

**NINE YEARS OF BRUTALITY: ASSAD'S CAMPAIGN
AGAINST THE SYRIAN PEOPLE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

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UNITED STATES SENATE**

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NINE YEARS OF BRUTALITY: ASSAD'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE SYRIAN PEOPLE

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:06 a.m. in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James E. Risch, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Risch [presiding], Rubio, Gardner, Romney, Young, Perdue, Menendez, Cardin, Shaheen, Udall, Kaine, Merkley and Booker

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH, U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO

The CHAIRMAN. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order. We are under special provisions today because of the security for our first witness today. I want to remind everyone that there will be no camera use and no cell phone use during this hearing. This will be strictly enforced by security that is here and by staff of the Foreign Relations Committee. We would ask everyone to keep that in mind and respect the security of the individual that we have asked to testify here today.

This month we marked a solemn ninth anniversary of the Syrian conflict. Nine years of barrel bombs and chemical weapons; 9 years of targeted attacks against medical and humanitarian workers; 9 years of the most horrific human rights atrocities of our time. Make no mistake, accountability for these crimes lay squarely on the shoulders of Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad, and his Russian and Iranian backers, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah.

Assad has weaponized every facet of the Syrian government against his own people on an industrial scale. Over 560,000 people have been killed. Over 100,000 Syrians have perished in Assad's notorious prisons, and Americans, including Austin Tice, have been wrongfully detained. Today we reiterate the demand for his immediate release and return.

For too many young Syrians, war and suffering is all they have ever known. Together with their parents, they suffer the physical and mental wounds of prolonged warfare. Those who left as refugees risk arbitrary arrest, interrogation and torture by the regime's secret police upon their return. The conflict has now entered an intensified stage with Assad, Russia, and Iran mounting a brutal and continuous offensive against Syria's last remaining opposition stronghold, Idlib.

More than 960,000 civilians have been newly displaced since December, many of whom fled other parts of Syria and now find themselves caught in a death trap. Beyond the onslaught of tanks and bombs and other weapons of war, they face the immediate risk of freezing to death during a brutal winter without access to adequate shelter and food.

Russia behaves as both an arsonist and a firefighter. Putin pours gasoline on the flames of conflict while simultaneously seeking a seat at the table by holding sham talks in Astana. The U.N. recently confirmed what we have already suspected: that Russia, in addition to Assad, is committing more crimes in Syria. Russian planes were carrying out attacks in order to kill first responders and bomb hospitals to destruction.

It's clear that the Russian government has no interest in bringing peace or helping the Syrian people, but sees the conflict as a way to grow its geopolitical importance. Russia's quest for relevance is killing Syrians. Iran, which continues to flood Syria with fighters, is no better.

This cannot go on. The Syrian people deserve better, much better. We remain committed to the Geneva-brokered peace process. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 remains our guide post—a complete ceasefire, a Syrian-led political process, a new constitution drafted by Syrians, and free and fair elections.

I was pleased to see the U.N. Constitutional Committee convene, even if the regime has resisted the committee's work at every turn. Assad is not serious about peace. He benefits from the status quo and will stop at nothing to remain in power. A deeply fractured Syria will never heal absent accountability and reconciliation. The regime and its supporters must be held accountable for the atrocities they have perpetrated.

This is precisely why we championed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which authorizes sanctions against the Assad regime and its backers. It has been a long road to get here. I was proud to sponsor this legislation as a stand-alone bill last year and to pass it out of committee. It was hard work to get it included in last year's annual defense bill, but we prevailed and it is now law.

We are greatly honored to have the namesake for this bill here with us today. What began with one man's courageous effort to expose Assad's atrocities has become the means by which we will hold Assad and his backers accountable. As with any law, implementation is the key. We are working closely with the administration to ensure that the Caesar Act is fully implemented and impunity is ended.

In the face of such depravity and destruction, the strength and resilience of the Syrian people gives me hope. Our witnesses today are remarkable examples of human bravery and grit. They have endured immeasurable suffering, yet continue to work tirelessly to end impunity and protect the innocent.

As we proceed today with the hearing, we are going to go without cameras of any kind, and without cell phones. There will be no recording. This is at the request of our witness, and that request is well-taken, and we're going to honor it. What will happen is there will be a transcript made of his testimony, which will be available shortly after the hearing.

So with that, Senator Menendez for your opening remarks please.

**STATEMENT OF BOB MENENDEZ,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY**

Senator MENENDEZ. Well, thank you Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing to commemorate and to try to grapple with the horrific atrocities the Assad regime, with its Russian and Iranian backers, is perpetrating against innocent people in Syria.

Our witnesses today have literally risked their lives to bear witness to crimes against humanity, to expose the barbarity of a dictator who, for almost a decade, has fomented a reign of fear, repression, and torture against his own citizens. A ruthless leader who has not only cooperated with terrorists to incite violence, who has murdered innocent civilians in cold blood, but who has barbarously bombed hospitals and medical workers to prevent them from providing relief.

Your courageous act, Caesar, ensures that the world can and must hold the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers accountable for their crimes. Your continued efforts to provide relief to the millions who need it remind us that we must continue to press for a political solution and to provide for those in immediate need.

Nine years ago, 9 years ago, peaceful demonstrators took to the streets to demand change and accountability from their government. Their calls for democratic reform were met with a vicious response that has turned into a brutal, devastating campaign. We know the numbers. More than half a million innocent people killed. Millions and millions forcibly displaced from their homes, many fleeing multiple times from the places in which they sought refuge.

Last month, headlines screamed about the hundreds of thousands of innocent people fleeing for their lives in Idlib. People burning doors they had ripped from the hinges of their homes to stay warm. Babies who survived targeted bombing campaigns only to freeze to death in their parents' arms. And yet the world seems paralyzed to act. We talk of humanitarian relief, and Russia and Turkey continue to calculate the implementation of yet another "ceasefire." But we need serious leadership and commitment. As Raed says in his written testimony, "What is needed is the political will to act to protect civilians."

Unfortunately for 9 years, the United States has not displayed that political will. American efforts at promoting a political process in the early years of the conflict were overwhelmed by the more invested Russian, Iranian, and Turkish governments. Facing little more than rhetorical pushback and calling on support from terrorists and Russian airpower alike, the Assad regime has pushed forward with its atrocities. Following the withdrawal of U.S. troops last year, Turkey stepped up its military involvement, pouring more fuel onto a raging fire and undermining our ability to respond.

Over the years, this committee and Congress as a whole have taken a number of steps to encourage both this Administration and the last to clearly assert American leadership in standing with the Syrian people, from authorizing a range of diplomatic and military

tools, to an AUMF in the face of the regime's first chemical weapons attack, to support for humanitarian assistance and refugee programs.

Unfortunately, we have not seen assertive policies from either of the past two administrations. However, inaction itself is a decision. One that carries consequences.

The Administration must make some decisions now. Will and how will they work to protect civilians to ensure that they receive critical humanitarian aid. While Ambassadors Jeffrey and Craft's visit to Idlib sends an important message that we are not totally deaf to the cries of civilians in desperate need, we must ensure that aid can be delivered, including a strategy at the U.N. to renew critical border crossing access for humanitarian operators.

And on the questions of accountability, the Administration must rigorously implement the Caesar Civilian Protection Act. It must commit resources to holding the Assad regime and Russian and Iranian facilitators accountable for their crimes against humanity.

We must find a way to support the millions of refugees and displaced people in Syria. But being a leader also requires setting an example. The Administration has destroyed this country's rich history of serving as a beacon of hope and light to all those oppressed. And when we close our doors, we not only turn our backs to those in need; we send a global message that it is acceptable to do so as well.

Our witnesses here, of course, cannot answer these questions. They have done extraordinary things—from exposing the regime's barbarity, to enduring that same barbarity and living to talk about it, to rushing towards the scene of an air strike to save lives. But they cannot change U.S. policy. I hope, however, their powerful testimonies will compel us to do more. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you Senator Menendez. We are now going to turn to our first witness, Caesar. For those of you in the room, you can see the photos displayed from the Caesar file and recent photographs from Idlib province. These are just a few of the thousands of images, thousands of images, that Caesar smuggled out of Syria to show the true brutality of the Syrian regime.

Caesar is a Syrian military defector and former military police photographer who smuggled out almost 55,000 photos of detainees who were tortured and executed in Assad regime intelligence branches and prisons.

Caesar is the namesake of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. He continues to be a key witness to prosecutions against war criminals within the Assad regime, as well as a voice of conscience on behalf of the hundreds of thousands who remain detained by the Assad regime.

Caesar, we are honored to have you with us today. Now we're going to take just a moment to turn the cameras off for Caesar's testimony and thank you all for attending today.

The prohibition is not only on photography. It is also on voice recording. So with that Caesar, the floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF CAESAR, SYRIAN MILITARY DEFECTOR

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] First of all, I would like to thank you all. And I want to thank Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez for giving me the opportunity to present the Syrian tragedy to this honorable committee.

I am Caesar. I worked as a forensic photographer in the military police. Our work since the beginning of the Syrian revolution and for years since the beginning of the Syrian revolution was to take photographs of the bodies of victims who have been detained, tortured, and murdered in the Syrian regime's dungeons.

My work, my daily work, was mixed with pain and sorrow, sorrow and pain at the painful scenes that I saw every single day on the bodies of the victims, including men, women, and children. The signs of torture were clear on the brittle bodies, including children, women, and men. You can see the torture on their bodies, including burning, strangulation, and whipping with electric cables.

I risked my life and the life of my family to be able to escape Syria under very tough circumstances filled with fear and terror. Fearing that we may be arrested at any time by the regime's security forces and fearing that my fate would be the same fate as the victims that I photographed. I came out of Syria carrying the most powerful documentation and files that incriminate and document the crimes of the Assad regime against detainees.

Five years have passed, and we have left no stone unturned in order to bring the voice of these victims that have been arrested and murdered in Assad's prisons with extreme brutality and their only fault was that they came out asking for freedom and dignity. We have worked and we continue to work in order to bring the pleas and the screams of tens of thousands; the pleas and the screams of tens of thousands that remain in the detention centers; and that does not just include Syrians citizens, but it also includes American citizens.

