



Written Testimony of Suzanne Nossel
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Regarding the Human Rights Crisis in Syria

Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Good morning, Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. My name is Suzanne Nossel, and I am the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA (AIUSA). Amnesty International (AI) is a global movement of people fighting injustice and promoting human rights. We have more than 3 million supporters, activists and volunteers in over 150 countries. With 300,000 members, the United States section of Amnesty International is the largest of the Amnesty movement's 68 country-based sections.

On behalf of Amnesty International, I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today and share our grave concerns about the human rights crisis in Syria. Since the crisis began one year ago, Amnesty International has investigated and documented the government-led violence and brutality against Syrians. Through direct interviews with survivors and witnesses -- as well as through acquired satellite imagery -- we have publicized a wide range of abuses by the Syrian government that amount to crimes against humanity.

In our reports, we have documented torture, detentions, and killings in Syria's hospitals, prisons, and on the streets. With this research as our guide, we have advocated in national capitols and at the United Nations for a global solution to this crisis. Our members and activists have served as citizen diplomats as well, sending hundreds of thousands of emails and letters to global decision-makers to remind them that the world is watching.

The crisis began in March of 2011, when a largely peaceful demonstration calling for the release of detained children in the southern city of Dera'a was suppressed by Syrian authorities. In the following months, hundreds of thousands of Syrians shook off decades of fear to demand their rights in overwhelmingly peaceful protests. Week after week, protesters defied the extreme violence of the security forces. Each weekly protest brought a new slogan – many of them directed at the international community, such as “Your silence is killing us” and “Disappointment with Russia.” Women participated in demonstrations and played leading roles in the debates and activism. The resistance seemed to develop spontaneously out of years of frustration and anger.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad and its security and armed forces responded with a campaign of escalating brutality, committing abuses that constitute crimes against humanity. Crimes against humanity cover specific crimes, such as murder, torture and severe deprivation of liberty, committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians, carried out pursuant to state or organizational policy. By mid-December, more than 3,800 people – the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights put the figure at over 5,000 – were reported to have died in connection with the protests, including 200 children.

Today, Amnesty International has received the names of some 7,200 individuals reportedly killed in the context of the demonstrations and unrest, most by Syrian security forces. This figure excludes members of the army and security forces as well as armed defectors. The UN has put the figure at well over 8,000, although it is not clear what categories of people reportedly killed this includes. (See UN Press Update Release of March 15, 2012, available here: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/d/19756.html>). The actual number of dead is likely to be far higher. Most of the dead are civilians who appear to have been shot by government forces at peaceful protests or funerals, though members of the security forces are also among those killed, including some who were shot by other soldiers apparently when they refused to turn their guns on protesters.

In addition, tens of thousands of people are believed to have been arrested. Local Syrian human rights defenders have the names of more than 18,000 people said to be held currently. They estimate that this is less than half the actual total. Many of these individuals, if not most, have been detained arbitrarily, held incommunicado for lengthy periods, tortured and ill-treated. Indeed, torture, which in previous years had been a likely fate for political prisoners, is now a certainty for anyone arrested in connection with the ongoing unrest today. Torture appears to have been used to obtain false confessions, punish protesters, and intimidate others to deter them from joining the demonstrations. Deaths in custody have rocketed from an average of four or five reported cases a year over the past decade to 276 reported to the organization in the first 12 months of the crisis.

To document these abuses, Amnesty International researchers conducted a research mission to Jordan in February of this year, where they met scores of Syrians. More than half of the individuals met were from Dera'a governorate, which borders Jordan and where protesters were first killed in March 2011. Others were from the governorates of Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Hama, al-Hasakah, Homs, Latakia, al-Suwayda and Tartus. Some 25 said they had been tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention before they fled across the border.

Our researchers documented this brutality in our latest report, *'I Wanted to Die': Syria's Torture Survivors Speak Out*. Published on March 14th of this year, the report catalogues the horrors visited upon Syrians by government security forces, including some 31 different kinds of torture.

These include:

- Beatings on all parts of the body, involving punching, slapping and/or kicking, administered with fists, feet, sticks, truncheons, braided cables, whips or butts of Kalashnikov-type weapons.
- Flesh gouged by pincers.
- Dulab torture, in which the victim is forced into a vehicle tire, which is often hoisted up before the individual is beaten.
- Bisat al-rih, the so-called flying carpet, whereby the victim is strapped face-up onto a foldable wooden board, the two ends of which are moved towards each other. This causes significant pain to the lower back. During the process, the victim is beaten.
- Shabeh, whereby the victim is hung by manacled wrists, or from a hook or over a door, or occasionally by the feet, often for long periods and usually while being beaten. Sometimes the beatings are administered while the detainee is in a stress position where the detainee must keep his toes on the floor.
- Being subjected to sexual violence.
- Being forced to watch the rape of another detainee.
- Being subjected to sights and sounds of torture being inflicted on others, including friends and family members, and being exposed to killings of torture victims.
- Electric shocks to parts of the body via an electric prod or other hand instrument.
- Being stabbed or cut.
- Sharing a solitary confinement cell with what appeared to be a dead body.

