

PUTIN'S SYRIAN PUPPET: WAR CRIMES AND COMPLICITY FROM SYRIA TO UKRAINE

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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SECOND SESSION

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Wednesday, July 10, 2024.

The hearing was held from 2:01 a.m. to 3:27 p.m., Room 2247, Rayburn House Office Building, Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Chairman; Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member; Representative Mike Lawler [R-NY]; Representative Emanuel Cleaver II, [D-MO]; Representative Victoria Spartz [R-IN]; Representative Marc Veasey [D-TX]; Senator Richard Blumenthal [D-CT].

Witnesses: M. Night Shyamalan, Co-Founder and President of The M. Night Shyamalan Foundation, Film Director, Producer, and Screenwriter; Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, Syrian Civil Society Leader and Human Rights Activist; Mouaz Moustafa, Executive Director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, CHAIRMAN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Chairman WILSON: [Sounds gavel.] Ladies and gentlemen, friends of freedom and democracy for the people of Syria, as we begin today, I would like to come to order. As a reminder, if there are any disruption of the proceedings, it will result in immediate removal and potential arrest. But we would proceed immediately, too.

I want to thank you for being here today as we address a matter of grave concern and moral urgency. For more than 10 years, the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by war criminal Vladimir Putin, has perpetrated unspeakable atrocities against the people of Syria.

Following peaceful demands for democracy and a stop to the brutal corruption of the narco-trafficking Assad crime family, protestors were met with unimaginable atrocities that continue today. Over half of the population of Syria, with more than 14 million people, have been forced to flee their homes, schools, forums, religious institutions, and businesses. The United Nations said they have stopped counting the number of those murdered at the hands of the regime at half a million. We know, sadly, approxi-

mately one million people, including women and children, have been murdered by the Assad regime.

The ability of Bashar al-Assad to brutally quash opposition was due to immediate and ongoing support for the Assad regime from war criminal Putin. Bashar al-Assad has given war criminal Putin free rein in the country of Syria.

The same tactics and atrocities we witnessed on Monday—the bombing of a children’s hospital in Kyiv that we saw, residential buildings, all began, sadly, in Syria with the murderous leveling of Aleppo, then the murderous leveling of the city of Mariupol in Ukraine. Now we see that Kharkiv is under attack, with 1.3 million people, with these same tactics of total destruction, which is gruesomely reminiscent of what Hitler was trying to do to London.

Now, in Kyiv, as we saw with the country’s largest children’s hospital bombed, the images of bloody Ukrainian children, who have just had surgery or received chemotherapy infusion, outside of the bombed hospital, sadly evoke images of Syrian children being buried in rubble caused by the Assad and Putin bombs. Brutal tactics, chemical weapons, attacks on children, indiscriminate bombings, and this systematic targeting of civilians constitute war crimes that cannot go unanswered.

Sadly, the complete lack of response and accountability for the crimes against humanity in Syria has laid the groundwork for the invasion of Ukraine. The scale of suffering inflicted upon innocent men, women and children is a stain on humanity itself. Particularly heinous are the double-tap strikes where the first responders are bombed as they are responding to the initial strike.

The involvement of Moscow in Syria is not an isolated incident. It is part of a broader pattern of aggression and impunity that Putin has promoted because he knows the unfounded fears of escalation will ensure his atrocities continue. Just this morning, Assad and war criminal Putin bombarded the countryside and villages around Aleppo and Idlib with missiles and bombs. How many more Syrians and Ukrainians have to die before the world takes action?

There is a direct link between what Russia has done in Syria and its actions in Ukraine. In both instances, we see disrespect for sovereignty, human rights, and the rule of law. We are in a conflict we did not choose, worldwide, of dictators with the rule of gun invading democracies with the rule of law. Justice and accountability are not abstract ideals; they are the foundations upon which a just and peaceful world is built.

We must ensure that those responsible for these heinous acts are brought to justice, that the victims are remembered, and that the international community stands united in condemning such barbarity. Those who attempt to normalize unrepentant mass murderer Bashar al-Assad are doing business with death itself. The forcible repatriation of Syrians under this maniacal regime is murder. As soon as they set foot in Syria, they are rounded up by the regime henchmen, and never seen again.

There can be no peace for Syrians in the region while Assad remains in power. Let us honor the memory of those who have suffered and perished by committing ourselves to the cause of justice, human rights, and enduring quest for peace.

Today we will hear from an extraordinary, outstanding panel of witnesses.

First, we will hear from M. Night Shyamalan, who is so appreciated worldwide. He is best known for his outstanding career as a film director, screenwriter, and producer, but is here today in the capacity of the co-founder and president of the M. Night Shyamalan Foundation.

We will then hear from Mohammed Ghanem Ranem [sic; Mohammed Alaa Ghanem], a Syrian civil society leader and human rights activist.

Finally, we will hear from Mouaz Moustafa, the executive director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force, who came by Chinook helicopter to get here, I believe, who has just returned from U.S. Forces, from delivering critical aid to the Rukban refugee camp in southeast Syria where humanitarian and medical aid has been blocked for more than a year due to war criminal Putin and the dictator Assad.

I am grateful that the House overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation—Democrats and Republicans—House Resolution 3203, The Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act, and I urge the Senate to pass this bill and save lives.

Thank you for your time here today, and now I yield to the ranking member, Steve Cohen, for his remarks.

**STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, RANKING MEMBER, U.S.
HOUSE, FROM TENNESSEE**

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the witnesses for being here today.

The Syrian people have been plagued by civil war now for about 13 years—violence and starvation, and murders—it has gone on and on, so it is a humanitarian crisis that continues to exact a devastating toll on innocent civilians. The Assad regime, with its blatant disregard for human life and dignity, has perpetrated unspeakable acts of violence against its own people. From the onset of this conflict, we have witnessed scenes of indiscriminate bombings, chemical weapon attacks, and torture. The Syrian people have endured unimaginable suffering, forced to live in constant fear and uncertainty as their homes, schools, and hospitals have been destroyed.

The responsibility for these crimes lies squarely with the Assad regime, and that is the reason they are having a civil war, because the Assad regime has been bad for a long time, and people know it. The regime shows no remorse for its actions, no willingness to negotiate peace, and no respect for international law.

He is not acting alone; he has got allies that are just as villainous as he, including Putin, who provides military support and diplomatic cover for Assad's atrocities. Putin's unwavering support for Assad has not only prolonged the conflict, but escalated the violence, and what Mr. Wilson said, what Putin has been doing in Ukraine—Mariupol—and what he has done—what he did in Aleppo is part of his tactics, and Hitler did the same thing in Warsaw to try to level the city and destroy the populace, and they have no concern about civilian populations.

However, Putin is helping Assad, and it has only prolonged the conflict. Russian airstrikes have targeted civilian infrastructure as he has done in Ukraine, and has done it under fighting terrorism—under that guise, but it has led to deterioration and killing of innocent lives.

Moscow's vetoes of the United Nations Security Council have thwarted efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable and deliver humanitarian aid to those in desperate need. Assad and Russia's collaboration is a stark reminder of the lengths that authoritarian regimes will go to maintain their grip on power. There are quite a few authoritarian regimes around, but Putin is the worst. Xi in China—authoritarian regime; Assad; and Hamas is an authoritarian regime—another one.

Assad has been torturing his people for too long and should stop. We need to continue providing humanitarian aid for diplomatic and a military solution, hopefully, and assure those responsible for war crimes face justice.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses and how we can best support the Syrian people. With that, I would like to ask the chairman a question.

Chairman WILSON: Yes?

Representative COHEN: My father was a psychiatrist. I learned a little bit from him. Do you think that when Mrs. Putin named her son War Criminal Putin, that that might have been some foreshadowing? [LAUGHTER.] I yield back.

Chairman WILSON: Ladies and gentlemen, again, you can tell that we work together, Democrats and Republicans, okay? [LAUGHTER.] I have to take abuse from him sometimes. [LAUGHTER.]

Representative COHEN: He is my straight man.

Chairman WILSON: No, no, hey—but very seriously, the ranking member and I—and the format today, we have so many multiple hearings, markups going on that we have got members of the House and bicameral members of the Senate who, based on how they can get away, will be bouncing back and forth. The format is that each of you would like to have five minutes of presentation, and then we would have questions from the members as they come and go.

However, we will begin indeed with Mr. Shyamalan, and we just appreciate him so much.

**TESTIMONY OF MOHAMMED ALAA GHANEM, SYRIAN CIVIL
SOCIETY LEADER AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST**

Mr. GHANEM: Thank you.

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Cohen, and esteemed staff members of the Helsinki Commission, I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today as a witness to the tragic consequences of Russia's intervention in Syria.

