

The Media Digest of the Victim Support Project

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Demonstration in front of ICJ, The Hague, The Netherlands
10 Octobre 2023

General introduction:

After 12 years of conflict in Syria, enforced disappearances are still unresolved with no serious solutions.

[Syrian human rights organizations](#) and civil society organizations documented more than 111,000 individual cases from March 2011 until August 2022, while the International Center for Missing Persons estimated that there were more than 23,000 cases of disappearance among Syrian men and women.

With the lack of clarity in the path of justice and accountability in Syria, and to ensure that cases of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance are not overlooked in the paths of justice in the future, several associations established by families and individuals of missing persons, with the support of human rights organizations and civil society organizations concerned with the issue of disappeared men and women, have been organized locally in countries neighboring to Syria and diaspora countries to lead the advocacy process either inside or outside Syria.

These associations work to ensure the centrality of the voices of male and female survivors and victims' families in the Syrian political process, in addition to ensuring their involvement in the fields of justice and advocacy. These associations include:

Overview of victims' associations:

Families for Freedom:

"Families for Freedom" is a movement that brings together families of detainees and forcibly missing persons who lost their sons and daughters in separate ways at the hands of various parties to the Syrian conflict.

This movement was launched in Geneva in February 2017 by five women from the families of male and female detainees, who forcibly disappeared men and women in Syria.

So far, the movement is working to enhance public awareness to include every family with a member who has been arrested, detained, or forcibly disappeared, regardless of race, religion, sect, political or ideological belief, with the aim of putting pressure on all parties in the Syrian conflict, whether local or international, to comply with the demands of the families of male and female detainees and forcibly disappeared men and women.

Since 2017, "Families for Freedom" has led more than 100 promotional campaigns at the local and international levels with the participation of 250 families of missing persons in Syria and hundreds of Syrian male and female activists in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Germany, the United States, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom.

Caesar Families Association:

The "Caesar Families Association" was formed from the families of the victims who died under torture, and they were identified through photos leaked by [Caesar](#), the Syrian photographer who shared photos documenting acts of torture in Syrian prisons.

This association emphasizes the demand for the prosecution of lawbreakers in Syria, and considers all victims of the "Syrian Arab Republic" who appeared in Caesar's photographs to be sons and daughters of "Caesar families."

The Association's Documentation Department works extensively to help Syrian families identify photos of their loved ones in Caesar's photos and provide them with legal support.

The Association pledges to continue demanding rights until all prisoners of conscience are released and to contribute to building civil peace in Syria. It is also committed to advancing truth and justice in the issue of male and female detainees in Syria.

The association was founded in February 2018 by 11 families, and has expanded to include about 85 families, and the number of affiliated families is still increasing.

Massar:

The "Massar Families Association" was established in April 2019, initially under the name "Coalition of Families of Persons Abducted by the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS)", as it was formed from relatives of people kidnapped by ISIS during its control of areas in Syria between 2013 and 2019. Since its inception, Massar has been working on three axes: Documenting the cases of abductees and the names of the violators, and networking with the families of the abductees, male and female, to come up with organized and effective work on their case, in addition to advocating for the issue of the abductees and attaching it to the general issue of missing men and women in Syria.

Taafi initiative:

“Taafi” was founded in 2017 by male and female survivors of arbitrary detention in Syria. It aims to provide support and protection to individuals who have escaped the restrictions of detention and to enable them to resume their struggle towards justice, accountability, and the rights of victims by motivating them in “Taafi’s” advocacy efforts to stop arbitrary detention and torture and guaranteeing freedom of expression and human rights.

Regional and international updates on the issue of forcibly missing men and women in Syria:



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The year 2023 witnessed several achievements at the human rights and international levels, which came as a result of advocacy efforts led by Syrian civil society organizations and victims’ associations over the past years, the most important of which were:

Approval of the United Nations General Assembly in favor of establishing an independent foundation for missing persons in Syria:

Members of the United Nations General Assembly voted on Resolution A/77/L.79 at its session on 29 June 2023.

The decision stipulates the establishment of an independent foundation concerned with the issue of missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and aims to strengthen efforts and take the necessary measures to reveal the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, and to identify the identities of those who died under torture. The decision also seeks to strengthen the rights of the families and relatives of the victims, and to provide them with support in knowing the truth after many years of loss.