They all await the same fate of those that have come before them, which is certain death. Our hope has been that, with the help of this international community that values human rights and freedom, to indict the Syrian regime for its systematic machinery of death against the Syrian people and to bring the war criminals responsible for these crimes before international courts.

And we hoped that we would be able to free the hundreds of thousands of detainees that remain under torture on a daily basis in Syrian prisons. But unfortunately, since I left Syria about 5 years ago, detentions have only increased and killing has only increased in the same time in the same places at the hands of the very same war criminals. And the reason simply is that the Assad regime considered the inaction of the international community in the mere statements of condemnation and concern as a green light for him to continue his crimes against the Syrian people, and what is happening now in Idlib province from a complete siege and the shelling with all types of weapons—some that are internationally banned weapons, with the intention of displacing and killing its civilians and occupying their villages.

This is the biggest example and the biggest evidence that this bloody regime only understands the language of death and this feeling of blood. The Syrian regime would not dare to commit all

of its war crimes if it was not for the strong military, economic, and diplomatic support of Russia and Iran.

Russia and Iran, who have increased their criminality with impunity. And the reason, again, that Iran and Russia are doing this is that the international community has yet again been a bystander to what is unfolding in Syria, while only issuing statements of concern.

Honorable Senators, I want to take this very powerful and important opportunity, I want to take this opportunity on my behalf and on behalf of the Caesar team, to express our sincere gratitude to the free American people represented by you all. And I want to thank all of the humanitarian organizations in the United States that have supported the passage of the Caesar Act. And I also want to thank the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Caesar law has become the final ray of hope for the Syrian people in the absence of any military or political solution.

This law is a very powerful message to all who support the Assad regime. It is a reminder to all of them that time for accountability and justice is coming and that no matter how long oppression lasts, that there is no doubt that truth will prevail in the end.

Dear Senators, the Caesar law is an important step in helping to end the suffering of the Syrian people and to help grant the Syrian people's wishes of freedom and dignity. But this needs hard work to ensure that the Caesar Act is implemented to the letter by the U.S. government.

I thank you all once again for your honorable and moral support of the Syrian people. And I wish for you and for your nation to live always in peace and in security, and that you always have freedom and success.

Thank you all.

[The prepared statement of Caesar follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CAESAR

First of all, I want to thank you all and I want to thank Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez for giving us the opportunity to present the Syrian tragedy in this honorable Committee. I am Caesar. I worked as a forensic photographer in the military police. Our work since the beginning of the Syrian revolution was to take photographs of the bodies of the victims who had been detained, tortured, and murdered in the Syrian regime dungeons. My daily work was mixed with pain and sorrow due to the painful scenes that I saw every day on the bodies of the victims including men, women, and children. The signs of torture were clear on their brittle bodies including burning, strangulation, and whipping with cables. I risked my life and the life of my family to be able to escape Syria under tough circumstances of fear and terror. Fearing that we may be arrested by the regime's security forces and fearing that my fate would be the same fate as the victims that I photographed. I came out of Syria carrying the most powerful documentation and files that incriminate and document the Assad regime's crimes against detainees. Five years have past, and we have left no stone unturned in order to bring the voice of these victims that have been arrested and murdered in Assad's prisons with extreme brutality and their only fault was that they came out asking for freedom and dignity. We have worked and we continue to work in order to bring the pleas and the screams of tens of thousands of those that remain in detention from the Syrian people and those of other nationalities including American citizens that await the same fate as those before them which is certain death. Our hope has been that, with the help of the international community that values human rights and freedom to indict the Assad regime for his systemic machinery of death against the Syrian people and to bring the war criminals responsible for these crimes before international courts. And that we would be able to free the hundreds of thousands of detainees that remain living under torture on a daily basis in Syrian prisons, but unfortu-

nately and since I left Syria 5 years ago detentions have increased. Killing has increased in the same places and in the same ways and at the hands of the very same criminals. And the reason simply is that the Assad regime considered the inaction of the international community and the mere statements of condemnation as a green light for him to continue his crimes against the Syrian people and what is happening today in Idlib from the siege of cities and targeting civilians with all types of weapons including internationally banned weapons in order to displace its people and occupy its villages is the biggest evidence that this regime—that this bloody regime—only understands the language of death and spilling of blood. The Syrian regime would not dare commit all of its war crimes if it wasn't for the strong military, economic, and diplomatic support of Russia and Iran, who have increased their criminality with impunity. And the reason is that the international community has been a bystander to what's unfolding in Syria while only issuing statements of concern. Honorable Senators of the United States—I want to take this opportunity on behalf of myself and the Caesar team to express our sincere gratitude to the free American people represented by you all. I want to thank all of the humanitarian organizations in the U.S. that have supported the passage of the Caesar Act. And I want to thank the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Caesar Law has become the only ray of hope for the Syrian people in the absence of any military or political solution. This law is a powerful message to all who support the Assad regime that the time for accountability and justice is coming and that no matter how long oppression lasts, there is no doubt that truth will prevail. Dear Senators—the Caesar law is an important step in helping end the suffering of the Syrian people in order to grant their wishes of freedom and dignity. But this needs hard work to ensure that the Caesar Act is implemented to the letter by the U.S. government. I thank you all once again for your honorable and moral stand support of the Syrian people and I wish for you and for your nation to live always in peace and security and that you always have freedom and success. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, very much Caesar. Thank you for that powerful testimony. We certainly admire your bravery and your willingness to come before us and tell the world what you have seen and documented through photographs.

But we are now going to do a round of questions, and we'll start with Senator Menendez.

Senator MENENDEZ. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman and Caesar thank you for, as I said, your extraordinary courage, work, and the dramatic testimony that is not only what you said, but what we can see, which if left to Assad and his supporters would be hidden from the rest of the world.

Let me say, you mentioned that the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act was a ray of hope. And when I worked with the Chairman to help pass it, I agree it was a ray of hope. But it has been law now nearly 3 months, and it was discussed far longer than that. Yet we have not seen an imposition of sanctions mandated in the bill or even released a list of individuals to be targeted.

What effect does a further delay in implementation, in your view, have on those individuals and entities that would be subject to sanctions under the law? What message would a further delay in implementation send to both the victims and perpetrators of these heinous crimes?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] Thank you for your question. Even when I first gave my testimony back in 2014, I spoke to detainees that were there at the time. The fact that the U.S. Congress at that time showed the Caesar photos, gave us the opportunity to testify, that alone actually helped lower the torture of those in there because those criminals thought that accountability was coming, that punishment was coming.

If the bill is not implemented quickly, then that would result in sending the wrong message to both the criminals and those that

are looking at it as a ray of hope. And so, we hope that all of its deadlines are met.

Any delay in the implementation of the Caesar Act will be considered as another green light by the Assad regime and his supporters to continue what they're doing.

Senator MENENDEZ. Okay, let me just ask you then one other question. The Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, which was enacted in 2019, recognizes that atrocity prevention and response are critically important in the U.S. national interest.

The law requires the President to submit reports to Congress that include a review of efforts to prevent and respond to atrocity crimes. That, as well as the fact that Congress has authorized the Secretary of State to provide appropriate assistance to support entities that collect, document, and protect evidence of crimes in Syria and preserve the chain of custody of such evidence. Groups including yours, inside and outside of Syria, have been collecting such evidence.

What assistance could and should the United States government provide to groups, such as yours, in their documentation efforts and what would you recommend us to do with reference to preventing and responding to atrocity crimes in Syria?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] First of all, there are amazing organizations like ours that work on documentation, but due to the lack of funding, many of these civil society groups and organizations have had to suspend some of their work due to the lack of capacity.

There must be support to those organizations doing that work, and just as importantly, there must be support to the families of victims and witnesses that are part of key prosecutions and documentation against the Assad regime.

And as far as atrocities unfolding in Syria, our number one priority even before and as we pursue justice, is for the killing to end. And that will only happen with true leadership from the United States.

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you Senator Menendez. Senator Rubio.

Senator RUBIO. I also want to echo and thank you for being here today. I wanted to briefly just recount a couple points that I think are critical here.

The first is that it has to be abundantly clear to everybody that the Assad regime has conducted brutal, coordinated military attacks in which innocent civilians were not just collateral damage. They were not just caught in the crossfire between two military forces. They were intentionally targeted.

They are the intentional targets of these attacks, meaning when they are dropping bombs, they are trying to kill civilians. When they were using chemical weapons, they were trying to kill children. Just in the past month, we've seen this in Idlib.

Remaining in power, if that's in fact how this turns out for Assad as part of a deal with whoever it is he tries to cut it with, cannot bestow immunity on this regime from prosecution, from accountability for what they have done.

I also think it's important to point out that Vladimir Putin is not simply supportive of Assad. They are not just protecting Assad. Vladimir Putin is an active participant in these efforts. He has con-

ducted and directed the carrying out of direct attacks against civilians, against children, against the elderly, against aid workers. He is not just providing the weapons for the attack. He is using his weapons, his planes, his bombs.

And this has to continue to be documented. This has to continue to be pointed out for the world to see and understand.

The other point that I would make is that Assad—and I think we thank you as much as anyone in the world for this. You have provided evidence that what Assad has done is he has industrialized a process of arrest, torture, and murder. A system that the United Nations has defined as a process of extermination.

We don't know the numbers. Some of the estimates say 128,000 people have disappeared, and of course they're presumed dead, that at least 14,000 we know of that have died from torture. The number is certainly much higher. Many others, of course, die from the horrific conditions. And then the stories that have come out from various sources just take your breath away.

I just tried to scribble some of them down here and in the time we've had. But it's important for people to hear this despite how uncomfortable it is. The story of a teenager doused with fuel and set on fire, who died 21 days later after suffering.