My testimony is drawn from my firsthand experiences on the frontlines of the Syrian conflict. Born and raised in Damascus, I lived in Syria for nearly three decades. My first direct encounter with the Assad regime occurred during my college years when I was unjustly detained and tried in a military court, despite being a civilian. Since 2011, I have been deeply involved in addressing

the Syrian conflict, engaging in the process with three different U.S. administrations at the highest levels.

Russia's military intervention in Syria has wrought devastating consequences. Russia has committed extensive war crimes, killing thousands of Syrian civilians, and obliterating hospitals, schools, mosques, marketplaces, and churches—marketplaces and residential neighborhoods.

Alongside my written testimony, I am submitting two reports from credible Syrian human rights organizations that chronicle the mass slaughter of thousands of Syrian civilians by Russian forces in over 360 documented massacres. This intervention triggered the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Only after Russia intervened in Syria did the refugee crisis reach unprecedented levels, with Russian forces getting involved, and the Obama administration's refusal to provide effective support to the Syrian opposition or enact a no-fly zone to help civilians stay in their homes. Millions were forced to seek safety in Europe. Putin and Assad strategically weaponized these refugee flows to destabilize domestic European politics.

It must also be noted that the unholy alliance between Iran and Russia, which is currently manifesting in Ukraine with Iran supplying lethal drones to Russia, has its roots in Syria. Russia's intervention in Syria was initiated, in fact, following a covert plea by Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, to President Putin, for help in preserving Assad's regime. Additionally, Russia's provision of crucial air cover to the IRGC, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups, significantly enhanced their operations on the ground in Syria.

This support comes as Russia's military intervention predominately targeted moderate Syrian opposition groups that were actively fighting ISIS and al-Qaida. Recent leaks have also revealed joint planning by Russia, Iran, and Assad to precipitate an American withdrawal from Syria by intensifying assaults on U.S. troops stationed in Syria.

Russia has also sabotaged the political process using its veto power at the U.N. Security Council, as many as 18 times, to politically shield Assad and block initiatives aimed at holding him accountable. Most egregiously, Russia used its veto to terminate the U.N. humanitarian cross-border aid mechanism in Syria, a crucial lifeline that sustained millions for nine years. This move, which mirrors Moscow's withdrawal from the Black Sea grain agreement, not only exacerbates the humanitarian crisis but also consolidates Assad's control by handing him the reins to distribute U.N. aid to the very population he persecutes, all while the U.S. appears to tacitly consent.

Yet, despite all this, Russia got away with it all, a lesson that Putin noted and replicated again in Ukraine. Policymakers who deem confronting Russia and Syria too costly or misaligned with U.S. interests now have to contend with the far greater costs of dealing with terrorism, deepening refugee crises, and an emboldened Putin, who has not only invaded Ukraine but also threatened further expansion into Europe.

Amidst this turmoil, the Biden administration, much like its Republican and Democratic predecessors, clings to a failed notion that dialogue with Putin could somehow bring resolution to the Syrian

conflict. Time and again this approach has proven ineffectual, provoking further aggression instead of fostering peace. The continued reliance on this strategy, despite its chronic failures, represents a profound misjudgment, a tragic error that continues to exact a heavy toll on lives and regional stability.

Chairman Wilson and Ranking Member Cohen, long before Russia's military intervention in Syria and its invasion of Ukraine, my staff and I had engaged with senior U.S. officials across various agencies, advocating for basic support to protect Syrian civilians. During trips to Syria, I was alarmed to see the dire lack of resources available to the moderate opposition. Upon returning, I conveyed my concerns to officials at the State Department and the National Security Council at the White House, warning that, without support, extremists could hijack the Syrian revolution. Instead of providing meaningful military aid, the U.S. offered soon-to-expire MREs—Meals Ready to Eat.

Long before the annexation of Crimea, we approached senior U.S. officials, emphasizing that failing to curb Putin's actions in Syria could have repercussions beyond Syria's borders, potentially threatening Europe, as well. However, these warnings were dismissed. The Obama administration believed that the conflict could be contained within Syria's border. At the time, the Obama administration was engaged in the so-called Russia Reset policy, which viewed Putin as a pragmatic leader with whom deals could be made. Additionally, the administration was pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran, a key patron of Assad.

Repeatedly, when we urged the Obama administration to adopt basic measures to protect civilians in Syria, officials would rhetorically ask if we wanted to trigger World War III. This narrative was debunked twice when the Trump administration conducted targeted air strikes on Wagner mercenaries in Deir Ezzor, and also military facilities of the Assad regime in response to chemical attacks. Those strikes, though limited, managed to establish limited deterrence without spiraling into a global conflict, proving that the previous administration's justification for its inaction was less fact and more fiction. In fact, even after Russia intervened militarily, former general, Petraeus, repeatedly informed us that there were still viable methods to implement a no-fly zone without engaging in direct conflict, such as through conducting targeted airstrikes against Assad's forces that were actively targeting civilians.

Far from securing cooperation, however, this appeasement strategy only emboldened Putin, culminating in the bold and illegal annexation of Crimea. When President Putin observed that he could flout international norms without significant repercussions, he saw an opportunity to extend such tactics into Europe, where the stakes for Russia were even higher.

I am convinced that, if Putin had been decisively challenged in Syria, neither the annexation of Crimea nor the invasion of Ukraine would have occurred. I applaud the U.S. Congress for acting against Russian intervention in Ukraine. However, I contend that, with less than 5 percent of the amount of money appropriated, we could have effectively countered Putin, Iran, and their influence in Syria, potentially averting Russia's and Putin's more destructive actions.

This leads us to a fundamental flaw in U.S. policy towards Russia: The bifurcation in our approach to Putin's aggression in Syria and Ukraine. It is imperative that U.S. policy erases this imaginary line, challenging Putin uniformly across both theaters. While U.S. policy has been resolute against Putin's aggression in Ukraine, it paradoxically allows him free rein in Syria, an arena of immense strategic and propaganda value to him.

A stark illustration of this has been seen over the past couple of years during which the Biden administration has greenlit the rehabilitation and normalization of Bashar al-Assad. It has also intervened to block a bipartisan Senate bill, developed with input from the Syrian American community, that seeks to counter Assad's rehabilitation, a principal policy objective of Putin. Additionally, the administration has conceded to Russia by endorsing the so-called, "Early Recovery" projects in regions under Assad's control, a term both Assad and Russia use synonymously with reconstruction. This has long been a strategic objective of Russia and Assad, to have the West ultimately finance the reconstruction of the very same devastation that they themselves have wrought.

To counter this, pushing Bashar al-Assad out of power is essential. By turning Syria over to Putin and Khamenei, Assad has been pivotal in upholding Iranian and Russian interests in Syria, acting as a lynchpin for their strategies in the region.

Additionally, the U.S. should reconsider initiatives like Timber Sycamore, the program that was designed to arm carefully vetted elements of the Syrian opposition. This program was disastrously terminated during the Trump administration in a bid to signal to Putin that the administration wants to improve ties to Russia, as verbatim—as stated by—as stated by U.S. officials verbatim. The cessation of this program undermined the Southern Front, a key moderate opposition coalition that had been effective in maintaining order and curbing the activities of Iranian militias in southern Syria.

As a result, Hezbollah and other Iranian militias have had free rein to launch attacks from southwest Syria on neighboring countries. Furthermore, since Assad regained control of the south, he has turned it into a hub for flooding the region with Captagon drugs, exacerbating what Jordanian officials describe as a war on their northern borders.

Congress, particularly the Senate, should also pass HR 3202, the bipartisan Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act introduced by Chairman Wilson, with wide support. This legislation aims to prevent the rehabilitation of Bashar al-Assad, a top objective of both Russia and Iran.

Congress should also pass S.4625, bipartisan legislation introduced by Senators Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal, that would provide for the designation of the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In conclusion, U.S. policy has made critical errors by accommodating Russian objectives in Syria, which conflict with U.S. interests and global peace. By treating Russia as a partner in Syria and disregarding its actions that destabilize the region and contravene U.S. interests, this approach has led to the rise of transnational

terrorism, and a massive refugee crisis, and emboldened Putin to expand his aggression by projecting U.S. weakness.

It was precisely in Syria that Putin found the audacity to extend his aggression to Crimea and Ukraine. Confronting Putin must, therefore, encompass a unified strategy that addresses both Syria and Ukraine.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Ghanem.

I now proceed to Mr. M. Night Shyamalan.

**TESTIMONY OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN, CO-FOUNDER AND
PRESIDENT OF THE M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN FOUNDATION,
FILM DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, AND SCREENWRITER**

Mr. SHYAMALAN: Thank you for having me here. This is a wonderful opportunity.

