

Discussion
Guide

82

NAMES

SYRIA,
PLEASE DON'T
FORGET US

Featuring Mansour Omari
Directed by Maziar Bahari

ushmm.org/82names
#82Names

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

WILLIAM LEVINE FAMILY INSTITUTE
FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

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COVER: Syrian prisoners recorded their names on this scrap of fabric in hopes that one of them would be able to smuggle it out—that person was Mansour Omari. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

Synopsis

82 Names: Syria, Please Don't Forget Us is a documentary film that traces the journey of Mansour Omari, a survivor of torture and imprisonment in Syria. When Mansour was released from prison, he smuggled out scraps of cloth sewn within the shirt he was wearing. The names of his cellmates are written on them with an ink made from blood and rust.

The film follows Mansour as he seeks to rebuild his life in exile. As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington prepares to display the cloths, he visits sites in Germany that memorialize the victims of the Holocaust and he reflects on how to bring attention to the brutal regime he escaped—and how to counter extremist ideology in the future.

Statement from the Museum Director

Our newest film, **82 Names: Syria, Please Don't Forget Us**, has a special significance to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This film brings together two crucial strands of the Museum's educational efforts. First, it highlights our work to educate the public about the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Assad regime against its own civilians, about which the Museum recently featured a powerful exhibition based on the story of Mansour Omari, the subject of this film. The exhibition has been visited by over 300,000 people, including all members of the UN Security Council. Second, the film is a way to bring Holocaust education to a global audience and is especially relevant to audiences in the Middle East and Iran, where there is widespread Holocaust distortion and misinformation.

This film also brought together two important Museum partners, Mansour Omari, a survivor of the Assad regime, and Maziar Bahari, who has his own story of imprisonment and torture, in his case by the Iranian regime. For the past few years, Maziar has worked closely with the Museum to bring stories from the Holocaust to the Iranian public. When Mansour approached the Museum with the cloths he smuggled out of a Syrian prison bearing the names of his 82 cellmates, we immediately understood their power. Over and over again we have heard Holocaust survivors say: remember me, don't forget me, tell my story. The Nazis wanted to obliterate the individuality of their victims. They wanted to make their victims a mass statistic that could easily be forgotten. But by bringing out their names, we restore to them a bit of the dignity and individuality that the Nazis tried to take away. Through his brave act, Mansour has done the same for the victims of the Assad regime.

Sara J. Bloomfield

Statement from the Director of 82 Names

At the opening ceremony of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on a cold April day in 1993, Elie Wiesel, one of the museum's founders, called on the United States to confront the ethnic cleansing taking place in Bosnia at the time. He said, "I have been in the former Yugoslavia last fall. I cannot sleep since for what I have seen.... People fight each other and children die. Why? Something, anything must be done." Wiesel wasn't interested in a museum that was only about the relics of the past. He wanted it "to bring the living and the dead together in a spirit of reconciliation." Since 1993, the Museum has done just that. It has held exhibitions about genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. And last December, it opened the exhibition Syria: Please Don't Forget Us, which ran through August 2018.

As an Iranian, I'm ashamed that the government of my country has been one of the main enablers of the Assad regime. When I came across the Syria exhibition at the Museum, I knew I had to make a film about its subject, Mansour Omari, a survivor of imprisonment and torture by the Assad regime. Mansour's stories tell us about the isolation and humiliation endured by prisoners in Syrian jails. Mansour's vision now is to open a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Assad regime and other groups in Syria, inspired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In my film, we see Mansour listening to a Holocaust survivor who spent months in Auschwitz, where her parents and siblings perished. Mansour learns about the importance of preserving the past, and also about how Germany has become a tolerant society, with one of the largest Holocaust memorials in the world. As one German tells Mansour, "Germany was a killing field, and in order to build a life in it again, you need to address the killing field." One of Mansour's main achievements documented in the film is his ability to remain human despite what happened to him. He shows us that no matter who we are and where we are from we should care about the Holocaust and learn about it. And his courage in saying so also means that we—all of us, as human beings—should care about the Syrian tragedy today and try to find a way to stop it.

Maziar Bahari

About the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

A living memorial to the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity. Federal support guarantees the Museum's permanent place on the National Mall, and its far-reaching educational programs and global impact are made possible by generous private donors. Located among our national monuments to freedom on the National Mall, the Museum provides a powerful lesson in the fragility of freedom and the need for vigilance in preserving democratic values. The Museum exposes millions of people each year to the dangers of unchecked hatred and the need to prevent genocide, and encourages people to act, cultivating a sense of moral responsibility among our citizens so that they will respond to the monumental challenges that confront our world.

As Elie Wiesel wrote in the Museum's founding document: "A memorial unresponsive to the future would violate the memory of the past." A core part of the Museum's mission is to be a voice for victims of mass atrocities, which the Jews of Europe did not have during the 1930s–40s. To fulfill that role, the Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide works to educate, engage, and inspire the public to learn more about past genocides—such as those in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur—and to consider what they can do to prevent such atrocities in the future. The Simon-Skjodt Center also works to galvanize policy makers both in the United States and around the world to create the tools and structures needed to avert the next crisis. The Syrian government is perpetrating well-documented crimes against humanity against its own citizens. More than 500,000 people have been killed and 11 million have fled their homes. The Museum is working to shed light on these atrocities and is working with Mansour Omari and other Syrians to tell their stories and preserve evidence of these crimes

Today we face mass atrocities and threats of genocide in several parts of the world, as well as an alarming rise in Holocaust denial and antisemitism—even in the very lands where the Holocaust happened. This is occurring just as we approach a time when Holocaust survivors and other eyewitnesses will no longer be alive. Through the William Levine Family Institute for Holocaust Education, the Museum works closely with many key segments of society who will affect the future of our nation. By studying the choices made by individuals and institutions during the Holocaust, professionals from the fields of law enforcement, the judiciary, and the military, as well as diplomacy, medicine, education, and religion, gain fresh insight into their own responsibilities today. The Museum also sponsors onsite and traveling exhibitions, educational outreach for teachers and students, and Holocaust commemorations, including the nation's annual observance of the Days of Remembrance in the US Capitol. The Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies fosters the continued growth and vitality of the field of Holocaust studies.

