



# HRSP NEWSLETTER

U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section

January 2025

In November and December 2024, the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP), in partnership with the U.S. Attorney's offices for the Northern District of Illinois (Jamil Hassan and Abdul Salam Mahmoud) and the Central District of California (Samir Ousman Alsheikh) brought indictments against three former high-ranking Syrian officials for human rights violations: charges against Hassan and Mahmoud, former Syrian intelligence officials, for conspiracy to commit war crimes against civilians, including U.S. citizens in Syria; and charges against Alsheikh, a South Carolina man, for the torture and conspiracy to commit torture of prisoners in the Damascus Central Prison. Details of the indictments are below.

## **Criminal Charges Unsealed against Two Former High-Ranking Syrian Government Officials for War Crimes against Americans and Other Civilians.**

On December 9, an indictment was unsealed in the Northern District of Illinois charging two high-ranking Syrian intelligence officials under former President Bashar al-Assad with war crimes. The indictment charges the former Syrian intelligence officials with engaging in a conspiracy to commit cruel and inhuman treatment of civilian detainees, including U.S. citizens, during the course of the Syrian civil war. Former Syrian Air Force Intelligence officers Jamil Hassan, 72, and Abdul Salam Mahmoud, 65, were each charged in connection with a conspiracy to commit war crimes through the infliction of cruel and inhuman treatment on civilian detainees under their control, including U.S. citizens, in detention facilities at the Mezzeh Military Airport (Mezzeh Prison), near Damascus, Syria. Warrants for the defendants' arrest have been issued, and they remain at large. [ABDUL SALAM MAHMOUD — FBI](#) [JAMIL HASSAN — FBI](#)

"The perpetrators of the Assad regime's atrocities against American citizens and other civilians during the Syrian civil war must answer for their heinous crimes," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. "As alleged, these Assad regime intelligence officials whipped, kicked, electrocuted, and burned their victims; hung them by their wrists for prolonged periods of time; threatened them with rape and death; and falsely told them that their family members had been killed. The Justice Department has a long memory, and we will never stop working to find and bring to justice those who tortured Americans."

"The Assad regime may have fallen, but our commitment to accountability continues unabated," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco. "For the second time in a year, the Department of Justice has brought charges against those who committed war crimes against U.S. citizens, deploying a previously unused federal law to hold accountable individuals who engaged in cruel and inhuman atrocities during armed conflict."

"Hassan and Mahmoud allegedly oversaw the systematic use of cruel and inhumane treatment on perceived enemies of the Syrian regime, including American citizens," said FBI Director Christopher Wray. "The FBI is fully committed to working with our law enforcement partners around the world to ensure these alleged war criminals are held accountable for their actions and justice is brought to the victims of these atrocities."

"The defendants are alleged to have committed atrocities against political dissidents, including U.S. citizens, opposing a brutal and now-deposed dictatorial regime," said Nicole M. Argentieri, who was the Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General and head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division at the time the charges were unsealed. "War crimes such as the torture described in this indictment strike at the basic human rights that we all share. This historic indictment — the second brought under the U.S. War Crimes statute — demonstrates the Justice Department's commitment to pursue accountability for those who commit war crimes and other atrocities wherever they may occur."

"The serious human rights abuses set forth in this indictment must not go unpunished," said Acting U.S. Attorney Morris Pasqual for the Northern District of Illinois. "The United States Attorney's Office in Chicago remains steadfastly committed to bringing justice to the victims of these heinous crimes, no matter where the perpetrators are or how long it takes."

"Human rights abuses are among the most egregious crimes that the FBI investigates, and this historic indictment memorializes our commitment to accountability and justice," said Special Agent in Charge Douglas S. DePodesta of the FBI Chicago Field Office. "This multi-year investigation is the culmination of the tireless work by FBI personnel, both in the United States and overseas, and the courage of countless victims and witnesses affected by the Assad Regime in Syria."

According to the indictment, Hassan was the Director of Syrian Air Force Intelligence and oversaw a network of detention facilities, including the Mezzeh Prison in Damascus, where civilians perceived to be opponents of the Syrian regime were detained and subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment. Mahmoud was a Brigadier General in the Syrian Air Force Intelligence and directed operations at the Mezzeh Prison.

