

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

OBADA MZAIK,

*Plaintiff,*

v.

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

*Defendant.*

Civil No. 22-cv-00042

Complaint For Torture,  
28 U.S.C. § 1605A

**DECLARATION OF OBADA MZAIK**

I, Obada Mzaik, upon my personal knowledge, hereby declare as follows:

**Background and Participation in Peaceful Protest**

1. I am a U.S.-born American citizen. I moved to Damascus, Syria, with my family as a child.
2. I attended Yarmouk Private University in Damascus between 2008 and 2011. One day in 2011, during the early months of the Arab Spring, I was visiting the Damascus University library to conduct research when my friend and I saw a group of students engaging in a peaceful anti-regime protest. We stood at a distance, watching the scene from afar.
3. Suddenly, a group of regime loyalists began attacking and assaulting the demonstrators. When I saw a student protestor being beaten mercilessly in front of me, I felt compelled to intervene. I told the attacker to leave the student alone. Though the attacker backed off, a swarm of government agents approached me. Within moments, the agents captured, blindfolded, and threw me in a bus. They then detained me in an unknown location nearby for 35 days total. I was ultimately found innocent by a judge and released.
4. After that experience, I felt I needed to flee the growing repression in Syria. I decided to return to the United States in the summer of 2011, when I was 21 years old. Once resettled in Michigan, I enrolled in a community college program.

5. While living in Michigan, I became involved with an organization called “Messages of Freedom.” The group, founded by a network of Syrian engineers, doctors, and businessmen, worked to support Syrian protestors by sending positive messages that would give them hope to continue the peaceful resistance they had started and to continue to push for change. It was our belief that such non-violent campaigns could be powerful agents to support change. At the time, only three people in the group knew my real identity, which was for my security in case I returned to Syria.
6. After several months in the United States, I grew to miss my family and yearned to return to Syria to reunite with my loved ones. But I still feared being targeted by the regime. I asked a family friend known for his governmental connections if I was still on the Syrian government’s radar. He assured me that my security file had been closed and that there was no open record under my name. And so, I returned to Damascus in early January 2012 to be with family and friends, and to finish my degree as I had only one semester left to complete to graduate. I was 21 years old at the time.

#### **January 2012 Arrest and Detention at the Political Security Branch**

7. When I arrived at the Damascus International Airport in early January 2012, I presented my U.S. passport and my Syrian national ID number to the border control officer. After looking up my ID number, the border control officer pulled me aside and detained me.
8. Once I was detained, security officers thoroughly searched my belongings. They searched through my laptop, where they found a photo of a Facebook post that my friends had published during my previous detention. The message read: “Freedom for our friend Obada Al-Sarbagy Al-Mzaik.” The officer who found this message was incensed. He looked at me and shouted, “You want freedom, you animal?” I explained that all I wanted was to visit my family in peace.
9. I was then taken by security officers to the police Criminal Security Branch in the Baramkhah neighborhood of Damascus, across from the Customs building. I was transported there in a bus. When I arrived, I was brought to the detention center in the basement, where I was forced to hand over my belongings and was subjected to a search.

10. I was held in a group cell with around ten other detainees, including one thirteen-year-old child. The child had just returned from an Air Force Intelligence branch and told me about the horrible torture he had endured while detained there. The other adult detainees also shared stories of the brutal physical and psychological torment they experienced at the hands of the guards. I was briefly interrogated.
11. Later that night, I was transferred to the Political Security Branch in the al-Fahamah neighborhood of Damascus. When I arrived, I was lined up with my head against the wall and was threatened that if I moved even a millimeter, I would be beaten. I heard other detainees being beaten, punched, and slapped.
12. I was detained for six days at the Political Security Branch and interrogated twice a day, with each session lasting at least two hours. During these sessions, members of the branch's Information Security Unit forced me to give them passwords to my computer, phone, and social media and communication accounts. I believe they hacked into some of these accounts because the Political Security Branch agents told me that they knew I had participated in the Messages of Freedom group while in America. They told me that while I wasn't involved in any armed resistance, my peaceful activity was considered terrorism.
13. I saw detainees being tortured with a leather lash, including an elderly man who I believe was in his late 60s or early 70s. I suffered from terrifying nightmares and was subjected to solitary detention.
14. I decided to engage in a hunger strike, hoping that such resistance would lead to my release. I hoped the guards would understand that the death of an American citizen in their prisons, especially from hunger, would draw unwanted international scrutiny. But the hunger strike failed to secure my release. One of the officials told me that if I continued, he would torture me like the other detainees and give me minimal food and water intravenously.
15. On the sixth day of detention, while blindfolded, I was forced to sign a thick stack of papers, which I was told was a "confession" documenting my anti-regime activities. The interrogator then informed me that I would be transferred to the custody of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate ("AFID").

