

# The Newsletter of the Victim Support Project

Edition Number: 1 || From June to November 2023



Demonstration in front of ICJ, The Hague, The Netherlands  
10 October 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 112,000 individual cases, 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.

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# Overview of victims' associations:

## Families for Freedom:

“Families for Freedom” was launched in Geneva in February 2017 by five Syrian women, and it consists of families of male and female detainees, who forcibly disappeared at the hands of various parties to the Syrian conflict.

The movement has been working to enhance public awareness about cases of enforced disappearances. Since its inception, it has led more than 100 advocacy campaigns at both local and international levels, with the participation of 250 families of the missing in various countries.



## Caesar Families Association (CFA):

The “Caesar Families Association” was founded in 2018 by 11 families of victims who were identified in the photos leaked by Caesar, the Syrian photographer who shared images documenting torture in Syrian prisons. The association calls for the prosecution of law violators in Syria, and its documentation department works to help families identify their loved ones in Caesar’s photos.



## 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 by the relatives of people kidnapped by ISIS during its control of areas in Syria between 2013 and 2019. Massar documents the cases of abductees and networks with their families. In addition Massar advocates for the cause of the abductees, which is closely tied to the issue of missing persons in Syria.



## Taafi Initiative:

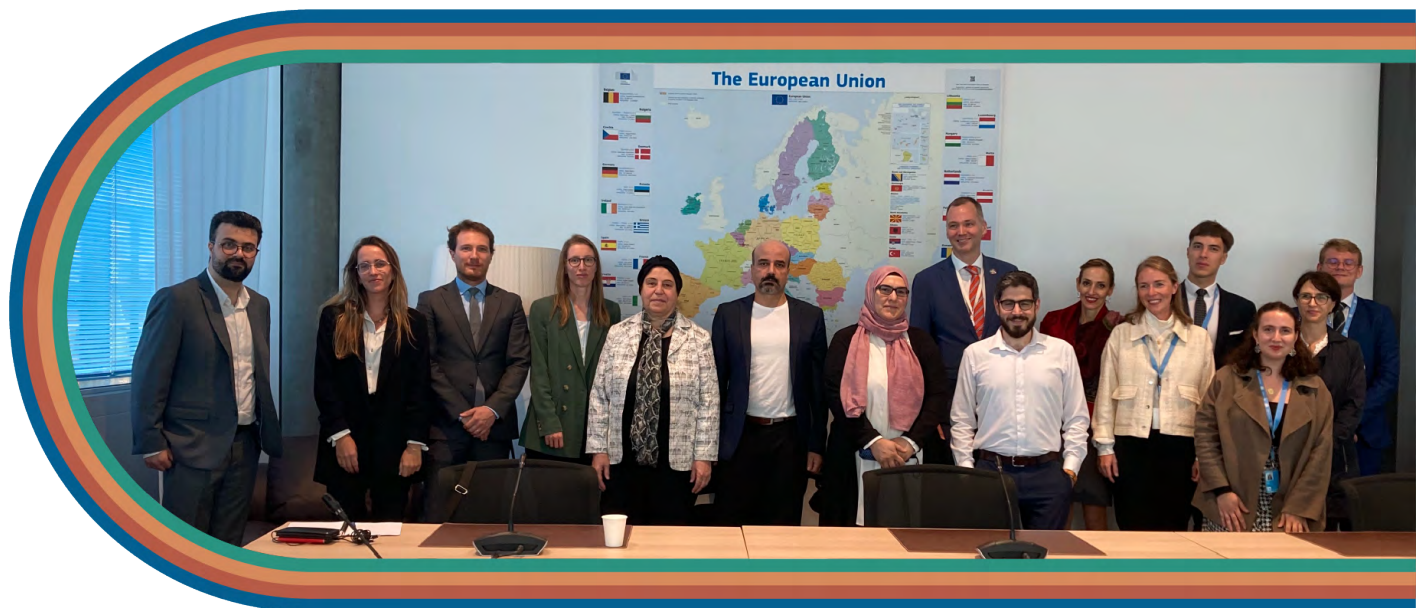
«Taafi Initiative» was founded in 2017 by male and female survivors of arbitrary detention in Syria. It aims to provide support and protection to individuals who have survived detention, and to enable them to continue their struggle for justice, accountability, and victims' rights. Taafi encourages them to participate in its advocacy efforts to stop arbitrary detention and torture and guaranteeing freedom of expression and human rights.





