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GERMANY JAILS SYRIAN FOR 10 YEARS FOR ASSAD-ERA WAR CRIMES

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A German court handed a 10-year jail term to a Syrian former militia leader on Wednesday for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed under former president Bashar al-Assad.

The man, named only as Ahmad H., 47, had come to Germany in 2016 at the height of the influx of migrants to Europe.

Assad was toppled last week by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and Berlin has since warned that his supporters will continue to face justice in Germany for crimes they committed.

Ahmad H. was found guilty of crimes including torture, deprivation of liberty and enslavement, a spokeswoman for the higher regional court in Hamburg told AFP.

Prosecutors said he carried out the crimes between 2012 and 2015 as a local leader of the pro-government "shabiha" militia in Damascus tasked with helping to crush dissent.

The militia operated checkpoints where "people were arrested arbitrarily so that they or their family members could be extorted for money, committed to forced labour or tortured", they said.

The fighters also plundered the homes of regime opponents, sold the spoils and kept the profits, they added, charging that Ahmad H. took part "personally in the abuse of civilians".

When Ahmad H. was detained in Germany in July 2023, the Washington-based Syrian Justice & Accountability Center, which tracks human rights abuses in Syria, said its investigations had led to the arrest.

It had launched its probe after a witness told the agency in May 2020 that the suspect was living in Germany.

Europe's biggest economy, then ruled by chancellor Angela Merkel, granted safe haven to hundreds of thousands of Syrians during the 2015-16 refugee influx.

NGOs warned at the time of the danger that militiamen accused of committing some of the most barbaric atrocities against civilians for Assad's government were arriving incognito in Europe and obtaining asylum.

Germany has previously used the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows the prosecution of certain grave crimes regardless of where they took place, to try Syrians over atrocities committed during the civil war.

In January 2022, Germany jailed former Syrian colonel Anwar Raslan for life in the first international trial over state-sponsored torture in Syrian prisons.

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