

## FORMER SYRIAN VICE PRESIDENT RIFAAT AL-ASSAD WILL STAND TRIAL IN SWITZERLAND ON CHARGES OF WAR CRIMES AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

**(Geneva, 12 March 2024) – Former Syrian Vice-President Rifaat al-Assad will stand trial in Switzerland for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) has just [charged](#) him with ordering homicides, acts of torture, cruel treatments and illegal detentions perpetrated in the course of the February 1982 massacre in the city of Hama, Syria. With today’s indictment, the victims can finally look forward to justice being done. Rifaat al-Assad, the uncle of current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, will be one of the highest-ranking government officials ever to be tried for international crimes based on the principle of universal jurisdiction.**

After issuing an international arrest warrant against Rifaat al-Assad in November 2021, the OAG indicted him on 11 March 2024 for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The proceedings concern the massive war crimes committed in the city of Hama, Syria, in February 1982 by the Defense brigades. The three weeks siege and assault of the city led to the death of between 10,000 and 40,000 people, many of whom civilians, as well as to numerous acts of torture, sexual violence and enforced disappearances. At the time, Rifaat al-Assad was the commander of the Defense brigades, the Vice-President of Syria, as well as the head of operations in Hama.

*“At the beginning, I could not even dream about having Rifaat al-Assad being brought to trial. The indictment shows that such powerful persons can be brought to justice and I want everyone to know what the al-Assad regime did to the Syrian people. My fight is for all the Syrians”,* said one of the three plaintiffs in the case, expressing the feeling of all survivors of the assault, who have been waiting for this moment for over 40 years now.

In 2013, TRIAL International filed a criminal denunciation in Switzerland against Rifaat al-Assad, that quickly led to the opening of a formal investigation. Since then, the accused, who was residing in neighboring France, persistently refused to testify before the Swiss prosecuting authorities, under various pretexts. He fled back to Syria in October 2021, to escape a 4-year prison sentence handed down by French courts for various financial crimes, but also his forthcoming audition by the OAG, that was about to be organized, based on a mutual legal assistance request from Switzerland to France.

Philip Grant, Executive Director of TRIAL International welcomed the historical indictment of such a prominent figure: *“It’s another step for justice for the Syrian people! This case, along with past and ongoing groundbreaking proceedings, notably in [Germany](#) and [France](#), is looking at the responsibility of the highest Syrian officials and strongly contributes to shedding light on the crimes committed by the al-Assad’s clan against its own people during the past decades”*.

The criminal investigation and forthcoming trial against the so-called “Butcher of Hama” are possible thanks to the application of the principle of [universal jurisdiction](#), which allows States to investigate and prosecute persons suspected of having committed international crimes, irrespective of where the crimes were committed and the nationality of either suspects or victims.

TRIAL International recalls the Swiss authorities that time is of the essence and plays against justice, as Rifaat al-Assad is aging. More than 40 years after the massacre of Hama, Rifaat al-Assad’s trial must take place at the earliest possible moment, irrespective of the fact that Rifaat al-Assad will very likely decide not to attend his own trial.

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