

POLITICS • 13 MIN READ

The road that led, 13 years later, to hearing: ‘Austin is dead’

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(Photo Illustration by Alberto Mier/CNN/Fort Worth Star-Telegram/Tribune News Service/Getty Images)



CNN’s Clarissa Ward confronts the man who held Austin Tice captive. [Subscribe to watch the full exclusive report.](#)

“The Americans drove through here,” the Syrian army guard said, pointing to a steep road behind him. “I don’t know where they headed, I’m not allowed up there.”

The barricaded road leads to a labyrinth of military facilities wedged into the rocky slopes of Mount Qasioun on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus. It was as close as CNN could get to the locations searched by an FBI-led team that came here in September looking for traces of American journalist Austin Tice — more than a decade after he disappeared.

The American team was hard to miss, arriving in a convoy of armored vehicles. Their objective was two-fold: to search for the place where Tice was last believed to have been held and, if possible, to find his remains.



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The US search focused on a facility called the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center. It lasted less than three days. On September 9, Israel launched its explosive attack on Qatar and the delegation abruptly left.

The tip that led to the US search came from several witnesses, including Bassam Al-Hassan, a powerful adviser to former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the man who held Tice after his capture in mid-August 2012.

For 13 years, the mystery of what happened to Austin Tice has plagued multiple US administrations. Then, after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, witnesses began to emerge. After fleeing to Iran, Al-Hassan made his way to Beirut, Lebanon in April, where he was interrogated by FBI investigators, along with several associates, about Tice’s capture.

In September, CNN managed to track the apartment where Al-Hassan was living in Beirut. After knocking on his door, the team introduced themselves as CNN journalists. During a 20-minute conversation, the first time he’s been confronted by a journalist, Al-Hassan told CNN that Assad ordered the execution of Tice.

“Of course, Austin is dead. Austin is dead,” he said, his comments captured on video by hidden cameras worn by the team. He nodded yes when asked if Tice was killed in 2013, saying that he had passed the execution order down to a subordinate.

“I don’t want to protect Bashar al-Assad because he abandoned and left us,” Al-Hassan added. “I don’t want to protect Russia or Iran, because the US thinks Russia and Iran have something to do with the case. And I can assure you that this is not the case. This relates to President Bashar only,” he said.

Assad fled to Russia after the collapse of his regime and attempts by CNN to reach him were unsuccessful.

Al-Hassan claims he passed the execution order onto a subordinate in the notorious Iran-backed, pro-government militia the National Defense Forces (NDF). CNN has learned the man in question is now in Russia. Through an intermediary, he refused to respond to CNN’s questions.



Freelance journalist Austin Tice went missing in Syria in 2012 and has not been heard from since.
(Fort Worth Star-Telegram/Tribune News Service/Getty Images)

Several sources that CNN spoke to claimed that there are holes in Al-Hassan’s story. CNN has confirmed that he failed a polygraph test given to him by the FBI.

The truth is tangled in a web of lies that remain the enduring legacy of a regime that killed and disappeared hundreds of thousands of its own people. In order to piece together what happened to Tice, CNN spoke to dozens of former and current officials, investigators and eyewitnesses in seven different countries. Many only spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters or protect their precarious status in the countries they fled to.

While CNN cannot confirm that Tice is dead, for the first time we are hearing from people with direct knowledge of his capture, captivity and attempted escape. The accounts they provide strongly suggest that Tice was killed more than a decade ago, but there is no hard proof. Since the Assad regime fell last year, the new Syrian government has been keen to establish good relations with the US and has been working closely with American officials to help solve the Tice case. The FBI has ramped up its own investigation, collecting evidence on the ground.

“As well as a recovery operation this is also an active federal investigation and there is always the goal of trying to bring some justice to this situation,” said a person familiar with the FBI investigation.

Since Tice disappeared in 2012, his family has not wavered from the belief that he is still alive. His mother, Debra Tice, has waged a tireless public campaign on behalf of her son, lobbying the US government across multiple administrations to do whatever it can to return him alive. Earlier this year, not long after the Assad regime fell, Debra travelled to Damascus to look for him and sat down with Syria’s new President Ahmed Al-Sharaa. She has previously dismissed Al-Hassan as a “pathological liar.”