### **Transfer to AFID Central Branch in Mezzeh**

16. The next day, January 10, 2012, I was blindfolded and transferred by Political Security Branch officials to the AFID central branch at the Mezzeh Military Airport complex in Damascus (“AFID central branch in Mezzeh”). I knew that I was at this branch because I overheard a conversation between the officers who transferred me, and from under my blindfold, I saw and recognized the highway to Mezzeh’s detention centers, which were notorious for their harsh treatment of detainees. Other detainees at AFID central branch in Mezzeh later also confirmed where I was being detained.
17. Upon arriving at the AFID central branch in Mezzeh, I was subjected to what was known as a “welcome party,” where I was hooded and handcuffed and then forcibly marched through a corridor of soldiers. The AFID soldiers beat me as I was forced forward. They threatened me with sexual assault and even rape. One AFID guard threatened to kill me and tried to choke me to death, calling me a “dog” and a “Zionist.” He would have succeeded in killing me but one of the Political Security Branch officials intervened to stop him, telling the AFID guard that he first had to sign a paper documenting that he had taken custody of me and that afterwards, he was free to go ahead and kill me. I screamed in pain throughout these events. But I could not even hear my own cries, as the sound was drowned out as the guards laughed and detainees in nearby cells cried out in pain. I was also stripped naked and searched, together with other detainees. I felt deeply humiliated to stand naked in front of the same soldiers who had ridiculed and beaten me.

### **Detention Conditions**

18. At the AFID central branch in Mezzeh, I was initially held with two other detainees in a windowless underground cell that was roughly eight feet by three feet. My cellmates were former soldiers who had been detained for refusing orders.
19. A few days later, I was transferred to another, more crowded windowless cell on the same floor. We were underground but the cell had small openings up toward the top of the cell, which were placed slightly higher than the ground outside. In this cell, the detainees had to coordinate our sleeping positions, lying on our sides, as there wasn’t enough space for all of us to lie down on our backs.

20. The cell was freezing cold, with temperatures dropping severely at night when most interrogations and torture sessions were conducted. We had no blankets.
21. We were allowed to use the bathroom only three times a day, after each meal, and given roughly 30 seconds each time. If anyone took longer, we would be beaten. These beatings during bathroom visits were systematic, with guards deliberately timing our bathroom breaks to maximize our humiliation and vulnerability. I was also forced to undress down to only my underwear for bathroom visits. It was humiliating. On one occasion, while I was waiting to use the bathroom, a guard hit me in the head so hard that I hit the wall. The guard instructed me to lift my legs to prepare for another beating, which I did. The guard then whipped and struck me repeatedly with a hose.
22. The detainees were not allowed to shower. The smell was unbearable, both because of the smell of our unclean bodies and because of the smell of the blood that coated the corridors and the interrogation rooms. Everything was filthy, and illnesses were commonplace. There were ticks, lice, and other insects everywhere, including in our clothes. The insects were so pervasive in our clothing that removing our shirts provided momentary relief from their bites, but the extreme cold forced us to put our shirts back on, only to be attacked by the insects again. The lice and scabies gave me red patches and made me itch so intensely that it drove me mad. I believe that the guards deliberately maintained the combination of cold temperatures and unsanitary conditions to punish detainees.
23. I had no access to medical care while I was in detention, nor did other detainees. I remember one person who was very sick and asked for medication. He was denied medication, and beaten and whipped by the guards instead.
24. There was a ban on us speaking, including praying or doing anything religious while in detention. As a result, we had to pray in silence, with only our eyes, and without any other movement. We also sometimes whispered to each other to avoid being heard by the guards and punished.
25. For drinking water, we were given a single cup to share among all cellmates. Although we were fed three times a day, we received meager portions. As a result of these

