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# Journalist Marie Colvin was hunted and assassinated by Syrian regime, defector says

By Rachel Olding

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In her last moments alive, veteran foreign correspondent Marie Colvin held hands with French photographer Remi Ochlik and made a desperate dash for safety amid relentless rocketfire.


The media compound that had housed them in the besieged Syrian city of Homs was being attacked. As dust and screams

filled the building, they ran for an underground shelter across the road only to have their lives end in the rubble of a street in the Baba Amr neighbourhood.

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In 2012, Marie Colvin was killed inside a media centre during the Siege of Homs. Her family are suing the Syrian government, using a video of a Skype call to the building and testimonies from defectors as evidence.

Just hours earlier, Colvin had shared her final dispatches on BBC and CNN, describing the Syrian government's endless onslaught on Baba Amr as the worst shelling she had seen in her 25-year career covering wars and humanitarian crises.

"It's a complete and utter lie that they're only going after terrorists," she told CNN. "[They're] simply shelling a city of cold, starving citizens".

Now, in a case that will have reverberations around the world, a US court has been asked to determine that her 2012 death was a targeted assassination that was orchestrated - and then celebrated - by officials at the highest level of the Syrian government.

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Legendary war correspondent Marie Colvin was killed while covering the Syrian war in 2012.

*Photo: AP*

Confirming their suspicions that she was murdered rather than caught in rebel fighting, Colvin's family and a team of experts have uncovered damning evidence that an informant leaked Colvin's location in Baba Amr to Syrian officials, who then intercepted her satellite broadcasts to CNN and BBC and deliberately bombed the media centre the following morning.

Her family, led by younger sister Cathleen Colvin, have launched a wrongful death lawsuit against Syria in the US District Court and, after five years of investigation and two years in court, they filed more than 2000 pages of evidence on Monday.

It is the first attempt to sue the Syrian government for illegal war conduct under a statute allowing Americans to sue foreign governments listed as state sponsors of terrorism, said Scott Gilmore, a lawyer with the Centre for Justice and Accountability who is leading the investigation.

In a testimony provided exclusively in Australia to Fairfax Media, a Syrian regime defector known only as Ulysses has come forward with a chilling first-person account of being part of the regime's Homs Security-Military Committee, who planned and executed Colvin's death.

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His testimony has been corroborated by extraordinary accounts from journalists who survived the attack, a military analyst, a former Arab League observer who toured Homs and a former member of the regime's Central Crisis Management Cell, who smuggled out thousands of meeting minutes exposing efforts to suppress the civil uprising by targeting activists and media.

"Senior military and intelligence officials were overseeing a campaign to surveil, target, and kill journalists in Homs," Ulysses said in his testimony. "This campaign resulted in the assassination of Marie Colvin by Syrian government forces."

### **'I refuse to cover Sarajevo from the suburbs'**

Despite hearing rumours that the regime was targeting journalists, Colvin and British freelance photographer Paul Conroy felt compelled to travel to Syria in February 2012 to document the deepening crisis. At that stage, extremist groups like Islamic State had not emerged and it was largely an armed uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

With the help of the Free Syrian Army, Conroy and Colvin took a smuggler's route into Syria from Lebanon and snuck into Homs via an underground stormwater drain. They were taken to a makeshift media centre run by local activists and hidden in a ground floor unit in Baba Amr, a neighbourhood considered to be an incubator of the revolution and heavily targeted by the Homs Security-Military Committee.

"The official line was that Baba Amr was full of terrorists," Ulysses said in his testimony. "But, in reality, it was clear... that [we] did not distinguish between armed rebels and civilian activists."



Marie Colvin pictured working in Baba Amr, Syria, on what would be her final assignment in February, 2012.

*Photo: Paul Conroy*

Amid relentless shelling, Colvin interviewed civilians and hospital staff but, less than two days into her stay, she heard rumours of an imminent gas attack and retreated to the city's outskirts to file her report. When the attack didn't eventuate, she insisted on returning.