“Austin Tice is alive. We look forward to seeing him walk free,” the Tice family told CNN in a statement.



Austin Tice filed his last reports from the Damascus suburb of Darayya in 2012 before his family lost contact with him. In August 2012, Darayya was the site of pitched battles between Assad’s forces and rebels as they pushed closer and closer to the capital. *(David von Blohn/CNN)*

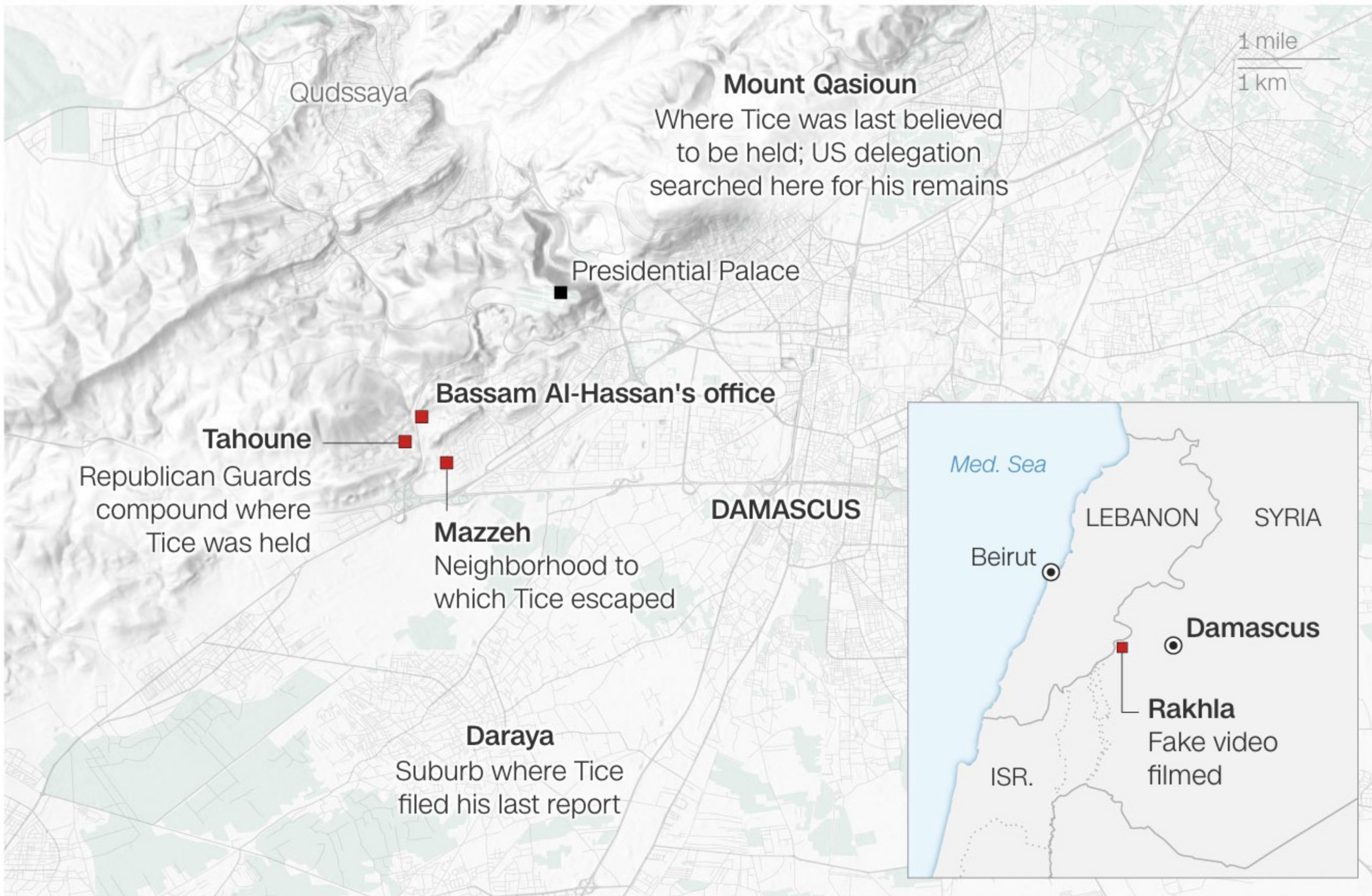
Captivity

Tice, an ex-US Marine Corps officer, reported from Syria during the summer of 2012, when protests against Assad had turned into an armed struggle. He embedded with rebels on the frontlines and documented the regime’s brutal crackdowns on peaceful protests. His daring approach got him bylines in top US outlets including the Washington Post and McClatchy.

He filed his last report from Darayya, a Damascus suburb that still bears the marks of years of fighting and bombardment. His family and editors said they lost contact with him in mid-August when he was supposed to travel to Lebanon for a break.

Key locations in the Austin Tice disappearance

Bassam Al-Hassan, adviser to former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, held American journalist Austin Tice after his capture in August 2012. Al-Hassan provided a tip to a US search team about the possible location of Tice's remains in the area of Mount Qasioun on the outskirts of Damascus.



Source: CNN reporting
Graphic: Renée Rigdon, CNN

For 13 years, the Syrian government consistently denied holding Tice or having any knowledge of his whereabouts, despite pressure from the American government and his family. Weeks after Assad fled Syria to Russia,

cracks started to emerge in that story. Early this year, a former officer with Syria’s external intelligence branch, General Safwan Bahloul, gave testimony to Al Jazeera, saying that he’d interrogated Tice in 2012 at the behest of Al-Hassan.

Bahloul agreed to talk to CNN only after securing permission from the new government in Damascus. A security official led the way to his house up a leafy hill in Latakia, the coastal province in Syria known for its loyalty to the Assads. Unlike other former officials who fled Syria, Bahloul took a settlement offered by the new government that essentially gives him amnesty.

