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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, March 29, 2018**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Michael Levitt**



## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (0940)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Welcome, colleagues, to the 101st meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Today's session is a briefing on the human rights situation in Syria. We last heard on this topic earlier this month during the siege of eastern Ghouta.

Before us today we have three witnesses from the White Helmets: Deputy Chairman of the Board Munier Mustafa, Board Member Nidal Ezeddin, and Medical Centre Officer Mayson Almisri.

Before we begin with testimony, I want to note that this month marks seven years of conflict in Syria. These have been seven years of brutality, fear, and tragedy for millions of Syrians. In the midst of this, we have also seen what amounts to the very best of humanity, individuals who have selflessly put themselves in mortal danger to help others each and every day. These heroes are the White Helmets, and I cannot fully express to you our admiration for the life-saving work that you and your organization do on the front lines. I'd like to thank you for making yourselves available to the subcommittee, and I'd like to invite you now to begin by making your opening remarks, after which we shall go to questions from the members.

Thank you very much.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Board Member, The White Helmets) (Interpretation):** First of all, welcome. We're very, very happy to be here today so we can deliver part of the message and the picture of what has been happening in Syria for seven years. It's a great tragedy. I think you have already read some information.

The White Helmets have been the first witnesses, for four years so far, of all violations of human rights in Syria. Today, four years after the work of the White Helmets started—

**The Chair:** One second, please, just while we go to the translation. The French translation, I believe, is not working. Can we just confirm that, please?

[Translation]

**Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP):** The English to French translation is coming through, but not the Arabic to French.

[English]

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC):** I have *le français*. I'll listen to him in Arabic. I'm okay. I think that Arabic to French is not working.

**The Chair:** Yes, that's what I think is not working. It's going to be one second while we get this sorted out.

We're good. We are clear to continue. Thank you very much, and I'm sorry for that interruption. Please continue.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** Thank you.

As I said earlier, today, four years after the conflict and after the work of the White Helmets, we have been the first witnesses to all the violations of human rights in Syria. After seven years of the tragedy in Syria, today we could start talking about an immense number of violations of human rights in Syria. Honestly, I will talk about a very small portion of these violations. My friends also will give you more details.

I come from Homs. I think you know the city. It's in the middle of Syria. Homs has people from many ethnic backgrounds. It's a diverse city, and it also started the public movement against the regime, especially after what happened in Daraa back in 2011. The regime's revenge has been very intense against the people in the city. I was one of the people who had been forced to leave the city back in 2012, and I can't go back to my city. Today we have death sentences, just like one million other people who have been expelled and forced to leave Homs.

We all remember the first exodus, and then the second one of Old Homs, and then many other treaties that have not been implemented in Syria, like eastern Ghouta, western Ghouta, Heleh, Aleppo. It is a huge crime when you evacuate areas and residents and deprive them from life, confiscating all their memories, taking their families away from them. No justification can give them the right to do that.

Today, if we're talking about numbers, the numbers are huge. Unfortunately, this was the first reason for the flow of refugees into places around the world. There were no other reasons. Today I have lost my country. I have lost my memories. I've lost my land, and I'm without a home in Ghouta. I need to find a new life.

There are so many Syrians who have suffered in this way. The displacements, the siege operations, have been there for three to four years, with small places that have been without medical supplies, without food supplies. People have been forced to leave, to exit those regions. Ninety per cent of those residents do not bear arms. They have not participated in any aggression that would cause them to be at the forefront of being killed, of being displaced. Unfortunately, it was very obvious that there was an international silence about this displacement process.

It's a long topic. Fortunately, we at the White Helmets keep all these files that support what we're saying. Those people who used to live in certain areas, who are they? Were they true residents of those places before the crisis? How were they displaced? What are their identities? With the men, women, children, what is their health situation? Do they have documents? We are able to provide such documentation to whomever is concerned.

Thank you.

• (0945)

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Deputy Chairman of the Board, The White Helmets) (Interpretation):** My name is Munier Mustafa. I live in Idlib north.