A living memorial to the Holocaust, the Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.

Mansour Omari



US Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Syrian government is detaining more than 100,000 men, women, and children; they are known as “the disappeared,” because their families are not told of their fates. Those in custody are starved, beaten, and tortured. Many have been killed.

Mansour Omari, a human rights activist, was detained for almost a year. He and his fellow prisoners mixed rust from prison bars with their own blood to create ink, and then used a chicken bone as a writing implement to record the names of 82 fellow prisoners on five scraps of cloth. They hoped this information could be smuggled out and their families would learn of their whereabouts. Mansour was able to do just that and is now sharing them with the world.

After his release, Mansour contacted the families of those detained, and now uses the cloths to educate the public about the conflict in Syria and the government’s strategy of “disappearing” people. He also hopes, one day, to use the cloths as evidence of the crimes committed by the Assad regime to hold perpetrators in Syria accountable for mass atrocities against civilians. Mansour brought these artifacts to the Museum, whose conservators aided in their preservation to help tell this story. The five pieces of cloth, as well as the notebook Mansour used to transport them, were on display at the Museum through August 2018.

Context for 82 Names

Since its outbreak in March 2011, the conflict in Syria has cost the lives of nearly 500,000 people, displaced more than half the country's population, and involved numerous atrocities and crimes against humanity. Seven decades after the Holocaust and despite promises of "Never Again," a regime is targeting its own people while the international community stands by. The conflict is not simply a civil war between opposing armed forces. What began as a democratic uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime has transformed into a violent struggle between local, national, regional, and international forces, in which the Syrian government, extremist groups, and outside actors perpetrate atrocities against civilians as a systematic strategy of war.

Members of Syria's Sunni Muslim majority have borne the brunt of the Syrian government's campaign of mass atrocities, while some of the forces opposing the regime have committed atrocities against Syrian civilians. In addition, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which took advantage of the chaos by seizing territory in the spring of 2013, has waged a campaign of persecution and horrific brutality against religious communities and others who do not ascribe to its brand of Islamist extremism. The uprising's transformation into a sectarian conflict in 2012 saw a dramatic rise in the civilian death toll. Civilians have been directly targeted by multiple actors in Syria, especially by forces loyal to the Assad regime, and their Russian and Iranian allies. There has thus far been no consequence to the commission of mass atrocities against civilians, increasing the risk that such abuses will continue.

The result of this conflict is a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions. Every day, Syrian men, women, and children are falling victim to the constant bombardment of their neighborhoods, schools, markets, and hospitals. They are being subjected to starvation, exposure, preventable diseases, and lack of medical care; to enforced disappearances; to chemical weapons attacks—which are banned under international law—and to torture, rape, and killings. The rapidly rising number of Syrian refugees is over 5.5 million, and another 6.1 million are internally displaced.

The Syrian people are not the only ones endangered by the conflict. The escalation of the fighting has exacerbated political and military tensions throughout the region. These tensions, combined with the burden of caring for millions of refugees, threaten to destabilize neighboring countries and lead to wider war. Syria's humanitarian crisis also has grave implications for security and other interests throughout the world.

Since the outbreak of violence in Syria in 2011, the Museum has sought to educate the general public on the crimes against humanity and war crimes being committed against Syrian civilians by the Assad regime and its allies, stimulate policy considerations for efforts to save civilian lives there, give voice to the victims, and support efforts to pursue justice for these crimes. All of the Museum's activities on Syria are predicated on the belief that the global response to the crisis has been woefully insufficient and a stain on our collective conscience.

Additional Resources

- [Simon-Skjodt Center Releases Report about Ongoing Risks in Syria](#)
- [Is the Worst Yet to Come? Event Marks Seven Years of Conflict in Syria](#)
- [Holocaust Survivor Irene Weiss Delivers Remarks on Seventh Anniversary of Conflict in Syria](#)

Discussion Questions

The questions can help you begin a discussion following a screening of the film. We encourage you to add to or amend this list.

1. Mansour risked his life to share the names of those detained with him. Why was it so important to him that these cloths be shared? What makes them so meaningful for him and powerful for us?
2. Mansour is a refugee fleeing persecution. How might the causes and responses of the world to those fleeing persecution from the Nazi regime help inform our responses today?
3. In exile from Syria, Mansour is trying to raise awareness of the crimes occurring in his country. How can his story inspire you to act to confront these crimes?
4. How might examining the Holocaust shape the choices that individuals and governments make in responding to mass atrocities today?
5. Holocaust survivor Irene Weiss was interviewed in the film. As a prisoner in Auschwitz, Irene thought that no one came to her aid because no one knew what was happening to her and her fellow prisoners. What were some of the obstacles that prevented people in the 1930s and 1940s from stopping the Nazi regime from murdering the Jews of Europe and millions of other innocent victims? Do those obstacles still exist today when it comes to taking action to help others in peril? What might we do to break down or diminish those obstacles?
6. How do we ensure that “Never Again” is not a hollow promise?