

Dr. Farida Opening Statement

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

March 15, 2017

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am here today not only as a doctor, but as a wife, a mother, and a Syrian. Throughout the past six years, I have witnessed unspeakable horrors. I worked as an obstetrician in M2 hospital in Aleppo, which was in the opposition-held area of the city. There, together with my fellow health workers, I risked my life every day to save the lives of others. I refused to leave until the very last minute. I was one of the many victims of chemical attacks, siege, cluster munitions, bunker buster bombs, and finally, forced displacement.

I left Aleppo on December 12, 2016, along with my husband, Dr. Abdulkhalek, and our 8-year old daughter. In the months leading up to our displacement, I can only describe the events as hell. Bodies parts scattered on the streets; blood everywhere; constant bombardment by air attacks; buildings reduced to rubble. In my hospital, M2, my team and I treated many women with severe injuries. One woman came with shrapnel which penetrated her womb, cutting the 5-month-old fetus into two pieces. It took three doctors at once to stabilize the patient. We saved her life, but her unborn baby lay dead on a nearby table, split in two from the waist down. Many other women died because they couldn't make it to the hospital due to the lack of ambulances and fuel, or because of the dangerous conditions on the roads. Instead, they bled to death in their homes, along with their newborn children. The women who were fortunate enough to make it to the hospital often couldn't wait to leave.

A hospital was the most dangerous place in Aleppo. My unit in M2 hospital was on the third floor, so we were subjected to a daily barrage of rockets, barrel bombs, and cluster munitions. One day I was performing a cesarean section when a missile struck the fourth floor, causing the ceiling to partially collapse. The surgical staff

had to flee the room, but the doctor's couldn't because we were forced to clean debris out of the patient's abdominal cavity. Thankfully we were able to save her life.

After my hospital, M2, was partially destroyed by airstrikes, we tried to build a new hospital underground, but the seige prevented the materials from entering the city. I then moved to M3 hospital, where I worked until it was targeted by both airstrikes and chemical weapons. From there I moved to Al Quds hospital, which was the last remaining hospital in the city. Through all of this, I had my daughter at my side. As a mother, how am I supposed to explain all of this to an 8-year-old who has known nothing but violence, killing, and destruction? How am I supposed to protect her? I remember one day back in July when there was a chlorine attack near the hospital. She came running into the operating room, crying and unable to breath. I left the patient, gave her oxygen, and held her close. What else could I have done? This broke my heart. That feeling of powerless to protect my child had shaken me to this day.

On December 11, 2016 I was working at M3 hospital when a patient in labor arrived. The few remaining staff were making preparations to deliver her baby when a chlorine bomb hit the hospital. We were unable to deliver the baby there, so I made the decision to travel by ambulance across the city to Al-Quds hospital, the last hospital still in operation. This was the only way to save her life and the life of the baby. I said goodbye to my husband and daughter. When I left, I thought to myself that it would be the last time I would see them. The drive to Al-Quds was extremely dangerous, and the scene we encountered in the streets was pure carnage. Bodies everywhere; burning cars; collapsed buildings. Those images will never escape my head. Thankfully, we made it to the hospital and were able to deliver the baby. But I couldn't leave my family; I needed to go back to them. So the ambulance driver and I embarked on the treacherous drive back to M3, taking heavy fire from helicopters overhead. Thankfully we arrived unharmed. The next day, the doctor was shot while attempting to drive to the hospital to check in on my health.

I wish I could say that these atrocities and the plight of so many Syrian families was unique to Aleppo. Sadly, this is not the case. They are happening right now in other parts of Syria. Presently, more than 600,000 Syrians live under siege. This must end. Humanitarian access must be granted to these areas, and the international community must work together to end this practice once and for all. In Idlib, East Ghouta, Dara'a, Hama, and Homs, airstrikes have intensified, and humanitarian aid has been nearly nonexistent. Three hospitals have been targeted by airstrikes in the past two weeks, and one of SAMS nurses was killed by an airstrike last week. It is our duty as human beings to advocate to all involved parties on the ground to allow humanitarian access, and to finally hold those who violate international humanitarian law accountable.

Later this month, my family and I will return to Syria to continue our work at a hospital in Northern Syria. The reason is simple: it is our duty. As doctors, we have taken an oath to treat any and all patients, regardless of their affiliation. We have a moral obligation to try and save as many lives as possible, even if that means sacrificing our own. The Quran teaches us that: "to save one life is to save all of humanity." Work with us to save lives. If you want to do anything, do it now. There is no time to wait, as Syrians continue to die day after day. Thank you.