



STATEMENT

JANUARY 4, 2023

WASHINGTON, D.C. – On Wednesday, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad held a meeting with United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Damascus, Syria, to discuss improving bilateral relations between the two countries. The Syrian Emergency Task Force condemns UAE's shameful normalization efforts with the Assad regime responsible for mass atrocities.

Since its military intervention in Syria in September 2015, one of Russia's major foreign policy goals has been to encourage normalization between Arab countries and the Assad government. In recent years UAE has continuously made efforts toward normalization despite the Assad regime's long record of mass human rights and international law violations. In 2018 the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus after seven years, followed by Sheikh Abdullah's first diplomatic visit to Syria in November 2021.

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Today's meeting in Damascus comes only ten months after Assad made his first trip to the UAE—his first diplomatic trip to an Arab country since the Syrian revolution began 11 years ago.

There is a concerning trend of normalization with Assad, whose government has been responsible for heinous violations of international law for more than a decade. The international community must stand strong against normalizing a leader whose legitimacy relies on the blood of his own people.

Since Syria's popular uprising against the Assad regime in 2011, an estimated 350,000 people have been killed. Tens of thousands of people, including children, have been arbitrarily detained and tortured by the regime forces. Families continue to search for information about the whereabouts of more than 102,000 missing loved ones in Syria, with the Assad regime responsible for over 85 percent of enforced disappearances.

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Over half of Syria's population has been displaced, with more than 6.9 million displaced inside the country. The Assad government and its allies continue to block essential humanitarian aid from reaching those in dire need.

The United States, as a notable ally and supplier of military aid to the UAE, cannot turn a blind eye to the Emirates' re-engagement with Assad or plans to open channels of investment and trade that would allow the regime to bury its horrific past and escape justice. The US must also investigate and reiterate compliance with the Caesar Act.

Normalizing ties with a regime responsible for arbitrary detention, torture, indiscriminate bombings, and chemical attacks is not only morally unjustifiable but also goes against our core international human rights values.

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