A guard who apparently calls himself Hitler, who organizes these grotesque dinner theaters where prisoners were brought out. Some are forced to kneel to act like tables and chairs. Some are forced to play the role of animals; bark and crow or whatever sound he wants them to make and if the sound isn't good enough, he beats them. Women and girls repeatedly raped. Stories of bloodstained floors from violent rapes.

It's a stunning testament to what's happening in our time, in our planet, and all with the belief that he is going to retain power, and Vladimir Putin will protect him at the United Nations with veto power at the Security Council.

It's sad that many nations, and sometimes our own, are more concerned about the disruption created by migrant flows, a legitimate issue, and some of the other things that surround this. But we are witnessing the single worst campaign of violence and torture that the world has seen in 70 years, in our time.

And my hope is that the testimony you have provided us in the past and here today, that these photos that stand behind us, that they will be part of the continuing documentation of these crimes so that the people responsible for this at some point, some way, somehow will be held accountable and will never live in peace for the rest of their lives, on this earth.

That anywhere they travel, everywhere they go, they must worry about the fact that they will be brought to justice. It is my sincerest hope that that will be the case, and the world will have a great debt to you for having provided so much information.

And I guess my last point is, I do think it's important for our nation to lead on these matters. I thank the Chairman, the Ranking Member, our colleagues in the House, so many that worked to pass the Caesar bill. But now we have to implement it. Because if we don't implement it, it's just words on paper.

The CHAIRMAN. Please.

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] Dear Sir, despite all of these different, horrific times of killing that is happening by the Assad regime and the torture, and all these crimes that you mentioned, Sir. Unfortunately, his supporters are right now trying to re-integrate him into the international community, somehow bring him back to the community of nations.

And what we hope today from the American government, is to ensure that the Assad regime is never normalized. Is never brought back into the international community and that we implement the Caesar law to the letter. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. We want to assure you we will do everything we can to see that that happens. That he is not integrated into the international community. Thank you so much. Senator Cardin.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me thank Caesar for his courage for being willing to come forward. When the photographs were first released in 2014/2015, I said then that unfortunately, statistics are not going to move the international community. You have to personalize it. And the photographs that you released did that and I was hopeful that when that release took place, we would have seen the type of international response that would have ended the horrific circumstances under the Assad regime in Syria. But that was not the case.

I serve on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Board as one of the Congressional representatives. I was telling my colleagues, when you look at these photographs, it reminds you of the photographs during World War II, when we said never again. And we have not carried out that mission.

So I thank you very much for your courage because we need to be reminded of our responsibility to humanity. I think this committee has done incredible work in passing laws. You mentioned the Caesar bill that we passed and thank the Chairman, Senator Risch and Senator Menendez for their leadership in guiding that legislation to completion. It's not easy to get bills to the finish line here in the United States Congress.

I'm also pleased about the atrocity prevention, Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act. Senator Young, I thank him. The two of us worked on that legislation and it provides the wherewithal to try to prevent atrocities so we don't have to deal with accountability and the humanitarian aftermath.

We also had enacted into the National Defense Authorization Act legislation that Senator Rubio and I worked on, the Syria Accountability Act, that requires our administration to prepare the evidence necessary to hold the Assad regime accountable for their crimes against humanity.

So we have passed the bills here in the Congress. It's now critically important for the U.S. leadership internationally to implement those bills. So first and foremost, we want to end the violence in Syria, to bring an end to the misery of war. We need to provide humanitarian aid to those who are at risk, and that needs to be done.

But there is a third part that you have mentioned that I just want to underscore and that's accountability. Unfortunately, when we resolve conflicts or we provide ways of reducing the violence, we

usually put the accountability as the last issue to be dealt with, and sometimes it is never dealt with. As a result, the perpetrators get away with what they did, and there will be another atrocity in another part of the world when people see they can get away with this.

So I just really want to underscore this point and give you a chance to respond. If, in fact, the Assad regime is not held accountable, even if we end the conflict, what message does that send in your region of the world and throughout the world as to future conflicts, as to whether there are any bounds as to how civilian populations and human rights are handled during conflict, if we don't hold the Assad regime accountable?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] The message if no accountability for the Assad regime happens, regardless if the war stops or not, if we do not pursue accountability, the message that that sends to the entire world is a message to every tyrant and dictator and war criminal that they can go on and commit these humanitarian atrocities against defenseless civilians and that they themselves, as well, will never be held accountable.

It is a green light for every other war criminal.

Senator CARDIN. I agree completely, and that's why we need to make sure that the United States is in the leadership internationally, to make sure that we take care of ending the violence, we provide humanitarian aid, but we must insist upon accountability for war crimes.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cardin. Senator Young.

Senator YOUNG. Caesar, thank you. Thank you for your selfless courage. Thank you for shining a light on these horrific atrocities that truly shock the conscience of the civilized world. Thank you for reminding us in graphic detail about what has happened and what is happening in Syria; the poisonings, the rapes, the extrajudicial killings, the bombing of families, the targeted killing of children.

You've helped many of us here in the United States understand Assad in a broader context. And it's been broadly understood by many of us that Assad was a ruthless political actor for some period of time. But, there has been less of a popular understanding that he is relentlessly and systematically abused and violated people's fundamental human rights. That he slaughtered thousands of our fellow human beings.

Caesar, how much do the Syrian people know about Assad's crimes? And as a former member of the military, I ask you relatedly, how should we view your fellow soldiers who have remained in the military but may have different political views?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] For 40 years, the Syrian people have suffered from the crimes of the Assad regime and his father before him. And what happened in Hama in the '80s is also another horrific example of massive atrocities committed. But at that time there was not media coverage, so the entire world was not able to know as the Syrian people know the brutality of the Assad regime.

What is happening today in Syria is a miracle. Because Bashar al-Assad and his father, have ruled for well-over 40 years. They consider the Syrian people as animals in their farm. So the Syrian

people, to answer your questions, for a long time understand the full scale of the brutality in the machinery of death of the Assad regime.

And I believe that Bashar al-Assad, if it was not for Russia and for Iran, would not be ruling Syria right now. Any free person, any person that is a true patriot of Syria or has any humanity that has been part of the military has defected, and others that are still there must defect from this regime's brutal military.

Senator YOUNG. That is an important message.

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] And so, it is the responsibility of every honorable person, every Syrian patriot, any Syrian military person with any humanity to defect from the regime, and the fact is the lack of action by the international community actually does not encourage anybody defecting because they fear that Assad will continue to rule with the world standing by.

Senator YOUNG. This Caesar legislation that I have worked with my colleagues through the great leadership of the Chairman and Ranking Member and Senator Rubio. I think it is essential that we see to it that that legislation is implemented.

If there are other things you believe that the United States should be doing in furtherance of addressing these gross human rights violations, I hope you will volunteer those to us in the course of these proceedings.

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] We call for the quick implementation and keeping up with the deadlines and full implementation to the letter of law of the Caesar bill. But what takes even bigger priority than that are the people of Idlib. Idlib is almost 4 million civilians in an ever shrinking space. There must be a no-fly zone or there must be any way of stopping the airplanes of Russia and the Assad regime from bombing the civilians that have nowhere to run.

We know and the whole world knows that the United States is the leader of the world and if it takes a leadership role, the rest of the world will follow. The United States to us is the leader of the free world.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Caesar.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you Senator Young. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Caesar, thank you for being here today and for your willingness to publicly call out the Assad regime for its atrocities.

I would like to ask you a little bit about the detainees. And do we know how many people are estimated to still be in detention in prison held by the Assad regime?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] Senator, I do not know the exact numbers, and I think most people do not know the exact numbers. But according to many of the organizations and the experts that we work with monitoring this, there is by conservative estimate, about 215,000 people remaining in Assad's prisons.

Senator SHAHEEN. And are those prisons all across Syria or are they concentrated around Damascus and the areas that Assad has controlled for most of this war?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] In every part of Syria that the Assad regime controls, we have these intelligence branches, detention centers, and prisons.

Senator SHAHEEN. And I know that many of the detainees are people who Assad views as enemies, as leaders of the civil war. But has he rounded up other Syrians and is he detaining other Syrians?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, I was in Syria working. I would see the people being detained. They would bring them to the military police headquarters where I worked. They are arrested randomly and arbitrarily at checkpoints that are all over Damascus.

If, for example, your cellphone had in its history on YouTube a single patriotic song that doesn't praise Assad, that's enough to be arrested and never seen again. Even if there's a picture of the revolutionary flag, even that's good enough to be arrested.

Some people would put some of the songs, some of them that are just patriotic songs, not even thinking of the political implications, just something that is a good song. And that was another reason that many of them were arrested.

And there are so many people. If you look at the pictures that is a child, he's done nothing. And the lady behind you and also elderly that were farmers or just people that were living their lives.

So these hundreds of thousands that are in Assad's regime prisons, the vast majority of them played no role in even being any part of any armed opposition, and many of them didn't even protest. They were just regular Syrian people arrested for random, arbitrary reasons.

Senator SHAHEEN. Your photographs will be very important, as there is an international effort which I hope will come at some point to hold Assad and the other perpetrators of these crimes accountable for what they've done. I also believe that Russia and Iran are responsible for war crimes: the bombing of hospitals of aid workers, of children in buses, and again, as you say, I believe all of that was deliberate.

Is there evidence that's been collected that you're aware of that can be used to hold those, Russia and Iran, accountable for what they have done?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] The Syrian people have been very creative in making sure that they document what is happening to them. For me personally, I am focused in my expertise on my photos in my files, so I don't have that.

But I can assure you that the Syrians every day are documenting what is happening to them also at the hands of Russia and Iran.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you and just have a final question. I know that you are concerned about your security. Is that because there is reason to believe that Assad has assassins who would be interested in murdering you?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] The Assad regime but not only the Assad regime; Russia and Iran as well. And I will give you example of the Russian spy that was killed in the United Kingdom by the Russians.

So I believe all those three criminal regimes are people that are of concern for me.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Shaheen. Senator Gardner.

Senator GARDNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Caesar, for being here today and sharing. Years ago, I saw a front page story on a magazine. I think it was Time magazine. It was a long time ago. It had a picture of a BlackBerry cellphone on. It tells you how long ago it was.