The individual accounts documented by our researchers reveal the unbelievable level of violence inflicted by Syrian security forces upon vast numbers of Syrians. In the following accounts, all of the names have been changed to protect the identities of the survivors.

Consider the account of “Karim,” who described night beatings he and his cellmates suffered while held for 25 days by the Syrian army’s Brigade 138 in a facility in Dera’a governorate in January 2012: *“During one of those night-beating sessions a guy had his*

ribs broken in front of me. Another had his back broken but they did not take him to hospital. A young man from Homs was beaten in one of those sessions with metal pipes. His neck was broken and he died on the spot. I don't know where they took him."

"Ghazi", a 22-year-old decorator, described to our researchers the torture he endured under the so-called "Flying Carpet", or Bisat al-Rih. Ghazi was subjected to this torture by Syrian military intelligence officials in Damascus. He had been detained on July 26th, 2011, while on his way to a hospital in Dera'a. About two months earlier, security forces had shot him in his upper chest with a tear gas canister during a protest in Dera'a city, causing broken ribs. He was detained at a Military Intelligence facility in Dera'a for six days, and then at Military Intelligence Branch 291 in Damascus for 43 days.

He described his torture as follows: "I was on a wooden board like a table, face up, in underpants and blindfolded. I don't know how the ends are raised but some mechanism makes it go up. I suffered terrible pain on my lower back as the body is forced into a V-shape. And I was beaten at the same time. Three men took it in turns with the kurbaj (whip). When they rested, they drink tea, smoke a cigarette until it's their turn again. It lasts about one hour (sic)."

Several former detainees described the terror and anguish they suffered because they witnessed or heard the torture of others, or saw the aftereffects on cellmates returned after torture sessions.

"Thamer" described what happened to him in the Air Force Intelligence branch in Dera'a city. *"The following day at noon they brought a group of detainees, 28 people, to the cell and the corridor adjacent to the cell. All of them were blindfolded and handcuffed. I was forced to look at the security forces while they were beating these detainees. They were kicking them and beating them with thick wooden sticks focusing on their heads for two hours. One man had his shoulder broken in front of me. Another man was my nephew whom I could not see but I identified his voice. I was screaming the whole time and asking them to stop..."*

Other detainees described how they were held in cells with fellow prisoners who were dying of their torture injuries or illness. In one case, a detainee was held for two days with what he believed to be a dead body. “Abu al-Najem” described what happened to him when he was held in the secret underground cells of Gharz Central Prison in July and August of 2011.

“One night I was placed in a solitary confinement cell with what looked like a corpse. I did not realize that at the beginning, as the cell was quite dark. I thought that someone was lying by my side so I stretched my hand to touch him and that is when I discovered that it was a plastic bag with a zip with what I assume was a corpse inside it. I was kept there for what I thought maybe two days.”

Some of the most horrifying accounts were those of sexual brutality:

“Tayseer” described an account shared with him while held at an Air Force Intelligence branch in Damascus. *“One young man in the cell with me [said he] was confronted with a glass bottle with a broken top. They told him, ‘Either you sit on it or we put it into you’. He did what they ordered.”*

At the time of our researchers’ visit, the Syrian military had launched its assault against neighborhoods in the city of Homs. Though our latest report has focused specifically on torture, Amnesty International also received testimony concerning the shelling of civilian areas; the shooting of live ammunition at peaceful protesters and others; extrajudicial executions; the burning and looting of houses; arbitrary arrests; the targeting of medical professionals; the denial of medical treatment to injured protesters and others; and enforced disappearances.

The state’s security forces are responsible for the overwhelming majority of human rights abuses alleged to have been committed during the crisis. There have, however, been increasing reports of abuses committed by members of armed opposition groups, including the kidnapping and killing of individuals apparently targeted because they

were outspoken about their support of the government or were members of the armed gangs known as shabiha. Relatives of these individuals have also been targeted. The shabiha are believed to operate on behalf of, or with the acquiescence of, of state forces. Amnesty International is investigating these reports. We condemn without reservation serious abuses by armed groups, including deliberate attacks against civilians, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, torture and other ill-treatment, hostage-taking, and the killing of captives.

The actions of the Syrian security forces have already been widely condemned by many members of the international community, but this has done nothing to stem the tide of repression. On February 4, 2012, China and the Russian Federation vetoed an already weak UN Security Council resolution aimed at ending the violence in Syria. The double veto was a shockingly callous betrayal of the people of Syria. Following the veto, there was an escalation in the use of force by the Syrian authorities against several residential areas of Homs. The Syrian government seems to have interpreted the veto as a green light to crush opposition in Syria by any means.

Amnesty International's recommendations:

In response to the crimes against humanity being committed in Syria, Amnesty International has asked the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Syria; freeze the assets of President Bashar al-Assad, his close associates, and others involved in ordering or perpetrating serious human rights abuses; and refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The US government can play an important role in advancing these goals by publicly endorsing and calling for the referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC. The US government has already moved from abstaining in 2005 on a similar effort regarding Sudan, to supporting such a move one year ago in the case of Libya. Now is the time for the US government to take the next step and proactively call for referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC.