I'll be talking about two crimes that have taken place against the Syrian people. The first one is the use by the regime of weapons that are prohibited internationally, like the cluster munitions that were used several times in several places inside Syria. Obviously there are also chemical weapons, as we saw in Khan Sheikhoun in southern Idlib and the use of chlorine gas in several areas on Syrian territories in the north and in the besieged area of Ghouta around Damascus. Obviously, these violations were repeated with the international community watching and hearing, sometimes even using the veto to protect the criminal who is sanctioning these weapons in Syria.

The second crime that I'd like to talk about is the shelling of the vital institutions and the service centres, such as the civil defence centres and hospitals, that are spread all over the south side of the Syrian-controlled area that provide health care, ambulances, and first aid. As an example, when a market was targeted in that area, it led to 94 people being killed in that market. They were all civilians. It was a huge massacre against the Syrian people. Another example of targeting the civil defence centres is the Kafr Zeta centre, which is another centre that provides service for children and women. They were directly targeted, causing seven members of the White Helmets to be killed, as well as other casualties, which disabled the centre completely, with complete destruction of all the tools and instruments in the centre.

These were two crimes using prohibited weapons and targeting vital service areas that are meant to provide service to the local residents.

Thank you.

• (0950)

**Ms. Mayson Almisri (Medical Centre Officer, The White Helmets) (Interpretation):** Good morning. My name is Mayson Almisri. I am from Daraa, which was the birthplace for the revolution in Syria.

Frankly speaking, there are many tragedies and memories of horrific tragedies, but this morning I felt tremendously afraid. I wanted to turn on the telephone, but I was wondering whether I was going to hear about somebody who had been martyred. I personally lost nine members of my family—siblings, nephews, nieces—about 50 individuals in terms of cousins and other relatives.

The situation in Daraa is that more than 95% of the place has been destroyed. The infrastructure is not there. We are forced to drink from the wells. There is no electricity; we depend on solar energy and simple generators.

We have a huge medical problem. If somebody requires surgery or axial tomographies, there are no facilities. People could die because of the lack of such medical facilities.

We had 19 people dead in the year 2013. There were so many crimes that affect people, but that particular one touched on my own brother. He came from the farm. There was shooting in Daraa, and there was a ban on movement, a curfew. When they came from the farm, there were no communications. As soon as they got into the residential area, he was targeted by a sniper and he was killed. The bullet went through his back and ended up in the body of my nephew.

This is the kind of personal tragedy that is so difficult. My brother was very close to my mother, and his daughter was there. It was so difficult to provide any first aid for him or to take him to the hospital. These facilities also get targeted. The last picture that we have of him was just before he breathed his last, and the screaming. We were unable to help him. We had nothing to do; we were able to do nothing.

The suffering continued with the targeting of our homes. We had to be displaced; we had to go to the farms. I lost another brother, and nephews and nieces. I am not married, but I have responsibilities towards at least 10 children who are fatherless and motherless. We have to protect them. There is no education. There are no secure places.

Yesterday I was talking to my brother, asking him about the situation. He said, "I don't know what to tell you; I don't know where to go."

Ghouta is basically completely finished. People are simply watching. We don't know about our destiny; we don't know what's going to happen. I'm here in body, but in spirit I am with my family. I'll be back in a few days in Daraa. I don't know what awaits me there, whether I'm going to meet my family, whether we are going to be able to live, or whether we will just die at any moment. There is no future for us; we don't know what's going to happen. I don't know my destiny or my family's destiny.

There are so many crimes that are hard to describe. When you see a barrel bomb that's landing from a plane, you don't know what to do. What are the options: to run away, run for your life?

•(0955)

I remember one time I was coming back from the civil defence—from my work—and a barrel was dropped. I had the option to try to run away, but I decided to stay with my family and not to leave them and flee. Whether we live together or die together, we will stick together. That's what we're talking about. There is no protection when you see the rockets and the barrels that are getting dropped.