The headline of the story was something like this. "Could the BlackBerry have prevented the Holocaust?" or something like that. It was a long time ago.

And the idea of the story was that a picture or a text or an email sent on that BlackBerry about what was happening could have brought international confirmation to what was happening and hopefully international condemnation and action to end the atrocities.

But today we know with more clarity the answer to that front page story because we have pictures today. We have witnesses, we have documentation, and we have the death full of atrocity. And yet the murder goes on.

And so, the BlackBerry or today's equivalent, has not stopped the grotesque violation against humanity. But the knowledge that your pictures, your experience, your testimony cannot be erased from humanity's memory. And so, now it's up to this Congress, to responsible global leaders to take these pictures, this testimony of these witnesses, these atrocities to stop the extermination. To prove true that we can actually take knowledge and act to end the depravity. To engage the world in active solidarity against depravity, in defiance against the idea that the blood of Assad's victims could somehow be washed away and forgotten through complicity, sanitized by countries willing to be active participants in the complicity.

Cellphones and cameras together don't stop tragedy alone, and they haven't. That's up to us to act. To do the hard work of humanity and for humanity, to carry out sanctions, to build coalitions, and to never leave a doubt about who could have stopped the tragedy of our time.

So thank you. And I guess I don't know how to ask this question or how to frame it. But given what we see here and what we hear from you and what we know is happening and what we see in the news and what reports every night share with us, how would you describe the condition of hope for the people in Syria or the condition of hope in Syria? How would you describe hope?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] I want to start by saying that for over 2 years I took photographs every day. I would take on average about 30 photos a day. I would cry every single day. They died in dark dungeons. I gave them my solemn promise that I would bring their voice and that I would give it to trustworthy hands. And I believe this is the place where those trustworthy hands are to help us get accountability for Bashar al-Assad.

Hope for me and the hope of the whole Syrian people is today to be able to implement the only law that has passed, the Caesar law. This is one of the very few rays of hope that we hold on to. And this ray of hope in this law, for example, which is not a magic bullet, is due to the lack of any military or political solution or option on the table. The Assad regime does not understand diplomacy

or negotiations. It only understands the credible threat of force and only understands negotiating from a position of power.

He believes in this sort of jungle law, that he can kill his way and kill everybody that ever stood against them and those that did not. That is the only language that he speaks.

And the fact is, all of his supporters are just as vicious, like Russia and Iran. And so, the only thing that Syrians are going on is their hope of an end to the killing.

Senator GARDNER. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Gardner. Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you so much, Caesar for time and again, bringing your story and the photos to the consciousness of the world.

The role that you played as a photographer. Why did the Syrian regime want to have photos taken of what was happening inside the security prisons?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] There's a longer answer, and I'll give you a very brief summary of that.

First of all, the routine for us as the military policeman, before even the uprising, was to take photos of any accidents or incidents under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense. That was the routine.

With the beginning of the revolution, there was a bit of chaos within the regime's intelligence branches and security apparatus. So one point is, no one, I think, sat and thought about the danger of what we were doing. We were documenting every single death that was happening. So we continued our regular, actual routine because all of these people that were being killed on a mass scale were being killed under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense.

And I can tell you, based on some of the information that we work on, the regime continues until today to document the crimes that are happening in his prisons because he saw that there is no accountability for that.

We, the Syrian people, understand the viciousness of this regime.

Senator MERKLEY. As you did this work and you were inside the institution and you were so deeply disturbed by it all, did you sense that there were many others who were deeply disturbed by this process of detention and torture and killing and did others find ways to protest or to escape?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] So I worked in the military police headquarters. In our full military police, we had about 5,000 individuals there. By the time I had left in 2013, after two and a half years of doing my job, there was only about 700 or 500 people left from those 5,000.

And, you know, even the people that work within the regime feared that this criminality could be done to them. In the forensic evidence section when we would print the photos, we would be afraid that a single tear might inadvertently come down our face.

Because I am afraid, anyone that worked with us, we were afraid of each other. If somebody saw an expression of sympathy or a tear, because sympathy with a dead child or woman or man will result in you being tortured to death.

And defection, by the way, is not an easy thing to do. A lot of my friends broke their own hands inside the office on purpose just

to have a medical leave, to be able to go to another town where his family is and never return. Because we did not even have vacations except if there was a serious medical condition.

And in the final period of time, even if you had a terrible health issue, you were not even allowed to go and see your family, fearing that they would escape. You can live or die in the branch that you work in.

Senator MERKLEY. So today we do not have present representatives of our executive branch of the Trump administration. I wish they were here in the room to see your pictures. And I hope that this testimony can motivate implementation of the Caesar law quickly.

If they were here, what would you say to them?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] For 9 years, the United States has watched as we have lived under bombardment and torture. We beg of you as an administration to do right by the Syrian people, to look at the Syrian people as fellow brothers and sisters in humanity.

Simply, I would ask the Administration to, please, end the killing in Syria.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you and thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I hope we can have representatives from the Administration participate in hearings like this whenever possible.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you Senator Merkley. Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Caesar, for being here and for carrying out your vitally important work.

I am moved by your courage, by the passion which you have to tell the world of what you have seen and what you have heard and what you have experienced. I am moved by your willingness to put yourself at risk to hopefully end some of the horror which is occurring in your homeland.

I would note that what you are doing will hopefully not only improve our commitment to protecting humanity, but it also inspires us who are in this room and around the world. We are more courageous as we see your courage. We are more willing to speak and to stand for what is right when we see someone of your stature who has done so in such an exemplary way.

What you have photographed and described today is overwhelming. The mind simply cannot encompass what we are seeing. It is horrifying. It is brutality beyond the comprehension of the human spirit to consider.

I ask at this stage whether the torture and the brutality has changed over the 9 years or whether it was as brutal and awful from the beginning as it is now?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] I want to thank you sincerely for your kind words. I am sure that the killing and the brutality has only increased in Syria over those 9 years. The fact that the entire world continues to be a bystander is only perpetuating the escalation of the violence against humanity.

And I know because I served in the Syrian regime, that this regime is a coward regime. But they have seen no reason to be afraid. He used chemical weapons, including under President Obama's administration. There was no response then. They told

him, "Give away some of your chemical weapons." Is this how we punish criminals: that if somebody stabs someone, you just take away their knife?

But we hope that despite that the situation in Syria is worse today than it ever was, we have hope in the American people and government to put an end to the tragedy of Syria.

Senator ROMNEY. Clearly, Bashar al-Assad is a butcher, a torturer, a war criminal, and should be prosecuted as such if we are able to eventually get our hands on him. Have Russia and Iran participated in the same form of brutality, which suggests that their leaders should be categorized in the same way.

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] First of all, Iranian-backed militias and Iranian security forces are entrenched throughout regime-held areas of Syria. Many of them are the ones that are leading the ground efforts against the Syrian people.

And Russia, even in a big way as well, has been responsible for many crimes. Its air force is responsible for the killing of countless civilians and the displacement of many others. And so, the president and the leadership of both Iran and Russia, are war criminals just like the Assad regime.

Senator ROMNEY. I would note in my last few seconds, Mr. Chairman, that there are some in the world who wonder why we are engaged in the world, why America is involved in the affairs of the world. And the reason is that when we are not involved in the affairs of the world, awful things happen and people suffer, and ultimately that suffering affects us even in our own homes.

But even if it were not to do so, we have a responsibility as members of the human race to stand for human decency and to apply American leadership because we are the leader of the free world. I say this not as a member of one party or another. I say this as someone who has observed foreign affairs, that this nation's leadership is essential to the preservation of human rights and human dignity throughout the world and we are involved in order to help protect those things.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you Senator Romney. Senator Udall.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you, Senator Menendez for holding this hearing.

Caesar, thank you so much for coming today. Thank you for your bravery and thank you for your real dedication to bringing out the atrocities that you have testified to today and I understand some of the other panelists will be talking about this, too, from what I have read.

I wanted to give you an example of how justice was brought to another situation that might apply here and then ask you a question.

In 2003, the United Nations and the government of Sierra Leone jointly agreed to form the Special Court for Sierra Leone in order to bring those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law to justice. This was in response to many of the atrocities that occurred during conflicts in Sierra Leone and which emanated from its neighbor Liberia under the control, at the time, of Charles Taylor.

Charles Taylor was indicted and tried in this court many years after he fled Liberia in 2003, under pressure from both troops from

the Economic Community of West African States and U.S. troops offshore, he fled to Nigeria, where he was eventually captured. A capture that was aided by a \$2 million reward authorized by Congress in 2003.

But this was an effort that also had strong international backing. The U.N. Security Council played a central role authorizing the Special Court to try him in The Hague for the crimes he committed. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to 50 years in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Among his crimes were violations of the Geneva Conventions, acts of terrorism, murder, cruel treatment of persons, and other inhumane acts.

In 2014, moving forward now, a number of years under the leadership of President Obama, the U.N. Security Council attempted to take similar action against those who committed crimes inside Syria. The Security Council considered a resolution to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power argued that the resolution, and I'm quoting from her, "was about accountability for crimes so extensive and deadly that they had few equals in modern history. It was also about accountability on the part of the Security Council. It was the Council's responsibility to stop atrocities if it could, and to ensure that the perpetrators of atrocities were held accountable at a minimum." That's the end of her quote.

Unfortunately, the resolution was blocked by China and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's ally, Russia. All of the panelists have helped bring forward and bring to light the atrocities inside Syria. We are grateful for your work. It also took many years for Charles Taylor to be brought to justice, but ultimately justice was served.

Do you believe that the U.S. should continue to insist that the U.N. Security Council refer the case of Syrian war crimes to the International Criminal Court?

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] Absolutely, I believe in that. And I am full of hope and I believe that we will also reach justice. We will reach accountability for these criminals.

But we also understand whether we do get to the International Criminal Court or whichever way we reach justice, it will be a very long road. But we are doing what our consciousness and our humanity obligates us to do. And we are even pursuing several national prosecutions in Europe.