"She said that 'this was today's Sarajevo' and that she 'refused to cover Sarajevo from the suburbs'," Conroy said.

Ulysses, who lives in hiding in Europe since defecting, said the Syrian regime were watching international broadcasts coming out of the Baba Amr media centre and were making increasingly desperate efforts to locate it.

"Tracking down these journalists became a top priority," he said.

33. Despite the dangerous conditions during the siege, the media continued to g news reports from inside Baba Amr. The intelligence agencies learned through various sources that media activists had smuggled in satellite transmitters that allowed them to access the Internet. We at the intelligence agencies also learned that the Baba Amr Media Center was reporting on the siege, uploading videos to the Internet, and talking to international news agencies like CNN and al-Jazeera. We learned that the Media Center was hosting foreign journalists who had snuck into Syria to cover the uprising. These media activists and journalists—like all suspected members of the opposition—were routinely referred to as “terrorists” or “terrorist supporters” in intelligence agency communications.

In his testimony, defector Ulysses said the Syrian regime deliberately targeted journalists.

*Photo: Centre for Justice & Accountability*

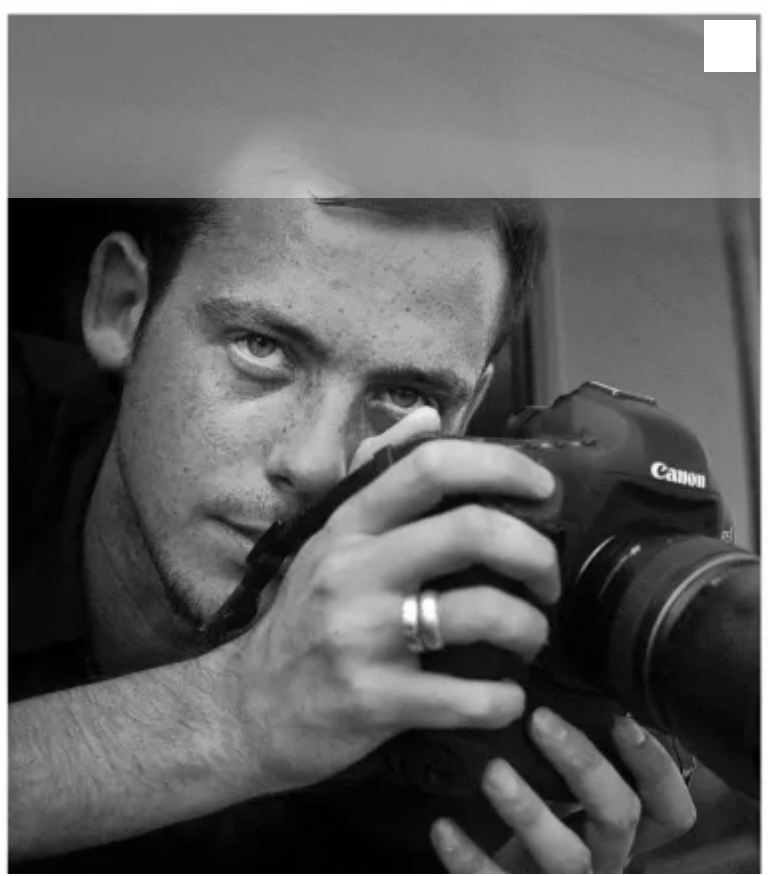
The Syrian regime had made no secret of its desire to suppress dissent by targeting media. With astonishing brazenness, Syria's Deputy Minister of Defence Assef Shawkat told an Arab League observer who visited Homs in January 2012 that "each journalist who enters into Baba Amr without state authorisation ... are terrorists [and] targets" for the military.

The observer, Abdelmalek Nouar, wrote in a statement tendered as part of the court case: "When I told him that I had already visited [the media centre], he asked me to disclose its exact location.

"He said that the media was his main problem ... He told me, 'In reality, they are not journalists. They are agents of the Israeli and American intelligence services'."