We have seen horrific things. We've seen parts of the bodies of children, and sometimes there is nothing left of those bodies. Sometimes we had to walk, only to realize that we were stepping on human remains and blood. We have no homes, no basic life necessities, and no security, and it's an ongoing situation.

We tell our children, "Well, tomorrow the war will come to an end." We just tell them that. We tell them the criminals will be tried, but we know, inside ourselves, that there is no hope. Sometimes we don't even have food supplies. We lived through a siege in which we had to give up our own food in order to make sure the children had food. In Daraa we were relatively better off than other places that suffered through sieges, but we realize there is more punishment awaiting us, and, frankly speaking, we do not want to leave our country.

Before joining the civil defence I used to be a journalist at SANA, an official news agency that speaks in the name of the Syrian government, but I could not continue with this kind of work. The Syrian media forced us to twist the facts, to deny that there was a revolution and to say that this was just terrorism. In fact, we saw educated people, including women and children, who were part of the demand for freedom. Basically, we wanted our country to deserve the name "Syria", but I don't know. The war we are faced with is just beyond imagination. We don't deserve this kind of punishment. All we wanted was freedom. All we wanted were the essential elements of life.

Yesterday, when I came to Parliament, I wept. I thought, "How come we are deprived of such places, of such facilities?" Parliament should represent people and be there for people, but unfortunately, this is our situation.

I remember always.... I wish I had better memories, but my memories are so painful. Even if there is food, we don't have the appetite. We are not able to fall asleep. When you look into the eyes of the children and you're unable to protect them, how do you feel about this? It's a horrific, unknown destiny. We're here today, but we don't know if we're going to be alive tomorrow.

I'm talking to people, not governments. It's my desire that people not forget the Syrian people who are being subjected to extermination by various weapons. I'm sure the killers will not be punished in the future, but we hope that there are certain parties that will hold the criminals responsible. We have lost our trust in our justice system.

Thank you.

•(1000)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much to the three of you. I am sure I speak for every member of this subcommittee when I say we are devastated and stunned by the testimony you have brought before us.

I want to immediately open up our first round of questions. MP Sweet is going to lead off. Thank you.

**Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC):** Thank you, Chair. *Shukran*. Thank you for your courage and your service. *As-salaam alaikum*, the peace of God to you.

Mr. Ezeddin, you mentioned that there's a death sentence against you, although you have a very clear code of conduct whereby you've made a vow not to be aligned with any political party, that your dedication is to saving those who are in trouble, and that you will not be used to gather information of a political, military, or economically sensitive nature. Why would there be a death sentence against you, since you have made those vows?

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** Honestly, as I said earlier, the White Helmets are the first witnesses of any violations of human rights in Syria. This has annoyed the regime, annoyed their allies. For this reason, the allies made us their first target.

We are doomed to die in any operation held against the people. We do rescues, and we look for people who have survived, but we are dealt with as terrorists. We are perceived by the regime as terrorists.

This question should actually be directed to those who are accusing us of being terrorists: "Why are you sentencing those 4,000 people, along with the paramedics who work with them, to death? What harm are we causing to the community?"

We are giving life. We are supporting life. We are jeopardizing ourselves and our lives under fire. We are not attacking anyone. We are giving life. We should have been given better consideration by the regime. If they really are keen to reach a peaceful solution, they shouldn't extinguish this candle of hope.

**Mr. David Sweet:** You're targeted because you're an innocent witness.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** Yes.

**Mr. David Sweet:** How many of your colleagues, your friends in the White Helmets, have you lost?

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** In the White Helmets, we have lost 243. Thirty-three volunteers were female.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I have one last question. Then I'd like to give Mr. Aboultaif the ability to ask a question.

How serious is the situation with mines and unexploded ordnances right now? How profuse are projectiles that haven't exploded? How dangerous are mines right now?