For example, in Germany, we were able to get the German government to put out an arrest warrant, for example for Jamil Hassan, the former head of the Air Force Intelligence Branch. And we hope that the United States is able to get the Security Council to put the Syrian case and to put the dictator Bashar al-Assad before the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator. Senator Perdue.

Senator PERDUE. I'll yield my time at this point.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Well, thank you very much, Caesar for being with us today. We admire your bravery. We appreciate your bringing to the attention of the world these things, so they could be described in words. There's no substitute for photographs.

I have no doubt that at some point in time your 55,000 photographs will be used and the people who did those things, those pho-

tographs will be put in front of them and in front of the people who will hopefully dispense justice to them. Thank you again for being here today.

CAESAR. [Interpreted.] Thank you all so much. I am confident that all of you will stand by us, will stand by the Syrian people.

The CHAIRMAN. You can be assured of that. Thank you. With that we will end this part of the panel. We ask everyone to retain their seats for a moment while we reconfigure the room. Thank you.

We will now hear from our second panel. Our first witness is Omar Alshogre. Omar Alshogre is a former detainee in the Assad regime's vast network of prisons. He spent nearly 2 years in detention in Syrian Intelligence Branch 215, where he numbered the bodies of dead torture victims that later appeared in the photos in the Caesar file. While detained, Omar learned that most of his family and village were killed.

After Branch 215, Omar was moved to Saydnaya prison, dubbed the worst place on earth, where he survived for a year before finally being released. Omar eventually traveled to Europe and arrived in Sweden, where he has resided since. Today he is a member of the Caesar Team and the Syrian Emergency Task Force. With that, we will hear from him, and then we will move to our second witness.

**STATEMENT OF OMAR ALSHOGRE, DIRECTOR OF DETAINEE
ISSUES, SYRIAN EMERGENCY TASK FORCE**

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you, members of this committee, for inviting me to testify.

As I am talking to you right now, people are scared in Idlib Province. Children are dying. They face constant bombardment. Schools, hospitals, and bakeries have all been targeted. All day every day, civilians live in fear of the regime, Russia, and Iran. During the humanitarian disaster in Idlib, we cannot forget why so many people have come to this desperate place to evade the very same detention I faced for over 3 years. When the regime advance and takes another village, those cities become like cities of ghosts. Innocent men, women, and children either die, flee, or end up in detention centers like me. What I am going to tell you in the coming few minutes is a story, true story.

My father left me on the street of my hometown, Baniyas, on March 18th of 2011. Before he departed, he whispered a few words in my ears. Guess what it was? I had participated in the demonstrations, and for only for asking for freedom, I was arrested, and I was tortured. I was confused. I did not understand why they arrested me. I was 15 years old. I did not really understand the situation and what was going on, and I was as like every other kid on this planet. They think police is like somebody who protects you. That is what I thought about the police even in Syria, especially that my father was an officer. He retired in 2009, but still for me it was that my dad was an officer. He protected me and that is what the police should do.

In prison, they tortured me, and my torturer forced me to say that I have killed, I had weapons, but that did not come that easy. He had to pull out my fingernails out of my fingers first before I

give this false confession. I was only 15 years old when the guard open scarred on my body. I was only 15 years when my life experience became nearly too much to bear. I was only 15 years old when I wished to die.

I remember one good thing from prison. One month something was different. I didn't know what is going on, but we got less torture, we got more food, and the guards were not screaming anymore. They were not burning our bodies with their cigarettes. They were giving us one full potato instead of half one. When I got out of prison, I tried to match what happened on this day and this month when I was in prison when I got more food than usual, what happened outside. It was when Caesar's pictures been released. Everybody around the world was talking about prisoners and what is going on in Syria's prison.

That is why we have to speak. That is why we have to do anything, even just write on Twitter or talk or have testimony. This testimony give hope for a lot of people.

I just published yesterday on social media that I am going to be testifying together with Caesar and Raed, and people were too kind, those who say it is amazing, something may happen, they may help us doing something. And other people who say that happened before, they know more than what you know about your own experience, they are not going to change anything. Let us show them the opposite.

I remember one Tuesday, a beautiful Tuesday, when I was in Saydnaya Prison. It was the night of June 2015. I already been in prison 3 years and experienced all kind of torture, and I was starving. But the guard opened the door and he said, "Omar." The only time they says your name in Saydnaya prison is when they are going to kill you. They took me from a room. They killed somebody who was next to me, asked me to pull him outside of the room. I pulled his body out. I looked at his face. It was my best friend at that time.

The guards took me, isolated me in room for 48 hours, and every single hour, day and night, when the watch of the guard, he comes and ask me a question. How do you want me to kill you? Be creative. I was forced to give 68 answers, answer for 48 because not all of them was nice or good enough for him to enjoy killing me. After 48 hours, they pulled me out of the room, took me in the car, blindfolded my eyes, my hands tied behind me, and they put me in the street facing the ground. The officer is walking slowly behind me, and I am scared because I do not want to see how they are going to kill me. I did not know. He walks, talks about my death, then he just got silent. And "load," "aim." It did not go that quickly. It took a billion years for me between "load" and "aim." It takes a long time. Then he said, "shoot." Poof.

And I died for the first time. I never died before. I did not know how it feels or what is going to happen. Have any of you died before, can explain how it feels to die? I did not—so I was just thinking, wow, finally the afterlife. I woke up still alive, did not know what happened. The guy they killed in the room when they come to take me was a guy who was supposed to be released. They killed him. They put my name on his face, and they took me outside of prison because it was my day to be executed. Took me outside of

prison with his name because my mother paid \$20,000 to an officer to get me out of prison. She did not know how, but my mom wanted me to be alive after they killed my father and my siblings in an attack on our village in Syria.

When the regime takes an area, people will die, flee, or get arrested. That is what happened to them. What I mentioned just was the mental torture you experience by the Syrian regime. I did not talk about the physical because it is not going to help you understand because the physical torture, you do not understand it if you do not experience it.

So what is waiting people in Idlib is the same thing if we do not help them. The people of Syria are suffering. They may be used to pain, but it is not pain who breaks people. It is fear. They fear not being able to feed their children. They fear being arrested, captured, and tortured to death. It is not the torture that was the worst. It is waiting for torture that was the worst.

Sometimes it seems impossible to help these people, but as Nelson Mandela said, "it always seems impossible until it is done." We have to do something. And I want to conclude by quoting the words of your own President when he said, "Assad is an animal." I hope you all agree with him. I do. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Alshogre follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF OMAR ALSHOGRE

Thank you members of this committee for inviting me to testify.

As you read my testimony now, in Idlib civilians face a constant onslaught from the regime and its foreign backers, Russia and Iran. They face constant bombardment. Schools, hospitals, and bakeries have all been targeted. In the midst of this massive humanitarian disaster, one cannot forget that the reason so many have come to this desperate place is to evade the very same detention I faced for over 3 years. When the regime advances and seizes another village, people either die, flee, or end up in detention centers like me and those cities became cities of ghosts. And here's a brief taste of what happened in detention centers:

The Syrian regime first arrested me on April 12th, 2011 at the center of my hometown, the village of al-Bayda near Baniyas city. when I was 15 years old. They arrested me for only participating in non-violent demonstrations.

There I got my first taste of what was to come—I spent two nights in jail and experienced torture for the first time. I for the first time braced as I endured electric shocks. I for the first time knew how it felt for my nails to be pulled from my fingers.

The regime released me thanks to the marches of women in Baniyas and al-Bayda. These women took to the streets to demand the release of their family and community members. I returned to my hometown, but faced arrest after arrest for no reason but for going to school or belonging to the Alshogre family.

On November 16th, 2012, the regime arrested me for the final time. I spent 3 years in many different prisons in different Syrian cities, but mostly in Damascus. I was only 17 years old.

Over a period of almost 3 years, the regime tortured me alongside my three cousins—Bashir (born in 1990), Rashad (1992), and Nour (1995)—who had been arrested with me. Guards pulled out our fingernails—sparing only Nour of this burden given that she was a girl. They threw us naked into small cells stained with the blood of former detainees who had suffered their torture as well.

At the time of the last arrest, we were taken first to the military intelligence branch in Baniyas. We spent around 4 hours there before being transferred to a military intelligence branch in Tartus where we spent the following 20 days. Next, we were transferred to a police station in the same city, Tartus, for 7 days and then we were transferred to al-Balouna police station in Homs. Again we were transferred, this time to al-Qaboun in Damascus, then to an unknown place near al-Qaboun, then to Branch 291 where we spent the last hours before being transferred to Branch 215 on December 13, 2012. I spent around 1 year and 8 months in Branch 291 before being sent to Branch 248 for a few hours, then again to al-Qaboun, then finally to Saydnaya prison on August 15, 2014. I was then sent to al-Qaboun for

court on the 8th of September 2014 and to the court at the 9th before being sent back to Saydnaya on the 10th of September 2014. I was then smuggled out of the country on June 11, 2015.

IN THE TARTUS MILITARY INTELLIGENCE BRANCH

I was first isolated in a small cell with my hands tied and my eyes blindfolded. In my first 7 days there, guards took me from my cell to the corridor where most of the torture happens. On those days, I spent 16 hours standing on my feet being tortured on and off physically. But the mental torture was constant. They put me in a German electric chair or in a car tire. When I wasn't physically tortured, the sound of my cousins screaming in pain instantly soured any relief I felt. I can still hear the screams of my cousin, Bashir, when the guards dug into his back with a screwdriver. My other cousin, Rashad, lost most of his hair on his body, which the guards took amusement in burning. I could hear him crying and screaming of the pain while the guards laughed loudly. Rashad was the first of us to be hung up to the ceiling by shackles on his wrist. I was next.

In the first 2 days, the guards didn't ask questions. They only tortured. Later, however, they started asking me questions like "how many officers have you killed?" I thought the guards were kidding because I knew I had killed no one. I answered their queries with quiet laughter. For this they beat my face and subjected me to electric shocks. They tortured me for 6 days. They strung me up and hung me on the ceiling. They again put me in a car tire and pulled my nails. They whipped me with cables and sticks. When I could no longer bear it, I told them what they wanted to hear: "Yes, I killed officers."