In the months before Colvin's death, the Homs Military-Security Committee doubled down on the hunt for the media centre. Ulysses said they regularly intercepted satellite calls and relayed the coordinates to artillery units but the intelligence proved imprecise and the attacks repeatedly failed.





Journalist Marie Colvin and photographer Remi Ochlik.

*Photo: AP*

Then, a breakthrough came. A narcotics trafficker, Khaled al-Fares, who worked for the regime by recruiting informants and financing paramilitaries, had an informant who disclosed the location of the media centre. At a late-night meeting attended by Ulysses on February 21, the tip was cross-checked with Colvin's intercepted satellite broadcasts earlier that day. She had been found.

### **Colvin's final moments**

Testimonies provided by activists, journalists and photographers in the media centre paint a harrowing picture of Colvin's final moments.

The group were woken early on February 22, 2012 to the sound of rockets crashing into the building and walls collapsing. Many of the activists and journalists inside had military training or had covered wars and immediately identified the sound of Syrian military rocket launchers and of drones buzzing above.

Colvin scrambled to put her boots and bulletproof vest on as an activist yelled at them to run in pairs of two, in twenty-second increments, into the foyer and then across the street to a building with an underground shelter.

"Marie acted calm under fire, but when I looked at her face I could sense fear. She was so pale," said Wael al-Omar, Colvin's translator.

Conroy, former British Army gunner, had run into another room to retrieve his camera and, realising that it was safer than the street, started yelling at the group to stay inside.

It was too late for Colvin and Ochlik who, with their hands tightly gripped, were struck down as they ran for the street.

A Skype video, published for the first time by Fairfax Media, captured the anguished cries of the group as the shelling continued for 17 minutes. Conroy's screams can be heard as his leg was almost blown off by shrapnel.

Ulysses then witnessed Syrian officials celebrate news of Colvin's death. The officer who launched the attack was told he'd get a promotion and Fares was given a new black Hyundai by Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad who commands the Syrian Republican Guard and the army's elite Fourth Armoured Division.



Photographer Javier Espinosa captured this image of the Baba Amr media centre moments after he escaped the bombing that killed Marie Colvin.

*Photo: Javier Espinosa/Centre for Justice & Accountability*

65. As Major General Shahadah's staff was drinking and celebrating [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] shout: "That blind bitch was Israeli." Major General Shahadah replied: "Marie Colvin was a dog and now she's dead. Let the Americans help her now."

A court testimony from Ulysses reveals that Syrian officials celebrated the targeted execution of journalist Marie Colvin.

*Photo: Centre for Justice & Accountability*

For Cathleen Colvin, the evidence uncovered has been chilling and devastating, but also vindicating. She knew immediately that her sister and best friend, who she describes as "loving, funny, intelligent, determined, and, above all, blazingly and uncompromisingly alive" was targeted for being a journalist. (It wasn't the first time either. Colvin gained her signature eye patch when she was hit by a Sri Lankan

Army grenade while reporting on the country's civil war in 2001, even after calling out 'journalist, journalist'.)

"I had a lot of reasons for wanting to bring the lawsuit, the obvious one was personal, I was just very angry at my sister being murdered," Colvin told Fairfax Media.

"But I also felt very strongly about wanting to get this evidence out in the public, about bringing attention to the targeting of journalists and, maybe even most importantly to me now, bringing attention to the suffering of the Syrian people."



Cathleen Colvin pictured with her sister, Marie, during the last time they saw each other in November, 2010.

*Photo: Centre for Justice & Accountability*

Adds Gilmore: "The evidence is shocking. But on the other hand, given the level of brutality in the Syrian war, it's not shocking at all."

He has filed a motion for a default judgement against Syria as the country hasn't filed any defence. In his only comments about Colvin's death, Assad told NBC in 2016 that Colvin came into the country illegally, worked with "terrorists" and was "responsible [for] everything that befell her".

A judgement will be handed down in the coming months.





In an interview with NBC, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said Colvin was responsible for her death.

Photo: AP



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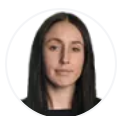
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