognize. The only recognition of Assad should be as a genocidal war criminal reminiscent of the worst people in human history.

It is vital that the United States including this administration or any future administration not recognize the Assad regime as the legitimate government of Syria, and that it NEVER normalizes relations with this awful dictator. There can never be accountability for the tens of thousands of innocent civilians that lay in the mass graves in Syria if those responsible for their brutal torture, murder and inhumane burial are admitted back into the international community.

The Syrian people look to the United States to ensure that there are consequences for those who normalize with the criminal regime. Allowing Assad to get away with what he has been sends a message to other dictators and tyrants that they can also gas, displace and torture their people in order to retain power or quell genuine calls for democracy. When the UAE invites Assad to their

capital and welcomes him with a 21 gun salute on the twelfth anniversary of the revolution, it sets a dangerous precedent. When Saudi Arabia decides to allow Syrian Arab Airlines, which is sanctioned under the Caesar Act, to land in their airports, it sets a dangerous precedent. When a country like Denmark decides to undermine the unity of the efforts of the US and the EU to isolate Assad, it sets a dangerous precedent. The United States must ensure that each and every attempt to recognize the Assad regime or to normalize relations with it is met with clear public and private condemnation and real consequences.

The Caesar Act is one of the most valuable tools in the hands of the United States to make sure the Assad regime cannot benefit economically from a vast array of business transactions. It is vital that this law is implemented to its fullest extent to hinder the regime's chances of benefiting from things like the Arab Gas Pipeline. Under President Biden's administration we have yet to see any real implementation of the Caesar Act, it is Congress that we as Syrian witnesses, survivors, and civilians beseech to pressure the Biden administration to implement the Caesar Act in order to stop the normalization and financing of the Assad regime. If the Caesar Act as it stands is not sufficient then we plead with you for new sanctions legislation or revisions of the Caesar Act that targets this evil regime and all those seeking to empower it.

I watched as the Assad regime exploited the devastating earthquake which tore through Southern Türkiye and NW Syria, to smuggle Iranian fighters and weapons to kill Syrians, claiming they are aid caravans. The regime in Damascus received tons of aid from the United Nations and other governments that he then looted instead of providing to those in need. I saw my people suffer immensely in liberated areas of NW Syria, and I have witnessed the shameful response of the United Nations, which allowed the Assad regime to block the provision of life-saving critical aid through border points he does not even control. It is time for a smart and moral aid policy to

benefit the people of Syria, not the Assad regime. One with no General Licenses, or aid delivered through the UN Damascus office but through a permanent cross-border mechanism that allows the unfettered and continuous provision of strictly humanitarian aid through all four border crossings in Northern Syria.

Many people may say there is nothing we can do, that Syria is a lost cause and that we must accept Assad. This is simply not true if a municipal employee from Damascus forced to bury hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians such as myself can find my way to stand before members of the most powerful legislative body in the world and share with you the horrors that I witnessed then there is hope; if the Bulldozer Driver, forced to dig mass graves, then ordered to be arrested tortured and executed can escape and make it here with us today then there is hope; if Caesar, an ordinary man, can take such personal risks to show the world what is happening in Syria through his photographs then there is hope. If the Syrian people continue to come out every day, continue to stand to demand Justice, Freedom, and Democracy in spite of Iran, Assad, Russia, and China then there is hope. Those who normalize with the Assad regime are complicit and accomplices in Assad's war crimes, we ask your committee to remind the Biden Administration that it must not veer away from the policies of previous Republican and Democratic administrations that publicly condemned the normalization of Assad and actively worked to prevent it. Today the Administration's statement on normalization with a genocidal dictator that threatens the world order is that and I quote "we hope that those who normalize with Assad get something in return." Today the administration says the United States will not normalize with the Assad regime yet. I am here because like many of my Syrian brothers and sisters, we know that the United States is better than this, I am here because you are the most democratic branch of the American government. You represent the American people who value

Justice, Freedom, and Liberty. I am here because after 12 years of the worst atrocities of the 21st Century, so many Syrians still believe in the American people and we believe that the words Never Again shouldn't be an empty slogan but it should be a sacred promise that ensures that Syrians and many other nations can live with freedom, justice, and dignity.

After 12 years of the worst atrocities of the 21st Century, we have buried hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, but just as many are still detained in Assad's dungeons and millions are still living under regime, Iranian, and Russian bombardment. We must stand with them not their butcher. What I have testified to today is a burden that I place on your shoulders as members of Congress, as Americans, and as human beings. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.