For the guards, the specifics of said guards—and even whether they ever lived or died—did not matter. They expected me to admit I had killed officers, and that was all that mattered. They wanted me to write a confession to give a legalistic facade to their dungeon of horrors. On the 6th day, the guards threatened that they would rape my cousin Nour before my very eyes if I did not confess to the murder of ten officers and possession of a weapon. They coerced me to state that I had worked as a spy for the United States and Israel. I didn't speak any word of English then and didn't even know what a terrorist was at the time.

On the 10th day, Bashir and I were taken to our village to the spot where, under torture, I had said I buried my non-existent weapons. The soldiers dug a hole, threw me in it, and buried me alive. For some reason, right as I was about to suffocate, they pulled me out of the grave. We returned back to Tartus branch—where the most extreme varieties of torture and horror were commonplace. The guards again asked the same questions, but I didn't remember what I admitted to before. They tortured me more. They threatened they would arrest my mom and sisters if I did not say I committed crimes.

Bashir's body was scarred. Rashad's ribs broke before we left the Tartus Military Intelligence Branch. My bones were broken as well. Blistering wounds freckled my skin where the guards amused themselves by putting out their cigarettes.

IN TARTUS POLICE STATION

The guards forced my cousins and me to clean the toilets while enduring torture. Back in the cells, during our "sleep time," arrested government soldiers tortured us. In reality, there never was a break. Our meager food was always stolen by these imprisoned soldiers. Our scars got their attention and their torture deepened our wounds. The officers told the imprisoned soldiers there that my cousins and I had previously carried weapons and killed officers so they tortured us and we could not sleep in peace.

IN AL-QABOUN

The guard hit me on my face until one of my teeth broke. My cousin, Nour, was still with us but isolated in a different, all-female room. The guards fed us either potatoes or bread and even sometimes eggs. But we could not eat the food because it was mixed with blood and hair. The guards all seemed to enjoy torturing people. They forced us naked and transmitted electric shocks to our genitalia. We tried to tell them that we are innocent. But, to the guards, innocence did not matter.

IN BRANCH 291

We spent around 6 hours continually tortured without any questioning. Later, we were transferred to Branch 215, known as "the branch of slow death."

We were put in a room under the ground with hundred of people. These people looked worse than death itself: broken arms and legs, decaying and vanishing teeth, blue bruises peaking through the few spots not covered in blood. Maggots ate at their flesh and the blood covered their skin. The room was so packed that there was not enough space to sit. We stood until we got dizzy and then we would fall over, onto people who then would hit us because we had fallen on their wounds. We endured 4 days of standing and falling then standing again until the guard took us to the first floor where we were divided to three different groups for scheduled torture. I faced the wall waiting my turn to be hit while a guards tortured a woman in the same room. I heard the voice of two kids with us in the room—her two children. By his or her cry, I could tell the youngest of them wasn't much more than an infant. The guards tortured and raped her. They forced her to say that she had killed officers and that her husband had too. I remember the sound when her younger child was thrown hard on the ground. Like a child's delayed reaction to a fall, it took some seconds before the child could cry. Later, this woman's husband, who was held in the same cell as me, told me that the blow had killed his child. Both he and his wife were forced to say that they were terrorists.

My turn came. They asked me to confess that my cousin Nour made bombs. I knew her as a strong student in high school—never as a bomb-maker. Again, the truth didn't matter to the officers. My cousins and I were thrown back to our room after hours of torture. Since none of us could stand and our knees had been smashed in torture, we lied over other peoples bodies. We were lucky that some of those people were dead so they didn't protest.

On March 15, 2013, Rashad died from the pain of his broken ribs and starvation. Rashad was a hero. He used to donate some of his food to sick prisoners. He was beloved for his kindness and respected by everybody around him. He was carried to the "Azel room,"—a sort of isolation room or mortuary where the guards collected dead bodies before taking them upstairs to a truck and driving them away. When Rashad's body arrived in the dead room, a guy who looked to be in better shape than all other prisoners, gave me a pen and asked me to write a number on Rashad's forehead. This later became my job. In Branch 215, I numbered the dead bodies of my fellow inmates and, with help of other prisoners, carried them into the truck on the ground floor.

In 2013, the regime arrested another of my cousins and put him in the same jail as Bashir and myself. His name was Hassan. He told me that my family had been killed—cut down and burned—alongside with tens of my other relatives in a massacre perpetrated by regime forces in my village al-Bayda on May 2, 2013.

Until March 2014, Bashir couldn't think about anything else than what he would do if he got out of prison. He wondered how he would respond when his mother asked him "where is your younger brother?" Those thoughts—alongside all the torture, sickness, and starvation—robbed him of hope. He died on March 3, 2014. I carried him in my arms back from the toilet. Bashir was my closest friend in prison. He gave me a reason to smile and to continue to be alive. His death was the first to break me—and the first to make me unbreakable.

After Rashad and Bashir, I witnessed the guards taking Hassan to his death. At this time and after that I witnessed the death of thousands of prisoners of all different nationalities and walks of life. All the while, I numbered their bodies. I even numbered my cousins and my best friend. I could see my face on every dead body I numbered. During my time in Branch 215, I got sick repeatedly. I was afforded no medicine or medical attention whatsoever. The only thing that protected us was the angel of death. During my time there, I met two prisoners who had been arrested since 2008. They told me they were until recently kept on the 6th floor of Branch 215. There, they had met international prisoners. During a period of time, the guards would search for prisoners who spoke English. Those who could speak English were taken to translate between the guards and the non-Arabic speaking prisoners. It was these same people who inevitably numbered the day after they were taken to translate. Their selection and deaths are the strongest evidence I have for the presence of the non-Arabic speaking prisoners in the regime's political prisons.

I had been the youngest detainee in Branch 215 until a 12-year old child joined our cell. I remember him crying and asking for his mom. I remember him and the other children scared and ashamed after being raped by the guards. I remember the guards laughing when they spoke of raping them again. In prison, we were Muslims, Christians, Atheists—all sharing the same kind of torture. All of us were forced to fight to eat, fight to drink, and fight to survive for just one more day.

IN THE COURT

The guards took me to a room and forced my fingerprints on some papers I hadn't read. They had blindfolded me. I could hear screams of pain even in the court. I was taken to stand in front of a judge and I felt some hope for the first time in a while. Then he asked me "how many people have you killed?" I answered "none." He told me to "get out." That was my one day in court.

IN SAYDNAYA PRISON

The level of torture in Saydnaya "the slaughter house," was incomparable even with what I had experienced earlier. Saydnaya was worse than pain, more horrible than anything previous to it, worse than death. Someone near to where I was in Saydnaya told the guards he was sick. They called the prison doctor who told him they needed no sick people in Saydnaya and executed him. They ordered me to pull him to the dead room. There, I saw people who seems like they have died of many different reasons—including torture, starvation, and the removal of organs

Between August 2015 and June 2015, a lot of people died. A lot of children became orphans and a lot of women became widows. The guards gave some people knives and asked them to choose between their life and that of their kin. The guards could starve us in days then give food to five of a hundred people. They would instigate a fight between the starving mass and those recently given some small amount of food. The guards would put a pile of food in the corner of our room and force us to look at it for days without being allowed to eat it. The shower days in the winter saw the most deaths.

On June 9th, 2015, I was taken to an empty room where I spent 48 hours being asked by the guards at every single hour the same question over and over "how would you like me to kill you? Be creative." They forced me to give different creative answers of how they could enjoy killing me. Behind the scenes, a huge amount of money was paid to an officer and judge to help smuggling me outside Saydnaya before my execution. They killed someone else who was set for release and saved me in his place. After a mock execution, they carried me off. I didn't know what was going on. I just woke up in the middle of nowhere covered in blood and unable to open my eyes. The sun shone over my head for the first time after almost 3 years. I managed to get myself to Damascus and get my way out of the country. The regime stopped me at a checkpoint and again brought me to the brink of execution near Idlib. However, my tuberculosis-borne coughs of blood scared the soldiers and in a panic they released me into rebel-held areas. From there I made it to Turkey, where I found out that my mom and some of my siblings had survived the 2013 massacre and escaped to Turkey after the death of my father and brothers. My mom had paid the money to smuggle me out of prison. She didn't know the money she'd paid was the cost to save my life.

ON MY WAY TO EUROPE/LEGAL CASES

For seeking treatment, I was forced to risk my life again by sitting on a rubber boat with tens of people in a dark night to go to Greece in the end of 2015. Greece didn't provide me any healthcare so I continued to travel through North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, and Denmark. Finally, on December 1st, 2015, I entered Sweden—the country that treated me the best and gave me what was necessary to survive and even thrive. I started to learn Swedish early in the hospital during treatment. Over the past 5 years, I've learned to speak it fluently. Later, I learned Norwegian before starting to focus on learning English in 2018.

I believe in justice and accountability for those who committed such heinous acts against myself and so many others. For this reason, I have testified to the Swedish police and worked alongside other survivors in legal cases in Germany, France, Sweden, Spain and Norway for war crimes committed by the regime against the Syrian civilians. I have felt immense concern for my safety since the regime actors contacted me threatening that I should remain silent or fear for my life. I refuse to be silent. Bringing Syria's war criminals to justice needs the support of the United States to protect innocent people and right past wrongs. I look to the United States to be the voice for the voiceless people, not only in Syria, but around the world.

The CHAIRMAN. It is powerful testimony, Mr. Alshogre. Thank you. We will have some questions for you in a moment. We are going to turn now to our second witness, Mr. Raed Al Saleh. Mr. Al Saleh is the head of the Syrian Civil Defence, more commonly known as the White Helmets. He manages this network of over

2,800 volunteers who have saved over 120,000 lives in Syria. He is originally from Idlib, and he is a father of two. Mr. Al Saleh, the floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF RAED AL SALEH, HEAD OF THE SYRIA CIVIL DEFENCE [WHITE HELMETS]

Mr. AL SALEH. [Interpreted.] First of all, thank you for giving us this opportunity to talk about what is happening in Idlib. What was said by both Caesar and Omar gives a very harrowing glimpse of the horrors that are faced by the Syrian people, but I will speak about a different perspective.

