

Remarks by LTG H.R. McMaster at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Simon-Skjodt Center — “Syria, Is the Worst Yet to Come?”

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Remarks

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Thank you Cameron. It is an honor to be included in today’s event, as we mark the Seventh Anniversary of the start of the Syrian Civil War—and, this year, the 25th Anniversary of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

This afternoon, we are privileged to be joined by many Holocaust survivors, including Irene Weiss, who will share her story of courage and resilience later in the program.

Irene, we are all so glad that you are here with us today. Thank you. You are an inspiration to all humanity.

Please join me in giving Irene, and all of the survivors in the audience, a round of applause.

We are gathered together this afternoon on holy ground. This museum bears witness to the most horrific acts of evil and atrocity ever inflicted on humanity.

The documents, recordings, and mementos contained in these walls provide testimony on behalf of millions of Holocaust victims, unjustly taken from us before they could share their stories.

Standing in the beautiful Hall of Remembrance here at the Museum, we can still feel the weight of every human life lost.

Engraved on the wall behind the eternal flame is the well-known passage from Deuteronomy:

“Guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw [...] and you shall make them known to your children, and to your children’s children.”

The United States Holocaust Museum teaches the importance of remembrance.

This Museum tells the stories of beloved children, like seven-year-old Tommy Pfeffer, who was gassed to death at Auschwitz alongside his ten-year-old brother, Jan-Peter.

It tells the stories of the righteous—rescuers who risked their lives to save others, like Raoul Wallenberg and Oskar Schindler.

And it tells the stories of inspiring Jewish resistance fighters, like young Hannah Senesh, who parachuted behind enemy lines with the British Army to aid anti-Nazi partisans and rescue Jews.

As many of you know, Hannah was captured in occupied Hungary, interrogated, and tortured. During her almost five months in prison, Hannah revealed no information about her mission.

Eventually convicted of treason, she was sentenced to death. On November 7, 1944, at just twenty-three years of age, Hannah was taken to a Budapest courtyard, where she refused a blindfold.

A poem found in Hannah’s cell after her execution read, in part, “I gambled on what mattered most.”

It is important to remember what happened to people like Hannah, Tommy, and Irene, because we know that these horrors can happen again.

But remembrance is only the first step: we cannot stop at remembrance alone.

If we are to fulfill our promise, “Never Again,” we must also act to protect victims and to hold all responsible parties accountable.

Unfortunately, today in Syria, we are confronted once more with some of the worst atrocities known to man.

This war has now raged on for seven years.

The Assad regime has killed indiscriminately, tortured, starved, raped, and used chemical weapons on its own people. It has attacked hospitals and schools, and countless Syrians have been arrested, abducted, or have simply disappeared.

And, ISIS has kidnapped, tortured, murdered, brutally persecuted religious minorities, and committed unspeakable horrors, such as burning victims alive in cages.

The Syria exhibit here at the Holocaust Museum, which I visited in January, details these horrifying crimes through photographs, film, first-person accounts, and other documentary evidence.

It is estimated that nearly 500,000 people have perished since the war began. In February alone, nearly 1,400 civilians have died. The conflict has created over 5 million refugees and over 6 million displaced persons.

Today, I want to tell you how the United States is taking action to protect innocent Syrians, defeat ISIS, and hold the Assad regime, and its sponsors, accountable for their crimes.

First, like so many in the room today, we are documenting atrocities.

The United States is declassifying intelligence that exposes Assad's horrific crimes.

In May of last year, President Trump released images that we believe depict a crematorium at one of the regime's prisons, likely installed to hide evidence of mass murder.

Our administration is also helping to fund the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (Triple I-M) created by the United Nations General Assembly.

Triple I-M's mission is to collect and analyze evidence of international humanitarian law and human rights violations in Syria and prepare this evidence for independent criminal proceedings.

We are also proud to support the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

This independent and impartial commission documents serious human rights abuses committed by all parties to the conflict.

Second, we are fighting alongside partners, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces, to defeat terrorist organizations.

The Coalition to Defeat ISIS has now liberated almost 100 percent of territory previously held by these terrorists in Iraq and Syria.

We have made immense progress alongside allies and partners over the past year, but we have more work to do.

The United States will continue to pursue these murderers until ISIS is completely defeated, population centers are stabilized, and refugees can safely return home.

Third, we are providing humanitarian aid to the people who need it the most—the victims.

The United States has provided over \$7.6 billion dollars to assist Syrians both in and outside of Syria.

We are sending our assistance in two directions: to Syrian refugees and to areas liberated from ISIS.

The United States and our partners will not provide reconstruction funding to areas controlled by the Assad regime until there is a political transition away from Assad's rule.

Fourth, we are working to protect innocent civilians from chemical attack and to hold Assad accountable for using these heinous weapons.

These past four years have marked another anniversary: the 100th Anniversary of World War One. In the aftermath of that horrible war, nations came together and agreed not to use chemical weapons again.

Assad's continued use of these weapons threatens to undo all of the progress we have made since the end of that terrible war.

Following Assad's April 4, 2017, sarin attack on innocents, President Trump launched a powerful missile strike on the Syrian air base from which this attack originated, destroying twenty percent of the Syrian Air Force.

Our actions sent an unmistakable message: using these horrific weapons is never acceptable, and we will hold perpetrators accountable.

