



THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Bringing Human Rights Abusers To Justice.

For Immediate Release

U.S. SUIT FILED BY SYRIAN-AMERICAN FORMER DETAINEE SPOTLIGHTS SYRIAN REGIME'S POLICY AND PRACTICE OF TORTURE IN DETENTION

April 12, 2023, Washington, DC: A lawsuit filed by the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA) and Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP (Freshfields) against the government of Syria for widespread and systematic torture in its detention centers was unsealed by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. This suit was filed on behalf of Obada Mzaik, a Syrian-American citizen who was detained and tortured at the Air Force Intelligence Branch at the Mezzeh Military Airport, which houses the presidential plane of Bashar al-Assad.

“I am filing this lawsuit in the name of all the many Syrians who were tortured in detention centers but who don’t have the opportunity to obtain justice,” said Mzaik.

Mzaik was a 22-year-old student when he was detained and tortured in 2012 as part of the nationwide strategy of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime to suppress democratic protests and silence perceived opponents to his authoritarian rule. Integral to the regime’s repressive strategy was the widespread and systematic detention, interrogation, and torture of Syrian civilians, a practice that continues to this day. More than 130,000 Syrians reportedly remain missing or arbitrarily detained — the vast majority of whom are either presumed dead or are detained without communication with family or legal representation.

CJA Senior Staff Attorney Daniel McLaughlin, stated: “This landmark lawsuit targets the responsibility of the Syrian regime for the state’s policy of detention, torture, enforced disappearance and execution of those who are seen as a threat to the regime. We intend to demonstrate how, as one of the four intelligence agencies tasked with the surveillance, arrest, detention, and torture of the regime’s perceived political opponents, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate was, and continues to be, integral to the government’s repressive policies.”

The Air Force Intelligence Branch at the Mezzeh Military Airport, where Mzaik was held and tortured, is reported to have one of highest mortality rates across all Syrian detention centers.

The lawsuit was filed under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act, a federal law that permits victims to sue designated state-sponsors of terrorism, like Syria, for the torture of U.S. nationals. As required by law, the plaintiffs have given the Syrian government an opportunity to arbitrate the claim for torture. “U.S. courts have broad jurisdiction against state-sponsors of torture, and we expect to prove that our client’s torture was carried out as part of a state-sanctioned policy and practice by Syria,” said Lee Rovinescu, a partner at Freshfields.



THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Bringing Human Rights Abusers To Justice.

The case has prompted an international coalition of detention survivors, Syrian families and human rights organizations to launch a campaign, “Free Syria’s Disappeared,” calling for the release of all those still arbitrarily held in Syrian detention centers and for survivors of torture to be able to pursue justice (www.freesyriasdisappeared.org). Yasmen Almashan, of the Caesar Families Association and a spokesperson for the coalition stated, “We support the filing of the U.S. suit, which will help to document the impact of detention, not just on the detainees themselves but also on their family members and loved ones, many of whom continue to suffer to this day from the state’s brutal policy.”

* * *

About the Center for Justice and Accountability

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.

About Freshfields

Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP is a global law firm with a long-standing track record of successfully supporting the world’s leading national and multinational corporations, financial institutions and governments on groundbreaking and business-critical matters. The firm’s 2,800-plus lawyers deliver results worldwide through its offices and alongside leading local firms. For more information visit Freshfields.us.