

Physicians for Human Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://phr.org/news/german-court-conviction-of-syrian-who-oversaw-torture-a-first-step-towards-justice-and-accountability-phr/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) welcomes the landmark verdict against Syrian colonel Anwar Raslan, who was [convicted today](#) of crimes against humanity in a court in Koblenz, Germany, and sentenced to life in prison.

Raslan supervised the systematic and brutal torture of more than 4,000 Syrian prisoners in 2011-2012. His conviction today marks the first time that a high-ranking Syrian official has been held accountable for atrocities perpetrated by the Syrian government during the decade-long war in the country.

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, PHR has [documented](#) the widespread violations of human rights amounting to crimes against humanity by the Syrian government, including its extensive system of detention and torture, and advocated for an end to the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.

The following quote is attributed to [Stephen J. Rapp](#), Senior Fellow at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and a PHR board member. Rapp is a former U.S. ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice and former international prosecutor at the Rwanda and Sierra Leone tribunals:

This is the first conviction in history for torture and murder carried out under orders of a foreign regime that is still in power. It was only possible because of evidence brought out of Syria by survivors of these crimes and organized by civil society groups into an unassailable case. It happened because of former Syrian military photographer Caesar and the photos he smuggled out, which showed the numbered bodies of thousands of human beings who had been tortured to death evidence which the court in Koblenz found to be rock solid. It depended on the Commission for International Justice & Accountability (CIJA) that collected more a million pages of Syrian regime documents that revealed the orders that set and kept in motion a machinery of murder. It required the courage of the victim-survivors whose testimony was taken and presented according to standards developed by groups like Physicians for Human Rights as reflected in the Istanbul Protocol. Finally, it needed the commitment and resources provided by German authorities who now lead the world in efforts to give meaning to the words Never again.

Other trials against agents of the Syrian regime will soon begin in Germany, and this judgment should motivate authorities in other countries to proceed with cases that are ready for indictment. It also signals that there can be no normalization with a Syrian regime whose officials now risk imprisonment if they venture forth from the devastation for which they are responsible.

The following quote is attributed to [Houssam al-Nahhas, MD, MPH](#), Syrian physician and survivor of detention and torture in Syria, who has served as PHR's Middle East and North Africa researcher (November 2020 August 2021):

This trial shows that impunity does not have to be the norm in confronting the horrible human rights violations that have been and are continuing to be committed in Syria. The verdict and sentencing give hope to those who suffered and those who lost their loved ones in detention centers. It should also add new urgency for a concerted, global movement to demand that the Syrian government immediately free people wrongly imprisoned and reveal the fate of the thousands of arbitrarily detained people over the past decade. In any settlement negotiations with the Syrian government, survivor-led plans for peace and accountability must be prioritized.

We applaud Germany for its leadership in universal jurisdiction cases like Raslan and call on other countries to follow suit, which is necessary in light of the glaring failure of the UN Security Council to refer the war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria to the International Criminal Court. As a Syrian and a survivor of torture, I understand how long the road toward justice will be, but I am glad to witness the first step in that journey today.

The following quote is attributed to a [Syrian physician](#) who survived torture and was a witness in the Anwar Raslan trial, whose name is being withheld for security purposes:

This is a first step in a long path to justice and accountability, which will take a long time not only because of the complex political situation in Syria but because it will be difficult to regain peoples trust in the process. Most Syrians have already lost hope in seeing real justice, but today offers a small measure of accountability for one perpetrator.

Justice should not be selective. While we are seeing this verdict in Germany, the international community must not forget what the Assad regime perpetrated. Our biggest fear is that all the survivors and their families demands for true justice and accountability will be in vain, neglected by those seeking a political solution and normalization with the Syrian government.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a New York-based advocacy organization that uses science and medicine to prevent mass

atrocities and severe human rights violations. [Learn more here.](#)

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