Fadwa Mahmoud from “Families for Freedom” described the new foundation as “a light at the end of the tunnel.” She also expressed her regret that the reality is still unknown for a large number of Syrian families living inside and outside Syria and suffering from the pain of not knowing the fate of their loved ones.

The importance of this decision comes from the fact that it is a historic victory for the efforts of male and female survivors, the families of the victims, and their connections, in addition to the efforts of Syrian human rights organizations. It is also considered an essential starting point for revealing the fate of tens of thousands of forcibly disappeared men and women and those missing in Syria.

Many victims' associations welcomed, through a collective statement, the establishment of this foundation.

You can read the full statement [here](#):

An arrest warrant against Bashar al-Assad and three senior officers on charges of using chemical weapons:

On November 15, 2023, criminal investigation judges in France issued arrest warrants for Bashar al-Assad, the "President of the Syrian Arab Republic" and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and Maher al-Assad, the de facto commander of the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army.

Arrest warrants were also issued against Brigadier General Ghassan Abbas, Director of Branch 450 of the Center for Syrian Scientific Studies and Research, and Brigadier Bassam Al-Hassan, Advisor to the President of the Republic for Strategic Affairs and liaison officer between the Presidential Palace and the Syrian Scientific Research Center.

These arrest warrants indicate the legal qualifications for complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes, on charges of using banned chemical weapons against civilians in the city of Douma and the Eastern Ghouta region in the Damascus countryside in August 2013, which resulted in more than 1,000 victims. Based on testimonies from male and female survivors of chemical attacks and their efforts to reach justice, and based on the testimonies of male and female Syrian victims in March 2021, the investigation was opened based on a criminal complaint filed by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) and with the support of the Syrian Archive and the "Open Society Justice" initiative as well as Advocates for Civil Rights Association, which joined the investigation as civil parties, as well as members of the Association for Victims of Chemical Weapons (AVCW).

This judicial action follows a criminal investigation conducted by the specialized unit for crimes against humanity and war crimes of the court in Paris.

Many organizations working in civil and human rights affairs welcomed the issuance of arrest warrants. Several associations issued a statement welcoming the issuance of these warrants. To view the statement, follow this link [here](#):

Start of Hearings in the lawsuit of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Canada against the Syrian Arab Republic:



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The first hearing of the joint case brought by the Government of Canada and the Kingdom of the Netherlands against the Syrian Arab Republic was held on October 10, 2023, to prosecute violations and abuses pursuant to the Convention against Torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

After Canada and the Netherlands referred the case to the International Court of Justice, the two parties requested the imposition of interim measures, which the court must consider as a matter of urgency, despite the postponement of the hearings from July to October 2023.

The request of the two plaintiffs was based on the principle that any state that is a party to the Statute of the Court has the right to request the imposition of these measures.

Later, the “Syrian government” informed the court of its non-attendance and absence from the hearings, which led to the cancellation of the remaining hearings, which were scheduled for noon on the same day and the following day.

A set of measures were proposed, which were requested by Syrian civil society organizations and victims’ associations in a joint letter addressed to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Canadian government, which was signed by [“85” organizations and associations:](#)

The first is to demand that the Syrian government take effective measures within its capabilities to prevent acts of torture by official bodies and organizations under its control, and to ensure the preservation and prevention of the destruction of any evidence related to accusations of acts that fall within the scope of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment, and to end its use of torture and detention of people.

Victims’ Associations also welcomed a statement about the decision of the International Court of Justice on Thursday, November 16, against the “Syrian Arab Republic” to stop torture. To view the statement follow the link [here:](#)

During the days of the trial, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression supported the attendance of members of the “Caesar Families Association”, “Families for Freedom” and “Taafi” at the hearing at the International Court of Justice in The Hague/Netherlands, and organized multiple events and vigils to recall the issue of torture and arbitrary detention, and the enforced disappearance practiced by the “Syrian Arab Republic”, carrying with them pictures of their family members to shed light on their tragedy.

