



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
Film Screening and Discussion**

**Syria's Disappeared: The Case Against Assad**

**Tuesday, October 3, 2017**

**5:30 – 7:30 PM**

**1539 Longworth House Office Building**

**Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good evening. I'm Jim McGovern, Co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and I'd like to thank you for joining us to view Sara Afshar's powerful film *Syria's Disappeared: The Case Against Assad*.

This event was organized with the help of the Valley Syrian Relief Committee of Northampton, Massachusetts, and the Syrian Emergency Task Force. I want to recognize their untiring efforts to focus attention to the devastating consequences of the armed conflict in Syria, and to provide humanitarian relief and support for refugees.

As a member of Congress, I greatly value the work of civil society organizations, and want to encourage the Committee, the Task Force and other groups to continue to engage us and push us to do the right thing -- especially on critical foreign policy issues where the voices of those most affected are usually under-represented.

I also want to recognize the presence this evening of Amb. Stephen J. Rapp, the former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues and currently a visiting fellow at the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Janelle Johnson, also of the Center, who will moderate the panel discussion after the film.

I am a strong supporter of the Museum. I deeply appreciate its efforts to understand the complexity of the Syrian war, and to identify policies that could help bring it to an end.

Last but certainly not least, we are privileged to be joined this evening by Mazen Alhummada, a Syrian who was detained by the Assad regime shortly after the start of the

conflict, and survived 15 months of torture before the case against him was dismissed and he was released. Mazen fled to the Netherlands, and is now a well-known advocate for peace and justice in Syria. I can only admire his strength and perseverance.

During my years in Congress, I am sorry to say that I have seen way too many wars and met with way too many victims. The Syrian conflict stands out because of its sheer dimensions – somewhere between a quarter and a half million people dead, tens of thousands of them civilians, and millions more displaced within and outside the country's borders.

But here's what's not different: at its heart, the Syrian conflict is about injustice. It is about the failure of a so-called government to protect the fundamental rights and basic human dignity of its people.

Some of the conflicts I know the most about have been in Latin America – El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia. In those countries it was always pretty clear that terrible human rights abuses were at the center of the fighting.

But in Syria, I think the humanitarian consequences of the conflict and its regional implications are so huge that sometimes they have overshadowed the brutal human rights violations that have gone on inside the country.

The film you'll see tonight is about those human rights abuses – the Assad regime's use of torture and enforced disappearance against its own citizens. And it's also about what comes after – the search for ways to hold those responsible to account. The search for justice.

I believe in justice. I believe in accountability. But because I've seen so many wars play out, I also know how hard it is to get the justice that is so desired. It's hard because of the sheer numbers of victims involved; because those responsible usually retain a lot of their power; because judicial systems don't work or are completely overwhelmed; and because lots of people just want to forget and move on.

I want to close tonight by urging two things. First, don't give up on justice. But second, don't forget that alongside justice, victims have other rights: to truth and memory, to reparations and the means to put their lives back together, and to never having to live through the same terrible violence again. As we think about how to advance justice in Syria, we should also be thinking about how to fulfill these other rights as well.

Thanks again for being here, and I leave you to be inspired by this film.