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** In different locations, cluster bombs have been used, and we have marked the areas that were targeted by those weapons. We have a full detailed report about this situation. Of course, I don't have enough time to talk about all those details in this session. However, we know exactly where those cluster bombs are and when they are potentially going to be detonated.

Our job is basically to locate those bombs, remove as many as possible from the residential areas, and get rid of them. However, there are still very many bombs on farms and in open areas. We have maps. We have reports from the civil defence regarding the distribution of those bombs. Of course, this is going to take a very long time. We may need scores of years to get rid of all that. We need help. We need more teams to support us in order to get rid of them totally.

• (1005)

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** *Salaam alaikum.*

You have Homs, Daraa, and north Idlib. Daraa was the very first target at the beginning of the conflict, then Homs, and then north Idlib. Where did the people go from Homs, north Idlib, and Daraa? To which countries did they flee?

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** I will answer this question.

Due to the active hostilities in these areas like Homs, north Idlib, and Daraa, some of the people who lived in those areas had to be displaced to neighbouring countries. More than four million people are located inside Turkey, 1.5 million in Jordan, and also some of them went to Europe to ask for refugee protection and asylum. Some of them also came here to Canada as refugees. Those are some of the people who have been displaced and run away from death. Some people run from death to death—that's how I want to say it. They leave a dangerous zone and go into another dangerous zone. They run for their lives from an area of conflict and then they go to another area in order to face their end there.

Displacement operations have been tackled earlier by one of my colleagues. People have been forced to leave their houses and then move to different areas within the same countries. However, there is no state protection for those people and consequently they have been targeted. A lot of people have been killed and injured. They are targeted with different types of weapons.

Some people have been displaced outside Syria as refugees and some people have lost their house within Syria. People are here and there.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** This is a tactic that is used by the regime. They force the people to be displaced in order to control the area.

I will talk here about eastern Aleppo, Homs, Ghouta, Darayya, Mu'adiyah, Al-Zabadani, Madaya, and eastern Ghouta. In all those regions, if you look at the population density in those areas, you see the forced displacement started two years ago in all those areas. The actual number is more than five million. Not one of these has come back to their place. It's a crime by the best definition of the word.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We're now going to move to MP Khalid for the next question.

**Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Before I begin, I will say I would like to share some of my time with MP Fragiskatos.

Thank you very much for coming in and for presenting your very compelling testimony. This is an issue that our subcommittee has been quite seized with for the last number of years, I think ever since we founded this subcommittee. Thank you for all the work that you do and thank you for coming in and presenting before us.

I have a few questions.

You had mentioned a bit about your interaction with other parties as they're involved with the conflict. Do you have ongoing communication with the parties? If so, of what nature?

• (1010)

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** Regarding co-operation with other parties, of course, civil defence is fully independent. It doesn't follow any other political or military organization. However, there should be some kind of co-operation and coordination. Those military personnel and military regiments are distributed in different places all over the country.

Are you talking about the external or internal co-ordination?

**Ms. Iqra Khalid:** Internal.

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** There are different parties on the ground. Civil defence is very independent. This is a very good aspect, because we can do our work without being involved with any political party or military organization.

We coordinate in order to reach some places. There are some facilities where the government of Bashar al-Assad and its allies don't allow civil defence personnel to reach those areas. White Helmets are not allowed to go there and do the work properly because of the death sentence against us because we are considered terrorists. However, those areas not controlled by the regime are accessible to us and very easy for us to get to. Some coordination is required, a very simple type of coordination, in order to provide our services very easily to the vast majority of the people.

**Ms. Iqra Khalid:** You mentioned that about 243 White Helmets have lost their lives because of the services they're providing. How do you provide safety for the 3,700 some civilian volunteers that you have? How do you ensure the safety of your volunteers?

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** Honestly, the services we offer are part of the mission of our faith. We're responsible for protecting human life, irrespective of their affiliation, culture, religion, or ethnicity. For us, a victim is a soul that has to be rescued. We are very keen on continuing our work in this regard. Regarding the persons who have lost their lives, I don't know how to explain to you the feeling of losing a friend, a colleague, in the White Helmets.

