

Dr. Abdulkhalek Opening Statement

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

March 15, 2017

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, members of the committee: my name is Dr. Abdulkhalek. I'm an ophthalmologist from Aleppo, and was the director of M3 hospital, one of three hospitals the Syrian American Medical Society supported in besieged eastern Aleppo. This hospital was built in 2014, and constructed underground to protect the patients and staff from airstrikes. M3 was a small hospital, so we were often overwhelmed by the large number of patients and wounded arriving at our facility. We did our best to save as many lives as we could, but we were forced to make very difficult decisions. With the overwhelming number of wounded civilians and the limited resources that were available to us, we had to face the unimaginable task of deciding who to save, and who to leave to die. Can you imagine having to make this decision? Yet my colleagues all over the city and I faced this every single day. We asked for help from the international community many times. We communicated with UN agencies; we risked our safety and that of our families by appearing on international media. We did everything we could, yet help never arrived.

The UN system is clearly broken, as it has no means to enforce its mandates and hold perpetrators accountable for these crimes. I was one of three doctors from Aleppo assigned to negotiate a plan for medical evacuations with the UN and World Health Organization. At first, these negotiations were moving well, with the cooperation of many parties, including Russia. However, as the regime and its allies began to take more territory, the cooperation disappeared and the evacuations never occurred. Instead, the attacks on medical facilities, schools, and markets escalated.

With the destruction of the largest trauma hospital, known as M10, in the eastern part of Aleppo by early December, our small M3 hospital became one of two functioning hospitals in the city, providing care to more than 200,000 civilians,

including 85,000 children. Equipped with only one OR we had to expand to three ORs, but that was not enough. We had to use the floor of our operating rooms to accommodate two surgeries in each of them at the same time. Doctors were performing major surgeries on the floor, sometimes without anesthesia.

Last year, on December 11, as we were trying to save lives and care for victims of barrel bombing attacks, the hospital was attacked by a chlorine bomb. We immediately ran into the inner room, closed the door, and covered our faces. We then heard a knock on the main door, and encountered three men who were suffocating from the gas. We brought them whatever medicine we still had available. Thankfully, we were able to save their lives, but many others who were outside died from the gas. After this attack, many hospital staff had to leave, fearing for their lives. Everyone was afraid that a second bomb would strike again. The next day, another chlorine attack on the hospital. Most of the victims were children, and we only had one unit of oxygen. The medical staff worked tirelessly to try and pass the mask from one child to another, so that they wouldn't suffocate. These chlorine attacks occurred after repeated attempts by the regime and its allies to destroy the hospital using barrel bombs and cluster munitions had failed. Instead, they resorted to chemical attacks to drive us out.

I am asking you today to hold the perpetrators of these attacks accountable. Whether it be ISIS, the Syrian government, or any other actors, it must be made clear that attacks on healthcare and the use of chemical weapons on civilians and healthcare workers are unacceptable, and that international humanitarian law must be strictly enforced. This can't be the new norm in Syria.

I am also asking the US government to use its influence to help improve the UN aid delivery system. Currently, the aid is not reaching the people most in need, particularly in non-government areas. Instead, the aid system is being used to enrich government officials, as well as to punish civilians in non-government areas by denying them delivery of aid or removing essential items such as medications or baby formula. In Aleppo, aid for the city was disproportionately given to the western portion of the city. It even got to the point where residents of western

Aleppo would sell their excess rations to residents of eastern Aleppo, for extremely high prices. This is unacceptable. The UN aid delivery system must be fair and equal, and meet the needs of all the beneficiaries.

In Homs, the three-year siege has blocked the delivery of medical supplies, such as blood bags, serum bags, and antibiotics. In the past six months, the siege has extended to create a complete lack of movement for all materials and medications. The situation today is dire, as people now lack basic food elements, including bread and meat. There are many reported cases of malnutrition, particularly among children. Yet the world does nothing. In East Ghouta, which is also under siege by the regime, there were more than 30 patients in desperate need of kidney dialysis medication earlier this month, after their medication had run out due to lack of aid deliveries. We pleaded with the UN and other international actors to deliver the life-saving medication, but it wasn't until after three patients died that the medications were delivered. And even then, it was a SARC convoy, not a UN convoy, that entered the area.

Constant violations of international humanitarian law, regular use of chemical weapons against civilians, besiegement of civilian areas, manipulation of humanitarian aid, and forced displacement are facts, not claims. I myself witnessed or was a victim of every one of these heinous acts. I am here today to ask the American government for help. Do not let these acts continue. Do not let more innocent civilians suffer. Do not forget the human toll of this war- the refugees, the education gap, the destruction of the health care system. An entire generation has been lost. The world failed Aleppo. Now is your chance to help protect and save the millions of Syrians still caught in the middle of this conflict. Enforce international law; hold perpetrators of war crimes accountable; reform the UN aid system; make the protection of civilians and hospitals a priority. I ask you to be a voice for us. Don't fail us again.