

# Trouble for Putin's Arab Client

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S INEVITABLE RECKONING

**JOEL RAYBURN AND NAWAF OBAID**

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In response to Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the United States and its allies are now looking for means by which to impose costs on Russia's aggression, not just in Ukraine but worldwide. It happens that elsewhere in Moscow's near abroad, one of Putin's major clients has new reason to worry, and the Western allies have a new opportunity.

For more than a decade, the world has largely stood by as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his regime committed mass murder with impunity, often with the direct help of Putin's military and mercenaries. A few states have taken steps to normalize their relations with Assad. On March 18, the United Arab Emirates leadership hosted Assad for the first time since the 2011 Arab Spring protests and ongoing civil war began—on the anniversary of the original uprising in Daraa.

But recent events signal that the Assad regime's reckoning may finally be coming, along with a steep increase in the consequential costs of Putin's Syria policy and insurmountable obstacles for those who wish to normalize relations with the Syrian tyrant.

On January 13, a German court sentenced a former senior Assad regime official to life in prison for crimes against humanity. Anwar Raslan, a former colonel in Syria's General Intelligence Directorate, was found guilty of overseeing the murder of at least twenty-seven prisoners and the torture of at least four thousand individuals during the early years of the Syrian conflict. This is the first time such a senior Assad regime official has been convicted in a European court using the legal principle of universal jurisdiction, but it will certainly not be the last. Already a new German trial has begun in Frankfurt, this time of a Syrian doctor, who has been compared to the infamous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, accused of killing a prisoner and torturing many others for the Assad regime between 2011 and 2012.

These landmark cases may well kick-start a concerted international effort to bring to justice the numerous actors who have perpetrated Assad regime's "killing machine" since 2011. For years, investigators and prosecutors in Europe have been building many other such cases, often with the help of human-rights and accountability organizations working to gather evidence from war-torn Syria and from the survivors of Assad's and Putin's atrocities. An important element of this push is the Commission for International Justice



and Accountability (CIJA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting criminal investigations during wars when there is no political will or plausible capacity to engage existing public investigative authorities. CIJA played a pivotal supporting role in bringing Raslan to justice.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, CIJA has helped an extensive network of Syrians gather more than one million official cables from the Assad regime's main intelligence and security services. These agencies were responsible for guiding the massacres of over half a million Syrians by Assad's forces and their foreign allies, Russia and Iran. As the custodian of these documents, CIJA has conducted investigations that have led to the finalizing of ten legal cases so far against Assad and his military and security command for crimes against humanity—and there are more to come.

It is high time for these criminal cases to come to fruition. The handful of Arab and European countries that have explored normalizing relations with Damascus have done so largely at the urging of Russia, but given Putin's ongoing war crimes in Ukraine, there is no justification for these countries to facilitate Putin's goals in Syria any longer.

Geopolitics aside, though, these misguided normalization steps are about to collide with the Western criminal prosecutions that are likely to cement the Assad regime's pariah status indefinitely. The criminal cases will make normalizing relations with Assad politically costly for any governments or businesses that wish to do so. It will also be financially costly: those thinking of doing business with the Assad regime could someday soon find their assets or revenue streams entangled in the civil court judgments that often follow criminal convictions. This is the sort of legal exposure that sovereign wealth funds from Europe, Asia, or the Persian Gulf, for example, can ill afford.

Instead of normalizing Assad and his regime's atrocities, European and Arab countries would be better served by joining the United States in putting their full support behind the increasing efforts toward accountability that are being rolled out across the world. If Assad and his regime can emerge unscathed from their mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, we can expect authoritarian regimes across the world to take note, copy Assad's methods with the assistance of Putin and his allies, and make the twenty-first century a truly bloody one.

The Western countries that erected the current international liberal system in the hope of preventing the horrors of World War II from happening ever again cannot expect the current global geopolitical framework to survive in the decades to come if they fail to act according to basic human conscience now. And the leading Arab countries cannot hope to permanently instill modern and sustainable open reforms in their own societies if the world's most murderous existing dictatorial regime sits unaccountable in their midst.

The German court cases and many similar efforts in the works across Europe show that a reckoning is coming for the Assad regime and its allies, whether some capitals like it or not. Better for them to join the bandwagon now than to pay a political, financial, and moral price for not doing so later.



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## About The Caravan Notebook

*The Caravan Notebook* is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

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