Today we lost more than 10 volunteers in Ghouta, and before that—during the last four years—233 people have been killed. It's the faith. It's our faith that compels us to be there. We have to keep doing what we're doing in order to give hope to the people. Hopefully, one day, the friends of the Syrian people will feel our agony and open all those files that are in our possession so that people can be paid back and the rights will come back to those people.

**Ms. Iqra Khalid:** Thank you. I know you have many friends here in Canada.

I'll pass the floor to MP Fragiskatos.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

*As-salaam alaikum.*

Thank you so much for being here. It's a true honour to be in your presence. I can only begin to imagine the unspeakable tragedy, the unspeakable violence, and the brutality that you have witnessed.

You have mentioned—and I've noticed you said it a few times—that the White Helmets are fully independent. I go for that. There's no question about that. I've been following the work you've been doing over the years very closely. One of the really important points about the White Helmets is that it's made up of so many folks from a wide variety of backgrounds. We're not just talking about doctors, nurses, and paramedics here. We're talking about former teachers, engineers, tailors, firefighters, and so on. It's a real volunteer effort and a genuine organic movement from the ground up—from the grassroots up, if you like.

While many in the world recognize that, there are those who continue to see you as not independent, but as al Qaeda-linked terrorists. A quick Google search will turn that up. Much of that has to do with Russian propaganda.

I'm just going to quote something here. It comes from a book by a British academic, David Patrikarakos, called *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. He says that in the old days, the Soviets would try to portray the Soviet Union as a model society, but that now it's about confusing every issue with so many narratives that people can't recognize the truth when they see it.

How has Russia tried to carry this out? You obviously know this, but I want it on the record. We're talking about Twitter bots putting out propaganda and untruths about you. The Russian state especially promotes bloggers—many of whom have links to the so-called “9/11 Truth” movement, which continues to say that 9/11 was an inside job carried out by Bush Jr., Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and the like—and they're promoted on outlets such as *Russia Today*.

For the purposes of the record, and for Canadians who are interested in this, can you go into this and how this propaganda effort has really created a perception of the organization that is completely false?

•(1015)

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** Yes, frankly speaking, if we look at this propaganda, we see a lot of contradiction in what they say and in the accusations that are filed against the White Helmets. They contradict each other. Sometimes we are AQ-linked. Sometimes we are the medical arm of al Qaeda, or we are a collaborator with the British or the Americans. These contradictory accusations just prove that it's misinformation against the White Helmets who work in Syria.

Also, you may wonder about the reason for these accusations against the White Helmets. The White Helmets, as we mentioned, are the first to reach the places where crimes are committed. They are the first eyewitnesses to such crimes. They take pictures. They convey the truth in a neutral way without any exaggeration, and they just show the facts of what is happening in Syria.

Of course, this is very disturbing to the criminals. When a criminal sees that you are showing the crime that's being committed, obviously you will have many accusations filed against you because you are documenting the crime.

This is one of the main reasons the Assad regime and its allies target the White Helmets using accusations in an attempt to try to prove to the world....

As you mentioned, it's really very little that the world sees. There are very few people who believe in such lies. I believe there are many friends around the world who know the truth, who see the truth as it is, and who receive our documentation. In civil defence, we pay with blood and human life in order to provide help to the civilian population inside the Syrian territories.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Quach, please.

[Translation]

**Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for meeting with the committee today. We are humbled by your courage, even at risk to your own life.

You talked about human rights violations aimed at....

The translation doesn't seem to be coming through, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** I think the French to Arabic translation is down.

[Translation]

**Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach:** I was thanking you for your courage and your appearance here today.

I'd like to ask you about the human rights violations aimed at hospitals and schools. Do you know how many of these institutions are attacked and how often?

•(1020)

[English]

**Mr. Munier Mustafa:** Yes, the White Helmets have reports and documents of all the operations that take place inside Syria targeting schools, hospitals, and markets, as well as civil defence centres. They have full reports along with pictures. They are available, and the White Helmets and civil defence are ready to submit them, upon request, to any organization or place that could participate in helping to stop such crimes.

