

PROFILES _____

Syrian torture survivors file criminal complaint against torture by Syria's air force intelligence

“We survived Assad’s personal machinery of repression and extermination”

Complainant profiles

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. 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 eleven Syrian women and men as well as the lawyers Anwar al-Bunni (Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, SCLSR), 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.

Complainant/Witness 24

Witness 24 (referred to in the following text as **W 24**) is 30 years old and studied engineering in Damascus. As an activist, he was involved from the very beginning of the protest movement against Assad’s government and was active as part of a group supporting political prisoners. In November 2011, W24 was arrested along with three of his friends. His “offences” were: political activism, taking part in demonstrations and providing humanitarian help to internally displaced persons. W 24 spent four and a half months in various prisons belonging to the Air Force Intelligence al-Mezzeh Investigative Branch. After his release, he fled to Germany. His injuries from the torture were so severe that he will have to be operated on in Germany.

W24 describes how when he arrived at the al-Mezzeh Investigative Branch, he was tortured for several hours with cables and wooden poles with nails attached at the ends. During this initial torture, the guards broke W 24’s jaw. He received no medical care and could not eat for weeks. To survive, he had to rely on his fellow detainees, who would pre-chew his food for him.

W 24 was tortured repeatedly. He was regularly subjected to electric shocks. He also described to ECCHR how he was subjected to the “Shabeh” torture method, whereby the guards tied his hands behind his back and hung him by the wrists from the ceiling. W 24 describes how he was sometimes tortured for up to ten hours. His wounds became septic and would often bleed. Once again he received no medical care. Instead he was subjected to more torture.

Of the three friends who were arrested with him and brought to al-Mezzeh, W24 recognized the corpse of one of his friend in the [Caesar Photographs](#).

W24 fled first to Egypt and then across the Mediterranean to Europe. He now lives with his wife in Germany.

Complainant/Witness 20

Witness 20 (referred to in the following text as **W 20**) is a 51-year-old Kurdish man. Before his arrest, he lived in Afrin, north of Aleppo, where he worked as a taxi driver. From October 2011 onwards he took part in demonstrations against the Assad regime.

Early one morning in March 2012 as he had just finished his shift, W 20 was arrested by members of the political intelligence services. His friend, Witness 21 (see below) had been forced under torture to give W 20's name and address. After being detained in political intelligence and air force intelligence branch, among others, in Aleppo, W 20 and W 21 were flown in a freight plane, along with other detainees, from Aleppo to al-Mezzeh military airport.

W 20 says that Air Force Intelligence is undoubtedly the most brutal of the four intelligence agencies in Syria.

“When we were brought to the al-Mezzeh Investigative Branch we were greeted with the words: ‘You are now in hell’,” W 20 told ECCHR. He spent part of his detention in a solitary cell which at times held 15 people, who would have to crouch to fit. There was no light, just a black iron door with a hatch that was opened when food was distributed. They could constantly hear the screams of other detainees.

W 20 and other detainees were regularly degraded and tortured by Air Force Intelligence personnel. Guards at the al-Mezzeh Special Operations Branch used the *falaqa* method: W20 was forced to lie on his stomach while the guards beat the soles of his feet. On one occasion, they broke his right foot. He received no medical care for it. “Other times I would have to stretch out my arms in front of me and then they beat my arms with the green PVC pipe called the *Lakhdar Brahimi*,” he added.

On 1 June 2013, W 20 left Syria via Turkey and now lives with his family in Germany.

Complainant / Witness 21

Witness 21 (referred to in the following text as W 21) took part in several demonstrations in Aleppo from 2011 onwards. In February 2012, he was arrested by the political intelligence services. Under extreme torture, W 21 was forced to reveal W 20's name and to lead a group of intelligence officers and members of Assad's Shabiha militia to W 20's home.

W 21 was detained from February 2012 to June 2013, partly at the Aleppo Branch and the al-Mezzeh Investigative Branch. While at the Aleppo Branch, he once briefly saw his brother who was also detained there.

At the Air Force Intelligence detention centers, both the one-person cells and the larger cells were always overcrowded. “It was unbearably cramped, there was

hardly any daylight or fresh air. It was inhumane,” says W 21 about the detention conditions.

W 21 was tortured countless times. At the al-Mezzeh Branch he was beaten, including with water bottles, some of which had been filled with water and frozen. On several occasions, he was beaten with cables and pipes. He also told ECCHR that the guards would often use the *dulab* method of torture. This involved being forced to place his arms and legs in a car tire, leaving him completely vulnerable to the guard’s beatings. Sometimes he was beaten over 70 times while in this position.

Alongside the physical torture, W 21 was also subjected to psychological torture. He still feels the effects of this torture in particular. While in Air Force Intelligence detention, he witnessed serious sexualized violence on several occasions. He was once present while a detainee was forced to insert a broken glass bottle into his anus, which was later violently removed by Air Force Intelligence officers. Another time, he saw and heard four naked men who were hanging from the ceiling of what was known as the “cold storage cell.” The worst part of his ordeal, he says, was being forced to listen to others being tortured.

W 21 now lives in Germany with his family.

Complainant / Witness 17

Witness 17 (referred to in the following text as **W 17**), aged 35, is a Sunni Muslim who lived in Damascus. In 2011, when Bashar al-Assad’s government oversaw the quelling of the peaceful protests in Syria and a growing number of people were fleeing and seeking refuge within Syria, W 17 got involved in efforts to provide medical care to internally displaced Syrians in Duma, a neighborhood in northeastern Damascus. She was targeted by Assad’s air intelligence service as a result of this work and was imprisoned.

