

*Dr. Ahmad Tarakji Remarks*

*Tom Lantos Commission Hearing: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?  
September 23, 2016*

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Pitts, and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: on behalf of the Syrian American Medical Society, thank you for organizing this important hearing.

My name is Dr. Ahmad Tarakji. I'm a cardiothoracic surgeon and the President of the Syrian American Medical Society, or SAMS. Our organization supports and trains over 1,700 Syrian medical workers, sponsors over 100 field hospitals, rebuilds healthcare inside Syria, and provides critical medical care for Syrian refugees who have fled the violence in Syria. Last year alone, we provided more than 2.6 million Syrians with dignified medical care. Our operations continue to grow, as we currently work in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Greece. Our work has enabled us to save countless lives, but there is more work to be done.

We continue to witness countless atrocities and blatant violations of human rights in Syria. Civilians and civilian infrastructure are targeted by aerial attacks. More than one million Syrians currently live under siege. Chemical weapons have been used ruthlessly, and critical medical and food aid is intentionally denied to innocent civilians.

My home town of Aleppo has seen unparalleled violence in the past few months, as eastern Aleppo City is currently under siege. Hospitals have been targeted at an unprecedented rate, civilians and civilian infrastructure continue to be attacked, and chemical weapons have been dropped on innocent men, women, and children with impunity.

As one of our physicians in Aleppo recently said: "more than 85,000 children trapped in besieged eastern Aleppo City are starved, targeted, bombed, and gassed to death while the world is standing by watching." How many more innocent men, women, and children must die before the international community will take meaningful action? How much more indescribable suffering and horrors must be committed upon the people of Syria? After more than five years, the situation has only continued to worsen, with no clear end in sight. SAMS has documented the use of chemical weapons 161 times from the beginning of the conflict through the end of 2015. These attacks have continued into 2016. As recently as two weeks ago, in the besieged neighborhood of Alsukari in eastern Aleppo, over 150 victims of chemical exposure, reportedly chlorine, were treated by our doctors.

This summer has also been devastating for medical workers and civilians in Syria. In the past two months, there have been 84 attacks on medical facilities - far more than occurred in the

previous six months combined. A hospital is the most dangerous place to be in Syria - one is attacked every 18 hours. There were 12 attacks on SAMS-supported facilities in August, half of which were in besieged eastern Aleppo City. There are around 35 doctors in the besieged city today. The most conservative population estimate is 300,000, translating to 1 physician for every 7,500 people. This ratio can only get worse as medical workers continue to be targeted. This past April, one of our cardiologists, Dr. Hasan al-Araj, was killed when his car was hit by a missile while he was leaving a SAMS-supported underground hospital in Hama. We believe he was intentionally targeted, as with many other medical workers in Syria.

Devastatingly, we have also seen an increase in the use of illegal incendiary weapons. On September 1st, one of our hospitals in Hama treated victims from the use of incendiary weapons, reportedly napalm. Children arrived at the hospital burned beyond recognition. Just days before, a SAMS-supported OBGYN clinic in Idlib City was targeted by phosphorous bombs, causing severe damage. Ten premature infants in incubators had to be transferred to another facility. This is horrific, and the use of these illegal and barbaric weapons should shock the world.

The use of siege as a weapon of war has also been particularly deadly. Hundreds of deaths have been recorded from such preventable causes as starvation, dehydration, and lack of basic medical care. In besieged Madaya, life-saving humanitarian aid continues to be denied to civilians, and medical evacuations have been frequently denied, resulting in the death of more than 65 innocent civilians, many of them children. Madaya is currently subjected to the Four Towns Agreement, which is an agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition in Madaya and three neighboring towns which mandates that all aid deliveries and medical evacuations have to occur simultaneously across the four towns. In other words, no civilian can be evacuated from one town if others aren't concurrently evacuated from the other towns.

This spring, three young boys were playing on the outskirts of Madaya, when one of the boys picked up what he thought was a toy, but was actually a landmine. Frightened, he dropped it, causing a powerful explosion which killed one boy instantly and severely injured the other two. When the two injured boys arrived at the field hospital, the medical staff requested an urgent medical evacuation for the boys. However, this request was denied because there were no medical evacuations needed from neighboring towns. Both boys, ages six and seven, died within a day. All three boys were buried in the same grave. As human beings, we must ask ourselves: "how can we allow this to happen?" Today in the town of Madaya, the situation has become so bleak that child suicide rates have increased dramatically in the past several months. Can you imagine? How hopeless, how bleak, how awful must a situation be for a child to take his or her own life? For most of us, it is unimaginable. Sadly, the situation in Madaya is not unique. The people in besieged areas of Syria feel helpless and trapped. They need our help.

Denial of medical care continues to be used as a tool of war in Syria. We have also been devastated by the inability to evacuate critical medical cases, especially those of children, from besieged areas of Syria. Conjoined twins Moaz and Nawras from besieged East Ghouta were born on July 23. At two weeks old, after extensive pressure from SAMS and other humanitarian organizations, the twins were evacuated to Damascus by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). We secured commitments from specialized hospitals abroad to provide pro-bono care for the twins and offered to provide 24-hour medical consultation using our telemedicine program. However, at just one month old, the twins passed away in Damascus after being denied evacuation abroad. Dr. Bakr, the SAMS doctor who treated the twins, was asked by their father if he believed the government had intentionally delayed approval of the medical evacuation. He stated: “At first I thought, no these are just babies, they have nothing to do with the political or military situation. Then I remembered the Ghouta Chemical Massacre of 2013, where at least 1,700 were killed, among whom were women and children. And I believe that any government that kills its own citizens, women and children, is capable of killing babies.”

Yet for all the humanitarian actors seeking to help improve the situation, there continues to be major obstacles to providing aid and relief to these besieged areas. The UN, for all of its efforts and good intentions, has been subjected to attempts by the Syrian government to determine the distribution of aid, even though there is a Security Council mandate which allows their agencies to operate without government consent. The UN, with the backing of the broader international community, must retake control of aid distribution, and use their full rights and powers as delegated by the Security Council to ensure a transparent, efficient operation.

In just these past few minutes, I have relayed countless human rights violations that the people of Syria face every day. They do not deserve this suffering. No one deserves this kind of suffering. I would like to make the following recommendations:

- First, Congress should call on the Administration to work with the Security Council to establish an independent third-party to supervise and document aid distribution.
- Second, Congress should pass a resolution calling on the US Government and the UN Security Council to refer perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks to the ICC or another independent international tribunal. The use of chemical weapons in Syria cannot be allowed to become the new normal. Just a few weeks ago, the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism attributed the use of chemical weapons to both the Syrian government and ISIS. Accountability must be the next step.
- Third, medical evacuation processes in Syria, including the Four Towns Agreement and others in besieged areas, should be revised to establish new protocols in which the

process of medical evacuations remains transparent to humanitarian actors and is not subject to political negotiations or the influence of parties to the conflict. In addition, these protocols should adhere to international humanitarian principles, and allow for the return of civilians to their hometowns.

- Lastly, given the systematic nature of the attacks on hospitals in Syria, the US Government should work with the UN Security Council to establish an independent investigation that is designed to fact-find in cases where violations of UNSC Resolution 2286 in Syria are alleged and that is mandated to assign attribution for such hospital attacks.

After seeing victims of incendiary weapons in Hama, Dr. Abdullah Darwish, a SAMS physician said, *“Even though I have been a surgeon working at the Kafr Zita hospital for five years and have seen many cases and conducted many surgeries on patients from war, what I saw today is beyond everything I’ve ever seen.”* This is a critical moment for action. Together we can work to ensure a better future for the people of Syria. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.