There are cyclical reports that are done, even when it comes to a small process of rescuing somebody and moving them from one place to another. There are also pictures that prove these reports.

In terms of targeting schools, hospitals, and other vital places inside Syria, all are documented with pictures and reports. Witnesses are willing to testify for individual incidents about when such incidents happened, what happened, what the number of casualties, fatalities, and missing persons was, and what the nature of the targeted place was.

Was it a school with children? Was it a hospital with doctors and health care providers? All of these have been documented with civil defence, and the reports have been available from the beginning of the establishment of the civil defence service until now. We're talking about more than four years.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach:** Thank you.

I have other questions about civilians, women and children, in particular. I see that women are part of your organization. Do they play a special role in dealing with women and children who have been victimized? How prevalent is sexual violence against women and children?

[*English*]

**Ms. Mayson Almisri (Interpretation):** When it comes to sexual violence, these things happen, but in small numbers. There is no society that is free of that, but the numbers are relatively small. For women in general, there are so many risks that we face: the direct shelling, the fact that there is no safe shelter for us.

Even as civil defence, when we go about our work on a daily basis, we are not sure we are going to return to our homes the same day. There's also the problem with arrests. Lots of women have been detained. They're away. We don't know what happens to them. Some people leave their detention places, and they subjected to horrific torture, so basically being arrested and detained is a very major concern.

Yes, we have the shelling, but the detention is very serious, as is the economic situation of women. There are so many women who have lost their men, and now the women find themselves fully responsible for their own families. Sometimes a woman has to be displaced to other places in the hope of finding safety. There are large numbers who hope to find safety and economic resources for the family.

We have a big group of women and young girls who have had to leave education. They could not pursue their education because the regime would detain women as a weapon, to pressure their families to surrender themselves and to stop participating in the revolution. Women are not able to pursue their education beyond grade 9.

As for health services for women, some pregnant women lost their lives. They died for lack of medical supplies or for lack of medical facilities that could perform surgeries.

We have so many children who lost their parents. There are lots of children who are unable to get an education, and they are unable to read or write. Lots of children have been physically injured, and they have become disabled. There are no centres to rehabilitate such disabled children.

Lots of women, lots of children have struggled psychologically, and they have severe psychological shocks and psychological problems because they have witnessed horrific scenes happening to their families or they have seen their parents being killed.

Imagine a child looking at the head of their mother who was targeted by a rocket when they thought they were safe in the lower level of a building. When the children were rescued, they were covered with the blood and body parts of their own families, so you

weren't sure whether they were injured themselves or not. Such children struggle with fear and horror as soon as they hear any noise. Even if it's not loud, they scream.

When I came to Canada, I just heard a bus at one point, and I thought I was in Tehran. I thought there was a plane, and I started looking for shelter. This is the kind of psychological suffering that we have. We are unable to leave that climate of war that haunts us. Imagine women and children who have been subjected to horrific crimes.

• (1025)

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** I have an addition when it comes to sexual violence in Syria. Most of such cases against women in Syria are done inside the detention centres that are run by the Assad regime. There are so many witnesses to this. There are so many women who were detained. Now they're free, and they're willing to give testimony about what happened to them.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** I have personal experience with the situation. In 2013 my wife was arrested from Damascus University. She was detained and remained for about 10 days after that, until she recovered from the physical effects of the detention. Five years later, she is isolated. She is unable to have friends. She does not talk to anybody. She is psychologically destroyed.

I tried to take her to a psychiatrist, but unfortunately her situation has been very difficult, and this is after a relatively short period of detention. Imagine women who were detained for a year or two or three. Some of their futures are not known. Their destiny is not known. Obviously such people would have suffered even more than my wife.

