

Ex-Syrian commander claims missing US journalist Austin Tice was executed

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Joshua Baker and Sara Obeidat BBC News



The man accused of being responsible for holding the missing American journalist Austin Tice has claimed that ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ordered his execution, security sources have told the BBC.

Major General Bassam Al Hassan is a former commander in the Republican Guards who was part of President Assad's inner circle.

He was also the Chief of Staff of the National Defence Forces (NDF), the paramilitary group that a BBC investigation uncovered was responsible for holding Mr Tice after his abduction in 2012.

The discovery was made as part of an upcoming BBC Radio 4 podcast about the disappearance of Austin Tice.

The American journalist vanished near the Syrian capital of Damascus in August 2012, just days after his 31st birthday.

He had been working as a freelance journalist and was leaving Syria when he was abducted.

The fallen regime consistently denied knowing of his whereabouts - the BBC investigation showed that was false and that Mr Tice was being held in Damascus.

Al Hassan, who is subject to UK, EU, Canadian and US sanctions, oversaw the facility where Mr Tice was held.

Earlier this year, he is said to have met with US law enforcement at least three times in Lebanon.

Sources claim that at least one of those meetings was in the US embassy complex.

During these conversations, he is said to have told investigators from the FBI and CIA that the now-ousted President Assad ordered the execution of missing American journalist Austin Tice.

Sources familiar with the conversations told the BBC that Al Hassan claims to have initially tried to dissuade President Assad from killing Mr Tice, but that he eventually passed on this order and that it was carried out.

Al Hassan is also understood to have provided possible locations for the journalist's body. Sources familiar with the FBI investigation have said that efforts to confirm the validity of Al Hassan's claims are ongoing, and that a search is intended to happen of the sites where Mr Tice's body could be.

Western intelligence sources familiar with the details of Al Hassan's claim that President Assad gave the order to kill Mr Tice are sceptical that he would directly give such an instruction, as he is known for having mechanisms for distancing himself from such actions.

The BBC accompanied Mr Tice's mother, Debra, to Beirut as the 13th anniversary of her son's disappearance approaches. Upon finding out that Bassam al Hassan had spoken to US officials, Debra Tice attempted to meet with Al Hassan herself and contacted the US embassy requesting assistance.

She told the BBC: "I just want to be able to speak to him as a mother and ask him about my son." Her attempt to meet with Al Hassan was unsuccessful.

When asked about the claims by Al Hassan, she said her feeling was that he "fed the FBI a story that they wanted to hear" to help them close the case.

Debra Tice has led a tireless and determined campaign to bring her son home and remains committed to finding him. She told the BBC: "I am his mother, I still believe that my son is alive and that he will walk free."

Separately, a former member of the NDF with intimate knowledge of Austin Tice's detention told the BBC "that Austin's value was understood" and that he was a "card" that could be played in diplomatic negotiations with the US.

Bassam Al Hassan was considered one of President Assad's most trusted advisors. After the Syrian regime's collapse in December, Mr Al Hassan had fled to Iran.

Sources close to him have told the BBC that while in Iran, Al Hassan received a phone call and was asked to come to Lebanon to meet with US officials. It is believed that he was given assurances that he would not be detained.

For years, consecutive US presidents have said that Mr Tice, a former US Marine captain, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and was a law student at the prestigious Georgetown University in Washington, was alive.

In December 2024, then President Joe Biden told reporters at the White House that "we believe he's alive," and that "we think we can get him back, but we have no direct evidence of that yet".

Secret Syrian intelligence files show missing US journalist was imprisoned by Assad regime

- Bashar al-Assad
- United States
- Syria