In conjunction with the session, the families of male and female detainees met in the city of Azaz, Syria under the coordination of “Families for Freedom.” Moreover, Taafi also coordinated Afrin, and 3 other points in the city of Suwayda to participate in solidarity demonstrations in support of the hearings in The Hague.

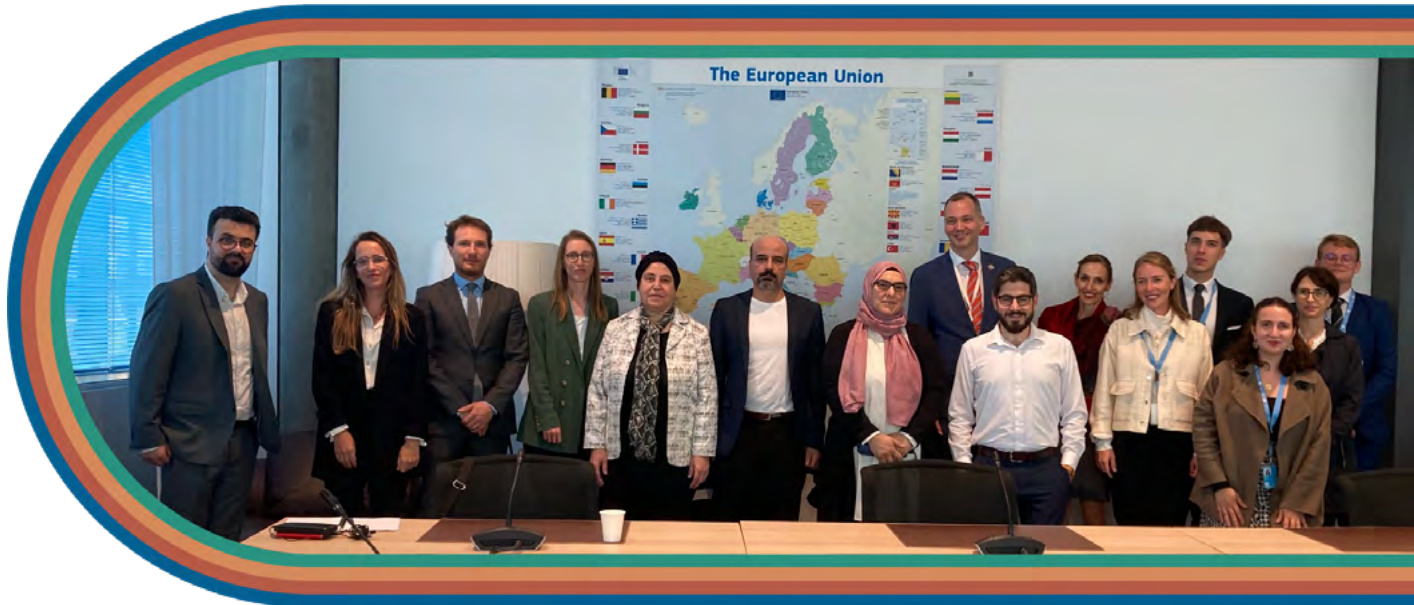
Abolition of the Military Field Court in Syria:

Decree No. 32 was issued on September 3, 2023, repealing Decree No. 109 issued in 1968, and its amendments, relating to the establishment of military field courts in Syria.

These courts were dedicated at the beginning of the demonstrations and protests in 2011 as a tool for killing and torturing detainees and a means of legislating executions and implementing unjust sentences against opponents of the Syrian regime, as the number of civilians is estimated at thousands who died under their rulings according to statistics from the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. It is feared that the decree to abolish the court will be used as a pretext for impunity for “the Syrian Arab Republic”, or for the destruction of the court’s archives, or the loss of very important evidence about the rulings, numbers, and fate of male and female convicts. The decree did not stipulate that the files of previous cases be referred to the military judiciary, and did not include any reference to the fate of court records.

Achievements section:

Advocacy Activities:



Meeting between VGs and reps of EU states
Geneva, Switzerland - 18 September 2023

Several meetings and participations on the sidelines of the 54th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva:

With the support of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, “Massar, Caesar, Taafi, and Families for Freedom” participated on September 18, 2023 in some sessions and side activities during the 54th session of the Human Rights Council during the days devoted to talking about enforced disappearance, with the support of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

Including, the meeting with the Permanent Mission of the European Union to the United Nations in Geneva and representatives of 12 permanent missions to the United Nations in Geneva.