You know, I kind of represent a different aspect of all this. I guess I would represent the—kind of the novice, the American—just the American who—where I started and where I am now that—kind of the movement from that, you know, and how I perceive this.

My wife and I have a foundation, the M. Night Shyamalan Foundation, and we support leaders—domestically and around the world. Mouaz Moustafa is one of those leaders. We currently represent 12 of them, and he is one of them, and so we are here in support of that.

However, it was an interesting journey that I took, just as kind of a normal American hearing about this, even with the interest that I had to help everyone, or my wife's kind of intense interest to help the world. When she came back and said, hey, let us support this person in Syria, my initial reaction was no way are we doing that. I had—I was very negative on it because I was like, ah, there is a civil war and, you know—and to be honest, I had a lot of probably prejudices underneath that of my beliefs about the violence over there, and, well, there is no way to fix that, and that is just the way they are, and those are—that is how we feel about those subjects. Ah, it just makes you feel too tight, and you turn away from it.

What I did not realize at that moment was that I had been told a story, and I brought into the story, and it was working on me. As I got to know everyone and started to talk to everyone, I asked the question, who is telling the story? I ultimately learned that Assad was the one that was telling this story, and I bought into it.

Therefore, you know, I am a filmmaker. I make movies and, you know, what we do from the beginning when I am making movies, so when I am writing it, so we are selling it, our job is to take a storyline and pull it out and make you guys hear it. Then you guys get so invested in that story that you cannot wait to see how it ends, so you are invested, and you come to the movie theater. Therefore, my job—and every other storyteller's job is to make you really invested.

Well, this is the opposite of the story that is being told to us. The storyteller here, Assad, is trying to de-invest us from this story, to

have the exact reaction that I had, which was, ah, that is a mess; I do not want to deal with that. There is no way to get involved. It is too messy—all of that stuff, you know. It makes me uncomfortable. He is honestly playing on our prejudices about Muslims and Muslim countries, and it worked.

Therefore, I did not put any effort in, and I did not want to get involved, and I—you know, and that is where we started. But as I got to know everyone, there is a very, very different story and actually quite a beautiful one. Therefore, I wanted to talk to you about that a little bit in the hopes of, like, changing interest in what is happening here rather than feeling hopelessness—you know, bringing back agency to each of us to advocate on behalf of these wonderful people.

Therefore, the story that I learned was kind of an amazing one—that America kind of inspired all of this, that democracy and it is the joy of it, and the wonderful existence of it inspired the youth of Syria. They went out, and they went out and they protested—amongst many other countries that were at that time, you know, fighting for and advocating for democracy. Therefore, they went out, and they—and the kids went out, and they spray painted on the walls, you know, democracy, and you are next, doctor. Assad took these individuals, these children, and killed them. More people came up, and city after city started to rise up in peaceful protest, just the way we taught them, to fight for this. It went on like this, and it grew and grew and grew, and public opinion started to turn on Assad, and it was inevitably going to topple. That is when he changed the story and started telling the story I referenced, which was, hey, these are Muslim radicals—and as soon as he says that we are out. We are all out, right? The whole Western world is gone, right, and he knows it, and he said it, and rather than, hey, they want democracy and I am going to kill them all. This is kind of the pattern that we will see in the world, I think, over and over and over, right—this inflection moment, the storytelling change that keeps us away.

Therefore, as you all know here, but I will reference some of it, what happened from that point on was he started to kill all the opposition, and then Russia got involved for many of the reasons that we have already heard here. But they are supporting the ideologies of authoritarian and dictatorships, and that is important, you know. The last thing that Russia wants is a democracy in Syria, so he comes in right at that moment and supports it, and Iran did the same thing and came in and supported, so—Russia with their air force and Iran with their ground. Here we are. They labeled it a civil war, and that is a wonderful way for us to stay out of it because it is someone else's family's problem. But that is not what is happening here.

It is been—you know, for me, learning—I have been incredibly fortunate to be able to learn from Moustafa and many of the players in this crisis that have been involved. I got to spend, you know, intimate time with a man named Caesar—I think he spoke to all of you guys—and he was the photographer for Assad, and he would—Assad, for whatever reason, wanted to photograph all of his victims. Therefore, he photographed the children, and the women,

and the men—everyone that was tortured, and then Mouaz and others got him out of Syria with all the photos.

Therefore, he came to our house, actually, and we got to spend time with him and I—you know, I saw the photos and—50,000—50,000 children, women. This is not a civil war. There is nothing—that is not what is happening here.

I keep thinking on the car ride here what the word is—genocide is the wiping out of a people, but there is—we might need to unfortunately have a term for when a dictator just wipes out his opposition in his own country and just wipes it out because he is not—you know, as you referenced, the lengths they will go to hold on—there is no lengths. They will go all the way to the end and burn the whole country down.

Therefore, I got to know Caesar, and what was really beautiful is they are just regular people. This is just a father, and he would cry and just tell me stories of the courage it took—because on their side there is no—there is no other group that is fighting the people for freedom. They are also being held. You know, if he did not do what Assad said, his family would be killed, so that is just the playbook, and so that group is in fear, as well. They are all in prison, as well.

I got to meet the gravedigger who was a person that would make the mass graves, and I think he spoke to you, as well, and he was quite shattered—he and his brother came, and he had told me that he had buried 500,000 people so, you know, these were directly the individuals that were right there and seeing things that we cannot even comprehend.

Therefore, as I learned about everything, I wanted to just help with telling the story again. That is what I do, and I just wanted to make sure that everybody was hearing it properly. Then I always ask, you know, what can we do, and what are the possibilities here and, you know, why is it in our best interest—America—to get involved emotionally and then in other ways here. You know, we feel—all of us feel that when others are inspired by our value system and spread it around the world, we are—it is an extension of our family, and so we are—in that way, we need to be responsible and support them in the right ways.

Therefore, I do feel it is important, and I agree with everything that is been said, that this was a blueprint for Ukraine and the future. Therefore, it was tried, and he pushed, and he saw, and not only the weapons that he tested on them or the tactics that he used, the exact pilots, the exact planes are being used in Ukraine that were used in Syria. This is part two, you know, and there will be part three and part four.

There is a balancing act here of how to get involved, but avoiding and looking away from the story will end up with a—we all can see what is going to happen. One day we are going to have to send our brothers and sisters over there to do something, and that is what we are trying to avoid.

You know, I ask this question, and over the years now having worked with these guys, and talking to the people that are doing it on the ground, I sense an opportunity. This is just me, the uninformed American listening to the people on the ground, but I do think there is a moment here. I do not think he is strong. I do not

think he is strong. He cannot—he is not gaining, and the people have a lot of power there right now, and they are gaining.

What they need is our support, and so it can be a different kind of support than sending military troops there into a war. I was asking Mouaz, and I was saying, you know, do you think that is enough—you know, the support of, you know, keeping the sanctions against the countries, and the anti-normalization, and maybe an envoy to Syria—these kind of things, and helping them, and training them—the Syrian Free Army—and helping with them, you know, giving them intel—all the things that we can do to support—is that enough?

You know, what we believe in—my wife and I—we believe in that, you know, any child that is in a tough situation, they just need one person to see them, one person to believe in them, and they can themselves come out of that situation. That is actually proven in psychological terms, and we believe that as an organization to another organization—if we just see him, you know, that Mouaz who is out there fighting for 14 years, and I say that to him all the time, Assad has no chance against you. He does not. Then he is on the ground, and he believes, and he can do extraordinary things. I believe that is on a country-to-country level, as well; that if we see them, we see the Syrian people, the children—my family has gone to Syria there under protection and, you know, just being seen, that we are here talking about them is giving them strength and is demoralizing the other side. Therefore, I do believe in igniting the human spirit, and they can do extraordinary things.

Therefore, thank you so much for having me here.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you so much, Mr. Shyamalan.

We have been joined by Congressman Michael Lawler of New York.

We now proceed to Mouaz Moustafa.

**TESTIMONY OF MOUAZ MOUSTAFA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
THE SYRIAN EMERGENCY TASK FORCE**

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, members, for giving me this opportunity. It is a real honor to be sharing the panel with these two amazing people. I am so grateful for Dr. Bhavna Shyamalan and M. Night Shyamalan for what they have done for the Syrian people. His wife and daughters went to liberated northern Syria when so many people were afraid to go and gave and empowered these people on the ground by just being there.

I am going to start—before I start my testimony, I have just come back from the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone in the Syrian desert alongside the border with Jordan and Iraq. There is the U.S. Al Tanf garrison where the commander of Task Force Armadillo and its U.S. servicemen and women support and train the Syria Free Army that continues the fight against ISIS and protects civilians.

