

Motion For Default Judgment Filed for the Assad Regime's Torture of U.S. Citizen

U.S. Federal Court presented with extensive evidence detailing torture and enforced disappearances in Syria's prisons, with over thirty sworn declarations from former detainees and five reports from international experts.

San Francisco, California, December 20, 2024 – Today, the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), with co-counsel Freshfields US LLP and the support of more than 20 Syrian civil society organizations, filed evidence with the U.S. District Court in Washington D.C. seeking judgment against Syria for torture in the Assad regime's detention centers.

The Plaintiff Obada Mzaik was born in the U.S. and grew up in Syria. In 2012, while completing his collegiate studies in the U.S., he returned to Syria to visit his family. He was arrested on arrival and detained by Syrian intelligence agents at the Mezzeh Military Airport in Damascus, where he was accused of being a traitor to the Syrian regime and tortured for weeks, until his family was able to secure his release.

The Plaintiff's arbitrary arrest and torture was not an isolated incident during President Bashar al-Assad's rule over Syria. Following the Arab Spring protests in 2011, the Assad regime suppressed perceived opponents to its authoritarian rule through a campaign of mass arrest, detention, interrogation, torture and murder of Syrian civilians. With the historic fall of the Assad regime on December 8, thousands of people have been released from the regime's vast network of prisons. However, over 100,000 people reportedly remain missing and disappeared. "I brought this case to honor all the Syrians who were tortured, killed or forcibly disappeared in the detention centers, and who are not yet able to seek justice and accountability for the regime's crimes," said Obada Mzaik.

CJA and its partners filed the complaint in 2022 and the Syrian government was served through diplomatic channels. While Syria never responded to the suit, the Plaintiff must still offer sufficient evidence to show that Syria is responsible for his torture. More than 30 former detainees who were tortured at the Mezzeh Military Airport now provide sworn declarations in support of the motion. "The witnesses courageously recount the atrocities they suffered at the hands of Syrian officials, and their stories lay bare the staggering extent and devastating effects of the Assad regime's state-sanctioned torture practices," stated Anika Havaldar, an attorney at Freshfields US LLP. Five international experts also submitted extensive reports on the nature of the systematic abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime in its detention centers, including the use of physical and psychological torture and gender-based violence, and the repercussions of detention and torture on victims, their families, and on Syrian society as a whole. This body of evidence and the legal pleadings are publicly [available here](#) in English for advocacy, investigative, and legal purposes. Many of these documents are available in Arabic and further translations are forthcoming.

This case is part of ongoing accountability efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable for its campaign of mass arrest, detention, interrogation, torture and murder of Syrian civilians. "This case comes as a pivotal moment as the fall of the regime creates an opportunity for a free and democratic Syria," stated CJA Senior Staff Attorney Daniel McLaughlin. "Now that the Assad regime is no longer in power, accountability for its widespread and longstanding human rights violations is critical for a just and democratic transition."

More information

More information on the case, including a copy of the complaint and motion for default judgment, can be found [here](#). Information on CJA's previous efforts to protect human rights in Syria can be found [here](#). Answers to frequently asked questions about the case can be found [here](#).

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About the Center for Justice & Accountability and its Partners

[The Center for Justice and Accountability](#) (CJA) is a San Francisco-based international human rights organization dedicated to working with communities impacted by torture, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious human rights abuses to seek truth, justice, and redress using innovative litigation and transitional justice strategies. CJA has successfully brought cases against defendants such as the Minister of Defense of Somalia's Siad Barre regime, the military officer responsible for the assassination of Chilean activist and singer Victor Jara, and Syria's Assad regime for its targeted killing of war correspondent Marie Colvin.

[Freshfields](#) is a global law firm with a long-standing track record of anticipating change, setting new standards and shaping the future of law. We successfully support the world's leading national and multinational corporations, financial institutions and governments on complex and business-critical mandates when it matters most. Our 2,800-plus lawyers and other legal professionals are steadfast champions of our clients and we are proud to be recognized as a top-tier leader in the practice areas most important to clients around the world.

CJA owes a huge debt of gratitude to the coalition of justice-seeking organizations and individuals who contributed immeasurably to this case. Please see our [Partners page](#) to learn more about their work.