During a wide-ranging interview last month, Bahloul discussed how he first became aware of Tice.

“I went to [Al-Hassan’s] office and he told me, ‘We have caught an American journalist. We want you to interrogate and see the possibility if he’s not a mere journalist or if he’s a spy,’” Bahloul said.



Safwan Bahloul was a general with Syria's external intelligence branch in 2012 when he was summoned to interrogate Tice. Unlike other Assad security officials who fled the country, Bahloul took a settlement offered by the new government that essentially gives him amnesty. (Scott McWhinnie/CNN)

Bahloul, who has spent time in the US and the UK and speaks English fluently, told CNN he interrogated Tice three times. “I just went through the names and the contacts on his phone, asking him about each name,” Bahloul said. “He was cooperative about it. He told me that he’s an ex-Marine officer. He wasn’t shaky. He was brave enough to face his custody. Sometimes even we talked about music.”

Tice was held in a Republican Guard compound often referred to as Tahoune, under the command of Ghassan Nassour, a senior officer who reported to Al-Hassan. The line between the Republican Guard and the NDF

was often blurred with officers serving in both, including Nassour.

CNN managed to reach Nassour on the phone in his new home in the UAE.

“This was not a formal prison, but a brief detention facility for offending soldiers,” he said.

When CNN visited the compound in September, it was mostly refurbished and used by soldiers of the new government. Faded Assad murals, discarded ammunition and bars on the windows of some rooms were the only traces left of the old guard.

According to Nassour, the soldier who was assigned to bring food to Tice was instructed not to speak to him. Tice’s nationality and identity, Nassour claims, were known only to a handful of people close to Al-Hassan, whose office was across the road from Tahoune.

“Ask any soldier in Tahoune and he would tell you they knew we had an important [prisoner], but no one knew who he was,” a low-ranking soldier who worked in Al-Hassan’s office at the time, told CNN over the phone from his village in Latakia. He said he only figured out it was Tice when details of his captivity were reported in 2025. Before that, he did not dare ask.