I have a letter here from the commander of the Syria Free Army I would like to read to you.

"In the name of freedom, justice, liberty, and democracy, in the name of humanity, I begin my message. From here, where the sun rises; from here, a small area lost in the midst of a desert; a place

you may not know where it lies on a map, I send all of you a greeting from the partners of your great military. I send you the best regards from your partner force and ally that has fought and continues to fight the powers of evil and darkness on behalf of world civilization and light.

"I send you this message with my utmost respect and admiration to the people of the United States of America and the Armed Forces of the United States. I send to you my deepest thanks and gratitude for all of the support that you have provided us.

"I send to you a small token in the hand of the man carrying my letter. It is a coin minted by ISIS, but more importantly, it is the only trace remaining from the empire of evil that your military, alongside its partners, has destroyed. It is our partnership and your limited presence in the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone that keeps the evil state from reestablishing itself, ensures the security of the world and protects democratic values everywhere.

"Lieutenant Colonel Salem al-Antari, leader of the Syria Free Army, a U.S. partner force also referred to as SFA."

Now I begin my testimony. The Assad regime has displaced 14 million civilians and, by many estimates has killed a million, and countless civilians—men, women, children, and elderly—remain in Assad's dungeons as we sit here right now, including American citizens and citizens of other nationalities. If it was not for Putin and Iran keeping the genocidal, narco-trafficking animal Assad in power, Syria would be an emerging democracy today. It allowed Russia to test over 400 types of weapons on civilians and occupy Syria which allowed them to invade Ukraine and perfect the killing of innocent babies.

If we leave Assad in power by turning a blind eye to his atrocities and not supporting the free Syrian people, no refugees will ever voluntarily return. That is Putin's dream: To increase refugees in Europe, allowing the rise of extreme right-wing parties in the disillusionment of the European Union. If we leave Assad in power if we do not support Ukraine and Syrians against Putin, we will not—he will not stop there. He will attack NATO allies, and in his pursuit of an evil authoritarian empire, we must support Ukrainians and Syrians in their pursuit of freedom, democracy, and dignity, and in their fight against our shared adversaries.

I just came back from the liberated areas of southern Syria, as I mentioned, where Putin, Assad, and Iran are besieging and starving thousands of innocent civilians in the Rukban camp. It is our inspirational servicemen and women who train and support our SFA partners to protect these civilians and keep ISIS defeated. It is U.S. military planes that have helped my small non-governmental NGO—a non-profit organization to provide medical and humanitarian aid to babies that have literally nothing—not a single doctor, not a single anything. If it was not for U.S. military flights, there would not be a single book for kids that have been stuck out there for nine years with no school. The service and sacrifice of our military at Al Tanf garrison truly fills me with American pride.

ISIS will always have hope of reestablishing itself if Assad, alongside Putin's Russia and Iran, occupy Syria. ISIS will be completely defeated only when Assad goes. Refugees will return home voluntarily only when Assad goes, and the world will be a safer

place, and democracy will take root in Syria when Assad goes. Iran will be defeated in the region if Assad goes.

We are not asking for the deployment of a single U.S. soldier or any direct military intervention. We merely ask that you give the Syrians and the Ukrainians the minimum tools to defeat Assad, Putin, and Iran for us so that we are not forced to go to war with them later.

Assad, Russia, and Iran are unable and unwilling to defeat ISIS. We must continue to sanction Assad, Putin, and Khamenei and their war-criminal gangs. We must continue to support our Syrian and Ukrainian allies. We must pass the Assad Anti-Normalization Act, and unfortunately, Senator Cardin is not here today. I want to say, Chairman Cardin, you have been at every event that we have held in Congress alongside our partners, the Holocaust Memorial Museum. You have had an amazing history of supporting the Syrian people. Do not tarnish it by not allowing markup and vote on the Anti-Normalization Act before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

We must appoint an official envoy on the ambassadorial level from the United States of America to show the world that we are serious about a political transition in Syria in line with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, and we must not allow nations—alies nor enemies alike—to normalize with the genocidal dictator.

Long live the Syrian Revolution and Slava, Ukraine [GLORY TO UKRAINE].

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, and indeed, hey, each of you is so inspiring. My inspiration has been—has come from the Syrian Lebanese community of my home community of South Carolina. We were blessed with people from the Lebanese Syrian communities in the early 1900s, coming to South Carolina. They immediately assimilated and have become business leaders and become very valued members of society, and so I know of the capabilities and talents of the people of Syria.

Therefore, with that, however, we can be helpful—and very grateful that we have Congressman Cleaver from Missouri who is here, has joined us. Therefore—and we will be having others come and go.

But indeed, now we are on the five-minute rule, and so the staff is going to be very brutal reminding me five minutes is up. No, but very seriously, each of you—it is so sad. The first victims of the current situation with Putin were the Russian people themselves. I have been to Russia a number of times. I thought it was going to be a modern country, and I did not realize that an authoritarian dictator would try to recreate the failed Soviet Union. However, the failed Soviet Union can be very beneficial for oligarchs who benefit just as the communist system was to the benefit of the elite. Here we go again. Therefore—and then now to spread it, as we have seen, by maintaining troops in Moldova, by invading Georgia, by invading Ukraine, by threatening Armenia, by threatening Estonia, by threatening Poland. It comes together that he is trying to create the failed Soviet empire, and so all democracies need to be working together.

Just to Mr. Shyamalan, the inspiration, again, of the Syrian American community, how important that is. Each of you bring a

perspective, too, of something that is really concerning, and that is Syrian refugees. I visited refugee camps; I was really startled. I have been to a lot of refugee camps of refugees from war-torn countries, from natural disasters, but the refugee camps I have been to with Syrians they are so extraordinarily organized, everything about it. They have little shops set up. I mean, you do not do that at a refugee camp, but they do. Sadly, they may perceive they are going to be there a while, too, but in the meantime, it shows enterprising people and it is inspiring.

Therefore, with that beginning here what is this—what is the consequence of refugees being returned?

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, we actually know. I do not have to hypothesize about this, Chairman Wilson. We actually know that few—the small number of refugees who have been forced to return to Syria—for example, Lebanon forcibly return—has been forcibly, unfortunately, returning Syrians—Syrian refugees to Syria, particularly political prisoners in the Roumieh prison—notorious Roumieh prison in Lebanon. We know that they have been killed. We know that they have been tortured to death.

Therefore, that is just the fact that is staring us in the face. Syria is not safe for the return of refugees. It is just not. Therefore, long as Assad remains in power Syria will never be safe for the return of refugees.

However, Assad/Putin would—are—have been using the refugee crisis as leverage against European countries. European—I was recently in Europe, and I observed how some European countries were contending with this issue. Some, out of frustration, are thinking that maybe we should talk to Assad.

That would be misguided. That would be misguided. That would backfire. Those people do not want to go back because they know they will be killed.

Chairman WILSON: Mr. Shyamalan?

Mr. SHYAMALAN: You know, as we move around, as I go country to country and visit for my—you know, my work I—you know, I see the unease of this burden that comes as they are seeing at each country, and we spoke a little bit about it, of, you know, hey, that is their—that country's burden and we are taking it on, which then starts to shift everything into a different balance of plates, as we are seeing.

You know, it is, again, storytelling that—you know, although that is a hopeless situation and hopeless people and look at them, they cannot even take care of them. They fight each other, so violently. This is what I shamefully had in my heart and my thoughts before—you know, years before, and having now seen those people they are—they are strangely beautiful and innocent on a way that I cannot believe in the face of what is happening to them.

The family—I mean, every single one that we have encountered, and they have met, and my family has gone and spent time with them—they just have love in their heart. They are just incredibly beautiful people.

Therefore, I—you know, Assad is not winning on that front at all. Their love is really, really bright and the best of us—the best of humanity. Therefore, I am sure anybody that is encountered them has felt that as well.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Chairman, it is simple. If anyone is returned from anywhere to Syria there is a very, very high likelihood of them not just being killed, of being tortured to death. Even if you are a loyalist of the Assad regime all it takes is you get stopped at a checkpoint and the guy does not like your name or where you were born, or maybe he fought with his or her spouse in the morning and that is good enough to be disappeared forever as the Caesar photos and the Gravedigger have taught us.

Chairman WILSON: Indeed, we will proceed. But I have hope and faith in the people of the region and I will tell you, again, because of the Syrian Lebanese community that I have seen but also, I have been to Beirut, okay, and so I saw what the Paris of the Middle East has been.

