

Global Opinions

A journalist's family says the Assad regime assassinated her. Here's the evidence.

By Jason Rezaian April 9 at 11:49 AM

The war correspondent Marie Colvin [spent her career](#) witnessing terrible things and then telling the world about them. She was known for going to places that others wouldn't, talking to people who were usually ignored, and writing with clarity and purpose that made the turmoil of armed conflict accessible to her readers, who were sometimes half a world away from the scene.

In the eyes of Syria's depraved leadership, those were reasons enough to brand her — and the rest of the media trying to cover its unfathomable civil war — as an enemy combatant.

On Feb. 22, 2012, Colvin, who had secretly entered Syrian territory to report on the war, was reporting from an impromptu media center in the strategically crucial city of Homs. She was there, doing her job, when she was killed by artillery fire.

We now know that the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad didn't just allow this to happen. In fact, it appears high-level officials directed the Syrian military to target Colvin and other journalists who were reporting on the conflict. This emerges from new evidence presented by Colvin's family as part of a civil suit they are pursuing in district court in Washington, with the help of the Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that identifies and attempts to prosecute human rights offenders.

"The evidence unsealed today leaves no doubt that the Assad regime methodically planned the attack that killed Marie," says Scott Gilmore, the lead lawyer representing the Colvins.

The testimony of Syrian regime defectors provides a credible narrative that is further fortified by recordings and nearly 200 government documents smuggled out of the country, confirming that the government had a premeditated goal of silencing all independent reporting about the conflict.

The Assad regime considered international journalists who were reporting on events in Syria to be outright opponents who needed to be hunted down and eliminated. A declaration from a former intelligence agent, known as "Ulysses" to protect his identity, describes how Syrian forces tried to track intercepted satellite transmissions from the media center to find its location. Once a government informant pinpointed it as a target, they wasted no time in striking.

In his testimony, Ulysses also recounts that during a boozy celebration that followed the successful assassination of Colvin, Major General Rafiq Shahadah, a commander in the operation, said, “Marie Colvin was a dog and now she’s dead. Let the Americans help her now.” Shahadah was promoted to head of military intelligence soon thereafter.

According to the witness, “people suspected of tarnishing the image of Syria in the western and Arab media were routinely arrested, tortured, and killed by the intelligence services.”

Since the uprising started in 2011, Syrian state-run media has produced countless articles and broadcast reports referencing the supposed media war being waged against their country. As Colvin’s killing illustrates, the Syrian government wasn’t just saying this for propaganda purposes; it was being entirely sincere. Its officials regarded journalists who were reporting from outside their own state-controlled bubble, and who were intent on capturing the facts rather than propagating official views, as full-fledged enemies, people who deserved to be targeted just as much as rebel troops.

“Marie knew the risks she was facing, and she took them anyway, because she believed so deeply in the importance of firsthand reporting and showing the victims of war,” says Colvin’s sister Cathleen. “They wanted to tell their stories and Marie listened to them. That’s why it’s so important for me to get this evidence out to the public.”

Marie Colvin and so many of her colleagues put themselves in harm’s way to ensure that the atrocities of war are not ignored by the rest of the world. Real journalism, of the kind practiced by Colvin and others, makes it more difficult for brutal regimes to obscure their crimes against innocents. To Assad and like-minded leaders, the media is a battle front, a notion that blurs the lines between censorship and armed combat.

“It’s important to see this attack within the broader context that treated media as targets of the highest value,” says Gilmore, who says the unsealed evidence shows the “architecture of a high-level policy that was part of a war strategy.”

In addition to damages for wrongful death, the case also seeks punitive damages, which are intended to pose a deterrent against the future targeting of reporters. By now it has been extensively documented that many journalists around the world are [under attack](#) for doing their jobs. Yet no one is being held accountable.

“My sister was killed for exposing the Assad regime’s brutality, but her work lives on,” says Cathleen Colvin. “We submit this evidence to seek justice for Marie — and for the thousands of Syrian victims of torture and murder who have not yet had their day in court. We hope our case will inspire the international community to finally bring Syria’s war criminals to justice.”

 **39 Comments**

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