In this screenshot taken from a 2012 video, Austin Tice is blindfolded and surrounded by Assad regime soldiers dressed up as jihadists. *(Obtained by CNN)*

Signs of life

Nassour recalled the day they took Tice to Rakhla, a mountainous area near the Lebanese border, to film a video that was released in September 2012.

Under the direction of Al-Hassan, regime soldiers dressed up as jihadists and led a blindfolded Tice up a hill while chanting “God is Great,” Nassour said. The point, he added, was to give the impression that Tice was held by extremists and not the Assad regime.

“The video was posted online the next day, and it was as if Tice was held by Taliban in Afghanistan and he never entered Syria,” Nassour said. Tice was seen in the 46-second video reciting the Muslim proclamation of faith and

pleading, “Oh, Jesus.”

US officials and independent analysts quickly determined the video was a ruse. US investigators followed the digital breadcrumbs to the Syrian regime. It was taken as evidence that Tice was in government hands and the first and only proof of life.



The Republican Guard compound, often referred to as Tahoune, was not meant to be an official prison. When CNN visited, the compound had mostly been refurbished by the new Syrian government. *(David von Blohn/CNN)*

Back in Tahoune, sometime in late October, Tice asked Bahloul for soap and a towel, which Bahloul said Tice used to escape. Syrian investigators at the time, Bahloul explained, determined that Tice used the soap to slip through the high window and the towel to jump over the shattered glass cemented at the top of the compound’s external wall.

The low-ranking soldier in Al-Hassan’s team described the ensuing havoc. “We were on a state of alert. There was chaos because someone had escaped prison,” the soldier told CNN. “They distributed his picture to the checkpoints close to the compound.”

Tice made it to the upscale Mazzeh neighborhood, about a mile from Tahoune. For more than 24 hours he was on the run in an area dotted with embassies and the homes of some of the regime’s top generals.

“Every security apparatus in Damascus, thousands of operatives, they started the search, and he was caught by one of them, and he was redelivered to the National Defense Forces militia, which was headed at that time by Bassam Al-Hassan,” Bahloul said.

Once Tice was recaptured, Bahloul was brought in one more time to see him.

“I felt the connection between me and him was just lost. I was talking to him and he was not responding. He was, in a way we could say, depressed,”