My name is Raed Al Saleh: I am the head of the Syria Civil Defence, popularly known as the White Helmets, this organization of 2,500 men and 300 women, who have dedicated their lives to saving others. When the bombs rained down, we rushed to dig lives from under the rubble. Since our formation in 2013, we have saved more than 120,000 lives in Syria. 282 volunteers have been killed in the line of duty, deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia. We rescue people regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or politics. We have rescued our own family members, complete strangers, and even Assad regime soldiers.

Our motto and inspiration comes from the universal teaching found in the Quran that reads, "Whoever saves one life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity." Yet for all the lives we have saved, death is beating us. For every Syrian that we have saved, there are five that we have lost. If only we could stop the bombs, we could save almost every single one.

I am here today to convey the voices of the millions of civilians in Idlib who wake up every day fearing death. Idlib, once an idyllic, rural province known for its olives and cherries has been turned into hell on earth. Since Russia's intervention in 2015, the number of internally-displaced people has doubled to 8 million. The relentless aerial bombardment and use of siege to retake areas like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta has forced millions to evacuate to Idlib. Now there is not another Idlib, nowhere else left to flee to, and so nearly 4 million civilians are trapped. The area is roughly the size of the State of Rhode Island. Its pre-war population of 300,000 has increased by more than tenfold.

Since the beginning of the Idlib offensive, the Assad regime, backed by Russian air power and Iranian proxy militias, has launched a systematic campaign targeting all civilian infrastructure. Water points, hospitals, White Helmet centers, food markets, schools, and bakeries have all been targeted and bombed. Nearly everything that can help civilians survive has been destroyed, and the vast majority of people are struggling to access basic shelter, food, and medicine.

I was in Idlib just weeks ago. There are no words to describe the apocalyptic horrors I witnessed there. Numbers are no longer useful as the horror cannot be quantified, so I will tell you a story. I saw a father in Idlib standing on the side of the road with a sign reading, "I will sell my kidney for a tent." Can you imagine being so desperate to just provide shelter for your family?

I did not come here to talk about humanitarian needs. Senators, I want to be very clear in this hallowed institution. What is hap-

pening in Syria is not an earthquake or hurricane that can be solved with humanitarian aid funding. No amount of money can stop a single barrel bomb falling over a child's bed. No amount of money can return a single displaced family to their home. We deeply appreciate the U.S. government's support to the White Helmets and urge your support in making sure the Syrian people's needs are met, but more funding to us will not solve the problem either.

The ambulances we purchase with your funding are being pursued by Russian drones and deliberately bombed. Russia has destroyed millions of dollars' worth of our U.S.-funded equipment. When you give us more money, what you are telling us is that you will not stop the atrocities, and that, instead, we must purchase more ambulances to transport more injured civilians, order new cranes to lift collapsed concrete crushing entire families, and buy more protective clothing to deal with chemical attacks. Raising funds to alleviate the suffering does not work any better than giving painkillers to a cancer patient. What is needed is the political will to act to protect civilians.

The overwhelming majority of the suffering results from one cause: the absolute impunity with which the Syrian regime and Russia bomb civilians from the sky. Yes, we have other evils, too: the thousands of Iranian proxy forces, known for their sectarian brutality, and other extremist groups who have similarly terrorized civilians. But it is the unimpeded aerial bombardment which is the primary cause of death, destruction, and displacement of civilians. The aerial bombardment is the primary cause of the refugee exodus to Europe, which has empowered far-right parties. The aerial bombardment and the West's unwillingness to stop it is the primary recruitment tool for ISIS and terrorist groups.

So today I ask you to use your power to end the root cause of all the suffering by taking real action to clear the skies above Syria. Since 2011, we have been told all the reasons why intervention to protect civilians is impossible, but who has considered the consequences of not acting?

The consequences of the world's inaction cannot be confined to Syria's borders. Meeting the most basic humanitarian needs will cost billions a month. Millions more refugees will flee Syria to Europe's safer shores. No border wall can contain them. An entire generation of children will be left uneducated. Extremist groups will foment in the chaos, necessitating future global coalitions and trillions of dollars to defeat new threats. Does this sound more possible? Does this cost sound more reasonable than acting to stop the atrocities being committed now? Turkey's intervention last month shattered the myth that the use of force to stop hostilities might cause further escalation. In fact, the opposite happened. After Turkey's brief military intervention last week, there was a complete stop in aerial attacks, but Turkey cannot do this alone. It needs your support and leadership.

The enforcement of a national ceasefire by all means necessary will create the conditions for real, internationally-backed peace talks, including accountability for all perpetrators of mass atrocities and war crimes. For I still believe in the values that the Syrian revolution called for in March 2011, the values of democracy practiced in this building every day, and which can be practiced in

Syria, too. With support of people around the world, we Syrians can rebuild our country into a free, peaceful democratic Syria that operates beyond the evils of the regime and extremists.

I do not wish to sit here in 2025 detailing the suffering of yet another unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, to speak of several hundred thousand more lives lost, the millions still without a home, and paying tribute to hundreds more White Helmets who will have been killed saving lives. As we enter the 10th year of war, the world has run out of words. Now is the time for action. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Al Saleh follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RAED AL SALEH

My name is Raed al-Saleh. I am the head of the Syria Civil Defence—popularly known as the White Helmets—an organization of 2,500 men and 300 women who have dedicated their lives to saving others. When the bombs rain down, we rush to dig life from under the rubble. Since our formation in 2013, we have saved more than 120,000 lives in Syria. 282 volunteers have been killed in the line of duty, deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia.

We rescue people regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or politics. We have rescued our own family members, complete strangers, and Assad regime soldiers. Our motto and inspiration comes from the universal teaching found in the Qu'ran, that reads: "Whoever saves one life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity."

Yet for all the lives we have saved, death is beating us. For every Syrian that we've saved, there are five that we've lost. If only we could stop the bombs, we could save almost every single one.

I am here today to represent the millions of civilians in Idlib who wake up every-day fearing death.

Idlib, once an idyllic rural province known for its olives and cherries has been turned into hell on earth.

Since Russia's intervention in 2015, the number of internally displaced people has doubled to 8 million; the relentless aerial bombardment and use of siege to retake areas like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta has forced millions to "evacuate" to Idlib. Now there isn't another Idlib, nowhere else left to flee to and so nearly 4 million civilians are trapped. The area is roughly the size of Rhode Island—its pre-war population of 300,000 has increased by more than tenfold.

Since the beginning of the Idlib offensive the Syrian regime, backed by Russian airpower and Iranian proxy militias, has launched a systematic campaign targeting all civilian infrastructure: water points, hospitals, White Helmets centers, food markets, schools and bakeries. Nearly everything that can help civilians survive has been destroyed and the vast majority of people are struggling to access basic shelter, food and medicine.

I was in Idlib three weeks ago. There are no words to describe the apocalyptic horrors I witnessed there. Numbers are no longer useful as the horror cannot be quantified so I will tell you two stories.

The first is of a father standing on the side of the road, with a sign reading: 'Will sell my kidney for a tent'. Can you imagine being so desperate to just provide shelter for your family?

The other is when I visited the thousands of families living under olive groves with no protection or facilities—many don't even have tents. I asked a grandmother what she needed most. She didn't say what you might expect: food, water, a blanket. She just asked for a toilet so she might have some dignity. How is it that the great Syrian people, the birthplace of civilization, the creators of the first alphabet from the fifteenth century BCE are now dreaming of a toilet? Abandonment has made our dreams very small.

I did not come here to talk about humanitarian needs. I want to be very clear in this hallowed institution: what is happening in Syria is not an earthquake or hurricane that can be solved with humanitarian aid funding. No amount of money can stop a single barrel bomb falling over a child's bed. No amount of money can return a single displaced family to their home.

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being pursued by Russian drones, and deliberately bombed. Russia has destroyed millions of dollars worth of our U.S.-funded equipment. When you give us more money, what you are telling us is that you will not stop the atrocities, and that instead we must purchase more ambulances to transport more injured civilians, order new cranes to lift collapsed concrete crushing entire families, and buy more protective clothing to deal with chemical attacks.

Raising funds to alleviate the suffering does not work any better than giving painkillers to a cancer patient. How much longer will the international community pursue this strategy before concluding it doesn't work?

What is needed is the political will to act to protect civilians.

The overwhelming majority of the suffering results from one cause: the absolute impunity with which the Syrian regime and Russia bomb civilians from the sky. Yes, we have other evils too: the thousands of Iranian proxy forces, known for their sectarian brutality, and ISIS and Al-Qaeda who have similarly terrorized civilians. But it is the unimpeded aerial bombardment which is the primary cause of death, destruction, and displacement of civilians. The aerial bombardment is the primary cause of the refugee exodus to Europe which has empowered far right parties. The aerial bombardment, and the West's unwillingness to stop it, is the primary recruitment tool for ISIS and Al-Qaeda. So today I ask you to use your power to end the root cause of all this suffering by taking real action to clear the skies above Syria.

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I do not wish to sit here in 2025 detailing the suffering of yet another unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, several hundred thousand more lives lost, the millions still without a home, and paying tribute to hundreds more White Helmets who have been killed saving lives.

As we enter the 10th year of war, the world has run out of words. Now is the time for action.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much. Both of you have given very powerful testimony to our committee. Senator Menendez.

Senator MENENDEZ. Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to say that questions are not valuable when you hear the testimony of Mr. Alshogre, who is extraordinary at such a young age to have to recount it so many times and relive it, and Mr. Al Saleh's tremendous work with the White Helmets. You know, I sat here as the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee a time, and we approved an AUMF to stop Assad when he was using chemical weapons. And it had a limited value because it was only pursued to give up those weapons that we knew at the time. I passed legislation to help the then-independent Syrian forces that we thought could ultimately change the tide in their own country.