Therefore, we know what it can be. We know—I have not been, obviously, to Damascus but we know what can be achieved there. Therefore, I am just so hopeful for the region and just in any way that we can possibly do—address it and, remarkably enough, it is going to be bipartisan beginning with the ranking member Steve Cohen.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me ask you first, sir, you mentioned that Putin kind of planned the idea of immigration to Europe to disturb the—in Europe and cause—has there been any—what is the proof of that?

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, the proof of that, first of all—first and foremost, is that Russia and Syria has systematically and deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure in Syria so that people simply cannot stay in their homes and will have to leave.

Speaking with a former rebel commander while I was preparing my testimony the rebel commander shared with me—and, of course, this stuff I know but it is different when you hear it from people who were there on the ground when it happened—during the span of 15 months during the onslaught on Aleppo 2015, end of 2016, Russia dropped tens of thousands of tons of munitions on residential areas in Syria including cluster bombs, cluster—sorry, including bunker buster bombs.

Bunker buster bombs are designed to go after those who are taking shelter in underground shelters. Therefore, Putin did not even want people in underground shelters to feel safe so those people had no option but to leave.

Now, after they left Putin realized that there is great potential for using these massive refugee flows to destabilize domestic European politics, especially with the—fueling the rise of the far right.

Therefore, now Putin has been telling European countries that if you would like those refugees to go back you have to underwrite the reconstruction of Syria. You have to finance the destruction that Putin, Assad, and Iran have wrought, and they use that as leverage. Therefore, so long as Europe says no to footing this bill those refugees, according to—Assad will not welcome them back.

Representative COHEN: How many people have left Syria?

Mr. GHANEM: Half the population has been displaced internally and externally and so we have—you have at least 7 million people seeking shelter in neighboring countries and in Europe.

Representative COHEN: Where are most of them?

Mr. GHANEM: Millions are in Turkey. Turkey has at least over 3 million Syrian refugees. Lebanon also has over a million Syrian refugees. Jordan has over a million Syrian refugees, and then there are also millions in Europe.

Representative COHEN: What is Turkey's role been in this?

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, Turkey early on—I can speak from my own direct experiences. I have engaged with the Turkish officials at the highest levels including the president and the prime minister and the foreign minister.

Turkey early on got on board with the policy of—there was talk at the time of establishing a no-fly zone in Syria. Therefore, Turkish officials at the level of the prime minister and the president came out and said that Turkey would be willing to assist with that.

When Mr. Obama also talked about a red line to be enforced in the case of the use of chemical weapons in Syria and that red line was crossed, Turkey also came out at the highest levels and said they would be willing to be a part of this operation to hold Assad accountable.

However, then after a while they realized, according to a very senior Turkish official I spoke with years ago, that, quote, "they were left holding the baby." Therefore, now, unfortunately, Turkish officials, also at the highest levels, are seeking rapprochement with Assad and talking about normalizing ties with Assad, something that is profoundly disturbing to our community.

However, when we reach out to U.S. officials, too American, and to Turkish officials, they counter by saying that while the United States has abdicated its leadership role in Syria we have a problem. We have terrorism on our southern border. We have millions of refugees.

The opposition is campaigning on a platform of sending refugees back to Syria if they are voted into office, so we have no option but to do this.

That is why it is imperative for the United States to play or restore its leadership role in the Syrian conflict. It would stabilize Syria, stabilize Turkey, and stabilize the whole region.

Representative COHEN: There is a fighting force that came and helped, I think, America in fighting ISIS and Turkey is not too fond of them.

Mr. GHANEM: Yes.

Representative COHEN: They analogize them to the [PKK] Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Mr. GHANEM: Correct.

Representative COHEN: What do they call them, the YPG—

Mr. GHANEM: The [YPG] People's Defense Units. They call them YPG militias.

Representative COHEN: Yes. Where are they settled right now?

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, that is mostly in northeastern Syria. That is where the Syrian Democratic Forces—American partners—work with American forces to combat ISIS. They are stationed in northeastern Syria.

Representative COHEN: They are still active?

Mr. GHANEM: They are still very active, yes.

Representative COHEN: I know they were good allies of ours.

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, they have fought alongside American troops to fight ISIS, alongside the Syria Free Army. However,—the YPG—the original militia that was transformed eventually into the SDF was called the YPG.

That is the name they chose for themselves, and they do have links to it—it is just well-documented. They do have links to the PKK and that is why it is been a very thorny issue between Turkey and the United States.

Representative COHEN: Thank you. Thank you. Yield back.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Ranking Member Steve Cohen.

We now proceed to Congressman Michael Lawler of New York.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL LAWLER, U.S. HOUSE, FROM NEW YORK

Representative LAWLER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to pick up kind of right where you left off. I do not think there is any question the lack of a response after the, "red line" was crossed created the kind of situation we see but also, I think, emboldened and empowered Putin to act with respect to Ukraine because I think the lack of a coordinated response by the free world after that red line was crossed I think gave Putin maybe a false sense of security in one respect but I think it opened the door for him to do what he is done in Ukraine.

Therefore, you know, you said before that this was a blueprint for Ukraine and I think that is right. What is it that you believe Putin learned from this situation in Syria and how he applied that to Ukraine?

Mr. GHANEM: Therefore, after—would you like to—

Representative LAWLER: You can both—you can both, yes.

Mr. GHANEM: Okay. Therefore, Putin first perfected the attacks—the deliberate indiscriminate attacks against civilian population centers and hospitals and schools, places of worship like churches and mosques, in Syria.

They honed those tactics in Syria, including a very cruel tactic called double tap strikes where they also target first responders that rush to the scene of an attack. This tactic as we speak is being replicated now in Ukraine, unfortunately.

Therefore, when Putin realized—and this is what my testimony was about—when Putin realized that he got away with—all without any serious repercussions he was emboldened. He found the audacity to extend those tactics into Europe.

That is when the illegal annexation of Crimea happened and that is when we approached senior U.S. officials and said Putin's actions in Syria must be curbed, otherwise there would be further expansion into Europe. Sadly, those warnings were dismissed.

The Obama administration at the time was pursuing something called the Russia reset policy which viewed Putin as a pragmatic leader to cut—that you can cut deals with. They were also pursuing the Iran nuclear deal with Iran and that is a key patron with Assad.

During one senior-level meeting with Mr. Rob Malley, who was at the time Mr. Obama's Middle East czar, after I made a plea for modest measures to protect the—to aid the Syrian opposition he

made it very clear to me that even striking ISIS in areas where ISIS was clashing with the Syrian opposition was off the table because, quote that would—and I am just quoting—that would, “piss off Assad and the Iranians.”

Therefore, clearly, that was the priority at the time. Therefore, when that projected—Congressman Lawler, that projected American weakness and that emboldened Putin to take this aggression to Ukraine.

Representative LAWLER: That therein lies the fundamental problem here. Okay. When you take a macro look at the world right now you have a coordinated effort between Russia, China, and Iran. Okay.

China, the biggest purchaser of Iranian petroleum, 90 percent of it, and since Joe Biden took office over a hundred billion dollar increase in the sale of Iranian petroleum. That is what is funding Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other terrorist networks in the region.

Therefore, you look at what has been allowed to occur because of weakness with respect to American leadership and these are the consequences of it. These are the real-life consequences of a failure to act against aggression, against tyranny, against dictators and despots.

Vladimir Putin has committed numerous genocides both in Syria, and in Ukraine, and should be held accountable, period. The Iranian regime should be held accountable, period. President Xi should be held accountable, period.

They snuff out the opposition within their own countries. They murder them, straight up, because they know if the people actually had a voice they would be out. They would be done and they would be held accountable.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the United States and the president of the United States and Congress to act, period. I yield back.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Lawler, and actually he—all of us are affected. His family is impacted. His wife’s family lives in Moldova, which is a target of war criminal Putin.

Therefore, over and over again it is amazing how members of Congress actually, as you are going to be seeing because we have got some leaders here with Emmanuel Cleaver coming up next and then we also have Congressman Marc Veasey who is joined us from Texas, and Congresswoman Victoria Spartz who has joined us from Indiana by way of the Soviet Union. She was born in Ukraine.

Therefore, we now proceed with Congressman Cleaver.

STATEMENT OF EMANUEL CLEAVER II, U.S. HOUSE, FROM MISSOURI

Representative CLEAVER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Can any of—either of you, any of you, speak to the earthquake? Well, I guess maybe there were two earthquakes in the northwest section. Let me explain why I am interested in it.