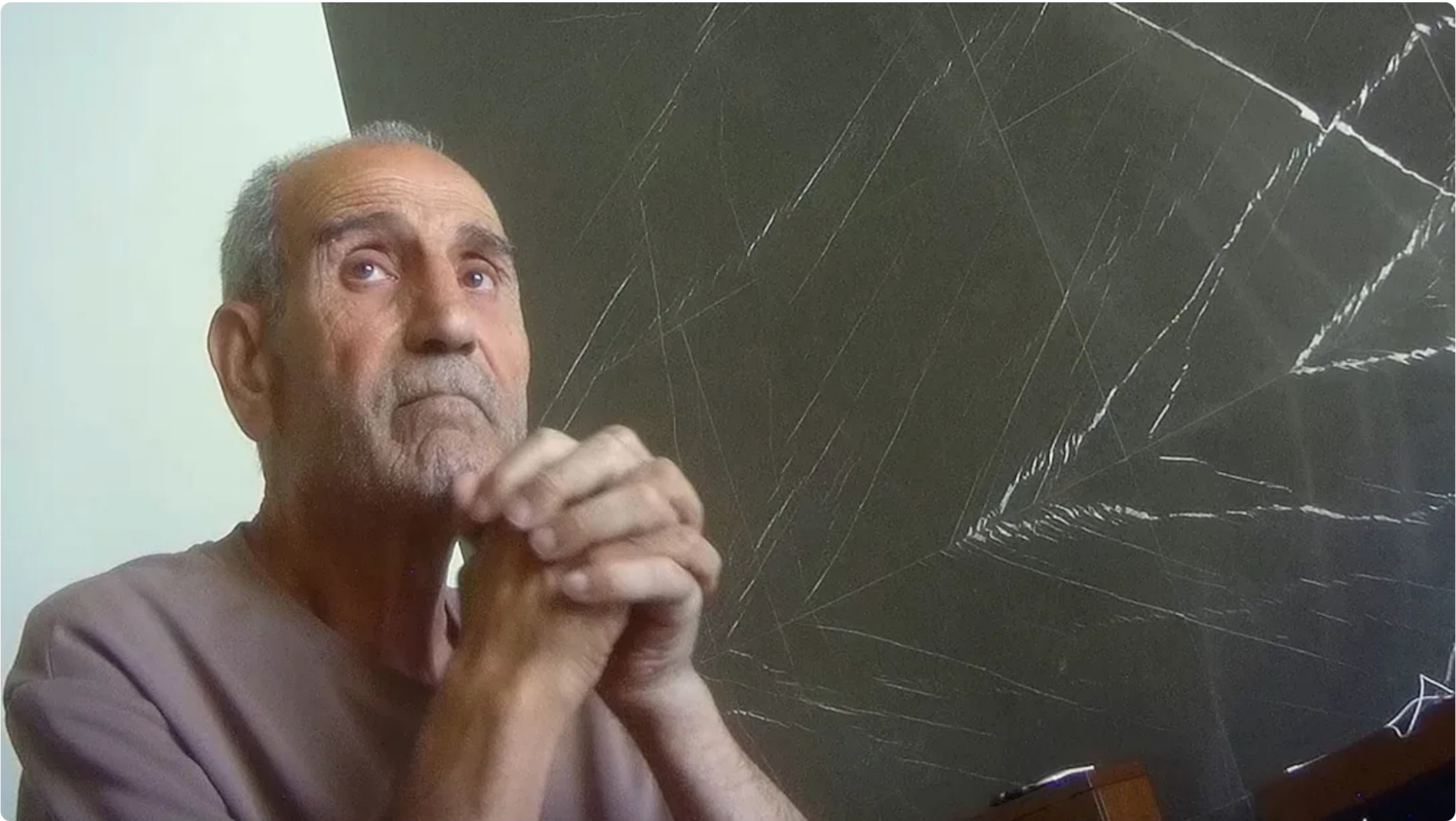
Bahloul recalled. “I never saw the guy again.”

This time, Tice was taken to Al-Hassan’s office across the road from Tahoune. From there, the trail went silent, according to multiple Syrian intelligence and NDF commanders.

“I stopped asking about the issue,” Nassour said. “In Syria if anyone hears that you’ve asked about what doesn’t concern you, you will be in trouble. I never asked again until the fall of the regime.”

Bahloul told CNN of Tice, “It’s one of the most mysterious cases I have ever experienced.”

The person who knows the key to the mystery is Al-Hassan.



Bassam Al-Hassan, advisor to former Syrian President Assad, held Austin Tice in 2012. He told CNN Tice has been dead since 2013. (Sarah El Sirgany/CNN)

Bassam Al-Hassan

Al-Hassan served as Assad’s adviser and created the notorious NDF militia, implicated in some of the worst crimes during Syria’s civil war. He was sanctioned by the UK and the EU in 2011 and by the US in 2014. The US sanctions note his multiple roles in the regime including “acting as the Syrian presidential representative to Syria’s Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), which is the government agency responsible for developing and producing non-conventional weapons and missiles.”

In 2023, French prosecutors issued an arrest warrant for Al-Hassan, Assad and others for complicity in war crimes over the use of chemical weapons against civilians in August 2013. The two attacks referenced in the case killed more than 1,000 people in the Damascus suburbs of Douma and Eastern Ghouta.

“He was sort of like a right-hand man to Bashar al-Assad, someone Bashar could absolutely trust, someone who Bashar could farm out his dirtiest jobs, his most unpleasant of tasks to,” said Economist journalist Gareth Browne who has covered Al-Hassan extensively since the fall of the regime.

Al-Hassan has refused to talk to journalists and the only photographs of him online were incorrect or very old. In September, CNN obtained a recent photo of him, and a tip about where he was hiding out — an upscale apartment complex in a suburb of Beirut.

A team from CNN spent an evening observing the buildings. One balcony and one man in particular appeared to match the photo. The next morning, CNN knocked on his door and asked him about Tice. He invited them in as soon as he heard Tice’s name.