The indictment alleges that, between January 2012 and July 2019, Hassan and Mahmoud conspired to identify, intimidate, threaten, punish, and kill people detained at Mezzeh Prison suspected of aiding or supporting opponents of the regime, such as those who protested, provided medical aid to opponents of the regime, or publicly criticized the regime. According to the indictment, detainees in the defendants' custody, including U.S. citizens, were mercilessly beaten, electrocuted, and had their toenails removed. Detainees were also allegedly hung from the ceiling by their wrists and were burned with acid. The defendants allegedly conspired to create an atmosphere of terror at Mezzeh, forcing detainees to listen to the screams of tortured prisoners and share cells with the dead bodies of other detainees, while guards threatened to kill and sexually assault their family members. The detainees were also allegedly deprived of adequate food, water, and medical care.

The defendants are charged with one count of conspiracy to commit the war crime of cruel and inhuman treatment. If convicted, the defendants each face a maximum sentence of life in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The FBI Chicago Field Office investigated the war crimes allegations against Hassan and Mahmoud in partnership with the Criminal Division's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP) and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs, the United Nations International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria, and French authorities also provided assistance.

HRSP Trial Attorneys Elizabeth Nielsen and Frank Rangoussis and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Steven Dollear, Barry Jonas, and Ann Marie Ursini for the Northern District of Illinois are prosecuting the case against Hassan and Mahmoud. HRSP historian Phil Hoffman provided substantial assistance in the investigation and prosecution.

## **Former Syrian Prison Official Charged with Torture**

On December 12, a federal grand jury in Los Angeles returned a superseding indictment charging Samir Ousman Alsheikh with torture. The superseding indictment adds three counts of torture and one count of conspiracy to commit torture to the visa fraud and attempted naturalization fraud charges that were the subject of the initial indictment against Alsheikh in August. According to court documents, Samir Ousman Alsheikh, 72, of Lexington, South Carolina, was the head of Damascus Central Prison, colloquially known as Adra Prison, from approximately 2005 through 2008. In that role, Alsheikh allegedly ordered subordinates to inflict and was sometimes personally involved in inflicting severe physical and mental pain and suffering on political and other prisoners. In particular, Alsheikh allegedly ordered some prisoners to Adra Prison's "Punishment Wing," where prisoners were beaten while suspended from the ceiling with their arms extended and were subjected to a device known as the "Flying Carpet," which folded their bodies in half at the waist, causing excruciating pain and sometimes resulting in fractured spines.

"Samir Alsheikh is charged with torturing political dissidents and other prisoners to deter opposition to the regime of then-Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," said Nicole M. Argentieri, who was the Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General and head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division at the time of the superseding indictment. "Alsheikh later allegedly lied about his crimes to obtain a U.S. green card. The victims of such violent treatment continue to suffer long after the physical acts of torture have ceased. The Justice Department is committed to prosecuting perpetrators of such crimes and will not allow them, through lies and concealment, to hide in the United States."

"The allegations in this superseding indictment of grave human rights abuses are chilling," said U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada for the Central District of California. "Our country will not be a safe harbor for those accused of committing atrocities abroad."

Alsheikh allegedly held a variety of positions in the Syrian police and the Syrian state security apparatus, was associated with the Syrian Ba'ath Party that ruled Syria, and was appointed governor of the province of Deir Ez-Zour by then-Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011. The superseding indictment alleges that Alsheikh immigrated to the United States in 2020 and applied for U.S. citizenship in 2023. If convicted, Alsheikh faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the conspiracy to commit torture charge, a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for each of the three torture charges, and a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for each of the two immigration fraud charges. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

HSI and the FBI are investigating the case against Alsheikh, with support from the HSI-led Human Rights Violators and War Criminals Center. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs and authorities in Belgium, the Swedish Police Authority, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police – Federal Policing, Pacific Region, provided invaluable assistance.

HRSP Trial Attorneys Patrick Jasperse and Alexandra Skinnion and Assistant U.S. Attorney Joshua O. Mausner for the Central District of California are prosecuting the case against Alsheikh. HRSP historian Phil Hoffman provided substantial assistance in the investigation and prosecution.

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Members of the public who have information about human rights violators in the United States are urged to contact U.S. law enforcement through the FBI tip line at 1-800-CALL-FBI or the HSI tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE, or complete the [FBI online tip form](#) or the [ICE online tip form](#).

*An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.*