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** There are many instances of pregnancies inside detention centres, because of sexual abuse and systematic rape.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Wrzesnewskyj, and then we'll finish off with MP Aboutaif.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

*As-salaam alaikum.*

Saying thank you doesn't fully encapsulate the gratitude we need to express to you for the work you are doing. You're doing God's work in a place where it seems the gates of hell have opened up. These are the most horrific human atrocities of the 21st century, and may God protect you in your work.

Having said that, we have a responsibility as well, and we can't be bystanders. Through your testimony bearing witness, and through your eyes, you have shown us the hell of Syria. Perhaps a starting point for all of us is to be clear, so we aren't just bystanders. We need to call things clearly by what they are, and we need to be clear in stating that what the regime and its Russian enablers—the generals and diplomats—are involved in is systemic, sequential, knowingly and methodically planned and meticulously executed war crimes, including the use of prohibited weapons, the use of prohibited tactics, the targeting of civilians. There have been nine UN-documented cases of intentional mass killings.



As diplomats at the UN discussed what was happening, and as Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov talked of peace, incendiary bombs—white phosphorus bombs—were being loaded on planes to be dropped on places like Raqqa and bunker-buster bombs were being loaded onto Russian planes to be dropped on Aleppo, targeting civilians—the children you described hiding in basements.

I have no questions for you. My question is for all of us: what are we going to do about it?

Thank you.

● (1030)

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** Thank you.

I have a question about north Idlib. It's more of a technical question. Idlib is near the Syrian coast, and it's a mix of ethnicities and faith-based groups. Have you noticed in Idlib any displacement of certain groups? For example, have Sunnis been replaced with Alawites in the area? What is the news about this specific region? I'd like to have a brief on that.

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** The people in northern Idlib, whether Alawites, Christians, Sunnis, or Shias, are people. They're Syrians. They did not revolt because of their sect; the revolution was against the regime that deprives them of democracy. Large numbers of the community and society, irrespective of their denomination, have revolted against the regime. Maybe the Sunnis are the majority, but there are also many other minorities, such as Christians. They even with us work in civil defence.

We have people from all walks of life and denominations. They work with the White Helmets. They help the White Helmets. We're brothers and sisters who work hand in hand. Nothing separates us. The common target is that we all are sentenced to death by the regime because we are eyewitnesses to all the atrocities and crimes committed against the people and all the supporters of the regime as well, so I don't think there is a specific group of people who are being targeted in the displacements.

I also know that the Druze in many other villages, as in northern Idlib, have been already targeted, such as in villages like Kaftin. I can't remember all of them. There are seven or eight villages, and those villages are inhabited by different sects. There are Christians also who are still there and nobody is targeting them. There are no problems.

However, we never thought as White Helmets to make statistics based on religious sects and denominations, because this is not part of our work. It doesn't go to the core and nature of our business.

The common denominator here is that we are considered enemies by the regime. Everybody who lives in the north is considered an agent just because we are demanding democracy and reject the false democracy practised by the regime.

● (1035)

**The Chair:** MP Fragiskatos, you may have a final short question.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Thank you very much.

Canada has provided \$12 million to the White Helmets, and six other countries have provided funding as well: Denmark, the

Netherlands, the United States, Germany, New Zealand, and the U. K.

Could you go over how that funding is used?

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** I will talk first about the funds given by Canada, and after that I will talk about other donations coming to the White Helmets from other friends.

The Canadian money has been used to make places for women in the White Helmets, and also to increase the number of women volunteering with the White Helmets. The percentage was 0.5% up to 2018. Now it is 10%, and this is thanks to Canadian money and Canadian donations to the White Helmets.

As you know, in all communities women form half of the population. In Syria, maybe our culture is a bit different from western culture. However, we wouldn't have had access to all walks of life and parts of the community without those donations. Since receiving the Canadian support, we've been able to employ around 400 women in different locations in all parts of Syria. We have accessed communities, women, and children, and we've provided our services more efficiently. We've provided medical care. Women have provided medical care and first aid to other women. This was all from the Canadian donations that have been given to us during the last two years.

