

## BACKGROUND \_\_\_\_\_

### Syria's Air Force Intelligence – Right hand to the al-Assad family

**In June 2018, it was announced that the Germany Federal Court of Justice (*Bundesgerichtshof* – BGH) had issued an arrest warrant against Jamil Hassan, head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Service until July 2019. This measure is a milestone towards justice and accountability for all those affected by Assad's torture system, particularly the 24 Syrian torture survivors and activists whose testimonies contributed to the arrest warrant.**

On 6 November 2017, a criminal complaint was filed by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) together with nine Syrian women and men as well as the lawyers Anwar al-Bunni (Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, SCLSR), and Mazen Darwish (Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, SCM). The criminal complaint, submitted to the Office of the German Federal Public Prosecutor (*Generalbundesanwalt* – GBA) in Karlsruhe, concerns crimes against humanity and war crimes in Syria. The crimes addressed in the submission – killing, persecution, torture and sexual violence – were committed between September 2011 and June 2014 in five Air Force Intelligence Branches in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama. The criminal complaint is directed against ten named high-ranking officials from the National Security Bureau and the Air Force Intelligence, including Ali Mamlouk and Jamil Hassan, who until July 2019 was head of Air Force Intelligence Service, as well as the heads of various regional military commands and branches.

A second criminal complaint – directed against officials from the Defence Ministry and the Military Police bearing responsibility for crimes against international law at the [Saydnaya military prison](#) – was submitted on the same day. These two latest complaints complement criminal complaints and evidence submitted to the GBA by [Syrian torture survivors](#) in March 2017 and the [Caesar Files Group](#) in September 2017.

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## A particularly powerful and brutal intelligence service

The infamous Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate is regarded as the most powerful and most brutal of Syria's four intelligence agencies. The head of Air Force Intelligence is said to serve as the President's "right hand", both during the violent suppression under Bashar al-Assad of the peaceful protest movement as well as earlier under his father Hafiz al-Assad, who turned the Air Force Intelligence into his personal machinery of repression and extermination.

Jamil Hassan, who until July 2019 was Air Force Intelligence director, does not shy away from public appearances and occasionally speaks to Western media. Nonetheless, very little information about the inner workings of the Air Force Intelligence is publicly available. What is known however is that aside from assisting the Syrian Air Force, intelligence service was originally tasked with the personal security of the President. Moreover, Air Force Intelligence personnel is responsible for important and sensitive missions in Syria and abroad and are therefore known as the "backbone of the regime."

Since 2011, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate is also tasked with the surveillance, arrest, and killing of all regime critics. The Directorate enjoys a particularly high degree of discretion and scope for its activities. Officially, Air Force Intelligence is subordinate to the Ministry of Defence, but reports indicate a direct link to the Central Crisis Management Cell (CCMC) and the National Security Bureau (NSB) – and thus to the Assad government's innermost circle.

Former detainees from five branches in al-Mezzeh (Southwest of Damascus), Aleppo, Harasta (Northeast of Damascus) und Hama tell of arbitrary torture, and not just during interrogations. Survivors and witnesses give consistent accounts of the use of electric shocks as well as beatings with what is known as the *Lakhdar Brahimi*, a green PVC pipe. They also describe the following further methods of torture:

*Shabeh*: The detainees' arms are bound behind them and they are hung from the arms, in many cases with no contact with the floor. This leads to dislocated shoulder joints, broken bones, unconsciousness and hallucinations.

*Falaqa*: Detainees, usually while lying on the ground, are forced to spread their arms and legs. They are then beaten on the hands and the soles of the feet with various objects.

*Dulab*: Detainees are forced to place their head, arms, and legs through a tire. In this position, the victims are particularly defenseless. This makes it easier for the torturers to “effectively” land beatings.

*Sexual violence* is also a common practice. This includes rape as well as injuries to and mutilation of the genital area and humiliation through forced nudity.

Apart from the physical torture the former detainees emphasize the psychological torture. In many cases the cells are next to the rooms where detainees are tortured. Incidents of violence and humiliation often occur in the corridors and the toilet facilities. All of this makes the psychological burden extremely intense. The survivors regarded being forced to witness the torture of others – to see and hear the death, the pain and the degradation of their fellow detainees – as a deliberate measure designed to maintain and increase fear levels in the prison.

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### **Assad’s goal is the annihilation of Syrian opposition**

The Air Force Intelligence Directorate seeks not only the physical and psychological torment and humiliation of detainees but also to obtain false confessions through the torture. The Directorate aims to find out the names of others to facilitate further arrests and torture, including of women and children. Through this approach Air Force Intelligence maintains a machinery of persecution and repression.

The torture, sexualized violence, enforced disappearances and killings in Air Force Intelligence prisons are not isolated acts but instead an integral element of a long term, comprehensive and strategic policy of repression. President Bashar al-Assad’s government uses Air Force Intelligence to implement its policies aimed at permanently eradicating all government critics. This is indicated by a document sent by the Head of the NSB from 5 August 2011 to all four intelligence agencies, police, military police as well as the army commanders of the Hama, Rif Damashq, Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Idlib and Daraa and other regions.

Besides the torture, everyday life in the Air Force Intelligence detention centers is designed to steadily wear down the detainees. The combination of inhumane conditions, the extreme hunger and almost complete lack of medical care all contribute to the deaths of detainees.

Many of the cells are only 1.5 x 2.5 meters in size; some of them house more than 15 detainees. Hundreds of detainees are crammed into the larger cells. Witnesses reported that there is no light and no fresh air circulation, which not

only increases the psychological pressure but also leads to life-threateningly low levels of oxygen.

Toilet facilities are outside of the cells and are filled with urine and excrement. The use of the toilet is allowed a maximum of twice per day; permission is often refused and is linked with various forms of harassment. As the detainees are denied any personal hygiene care, illnesses and skin conditions like scabies and lice spread quickly in the ant and cockroach infested cells.

The detainees receive only very small portions of food and drink, and the food is very often purposefully spoiled. The only “medical care” provided is the sporadic handing out of painkiller tablets. Detainees thus die from illnesses as well as a result of abuse and torture. The photos and information provided by the [Caesar Files Group](#) show that death certificates issued in detention often record a false cause of death in an effort to cover up the torture practices.

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**Correct as of: August 2019**

European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)

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