At this point, I hope that your testimony and Caesar's testimony before you pricks the conscience of this nation. There are some things that we can do. We can immediately seek implementation of the Caesar Act, and begin to create a consequence for those who

are committing these horrific acts. What more testimony do we need? What more visualization do we need? We can do something like the Administration changing its decision to zero out the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States, refugees who are the most heavily vetted of any group that may come to the United States.

Tomorrow the Trump administration could start a Syrian refugee resettlement as a message to the world that we need to take care of those who are fleeing. And tomorrow we could start an effort of a surge in international efforts to hold those accountable and to seek a true ceasefire and an implementation of it. These are things that take political will. It is a will that has not been forthcoming from our country, and that is not unique to this Administration either.

So I hope that this testimony that is riveting—I could ask you about assistance from humanitarian organizations. I could ask you about what else we could do, but you have said it so aptly. Giving me more money to buy more ambulances that will get bombed by the Russians is not going to solve the horrific violence. So for myself, I will seek to find ways in which we can prick the conscience of our colleagues, and of this Administration, and of others who can ultimately cast a garish light upon these horrific acts of violence, and to seek a movement that begins to change the course of events, because that is what we ultimately seek to serve for: to change the course of the events for the better, both here and abroad. And I appreciate your testimony in that regard. I have no questions for you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Menendez. Senator Perdue.

Senator PERDUE. Well, to say that, sitting in this moment of luxury and safety here in the United States Capitol, we are chagrined and horrified about what you have told us today would not do you honor. I do have a question. I want to allow you to speak more about this. I agree with Senator Menendez. This is not about American politics. This is about human life in Syria. What you went through, Omar, as a 15-year-old shocks me, and I want to thank you for being here and having the guts to be here, and, Mr. Al Saleh, thank you for the White Helmets and your leadership. But we have to hold these people accountable, and we have to stop the killing.

You mentioned clearing the skies. There were some of us who supported a no-fly zone in Syria that would have saved thousands of lives heretofore. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act became law in December. I agree with Senator Menendez. We need to implement that. I want to ask both of you, Mr. Al Saleh and Mr. Alshogre, what can we do to help hold these people accountable? Assad. Russia. UAE is now recognizing them. These are things the U.S. can influence on. We are not walking away. None of us want to walk away from Syria and our responsibility in that part of the world.

The U.N. in 2016 created—the General Assembly—the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism. Tell us your personal opinions about what we need to do now to help make this end and help hold these people accountable. Omar?

Mr. ALSHOGRE. Thank you, Senator. I think before we think about holding al-Assad or Russia accountable, we have to stop

them because it is like still going on in Syria. People are dying every day, and like, when I get in contact with any person who has been newly released, he tells me, like, torture is, like, unlimited. Starvation is horrible. So we have to stop them, and if not, the U.S., the leader of the free world speak up for these people or, like, take an action by—

I know the U.S. maybe does not have a great relation with Turkey. Europe does not have it. But if we are going to support Turkey, we support Turkey for the Syrian people, not for Turkey itself. And right now, it feels like the only scenario the U.S. can do because there is no intention to sending the troops, and I understand that. Maybe it is not a good idea at all, but the U.S. has their own allies in Syria. They can support them. You have the NATO allies. You can support them and provide them internal assistance and stopping the killing.

And Turkey, like a lot of Syrians talking about how much they like what Turkey is doing, even if Turkey is, like, coming inside their country, but it is the only way to survive, the only way to be protected. These people want to be protected in any way on earth. It does not matter who protect us, just protect us. Israel, the U.S., just protect us. Holding al-Assad accountable, there is no way as the commander of the Syrian war. I even have a picture of my father being killed by the soldiers who made that. I have my brothers' pictures.

And to just make it clear, my father looks like any other human being on earth. He is normal dad. I loved him. He loved me and my brothers as well. So there is evidence of them being killed, and now we have five legal cases, prosecutions against the war crimes in Syria, and it is in Germany, and Spain, and France, and Norway, and Sweden. We have to support these cases, and we have to start one here in the United States because, like, the United States has more power than Europe in doing any prosecutions. And Germany just 2 days ago started their prosecutions, brought two guys who have been arrested just to court. They are going to start now.

And the U.S. is still kind of not doing enough when it comes to prosecutions. I do not think Germany has more ability to do that than the U.S., but the U.S. is waiting for something. I do not know what. I am not an expert. I do not know what is going on, but still, the U.S. can do more than what it is doing right now. And really bad hand.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ALSHOGRE. I do not know how to say. Yeah, I mean, oh, one—I know I have 17 seconds. I will try to make it possible. But when I was in Branch 215, one of the branches almost 2 years there, the guards used every day to come and in a period of time, to come every day and ask for somebody who speaks English. They take this person to the sixth floor, translate some people who only speak English, and there were prisoners used to translate. I was working in the isolation room, that room, dead bodies. If you look straight behind you, this girl, there is a paper and number in his hand. I was writing those numbers. I was, like, tasked from the guard to write these numbers before Caesar took the pictures.

They were using people to go up to translate. This person who translated only once, and killed, goes to the isolation room. I saw

this person, like, go into the sixth room and die, and second person die. Then I understood there are international prisoners, which include Americans, and so Syria's translator is dying for the Americans. Americans should do something to protect these people there.

And there are Americans in Syria's prisons. If somebody does not care about what is going on for Syrians, there are Americans. And Layla Schweikani just died, and we do not know what happened to Kamalmaz, an American citizen. The U.S. has to do anything in their power—I started to speak like an American, but, like, I feel it is amazing we can host this testimony, but it is time for action, too. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Go ahead.

Mr. AL SALEH. [Interpreted.] Since the Russians intervened in 2015, they have used the veto 24 times in the Security Council. The first thing that the United States and the international community needs to do is to take all of the conversations for the future of Syria and for saving the Syrian people out of the Security Council because in the Security Council, everything gets vetoed by the Russians. Even the issue of delivering assistance to people who are in desperate need across the borders has been vetoed last month by the Russian government.

Russia vetoes anything that just merely condemns the war crimes that are being committed by the Assad regime or by Russia, and this was seen in 2017. The Russians used seven vetoes just stop the work of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, which confirmed the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria. And in 90 days, there will be another vote at the Security Council just for the delivery of assistance, for the delivery of a bite of food to eat, assistance which is being delivered not by Russia. It is assistance that is being delivered because of the United States and Europe's support to the U.N. But this assistance will be debated in the Security Council and can be compromised by the Russian veto.

And allow me to say that if Russia uses the veto and stops the delivery of humanitarian assistance across the border, then all of the U.S. funding to the U.N. will be in direct support of the criminal Assad regime and the Iranian militias.

Senator PERDUE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Perdue. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you both very much for being here. I cannot add much to the eloquence of Senator Menendez in talking about the fact that anything we say pales by comparison to what the two of you have experienced and seen. But I do want to ask some questions because I think it helps me be able to better witness to people who we want to respond to this crisis.

So this is probably for you, Mr. Al Saleh. Critics of the Turkish-Russian ceasefire in Idlib argue that the agreement will solidify the territorial gains that have been made by Assad, and yet they do nothing to address the humanitarian crisis or to protect the millions of refugees. So can you talk about what you believe will happen if—first of all, will that ceasefire hold? And second, what will happen to the Syrians who are currently in Idlib if Assad and the Russians and Iranians are successful?

Mr. AL SALEH. [Interpreted.] We have been warning of the humanitarian crisis which will result in Idlib back since 2015 before

the Sochi Agreement, and we know that Russia never abides by any ceasefire that they sign in Syria. This ceasefire will end the same that every other ceasefire has ended in Syria. The ceasefires are simply a tool that is used by the Russians and the regime in order to reorganize the situation on the ground, change the deployment of forces, and to be able to, at a later date, resume the unimpeded bombardment of civilians.

Turkey took a very bold step in intervening to stop the assault on civilians in Idlib, but it is unable to enforce a civilian protection mechanism on its own. That is the words of the Turkish government, and that is not my analysis. Turkey has asked the international community, the United States, and NATO for more support to support its efforts in Northwest Syria, and it is something that we have been asking for, for many years: for a no-fly zone and for civilian protection.

In just 60 days, 1 million people were forced out of their homes and displaced by the latest offensive, and there are still 200,000 who are without any shelter. So if that is the scale of the crisis that we have seen so far, it is impossible for us to even imagine what would happen if, as you said, the Assad regime was successful in retaking all of Idlib. The crisis would be of an unimaginable scale. And for that reason, before we talk about sending more humanitarian assistance to those who have been displaced most recently, we need to stop the ongoing offensive and return the Assad regime forces back to the lines where they were in 2018 so that those civilians who have been displaced can return to their homes.

And after that, we need to go back to the U.N. and force the U.N. to apply the correct interpretation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which has been misinterpreted because of the pressure from the Russian government. The Constitutional Committee, which has come out of the 2254 resolution, is not a solution for the crisis in Syria. The Syrian people never went to the streets or called for a new constitution. The problem in Syria is not with the constitution. It is with who is implementing the constitution.

The solution for Syria is a stop to all of the hostilities, accountability for all those who have committed war crimes, and a transitional governing body which can allow the Syrians who have been displaced from their homes to be able to return to their homes safely. So we don't want to see Bashar al-Assad in the next year receiving a Nobel Peace prize because after all that he has committed, he simply signs a peace agreement with the opposition.

Senator SHAHEEN. I cannot imagine anyone in the civilized world who would believe that Assad should be the recipient of any kind of prize for any peace because all he has done is commit crimes against his own people, and he should be held accountable for that.

Mr. AL SALEH. [Interpreted.] Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. And I believe this committee will do everything we can to try and support that. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Shaheen. Thank you to our witnesses, a sincere thank you. Brave people giving us a lot to think about. Your testimony here today is going to become very public in the world. Thank you for your bravery, and thank you for coming here today.

For the members of the committee, the record will remain open until the close of business on Friday. With that, the committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