In its interventions, the participating delegation focused on the issue of enforced disappearance in Syria, as one of the humanitarian issues that involve all the parties to the conflict, and on the importance of supporting the international institution concerned with the disappeared, in addition to answering questions from male and female representatives of the missions of the participating countries.

The delegation also discussed the level of challenges and fears that families face in communicating with United Nations teams and institutions, and the humanitarian aspect of the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared people in Syria.

The delegation also stressed the importance of securing a headquarters for this institution so that it does not affect the conduct of its work, securing financial support, and appointing a high-level representative to head it, no less prestigious than the Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Some members of the delegation also presented part of their personal experiences with enforced disappearance.

Heba Al-Hamid from the “Association of the Families of Persons Abducted by the Islamic State (ISIS) - Massar” participated in an oral [intervention in the interactive](#) dialogue sessions on truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence, in which she stressed the demand of the families of the victims that the institution concerned with missing persons in Syria shall not be merely an item in formalities for peace in Syria, and to be effective and independent, able to provide answers to the families of the missing, regardless of the perpetrator of the violation. The Institution should also should include missing persons inside and outside Syria.

“Bayan Rayhan” from “Families for Freedom Association” also presented [a joint oral intervention](#) calling for revealing the fate of the forcibly disappeared men and women and pressing for the release of male and female detainees to put an end to the pain experienced by thousands of Syrian families, in order to contribute to the path of justice and strengthen peace efforts in Syria.

[In a video-recorded intervention](#), Maryam Al-Hallaq from the “Caesar Families Association” probed on arbitrary arrest, which is often the beginning of the loss of victims and their forced disappearance. Other times, it leads to victims dying due to torture in detention centers. She also focused on the struggle of the families of the victims and the male and female survivors to establish an international institution concerned with revealing the fate of these victims. She called on the Council and the member states to press for the release of male and female detainees, reveal the fate of the disappeared, and contribute to the process of redressing the victims and strengthening peace efforts in Syria.

In the same context, the “Massar Association” and the “Truth and Justice Charter” associations coordinated actions within a long-term work plan, where most of the association’s collective activities were focused in the fields of advocacy and media.

These actions primarily targeted countries, international organizations and UN agencies, in addition to associations of families and victims from other countries and societies, such as Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, and Guatemala, in order to gain support for the demand of associations of families and survivors to establish an international institution concerned with the affairs of missing persons in Syria and to enrich the experiences of the associations of the charter and raising its level in the areas of networking and lobbying, as the number of these actions has increased in recent months.

The “Massar Families” association organized several activities in the fields of advocacy and media campaigns, which covered all of the basic objectives of the association. The activities included issues of continuous and periodic communication with the rapporteurs concerned with the files of missing persons as well as with the UN and international mechanisms and institutions related to the files of missing persons in Syria and with Syrian Civil Society Organizations.

It also covered, through media campaigns and written and visual reports, several issues related to the issue of kidnapped men and women at the hands of the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), such as the unjust and destructive treatment with mass graves and recalling incidents of kidnapping and mass massacres committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) in Al-Mabouja area in the eastern countryside of the city of Hama, and Al-Baghiliyah and Al-Shaitat in the western and eastern countryside of the city of Deir ez-Zor.

In the field of advocacy, the “Taafi Initiative” is working on a long-term project that aims to formulate the vision of survivors of detention and torture to determine the limits and forms of reparations processes, ensure their effective participation in them, and contribute to developing cognitive frameworks that contribute to building an informed and effective policy and advocacy base to ensure Victims’ rights.

In this context, three physical discussion sessions were held for June and July 2023 with a group of male and female survivors of arbitrary detention, with the participation of experts in the reparations process, to establish a knowledge base about the opportunities for risks of working on the project's temporary measures with the presence of violators in authority and possibility to use the confiscated and frozen assets of individual criminals for the benefit of such measures.