conditions, I lost weight and became emaciated while in detention. You could see my bones, and my face grew so thin that it looked as if my flesh had been sucked out.

26. I only saw male detainees during my time in detention. However, I learned through one of individuals who interrogated me that one of the former detainees at the facility was an 18-year-old female, Yaman al-Qadri, a medical student who was arrested in November 2011 for peacefully protesting at her university in Damascus.

### **Interrogations and Torture**

27. During my detention at the AFID central branch in Mezzeh, I was regularly interrogated and tortured by Syrian officials. I was threatened with electrocution and additional forms of torture. I was insulted and told I was an animal.
28. I was beaten dozens of times during interrogations. During the beatings, I was typically handcuffed behind my back, leaving me defenseless. The beatings took several forms: I was punched hundreds of times in the face. My body was pummeled with kicks. I was whipped with a hose. I was also beaten via a method called *falanga*, which involved being hit on the soles of my feet with a PVC pipe. This was the most painful. In one instance, I received roughly 45 blows with the PVC pipe, which left my feet so swollen that I could not even stand.
29. During the torture sessions, I hoped to die as soon as possible so that I could avoid any further beatings or pain. I felt hopeless and thought I would never be released from detention.
30. The interrogations often involved disorienting tactics, including alternating between “friendly” interrogators, who spoke politely, and brutal interrogators, who would become enraged.
31. While waiting to be interrogated, I was sometimes forced to sit in the corridor for up to seven hours, hooded, with my head facing the wall, listening to the torture of others.
32. To try to stop the torture, I would give the guards false confessions and false information. The guards made me sign a document saying that I was part of an anti-regime group and that I was carrying out anti-regime activities while at university. At other times, I would

give the guards the names of acquaintances who I knew were not in Syria and were presumably safe from arrest.

33. During one interrogation sessions, I was interrogated alongside my cousin. I learned that he had been detained and tortured for two months. When my cousin was brought into the interrogation room, it was clear that he had been severely beaten. Among other things, he had open wounds on his wrists. My cousin was hung by his bound and already brutalized wrists outside the interrogation room. I could hear my cousin's piercing screams. The guard threatened me that I, too, would be hung by my wrists and electrocuted unless I confessed. My cousin was eventually taken away. This was the last time that I, or anybody else in my family as far as I know, has seen or heard from him. We fear that he was killed in detention.

#### **Psychological Torture**

34. Guards repeatedly threatened me with further torture and even death. They told me that they would hang me from the wall and subject me to electrocution. They repeatedly made threats of sexual assault and rape. These threats instilled in me a great sense of terror. At the time, I expected that I would not leave the detention facility alive.
35. Throughout my detention, I was surrounded by the sounds of other detainees being tortured, which caused me great mental suffering. Guards frequently hung detainees by their wrists for many hours at a time—a torture technique called *shabeh*. During *shabeh*, detainees would be beaten mercilessly with whips or thick rods known as “green Ibrahimi.” The guards deliberately positioned *shabeh* victims in open corridors. That way, we could see these detainees as we walked to the bathroom and could hear their screams from their nearby cells. And whenever we were in the hallway, we would usually see groups of detainees kneeling, with mesh bags over their heads, awaiting their turn to be strung up by their hands and beaten. This constant sight and sound of torture was terrorizing and felt like a form of psychological warfare against the detainees.
36. On the third night of my detention, I could hear the guards torturing a detainee accused of coordinating anti-regime protests by repeatedly electrocuting him and subjecting him to *shabeh*. The detainee screamed in pain as his body dangled off the ground until it came

crashing down to the floor in front of my cell. I heard the detainee plead with the interrogator to put him out of his misery and kill him. Instead, the interrogator subjected the detainee to *shabeh* once again. This time, the guard also stuffed the detainee's mouth with salt and poured boiling hot water over his dangling body.

37. This was not the only time I could hear electrocutions from my cell. Often, I could hear the guards throwing water on the detainees before the electrocution began, to intensify the pain. The sounds of torture were constant, creating an atmosphere of perpetual terror.
38. One night, I could hear the screams of a child being tortured nearby through the small openings at the top of my cell. From what I could discern, the boy was naked, and the guards were pouring freezing water on him and whipping him across his back. I could hear the boy screaming for his mother and begging for the torture to stop. The child's pleas grew more hysterical with each lash.
39. This was not the only child I saw while at Mezzeh. One time, when I was brought to be tortured, I passed a room of detainees, including children, who were naked while they were subject to *shabeh*. The guards showed no mercy even to children.
40. I heard guards routinely telling detainees they were about to be released, only to return them to their cells. This cruel manipulation and use of false hope was a common tactic.
41. I heard about yet other forms of torture secondhand. One of my cellmates told me that he had been subject to almost every form of torture imaginable: being burned with cigarettes, having hair ripped out of his body, being scalded by boiling water. The guards even assaulted his genitals in brutal and degrading ways.
42. The mental pain and suffering of seeing and hearing the torture of other detainees, my relative included, was horrific and long-lasting. During many nights, I wished for my own death so that I would no longer have to endure the misery of detention.

#### **Release from the AFID Central Branch in Mezzeh**

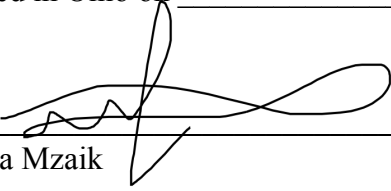
43. To my knowledge, I was never formally charged with a crime. I was never allowed to seek legal representation or access to U.S. consular services or permitted to contact family members or friends during my time in detention.



44. I was finally released from the AFID central branch in Mezzeh on January 25, 2012. I later learned that I was released only because my family paid money to high-ranking officials via a middleman connected to the Syrian government.
45. Through this middleman, my family connected with Major General Jamil Hassan, the head of AFID, to secure my release. I later learned that General Hassan initially refused the intermediary's request to pay for my release. General Hassan had apparently told him that I would "die in that prison" and that I was among those "whose life we need to wipe out."
46. But eventually, my family's intermediary tried again, and this time succeeded. Following the payment, members of my family met with General Hassan and later with Brigadier General Abdulsalam Fajer Mahmoud, the head of the AFID central branch in Mezzeh. My family members assured these men that I would not take part in any anti-regime activities. That same day, General Mahmoud ordered my release.
47. Because of my torture and the abysmal conditions of my detention, my health severely declined, and I had to be treated by doctors in Syria for four weeks after my release before I could leave the country. During this treatment period, doctors confirmed I had contracted hepatitis from the unsanitary conditions in detention.
48. After I had recovered sufficiently, in February 2012, I left Syria for Jordan and eventually returned to the United States, where I currently live. I have not returned to Syria since then, for fear of once again being detained and tortured—or killed.
49. After I fled Syria, an agent from the Syrian Political Security Branch, Colonel Adan Hariri, contacted me via my own Skype account. I assume that the agent was able to use my own login credentials because I had been forced to disclose them to interrogators under duress during my detention. The agent threatened me and demanded that I return to Syria. Others, who I believe were also Syrian government agents, used my communication platform login credentials to pose as me and sent threatening messages to my friends and family.

I, Obada Mzaik, declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.

Executed in Ohio on November 27, 2024.

  
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Obada Mzaik