It would seem to me, you know, we may not have accurate reports on what happened. I think I saw one report that 6,000 people may have died. But my interest is who comes to their aid now be-

cause that—I mean, those people are going to be responsive to, I think, whoever came—whoever comes to their aid.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Thank you, Congressman, for that question. I was there right after that earthquake, days after that earthquake. Between Turkey and Syria, a hundred thousand people died. It was a horrible disaster no matter where it would have fallen. It looked like there were literally nuclear bombs that were dropped on entire cities and—but what is the most heartbreaking thing in all of this is also what Assad and Russia had done to those victims.

Number one, the Assad regime did not even declare it an emergency situation. Imagine. Imagine. Imagine a horrible hurricane like Katrina or a horrible earthquake, God forbid, that happens in the U.S. We did not even declare it an emergency situation, and he did that in order to make sure aid did not get in.

Number two, according to the United Nations, Assad is pretty much the secretary general of the U.N. He gets the final call of what United Nations aid comes in or out, although it is our money—it is taxpayer dollars that are paying for aid that goes to the U.N. to Syria. He blocked the border off, and it was so horrible that people started assuming that the roads did not exist, that somehow the highways were not there. They kept saying the borders were closed.

Well, the borders were closed by a decree of Bashar al-Assad and his supporter Putin, who is on the Security Council. Therefore we went over there and we took over 35 media outlets including "60 Minutes," which is a really powerful story and I recommend everyone watch that piece.

The reason I took all these media outlets including The New York Times, the Washington Post, and others is to show that the roads were not closed. They were perfectly paved. There were so many aid trucks just waiting there. The only things that were allowed in were the ambulances bringing back Syrians who died on the Turkish side so that they may be buried back home.

The Assad regime then said that it was the sanctions by the United States that somehow were preventing the aid to the people there, which is an utter lie. Even the aid that made it to Damascus did not even make it to regime-held areas that suffered from the earthquake.

However, the suffering came mostly in Jindires. The epicenter on the Syrian side was in northern Aleppo countryside, and I sat and listened to people under rubble yearning, pleading. Imagine, sir, your daughter or your mother under rubble. You can hear her for the first hour. You can hear her on the first day. You hear her into the second night, and all you can do is try to lift rocks.

But the bulldozers that would have saved her were six kilometers away—that is less than five miles away—but would not be allowed in without Assad's green light, and after vindictively waiting for nine days did, he say the first—some of the aid may be allowed in.

People died in that earthquake, sir, they did not have to, and it was because Bashar al-Assad continues to have full reign and sovereignty in the United Nations.

Representative CLEAVER: Were they Druze?

Mr. MOUSTAFA: In terms of—the Druze community?

Representative CLEAVER: Uh-huh.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Well, right—no, in the north it was everyone—Druze, Christians, Muslims, the whole—because a lot of people had run out, run away from Assad's killing. You know, 14 million displaced—7 million outside, 7 million internally displaced, mostly in the area where the earthquake happened.

However, you mentioned the Druze and we should mention them. Sheikh al-Hajri, the spiritual leader of the Druze, has spoken to Chairman Wilson and I recommend sir, I am happy to follow up and have you talk to him.

He not only represents the Druze community in Syria but the Druze community all over, and the fact is right now the Assad regime cuts off electricity and water and detains people from the Druze community because they have liberated themselves without firing a single bullet. They have been protesting now day after day for, like, a year of nonstop protests while the world has not looked towards them.

The Druze right now is an example of the flame that was ignited 14 years ago in Syria and the Syrian revolution continues to live in the north and in the south thanks to the Druze community.

Mr. GHANEM: Thank you. Mr. Cleaver, if I may add, to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis after the earthquake Russia used its veto at the Security Council to terminate, to shut down, a crucial lifeline called a cross-border aid mechanism into northern Syria.

Just for context, Assad has no control—has had no control in northern Syria for over a decade now. Assad does not control the borders with Turkey. Nonetheless, the U.N. insisted that they needed Assad's okay.

Therefore, there was a mechanism—a U.N. mechanism called a cross-border aid mechanism, a lifeline that sustained millions of people in northern Syria for nine years. After the earthquake Russia used its veto to terminate it, to shut it down, and instead, the U.N. had to negotiate a deal directly with Assad.

Russia effectively handed the reins of aid distribution to Assad so that Assad now is in charge of distributing aid to the same population he has bombed for 10 years. Therefore, that is in the north.

In the south, as my colleague mentioned, people in—the Druze are a minority in southern Syria, mostly in the Suwayda province but there are also Druze—there are also Druze villages in northern Syria as well but mainly located in the south. They have been protesting day in, day out, for almost a year now because they realize Assad is bankrupt. Assad cannot stabilize the country.

Unfortunately, there used to be a program supported by the United States called Sycamore Timber that supported the largest moderate rebel coalition in the south. That coalition stabilized the south, protected the Druze minority, protected the borders with Jordan, and kept Hezbollah and Iranian-aligned militias away.

This program was disastrously terminated under the Trump administration and now Assad is back in control. Assad uses the south to flood the region with Captagon drugs, and Hezbollah and Iranian militias also use the south to attack the Druze minority and to launch attacks against neighboring countries.

Representative CLEAVER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Cleaver.

We now proceed with Congresswoman Victoria Spartz

**STATEMENT OF VICTORIA SPARTZ , U.S. HOUSE, FROM
INDIANA**

Representative SPARTZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here.

I actually never thought that you know, I would be involved in some issues being a congresswoman as I did. But being involved in some issues with Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Israel, I have spent some time and visited some countries in the region, and you know, I feel so sorry for the people of your country. I truly do. It is a very, very serious situation.

I think you people have been abandoned by many governments and I think it is very brutal. I actually saw some Syrians and actually visited some refugee camps too in one of the countries, and I did not even—though the Syrian government condemned me—you know, Congressman Wilson and Congressman Dean Phillips crossing the border. I did not get a chance but someday we might, you know. But they condemn it already, so I probably need to make it happen, just make sure that their condemnation, you know, in the newspapers was not just for nothing, you know. But I am used to media writing a lot of crap so it is okay.

You know, what my question is really for you, you know, what is really—and I think you know and I—you might not know but I am not a huge fan of U.N., and they do a lot of resolutions, but I have not seen them on the ground on the very, very, very bad regions and situations.

Therefore, I have a challenge with us giving so much money to them because I have seen suffering, and deaths, and we still directly help countries and I have not seen that. Therefore I have, like, two questions. One of them—maybe, you know, I have not been directly into Syria so you might give me—maybe they have done great things there.

I would like to know. Maybe, you know, since—you know, I cannot claim. On some places I have been on the ground, so I can have—I have been witness of what they are not doing. But I have not been there, regardless of what they say, just—[LAUGHS]—to clarify.

Then the second: What is, you know, really, we need to do as the United States and maybe have some international community really—to really get back attention to—it was very—I mean, there was a lot of huge loss of human lives and war crimes were done. It is really sad what is really happening with the country. I feel very bad and sorry that it is really happened to a lot of people in your country.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Congresswoman, I remember exactly when that article came out. Therefore, Chairman Wilson, yourself, and Congressman Dean Phillips were visiting Turkey and you were visiting Syrians. I know you met with the White Helmets.

I was with Congressman French Hill, Congressman Fitzpatrick, and Congressman Ben Cline and we were actually going into Syria. I think it was one of my staff members who resembles you and they mixed up the two. But we need to get you to Syria and my

recommendation, ma'am, is for you to visit the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone.

Number one, it is safer than northwest Syria. It is under the United States military protection. I know that the commander out there—I know that the partner force out there would brief you fully and I think you will see there the major failure of the United Nations.

At camp alongside the border in the middle of the desert, there is not a single teacher, not a single school, not a single—but we have established some—not a single hospital. No doctors. We just brought in five doctors on U.S. military aircraft who are now treating people as we speak.

However, you will see how the U.N. has miserably failed for nine years. I think one convoy that was nine months late, came in from the Damascus office filled with intelligence officers of the Assad regime threatening these civilians.

However, today and for the last 12 months under the Denton program the Syrian Emergency Task Force was able to bring in food and aid on available space on ongoing operations, taking no, you know, money or diverting no resources from Operation Inherent Resolve.

However, I do know, Congresswoman, it would be safe, and it would be very, very important for you and other members of Congress or your staff to visit the 10th Garrison and I am happy to work with your staff on making that happen alongside U.S. forces.

Mr. GHANEM: May I add just quickly, yes, regarding the—thank you.

Representative SPARTZ: Yes. Please, if you can add on, yes, how we can be helpful.

Mr. GHANEM: Yes, regarding the U.N. role in Syria. Therefore, the United Nations, after—when the earthquake happened last year, the devastating earthquakes that struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, for the first eight critical days after the earthquake when lives could have been saved the U.N. was nowhere to be seen on the ground.