Such an effort should be pursued alongside the demand that the governments of Russia, China and other countries with influence over Syria use their clout to stop the use of heavy weaponry in residential areas and immediately give humanitarian agencies full and unhindered access to affected areas. We have also asked the Russian government to immediately stop arms transfers to Syria, because the arms could be used to further commit grave human rights violations. Last week's UN Security Council Presidential Statement is a potentially positive step, but the Council needs to back its words with action.

In light of the worsening human rights situation in Syria and the influx of refugees from Syria to neighboring countries, we also ask all governments, including the United States, not to return to Syria those Syrian nationals and others who have fled abroad to escape from the violence. The international community should make it easier for people in Syria to flee the violence and should protect them from the long-reach of Syrian government agents. In our October 2011 report, *The Long Reach of the Mukhabaraat*, Amnesty International documented cases in which Syrian activists living in Europe, North America, and South America said they faced intimidation from Syrian embassy officials and others apparently because of their activities in solidarity with the pro-reform movement in Syria. In February of this year, Amnesty International's Syria campaigner Maha Abu Shama was told directly by a refugee near the Syrian border, "We are a bit scared to give you information as we don't know if you would tip off the Syrian authorities." Outside of Syria's borders, Syrian refugees and activists alike remain deeply concerned about Syrian government surveillance, intimidation, and retribution.

For the long-term, we demand accountability for the victims of the conflict. We commend the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for extending the mandate of its independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. We hope that the work of the HRC independent commission can later be used in the eventual prosecution of those responsible for crimes under international law and other gross violations of human rights. We urge the international community to pressure Syria to

grant the commission of inquiry access to the country – and to afford access to other international human rights monitors such as Amnesty International.

We also call on the UN to ensure that any UN mission to supervise an end to armed violence in Syria must include as part of its work the monitoring and reporting of human rights violations and abuses, including crimes against humanity. On Wednesday, March 21st, the UN Security Council endorsed, in a Presidential statement, the “six-point plan” proposed by Kofi Annan, Joint Special Envoy for the United Nations and the Arab League on Syria.

Amnesty International is calling on Mr. Annan, the UN Security Council and the Arab League to ensure that any UN mission deployed to the country included human rights monitors who would be able to pass vital information to investigators, including at the independent international Commission of Inquiry on Syria. We must also warn that many of the commitments in the “six-point plan” were similar to those that the Syrian government had agreed with the Arab League in late 2011. Arab League monitors later concluded that the Syrian government had failed to implement genuinely its commitments.

Finally, we urge members of the international community to accept a shared responsibility to establish joint investigation and prosecution teams to investigate crimes against humanity and other crimes under international law committed in Syria. International law and standards permit, and, in some cases, require states to exercise jurisdiction over persons suspected of certain grave crimes under international law – including torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity – no matter where such crimes were committed, even if they took place in the territory of another state, involved suspects or victims who are not nationals of the state or posed no direct threat to the state’s own particular security interests. Particularly in light of the failure of the UN Security Council so far to refer the situation to the ICC, such efforts will send a strong message that there will be no safe haven for those responsible for abuses in Syria, and will improve the

effectiveness of investigation and the chances of arrest. These national procedures must be done in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty.

To build global support for these goals, we are campaigning around the world to stop the violence in Syria and demand accountability for the victims. Our advocacy efforts have been conducted through the UN and at the country level, via our professional advocates and grassroots activists. Here in the U.S., Amnesty International USA members successfully targeted the embassies of India, South Africa, and Brazil with some 90,000 letters to compel them to support action in the Security Council to stop the violence in Syria. Amnesty International activists have contacted the Russian government 70,000 times to urge it to use its influence with Syria to end the violence. Worldwide, Amnesty International members have taken action hundreds of thousands of times, including holding vigils, rallies and other public events to voice their outrage and demand respect for human rights in Syria.

These efforts have been enhanced by our *Eyes on Syria* project, located at EyesonSyria.org. *Eyes on Syria* is an interactive mapping platform that documents human rights violations that have been committed in the context of the popular uprising. *Eyes on Syria* also acts as a demonstration of international solidarity with peaceful protesters in Syria, providing a platform that tracks global activism in support of the protestors' demands for basic human rights. The platform provides a means of connection, mapping out and amplifying local activism. *Eyes on Syria* has helped Amnesty International generate hundreds of thousands of signatures calling for an end to the bloodshed in Syria.

The crushing violence of the government of Syria is destroying the hopes of the Syrian people for human rights and political reform. At a time when other Middle Eastern and North African countries are making profound political changes, the government of Syria has chosen to respond in an utterly ruthless manner to smash the legitimate hopes and aspirations of the Syrian people. It is shocking that the governments of the Russian Federation and China have allowed crimes against humanity to continue by obstructing action in the UN Security Council. The time has come for global leaders to behave

responsibly – not as enablers of violence that has brutally cut short the lives of thousands of Syrians.