The United States is supporting the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in their efforts to compel Assad to fully dismantle his chemical weapons program.

Unfortunately, many of these life-saving efforts—to resolve the conflict, defeat ISIS, deliver humanitarian aid, and deter chemical weapons attacks—are impeded by the Assad regime's sponsors in Tehran and Moscow.

All civilized nations must hold Iran and Russia accountable for their role in enabling atrocities and perpetuating human suffering in Syria.

Across the greater Middle East, Iran is proliferating dangerous weapons, fueling sectarian violence, and supporting terrorist proxies and militias, such as Hizballah.

This regime proudly chants "Death to America" and "Death to Israel." It further offends the conscience of every human being by denying the Holocaust.

In Syria, Iran's actions have directly interfered with efforts to de-escalate violence, defeat ISIS, and protect innocent civilians.

Since 2012, Iran has provided over \$16 billion dollars to the Assad regime and to other proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Tehran is also transporting foreign Shiite militias and weapons from Iran to Syria on illegal flights, including on Iranian civilian airlines.

Iran's goal is to secure a permanent military foothold in Syria, which would threaten Israel, undermine U.S. interests, and strengthen the terrorist and proxy forces that Iran uses to weaken Arab states and foment violence.

We cannot let this happen.

All responsible nations must take action to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in Syria and across the region.

For example, the United States has taken legislative and law enforcement action against Iran's proxy, Hizballah, and we continue to call on all nations to do the same.

Anyone who cares about the plight of Syrians, Israelis, Lebanese, Yemenis—and all people in the region—should also stop doing business with companies affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iran uses its relationship with these companies to fund and facilitate violence, terror, and bloodshed.

Sadly, Iran is not Assad's only sponsor. Russia is also complicit in Assad's atrocities.

The Russian government has bombed civilian areas and provided political cover for Assad's crimes. Furthermore, Russia has done nothing to encourage Assad to ensure delivery of humanitarian aid, respect ceasefires and de-escalation agreements, or comply with UN Security Council Resolution 2254's call for a UN monitored political process.

From February 24 to February 28, Russia conducted twenty bombing missions every day in the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus areas of Syria.

Russia has also repeatedly thwarted efforts by the OPCW to hold the Assad regime accountable for using chemical weapons.

This morning, the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom condemned the abhorrent nerve-agent attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal that took place in Salisbury, United Kingdom on March 4.

The statement made clear that we believe that Russia was responsible for this attack, and we call on the Russian government to answer all questions related to this incident and to provide full information to the OPCW.

No nation—Russia, Syria, or anyone else—should be using chemical weapons and nerve agents.

If Iran and Russia do not stop enabling the regime's atrocities and adhere to UN Security Council resolutions, all nations must respond more forcefully than simply issuing strong statements.

It is time to impose serious political and economic consequences on Moscow and Tehran.

Assad should not have impunity for his crimes, and neither should his sponsors.

And if we needed reminding of the importance of acting now, we need not look any further than this Museum's powerful exhibits and resources on the Syrian conflict.

Just as this Museum remembers Tommy Pfeffer, Oskar Schindler, and Hannah Senesh, it bears witness for innocent victims, righteous rescuers, and courageous resisters in the Syrian conflict.

This Museum bears witness for Ahmad al-Ahmad, a Syrian child murdered in one of Assad's chemical weapons attacks.

This Museum bears witness for the Syrian Civil Defense—the White Helmets—unarmed first responders who voluntarily put themselves in the line of fire to save lives and rescue the wounded.

The co-founder of the White Helmets, Mounir Mustafa, travelled all the way from Syria with his colleague Radi Saad to be with us today. Thank you Mounir and Radi. Please join me in giving Mounir and his courageous colleagues a round of applause.

And this Museum bears witness for Syrians like Mansour Omari, who risked his life to confront Assad's atrocities.

Mansour was working to document the Assad regime's abuses when he was arrested and sent to a top-secret underground military prison.

While in prison, Mansour suggested collecting the names of other prisoners. Like brave Hannah Senesh, the prisoners would leave permanent traces of themselves, so that others might remember them and know their stories.

Using their blood and rust from cell bars, they wrote their names on scraps of fabric torn from clothes.

To hide the strips of fabric, a prisoner sewed them into the collar and cuffs of another prisoner's shirt.

After nearly a year in captivity, Mansour received news that he would be released.

As he was leaving, other prisoners whispered four heart-wrenching words: "Please don't forget us."

He would not. Mansour was wearing the shirt, and the bloodied scraps of fabric containing the names of 82 prisoners are now on display here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Every visitor who passes through the Syrian exhibit will know their names and remember.

Today, on the Seventh Anniversary of the Syrian Civil War, let us all promise to remember and to act.

We will never forget the victims of the Holocaust, and we will listen to survivors like Irene.

We will never forget the victims of the Syrian Civil War, and we will listen to witnesses like Mansour.

Preventing genocide and mass atrocities falls on all of us. Every nation, and every person, must share this responsibility.

With allies, partners, and like-minded nations, we are acting: we are exposing atrocities, defeating ISIS, providing humanitarian assistance, deterring chemical weapons attacks, and holding Assad and his sponsors accountable for his horrific crimes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to join today's events. It is an honor to be among so many survivors, advocates, and concerned citizens. We appreciate all that you do to bring greater awareness to these and other atrocities. Thank you.