Actually, it was Syrian and Syrian American organizations that deployed on the ground to help people. But you needed heavy equipment and, you know, the U.N. had that and, sadly, that was not forthcoming.

Because why? Because the U.N. was waiting for the green light from the Assad regime. That is on the first hand—on the one hand.

On the other hand, generally speaking, in terms of their conduct over the past 13 years the U.N. has been very accommodating of Assad. The U.N. does not—for example, the U.N. does not push back against the diversion—significant, substantial diversion of U.N. humanitarian assistance into Syria. Therefore, it gets pilfered by the Assad regime.

The U.N. does not push back. They believe their methodology, or their modus operandi is we have to work through the state; we have to work through the Assad regime. In fact, a couple of months ago we were very disturbed to see some U.N. officials come to this very Congress and lobby against the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act that Chairman Wilson introduced with bipartisan support.

Therefore, the U.N. role has been very, very problematic, to say the least, in Syria.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Sorry, just to follow up one more time.

Therefore, I have had the pleasure of taking Dr. Bhavna Shyamalan, M. Night Shyamalan's wife, and his daughters to northwest Syria and I know they would wish to also come to the south. Therefore maybe it could be a trip together.

However, one more thing in terms of what we can do. What we can do is we can just support the Ukrainians and the Syrians to fight their war and our war for us, and when you go, hopefully, to the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone you will see an amazing partner force, the Syria Free Army that has destroyed ISIS.

They even gave me an ISIS coin to show that it was the last trace of ISIS in the area, and you could see the work that they are doing now protecting our doctors—American doctors—who are on the ground training people. I hope you can see it in person alongside Mrs. Shyamalan.

Representative SPARTZ: Thank you.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congresswoman Spartz.

We have been joined by Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, and that shows how important what you are doing here today. It is quite rare to have members of the Senate come all the way over here to the House side, okay? [LAUGHTER.] It is even—it is even humbling—[LAUGHTER]—but no matter. No, it really is serious. You have got Republicans and Democrats, you have got Senate and House,

Therefore, that he can get his breath, then we will—we need to proceed with Congressman Marc Veasey, all the way from Texas.

STATEMENT OF MARC A. VEASEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TEXAS

Representative VEASEY: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. It is hot right now in Texas, so we need as much breath as we can get.

I wanted to ask Mr. Moustafa, you know that, when you think of all the discord that the Russians have sowed, and they are continuing to sow around the world so they can disrupt everything that has been created since the post-World-War II order, I wanted to ask—from your perspective, particularly since you have been on the ground—how has Russia exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Syria by their involvement there?

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Where do I start? Therefore, sir, first of all, I was on—I was in the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone—I arrived this morning—and the Russians overflew us like 10 times in one single day. The reason they are doing it is to pull information, to intimidate us, to have us scatter or go hide in bunkers, to stop the provision of humanitarian aid, to stop doctors—who, for the first time in nine years, showed up. Imagine nine years—people would call me and say, I do not know why my child died. I want to know why—what the diagnosis is so the other one does not die. It is that level of desperation. Therefore, you have the intimidation of the Russians there.

The Russians, alongside the Assad regime, have a complete besiegement and starvation campaign around the 55-K. They do

not allow anything in. For example, when I go there, I have to bring everything that I need with me the entire time. Imagine kids that have never seen a toy or have never had cake. Imagine—just imagine the worst camp in the world. I do not know a camp worse than the situation at Rukban camp. But what is amazing is, if we are handing out some baby formula or if we have doctors, the discipline they have—in another place, people would be clamoring to eat something because they are starving, but I think being amazing people, standing up to these evil forces, has been quite inspirational.

In terms of vetoes in the Security Council for the opening of borders—which is really amazing—like, what we—it is our money that we give the U.N. to give to the Syrian people, yet we have to negotiate and give concessions, so Russia allows us to bring in our aid through borders that neither Russia nor the Assad regime control. We clap and claim victory for getting six more months of an open border. Every border between the north and any border between the south should be open for the provision of aid. It should not be simply in the hands of Russia and the Assad regime. I can go on, sir, but the Russians have done everything they can to make the humanitarian situation horrible, and everything they can to make sure that as many Syrian refugees go to Europe because they know that destabilizing the European Union is a major goal of theirs, and they are happy to use Syrian civilians to do so.

Representative VEASEY: I wanted to ask you, too—if you were comparing Russia’s military strategy in Syria versus what they are doing in Ukraine, what sort of lessons do you think can be learned from that? Then also, you touched on something a second ago that I think is important; that when—the Russians, they have—they just have no scruples at all when they fight these conflicts and these wars, and people need to know that—that what they are doing is far worse than anything that we are seeing in any theater that is happening around the world, and that we need to shed light on that because it is bad, and it is terrible, and it makes everything in these regions even much worse.

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Sir—

Representative VEASEY: Could you talk about that?

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Yes, sir, the Russians are brutal. One of the things that they did to prepare for Ukraine was to test over 400 different types of weapons, both internationally utilized and internationally banned weapons on Syrian civilians. They perfected the double-tap attack, which is you hit a place, wait for the first responders to show up, then you hit it again. They use the same airplanes, as Night mentioned a little bit earlier. The same planes that are being used to bomb Ukrainian cities were used to bomb Syrian cities. The same pilots that trained on killing babies in Syria—and continue to—are killing babies with that same training in Ukraine today. Therefore, it was literally a training ground.

Not only that, it was our lack of action, it was our lack of doing anything—I am not talking about direct military intervention—but that allowed them to know that, hey, it is okay to this in Syria, it is okay to do it in Ukraine. If we do not help Ukraine win-win the war completely and totally, they will go to another place. When they come to a NATO ally and Article 6 is invoked, then the United

States is pulled into a war. All we are asking for is for the United States to stay out of war, and you only do that through the military and political support of both revolutionaries in Syria and the Ukrainian military.

Representative VEASEY: Yes, well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am almost out of time; I yield back. Thank you.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Veasey.

STATEMENT OF RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, U.S. SENATE, FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator BLUMENTHAL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for your kind words about my coming over for the Senate. It is always an honor to be in meetings of the Helsinki Commission. Thank you for the great work that this commission is doing with bipartisan support. I hope that you and all who are attending have noted that this is a very bipartisan effort, and I am particularly honored and grateful to be with these three excellent, courageous, and strong champions of freedom and human rights.

What you just said, Mr. Moustafa, I think rings particularly true. Syria has been a testing ground and a training ground, not only for the military weapons that Russia has used in Ukraine and the tactics—the inhumane and criminal tactics that it has used but also for the human rights abuses and the humanitarian injuries that it has inflicted in Ukraine. The two fit together seamlessly in implicating Russia in crimes against humanity—very simply, war crimes, human rights abuses of the most atrocious kind; perhaps the worst in recent history.

The United States needs to do more in Ukraine. I have advocated that there be more military long-range artillery, air defenses, F-16s, and the panoply of weapons that are necessary to disable the Russian invasion behind the lines, as well, as stronger sanctions.

Therefore, my question to you today is: Russia, in effect, was forced to abandon previously controlled areas in Syria and transfer some personnel and equipment out of Syria to Ukraine. As a result, to some extent, Russia's influence in Syria has been reduced. But even with a limited presence and a strain on their resources, Russia continues to conduct bombing strikes—as you just observed—and harass not only forces there who are fighting for freedom but also United States forces.

Would additional sanctions placed on Russia in response to this engagement in human rights abuses have possible impacts on Russia in their ability and their inclination to continue this pattern of crimes against humanity, and aggression in Syria, as well as in Ukraine?

Mr. MOUSTAFA: Yes, I think that the more sanctions on war criminals, the better, because they are already strained by the war effort, and we need to make sure that they do not have the money to use to kill Ukrainians and Syrians.

I do want to pass it over to Mr. Shyamalan to speak more to what can we do to help Syrians and Ukrainians.

Mr. SHYAMALAN: You know, I have just been listening and taking notes about, you know, what I can offer from my experience. These guys are obviously, day in and day out, with it, and when I spoke earlier, I was saying I was kind of representing the uninformed

American, and how my journey to coming here has happened, and where I started in my thinking of it all.

However, it just is—this is maybe helpful or not but, you know, having spoken to, let us say, the prisoners that have been taken and been in the prisons there and tortured, when I hear the specifics from them about how they are tortured, it is kind of a classic playbook of emotional torture. You have your cousin across from you, and they hurt your cousin if you do not say that you were doing something bad, and you can write it down, so now they can kill you; otherwise, I will hurt your—and they break something on your cousin. Then you say—then you jump to another version of that where I spoke with one of the police of Assad who escaped and was—and saying what they would do and, you know, I will kill your family if you do not do this, so you have to do this—or you have to do this awful thing or I will kill your family.