Public opinion mobilization activities:

The tenth anniversary of the chemical massacre:

In conjunction with the tenth anniversary of the chemical massacre, on August 21, 2023, a delegation of Syrian civil society members met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the associations of the families of the forcibly disappeared men and women in Ukraine, and the male and female political prisoners kidnapped and detained by Russia in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

The attendees presented personal stories and lessons learned from Syria and Ukraine, establishing a joint solidarity campaign demanding justice for all female political prisoners and detainees around the world.

International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearance:

In commemoration of the International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearance, which falls on August 30, Families for Freedom organized solidarity vigils in multiple areas inside Syria in the city of Idlib and its countryside, the city of Azaz, and Jindires, through which members of the Association gathered and expressed their demands regarding their missing and forcibly disappeared loved ones.

This stand is considered part of the ongoing efforts of families to reveal the fate of their loved ones and demand their basic rights. These activities aim to raise awareness about the problem of enforced disappearance and press for answers about the fate of missing Syrians.

"Families for Freedom" participated in the International Day of the Forcibly Disappeared with a group of representatives from Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Widad Halawani from the Committee of Families of the Kidnapped and Missing Persons in Lebanon expressed her thanks to "Families for Freedom": "I would like to thank Fadwa and the families of missing Syrian women and men for their success in reaching a resolution at the United Nations on the mechanism for dealing with missing men and women, and we hope that we can do the same."

This meeting formed a state of solidarity between families, and those gathered demanded answers about the missing persons.



"Freedom Bus" raising pictures of detainees
Berlin - Germany , March 2023

Freedom Bus:

As part of its advocacy and coordination efforts, Families for Freedom invited the family members of [Mazen and Patrick Al-Dabbagh](#), who were killed in Syrian government prisons, to join its group on the "Freedom Bus" trip to Paris on March 29, 2023.

The families hung pictures of male and female detainees and disappeared men and women in Syria, stressing their desire to convey their message to the public.

It is also worth noting that the War Crimes Unit of the Paris Judicial Court brought charges against three senior officials in the Syrian government of complicity in crimes against humanity, against the backdrop of the killing of Mazen and Patrick Al-Dabbagh, who were forcibly disappeared in 2013.

Projects to support the issue of missing persons, including support for families and victims:

Capacity building:

Under the umbrella of the Associations Support Project, the "Caesar Families Association" worked to support 7 families from the association to obtain scholarships that would enable them to continue their studies and educational attainment, improve the economic level and secure a more stable future within the available resources in northern Syria, Lebanon and Turkey.

According to its vision, the "Recovery" initiative sought to provide economic support to male and female survivors by providing grants to support capacity building through vocational training, as part of a participatory plan with male and female survivors. It aims to improve their chances of obtaining jobs, and to provide an aspect that may contribute to their return to the field of advocacy and support the cause of male and female detainees in Syria and the struggle for human rights.

In the same context, 26 grants were provided to survivors of detention to recover from the effects of the earthquake that occurred in 2023.

Psychological support projects:

Within the psychological support plan for male and female survivors of arbitrary detention, the “Taafi” initiative conducted some therapeutic documentation sessions using cognitive tools and therapeutic techniques used in psychological support mechanisms that contribute to documenting experiences of detention, and then presenting these stories in a literary framework through creative narrative texts attached to artistic drawings inspired by events. The stories and drawings were published on the Taafi website at the end of October 2023.

To view the stories, you can visit the link [here](#)

Verbal memory:

Because of the importance of oral history and building a true narrative of accounts of arbitrary detention, the “Taafi” initiative recorded podcast episodes with male and female survivors of detention, through which their ideas and narratives were discussed about the methods of resistance and survival that they followed inside Syrian prisons, and their endeavors to create a parallel world capable of expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of the cell, and not to submit to the will of the jailer due to his desire to create psychological and physical isolation for the detainees. These stories and drawings were published on the “Taafi” website at the end of the tenth month of 2023.

To view the stories, you can visit the link [here](#)

In the context of scientific research, “Taafi” initiative issued a lengthy study on 12/18/2023 in three languages: English, Arabic, and Kurdish. This research is concerned with the issue of violation of the housing, land, and property rights of male and female survivors of detention and its impact on their social relationships, based on questionnaires and a survey that included the experiences of male and female survivors in this context.

To view the research, please visit the link [here](#)

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المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير
Navenda Sūriyayî ya Raqihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression