

SYRIAN REGIME CELEBRATED ASSASSINATION OF 'DOG' MARIE COLVIN, EVIDENCE IN LAWSUIT SAYS

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New evidence released to the public as part of the world's [first lawsuit against the Syrian regime](#) led by President Bashar al-Assad claims high-ranking military and intelligence officials orchestrated and celebrated the killing of war reporters Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik in an attack they orchestrated in Homs in February 2012.

The documents were filed in March with the Washington, D.C. District Court “under seal,” but the court agreed to make them public on Monday. Human rights lawyer Scott Gilmore has been working on the civil case for six years, first as part of Reporters Without Borders and then with the Center for Justice and Accountability, acting on behalf and Colvin’s sister Cathleen and her children.

The complaint claims that Colvin’s death was an extrajudicial killing, as she was targeted in violation of international law, which prohibits the deliberate targeting of journalists.

After the lawsuit was first filed in July 2016, Assad rejected the accusations and claimed Colvin was responsible for her own death because she entered the country illegally, in an interview with [NBC News](#). "The army forces didn't know that Marie Colvin existed somewhere," he said. "Nobody knows if she was killed by a missile or which missile or where did the missile come from or how. No one has any evidence. This is just allegations."

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But crucial pieces of evidence collected by Gilmore show that military and intelligence officials were not only aware of the journalists' existence, but that they specifically targeted foreign reporters, celebrating their deaths.

These include eyewitness accounts of the fatal shelling of Homs' Baba Amr Media Center that served as a base for local and foreign journalists covering the siege of Syria's third largest city, which was considered the birthplace of the pro-democracy protest movement, the suppression of which gave rise to the seven-year civil war.

One of the key pieces of evidence is the testimony of a high-ranking intelligence official—known by the code name “Ulysses”—who personally observed the regime's operations in Homs between 2011 and 2012. Ulysses, who defected at an undisclosed date, said the regime's senior military and intelligence officials were “overseeing a campaign to surveil, target and kill” journalists in Homs.

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A memorial page to Marie Colvin is displayed as part of a service commemorating news gatherers who have died in the conflicts of the 21st century, at St. Brides Church, on October 22, 2012. in London.

BEN GURR/WPA POOL/GETTY IMAGES

According to his testimony, the targeting of people who could spread information contrary to the government's position went so far as indicating media activists and journalists as "high-priority targets," referred to as "terrorists" or "terrorists supporters" in intelligence communications.

"Throughout 2011-2012, people suspected of tarnishing the image of Syria in the Western and Arab media were routinely arrested, tortured, and killed by the intelligence services," Ulysses said.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford said that the control of information was key to the regime's strategy to suppress dissent and bolster its authority. In its statement presented as part of the lawsuit, Ford recalls that the regime's efforts to restrict access to the opposition extended to diplomatic staff. From July 2011, U.S. embassy staff were restricted to "moving exclusively within a 15 kilometer (9 mile) radius of the Embassy, ostensibly for protection."

In one instance, a member of the staff was arrested by intelligence officials, detained, hooded and handcuffed for hours while other detainees were loudly beaten nearby. "I understood such measures as efforts to intimidate and restrict my diplomatic staff from gathering information related to the uprising and Assad regime's crackdown," he said.



Marie Colvin of The Sunday Times, gives the address during a service at St. Bride's Church November 10, 2010 in London, commemorating journalists, cameramen and support staff who have fallen in the war zones and conflicts of the past decade. Colvin's death in 2012 was an extrajudicial killing, according to documents.

ARTHUR EDWARDS/WPA POOL/GETTY IMAGES

The government coordinated operations against the opposition movement in Homs through a special committee known as the Homs Military-Security Committee, which reported to Assad's brother Maher al-Assad, who also commanded an elite unit of the Syrian Army. The committee was tasked with targeting foreign journalists who had traveled to Homs via Lebanon, taking "all necessary measures," including lethal force, to capture them.

A first casualty of the committee was French TV reporter Gilles Jacquier, who became the first Western journalist to be killed in the conflict in January 2012 while covering a pro-Assad rally. According to Ulysses' statement, the journalist was killed in an ambush orchestrated by the regime with the support of local thugs known to the authorities.

The committee also identified Baba Amr Media Center as a target. Those within the center were aware of the danger involved in remaining there, as the area was increasingly under attack by government forces.



A picture taken on February 11, 2012 shows a house that was reportedly damaged from shelling by government forces, in Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

By mid-February, Major General Rafiq Shahadah, who was appointed to head the committee in January 2012, “was growing furious” at the military and intelligence forces’ inability to pinpoint its location. A female informant supplied its address on February 21 as well as informing that foreign journalists were in the building.

Colvin and photographer Paul Conroy, who were both covering the conflict for the London-based newspaper *The Sunday Times*, had previously evacuated the center fearing Assad's final attack on the Baba Amr, but then decided to return considering the government offensive did not happen as they thought. In his statement, Conroy described Colvin comparing the siege of Homs to that of the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, besieged during the Balkan War. "She said that 'this was today's Sarajevo,' and that she refused to 'cover Sarajevo from the suburbs,'" Conroy said.

He also mentioned that the both of them were aware that journalists had become a target for the regime. "Though Marie and I discussed the risks, it was the nature of what we did as war reporters to be as

cautious as possible, but to move forward in order to expose the truth about what was happening inside Syria," he said.

Four other foreign journalists were at the center at the time of the attack: French journalists Edith Bouvier, Remi Ochlik, and William Daniels, and Spanish journalist Javier Espinosa. Details of how the Homs Military-Security Committee proceeded to organize the shelling are heavily redacted, but the information that transpires indicate the involvement of the regime's Special Forces and high-ranking members of the military.

They verified the informant's address with the GPS coordinates of the intercepted satellites broadcasting a report Colvin did for BBC, Channel 4 and [CNN](#) denouncing the regime's operations as targeting civilians rather than military targets. "The Syrian Army is simply shelling a city of cold, starving civilians" she told CNN's Anderson Cooper in what would become her last interview on February 21.

The shelling of the center occurred on the morning of February 22. Later that day, the intelligence and military officials celebrated. "Marie Colvin was a dog and now she's dead. Let the Americans help her now," Major General Shahadah said, according to Ulysses. Officials who orchestrated the shelling were given promotions and gifts as a reward.



An image grab from a video uploaded on YouTube purports to show a wounded father and his child killed in the bombing of the Baba Amro neighborhood, an opposition hub in Homs, on February 18, 2012. Marie Colvin's broadcast of the video to BBC, Channel 4 and CNN on February 21, 2012 was intercepted by the Syrian regime, helping officials confirm her location.

AFP PHOTO/YOUTUBE

The judge will decide over the coming weeks whether to make a default judgment in the case based on the evidence presented or call an evidentiary hearing.

“Whatever the outcome, our ultimate goal is to establish a record of truth, to show that there is sufficient evidentiary basis to dispel some of the clouds of denial and ambiguity that the regime has always disseminated surrounding this attack and show it actually happened,” Gilmore told *Newsweek*. “We hope this one particular attack may open a window onto the broader conflict and the evidence that shows that the regime at the highest level was targeting the civilian population to crush the opposition.”

The U.S. case was among the first to be filed against the Syrian regime. Other investigations into the regime’s alleged war crimes were opened in France in 2015 and Spain and Germany in 2017. With Russia, Turkey and Iran taking the lead in diplomatic efforts to end the hostilities, these cases can contribute to ensuring that international law, justice and accountability remain part of the peace-building process.

“Historically, no political resolution has worked without some accountability. Impunity is just not going to be a recipe for peace in Syria, given the degree of harm and the massive scale of suffering,” Gilmore said, calling for accountability for all the parties involved in the conflict. “The role of these cases is not to influence the political discussion, it is to ensure that justice and international law remain part of those discussions or parallel process,” he said.

Through the lawsuit, Colvin's family is seeking to establish the truth about what happened to the journalist as well as continuing her work in exposing atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population. Colvin's nephew, Christopher Araya-Colvin, who was 12 years old at the time of her death, acknowledged in his statement that he "can't bring myself" to follow what is happening in Syria.

"It only got worse after she was killed. I hate how it feels that she passed in vain," he said.

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