A tip led a CNN team to Al-Hassan’s apartment in Lebanon. *(Sarah El Sirgany/CNN)*

During the conversation, Al-Hassan appeared rattled that CNN had found him and repeatedly asked who told where he lived. He explained to CNN that he had recently told a team from the FBI that he had been holding Tice when Al-Assad gave him the order to execute him. According to multiple sources with knowledge of the interrogation, Al-Hassan also claimed that he tried to push back on Assad’s order but that the then-president was adamant.

Multiple Syrians who know Al-Hassan disputed the likelihood of him challenging Assad.

“You could say whatever you like about Bassam, but he is not the courageous guy... I couldn’t imagine him giving such, you know, ‘Sir, we shouldn’t.’ No, he doesn’t give such advice,” Bahloul said.

Other sources told CNN that they question his motives for talking to the FBI. After the regime fell, the US government offered a reward of \$10 million for information on Tice. Al-Hassan told CNN that he was not seeking a monetary award for coming forward.

Sources also described Al-Hassan as cunning, Machiavellian, and not someone to be trusted. In many ways, Al-Hassan embodied the culture of the Assad era.

“You have to look at the nature of this regime. You know, these people are competing with each other. It’s riddled with rivalries. There are people lying

and deceiving each other, even though they’re nominally on the same side,” said Browne, the Economist reporter.



Austin Tice reported from Yabroud, Syria, in July 2012. He stayed with the family of activist Waseem Enawi. (*Waseem Enawi.*)

Behind the scenes

Both Nassour and Bahloul told CNN that when Tice was first captured Assad was pleased and saw him as a valuable card to be used in later negotiations with the US.

“Assad knew about Tice and knew he could use him in negotiations. It would be extremely stupid to kill him... to let go of a winning card in your hand,” Nassour said.

Others CNN spoke to believed it was plausible that Assad would order Tice’s execution, particularly after his escape.

Over the past 13 years, multiple US administrations made several offers to the Assad government in exchange for Tice’s release. Syrian negotiators were steadfast in their denial, even when US officials merely asked for a proof of life.

“It wasn’t logical for me. But I started to feel that there is something wrong happening around the case or around Austin,” General Abbas Ibrahim, Lebanon’s former spy chief, said of the failed negotiations during President Donald Trump’s first term.

A mediator who has negotiated the release of numerous Western hostages across the region, Ibrahim worked on Tice’s case through all US administrations starting with President Barack Obama’s until his retirement in 2023.

“The Americans were very interested in this case, and they were ready to pay any price to get [Tice] back,” Ibrahim said. “The regime in Syria had a big opportunity to save themselves [with] Austin, but they didn’t play this card because maybe they don’t have this card anymore,” he said.



A defaced portrait of Syria's ousted president Bashar Al-Assad hangs on a wall in the capital Damascus on June 2. (Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images)

Elusive justice

During CNN’s visit to Tahoune and Bassam Al-Hassan’s office across the road, it was clear that traces of what happened there 13 years ago were gone — not just lost in the looting and vandalism by crowds retaliating against years of oppression in December, but painted over by the horrors these compounds witnessed over the years.

In the months after the Assad dungeons were flung open last year, the hope to find Tice and tens of thousands of missing Syrians began fading. Those who hadn’t emerged were presumed dead. Many of their families refuse to officially accept this until the remains are found. They still hope that the truth, buried in secret graves and hidden in millions of old government documents, could provide closure one day.

For the Tice family, the search for Austin goes on.

It was only at the door on our way out that Al-Hassan’s voice cracked, saying he owed Tice’s mother an apology.

“Truly, it upsets me to remember it. I wish what happened hadn’t happened,” Al-Hassan said. He removed his glasses revealing blood-shot eyes. “It was a predicament that I was burdened with.”

Tice may simply be remembered as yet another victim of the endless lies and senseless cruelty of a ruthless regime.



Pins are seen with a hashtag calling for Austin Tice's release, during an event at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on August 14. (Alex Wroblewski/AFP/Getty Images)

-Additional reporting by journalist Zaher Jaber in Syria



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