W 17 was detained by Air Force Intelligence at the al-Mezzeh Special Operations Branch and the al-Mezzeh Investigation Branch. She was tortured several times.

Around 15 days after she was arrested, while in the al-Mezzeh Intelligence Branch, she was blindfolded and brought to a room where, after removing her blindfold, she was forced to watch as a man she knew was being tortured. Afterwards, she was beaten until she was unconscious. When she regained consciousness, her back felt like it was broken. She was deaf in one ear for two

months after this incident. And that was just the beginning, as she explained to ECCHR. Over the next nine months, W 17 was regularly harassed, degraded and beaten.

She witnessed the torture of other women and men several times. She was forced to listen to the desperate screams of the other detainees. One day, while walking towards the toilets, she saw a room with six men hanging from the ceiling, blood dripping from their bodies. When the guard noticed that W 17 had seen this, he beat her to the ground. The ground was covered in blood. This was because in many cases after the detainees were tortured, the unconscious or dead bodies were dragged across the hallway and back into the cells.

W 17 also described to ECCHR the appalling conditions of detention in al-Mezzeh. For example, she explained how “one cell was in the cellar, it smelled like blood and death.” During most of her time there, she was crammed into a small cell with up to 19 other women. There were cockroaches, ants, and other insects everywhere; almost all detainees developed skin conditions such as scabies. To eat, W 17 says that the detainees were given moldy bread, half-cooked rice, and dirty tomato sauce.

Basic things like accessing toilet facilities were transformed into acts of torture. Sometimes, the detainees would be beaten and humiliated as they made their way there; at other times, the corridor to the toilets would be blocked. Describing the toilet facilities, she says: “There was urine everywhere, it smelled horrible. Some of the toilets were blocked and you had to walk across urine and excrement.” Once W 17 saw a guard forcing a man to eat his own excrement; and when the man refused, he was beaten.

When W 17 was released, she fled via Turkey and along the Balkan route to Germany where she has lived since early 2016.

Mazen Darwish, human rights activist, journalist and complainant

Mazen Darwish is a Syrian human rights activist, journalist, and president of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), which he set up in 2014 in Damascus. The organization documented numerous violations of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press. It also worked on journalists’ working conditions and assisted media professionals in disputes with the authorities. When the government refused to allow the organization to be officially registered, they went underground to continue their work.

Darwish was imprisoned several times on account of his work. One of these arrests occurred in April 2008, after Darwish and his colleagues reported on uprisings in Adra, a city near Damascus. One a false charge of “defamation and slander of state authority” Darwish was detained for ten days.

Following the start of the peaceful mass protests against President Bashar al-Assad in the spring of 2011, the SCM began documenting the names of activists who had been imprisoned, disappeared or killed. In 2012 he was named Journalist of the Year by Reporters without Borders.

In February, Darwish and his colleagues were arrested at their offices. “After my arrest by air force intelligence, I was brought to various different secret military prisons, they kept taking me from one torture jail to the next,” Darwish said in an [interview](#) with *DIE ZEIT*. He says the conditions in the torture centers are catastrophic. Aside from the lack of hygiene and cramped conditions, he also describes the torture methods, including: electric shocks, hanging detainees by the hands, beatings and sleep deprivation.

More than 70 human rights organizations campaigned for years for the release of the SCM team. The UN General Assembly and the European Parliament also called for their release. Darwish was freed in August 2015 on the condition that he appears one month later before the anti-terror court in Damascus. On 31 August 2015, the court held that the cases of Darwish and his colleagues were covered by an amnesty that had been declared in 2014. The judge also explicitly rejected the central charges of supporting terrorism.

Darwish, with his first-hand experience of the methods used and the conditions in Syrian intelligence prisons, told ECCHR that “torture was not an isolated case in Assad’s prisons, it was something that was systematically used.”

As a key witness to the events in Syria, Darwish continues to be involved in the fight for justice in his country.

Anwar al-Bunni, Lawyer and complainant

Anwar al-Bunni is a well-known Syrian human rights lawyer. He is one the founders of the Human Rights Association Syria ([HRAS](#)) and the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research ([SCLSR](#)), an organization which supports political prisoners.

As a lawyer, al-Bunni defended many human rights activists and others who were arrested and persecuted on account of their political positions in the wake of the protests in 2000 and 2001 in Damascus. Al-Bunni also became a target of repressive measures due to this work. He and members of his family were

systematically threatened, persecuted and defamed by the authorities. He was debarred by the Bar Association in Damascus.

In May 2006, al-Bunni was arrested along with several other human rights activists after they signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, in which 274 Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals called for a normalization of the relations between the two states. During his pre-trial detention, al-Bunni was tortured several times.

In April 2007, after proceedings that did not meet international fair trial standards, al-Bunni was convicted of “disseminating false information threatening the state”. By that time, he had already spent almost one year in the infamous Adra prison in Damascus.

“It’s a miracle that I am still alive,” al-Bunni told ECCHR. He was not held with the other political prisoners but instead with the non-political inmates. On one occasion, some detainees who were loyal to the regime tried to throw him from a second-floor balcony. He survived only thanks to the help of other detainees.

Al-Bunni was released in May 2011. He now lives in Berlin. In 2008, he received the [Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#). In the same year, he was also awarded the annual [Human Rights Prize](#) of the German Richterbund (Judges Association). In 2018, al-Bunni was awarded the [Franco-German Prize for Human Rights](#).

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