Regarding the rest of the donations coming from other friends, these have been used for searches and locating people, buying equipment for searches, and also for buying machinery and paying some rewards. We call them "rewards" because they're not large sums. We can't call them "salaries". This is volunteer work, but some of this money has been paid as rewards or donations to other members and other volunteers who are sacrificing their lives. They all have families. They take care of their families, and they needed this money very badly.

Some of this money has also been used in campaigns to enlighten people and teach them about the systematic aggressions, and about concerns regarding weaponry and bombs and the like.

Also, we use this money to train our volunteers, such as those in civil defence. As you know, any mistake that a civil defence officer commits could make him lose his life, so it's very dangerous work. That's why training is very essential and key in this regard. We offer services. We offer training regarding firefighting services.

There are more details. I don't want to be very long in my explanations, but if you need anything more I'll be happy to add.

● (1040)

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** No, you've been very thorough. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will close with Madame Laverdière, please.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their very compelling remarks.

We have been following your efforts from afar for a while now, and as my colleague mentioned, we are grateful for your courage.

I know you collect and track information on the ground. I have no doubt that some of it will play a key role in the way forward, for instance, to ensure justice is done where war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed.

What resources do you need to keep tracking these crimes?

Thank you. *Shukran*.

[*English*]

**Mr. Munier Mustafa (Interpretation):** Of course, the first need here for the White Helmets to continue their work is for the support to continue. Without this support, we cannot give our work to the people. We cannot go on with our firefighting missions and civil defence.

We help people in the communities to relocate, and we also help them to come back to their homes, resettle in their places. This is our first request from you, ladies and gentlemen. We need your support so we can go on with our work for many years.

There are difficulties, of course. We are suffering from many difficulties, such as in the transferring of money. It is very difficult for the money that is offered to us from the Canadian government to reach us inside the Syrian territories, maybe because of the sanctions.

The sanctions are not against the White Helmets. They are imposed general sanctions. We work within the Syrian territories, so we've been included with these sanctions. Therefore, it's extremely difficult for this money to come to White Helmets personnel, members, and volunteers. The money is coming anyway, but it's extremely hard for it to reach us.

I'll give you a simple example. From three months ago until now, we have never taken any of the awards, the simple amount of money we offer the volunteers to help them sustain their living. For the past three months, volunteers have been deprived of this simple award that we pay them. This money is used for food, buying necessities like gas, and for other humanitarian necessities. We haven't received any money for three months so far, because of the difficulty of transferring the money. This is a general perspective. I'm giving you a general picture now.

I would love to help, but mainly the difficulties are logistic, because of the sanctions.

The other thing I need to reiterate and stress is to continue the support so that we can go on with our work.

**The Chair:** Yes, Mr. Ezeddin, go ahead.

**Mr. Nidal Ezeddin (Interpretation):** Also, I want to say something honestly. The immense help that comes from the friends of the Syrian people is helping us to stand on strong ground.

We cannot go on with helping and rescuing people. We need to draw a very bright picture about peace. We need to stop this destruction in Syria. We are all part of this. The people's support, the political support, is important.

We look for our old life. We want life to come back. I am a dentist. Munier, my friend, is a firefighter. "Sarah", or Mayson, is a journalist. We miss our work; we miss our lives. Help us to stand again. Please help us.

Thank you.

• (1045)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much to the three of you. This has been riveting and gut-wrenching all at once. Again, I know I speak for all members of this subcommittee. We heard from you almost a year and a half ago, and we keep hoping that things are going to get better, but we're very clearly understanding that things are not getting better. Your being here in person, telling your story to Canadians across this country and on Parliament Hill, makes a difference.

We will amplify your voice and we will make sure your message is heard, both within our own caucus and by Canadians in our community, because as my colleague said, this is the very worst situation facing the world right now, and it is important that you document these crimes and continue to do that work so that one day justice will be served on those perpetrating these atrocities.

With that, I thank you and I call the meeting to a close. This session is adjourned.







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