I remember Caesar telling me that he had two IDs in his pocket, and every corner he was stopped, he had to gauge which side was stopping the car and pull-out whichever ID, or he would be dead if he pulled the wrong one. His family was there, and he kept thinking about his family. Luckily Caesar is out.

Then when you think about the emotional thing that they are doing by the playbook that they are learning, which is this a war of emotion as much as physicality—maybe more emotion—and by attacking a school and attacking a hospital, you are breaking the will, you are breaking the emotion, the ability for a human being to continue to fight. You lose hope. There is a randomness to it, a godlessness to it, and that is how they try to break the spirit. It is a playbook of emotion that they are repeating in the Ukraine.

Now you see it on a kind of a country-to-country level in the things you were talking about in the U.N.—oh, we will play well, you know, talk to us. No, no, no, I think you are right. Let us see, maybe we can get some aid in—and all of that emotional warfare that is going on from the prisoner level, each level up, to the countries talking themselves. You see it repeated in Ukraine and starting all over again, and they are going to do it over and over.

Senator BLUMENTHAL: That is such an important observation and, obviously, you have been the face, and the voice, and the eyes and ears of this kind of torturous criminal conduct by the Russians, and they have practiced this kind of atrocity continuously in Syria and then in Ukraine. What you have just described is very graphic and dramatic, and I know you have done it even more so in your films, so thank you for that, sir.

Mr. SHYAMALAN: Yes, they almost count on our value system to not act, you know. They are playing our own value system against us—they will not do anything because they are very polite. We have a value system, so they are playing that against us.

Mr. GHANEM: Senator, if I may add, I would say yes, but those additional sanctions would have to be smarter sanctions. Current American sanctions against Russia are replete with loopholes, general licenses, and exemptions. Therefore, what is needed right now in terms of sanctions is secondary sanctions against Russia's oil, gas, and timber resources. That is first and foremost. In addition to that, I actually—in my testimony—called for Congress to pass

the bill that you introduced with Senator Lindsey Graham to designate the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

However, overall the big picture, the fundamental issue, the fundamental flaw in American policy towards Russia is this bifurcation towards Russia's actions in Russia—in Syria versus Ukraine. In Ukraine, we say Russia is not a partner, and we need to stand up to Russia. In Syria, we give Putin a free hand, as much latitude as his heart desires, even though Putin's actions—military actions in Syria clearly align with his overall geopolitical goals, and even though it was in Syria where Putin first had the audacity to extend his aggression into Europe. Therefore, we need a unified strategy to challenge Putin across both theaters.

Senator BLUMENTHAL: Thank you. Thank you to all three of you. My time has expired, but I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman WILSON: Hear, hear, and thank you. As we conclude, we will want to get a picture with our three witnesses in just a second, but I want to thank the senator and Mr. Shyamalan.

Indeed, it is hard for people of Western civilizations to conceive of the levels of barbarity, and then I—Moustafa, you brought up something that people need to know, and that is the double-tap attack. Western minds cannot comprehend what that means. It means that it is an attack on a civilian target in Ukraine—a couple of months ago is where I first saw it—to kill as many people in an apartment complex as you could, and then that is not the real attack. They wait for the EMS personnel—the emergency medical services, they wait for the fire service to come, they wait for the police to come. That is when the attack comes.

Then—again, we just cannot fathom the barbarity of this, but it is well-planned, and that is it intimidates people that aid is not coming, and then it intimidates the aid workers—the police, EMS, and fire—that they will come—they will die if they come.

This is the 21st century. All of us can do better, and I just—it is bicameral, bipartisan. We will be working, and the secondary sanctions—I cannot wait to work with the senator on that because that is so serious.

With this, if there is no further, we shall be adjourned. [Sounds gavel.]

[Whereupon, at 3:27 p.m., the hearing ended.]

ADDITIONAL STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

STATEMENT OF DR. MUHAMMAD BAKR GHBEIS, IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT AND BOARD MEMBER CITIZENS FOR A SECURE AND SAFE AMERICA

Chairman Wilson and Co-Chair Cardin,

Thank you so much for holding today's hearing. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement on behalf of Citizens for a Secure and Safe America [C4SSA].

The last decade has seen extraordinary devastation across Syria with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced at the hands of the Assad regime. But today's hearing is so important because none of the murders, none of the disappearances, none of the brutality would have been possible without the support of Vladimir Putin and his war machine. Russian weapons are fueling the conflict while Moscow's political backing protects Damascus in the United Nations and around the world.

It would be bad enough if Russia's cruel approach to Syria stopped there, but unfortunately that is not the case. Putin has applied so many of the ruthless strategies he employed in Syria to his ferocious assault on Ukraine. Just yesterday, that attack took on a new and horrific face when Russian cruise missiles destroyed a Kyiv children's hospital, killing dozens.

Clearly, Bashar Assad and his henchmen must be held accountable for their campaign of terror in Syria. But Vladimir Putin must be brought to justice as well. Murderous schemes are murderous schemes regardless of where they occur, and the perpetrators must be held to account.

Some senior Assad officials have been indicted and convicted in courts across Europe, and the wheels of justice have begun to turn in other places. But more must be done. I am pleased to inform the Commission that C4SSA, in partnership with the Public and International Law and Policy Group, has written a groundbreaking report entitled "Fighting 13 Years of Impunity: Accountability Opportunities for United States Leadership in Responding to Mass Atrocities in Syria." The report details progress in the effort to advance accountability for the terrible crimes committed in the Syrian Civil War and proposals more that must be done.

Chairman Wilson and Co-Chairman Cardin, I am writing this statement as I visit the Rukban refugee camp in southern Syria, near the border with Jordan. I am joining the Syrian Emergency Task Force as a guest of this community of 8,000 Syrians receiving vital lifesaving supplies. It is an honor to witness the conditions on the ground with the help of the U.S. military. Please know that Syrians everywhere appreciate the generosity of the people of the United States and the steadfast support of America's service personnel. Our presence in Syria is extremely important and must continue.

Again, I thank the Commission for holding this important hearing and greatly appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement. I look forward to working with Senators and members of the House on both sides of the aisle in the days ahead to support the Syrian people in their quest for human rights, justice, and democracy and in critical efforts to push back against the Assad regime.

TALKING POINTS

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished colleagues, we are here today to call attention to a matter of profound moral urgency: The ongoing atrocities committed by the Assad regime in Syria, with the active support of Russia.

For over a decade, the Syrian people have endured a systematic campaign of oppression, brutality and terror. Though Russia has turned its focus to Ukraine, expanding the scope of its murderous foreign policy, it is imperative that we continue to unequivocally condemn its crimes elsewhere and call for those complicit to be held accountable.

The Assad regime wages a war not only against armed opposition and advocates for democracy, but against its own civilian population. The evidence is overwhelming and harrowing: Systematic torture, indiscriminate bombings, chemical weapons attacks, and the deliberate targeting of hospitals and schools. These actions are some of the most egregious violations of international law and human rights commitments in the world today. They are stark reminders of man's capacity for evil and offend the conscience of the world.

The magnitude of the suffering of the Syrian people is hard to overstate. Millions have been displaced and forced into exile; entire communities have been decimated; and hundreds of thousands of lives lost. Families are torn apart, children orphaned, and survivors carry the physical and psychological trauma of war forever.

Russia's enabling role in these atrocities is visible for all who have eyes to see and underscores Putin's sense of impunity. Since 2015, Russian military intervention salvaged Assad's slipping grip on power, after peaceful advocates for democracy and respect for human rights were obliged to resort to armed insurrection in the face of a brutal campaign of repression. Russian airstrikes have targeted civilian infrastructure, caused mass casualties and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

The need for accountability is paramount. Assad and his enablers, including Russian officials and military personnel, must face justice for their crimes. The international community must pursue all available avenues, including international courts and sanctions, to hold these perpetrators accountable. We owe it to the victims and to the principles of justice and human rights that we uphold to ensure that these crimes do not go unpunished.

Finally, we all recognize the connection between Russia's actions in Syria and its aggression in Ukraine. The same disregard for international law, human rights, and national sovereignty that we see in Syria is evident in Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

This pattern of behavior threatens stability and security globally. Holding Russia accountable for its crimes in Syria and elsewhere can potentially have a deterrent effect on similar conduct by Russia or any other State anywhere. We stand united in bipartisan, bicameral unity in ensuring that human rights, the rule of law, and accountability remain cornerstones of American policy in Europe, in the Middle East, and globally.





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The Commission, Created in 1976, is composed of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Department of State, Defense and Commerce.

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