# Achievements section:

## Advocacy Activities:



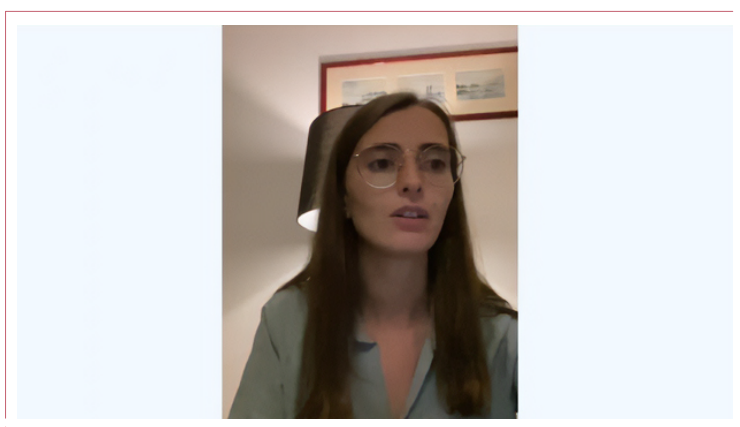
During the last quarter of 2023, the victims groups (VGs) participated in several advocacy activities at regional and international levels, which had an impact in mobilizing public opinion.

### 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 Families, Taafi, and Families for Freedom” participated in some sessions and side events during the 54th session of the Human Rights Council.

In its interventions, the participating delegation focused on the issue of enforced disappearance, the importance of supporting the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, 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 people in Syria.

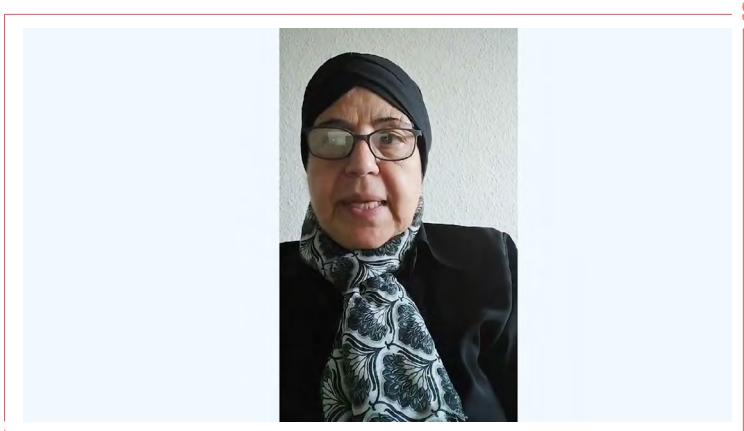
Heba Al-Hamid from the “Massar” participated in an [oral intervention](#) in the interactive dialogue sessions on truth ,justice ,reparation ,and guarantees of non-recurrence .She emphasized the demand of the victims families that the Institution on Missing Persons in Syria should not be merely a formality within peace procedures in Syria ,but must be effective and independent, capable of providing answers to the families of the missing regardless of the perpetrator of the violation. Furthermore ,the institution should include missing persons both inside and outside of 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 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 emphasized the struggle of victims’ families and survivors to establish a UN-affiliated institution dedicated to uncovering the fate of these victims. She urged the council and member states to exert pressure for the release of detainees, disclose the fate of the disappeared, and contribute to justice for victims while supporting peace efforts in Syria.



In the same context, “**Massar**” 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.

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

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.

Members of the “Caesar Families Association”, “Families for Freedom” and “Taafi” attended the hearing at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands. They organized multiple events and vigils to highlight the issues of torture, arbitrary detention, and the enforced disappearance practiced by the Syrian Arab Republic. Carrying photos of their family members, they aimed to shed light on their suffering, while the «Syrian government» was absent from the court sessions.



\* The Hague/Netherlands 10-10-2023

Victim groups (VGs) welcomed the International Court of Justice's order on Thursday, November 16 2023, instructing the «Syrian Arab Republic» to take effective measures within its power to prevent acts of torture. The full order can be found [here](#).

A set of measures was proposed, previously demanded by 85 Syrian civil society organizations and victim associations in a joint letter addressed to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Canadian government:



\* The Hague/Netherlands 10-10-2023

- \* Urging the Syrian government to take effective measures within its capabilities to prevent acts of torture by official entities and organizations under its control.
- \* Ensuring the preservation and prevention of the destruction of any evidence related to accusations of acts falling within the scope of the Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.
- \* Ending the Syrian government's use of torture and detention of individuals.

In conjunction with the session, on 10 October ,2023 the families of detainees gathered in the city of Azaz ,Syria ,under the coordination of“ Families for Freedom ,”to participate in solidarity demonstrations in support of the hearings in The Hague.

Additionally” ,Taafi Initiative “,in collaboration with their partners in the” Truth and Justice Charter“, organized several solidarity demonstrations in various locations, including Afrin ,Syria ,and three other demonstration points in Suwayda, Syria ,as well as other areas.



\* The Hague/Netherlands 10-10-2023



# Public opinion mobilization activities:



Some of the VGs participated in a number of activities aimed at mobilizing public opinion and raising awareness about the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

## The tenth anniversary of the chemical weapons attack

In conjunction with the 10th anniversary of the chemical massacre, a delegation of Syrian civil society members met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on August 21, 2023, along with associations of families of the forcibly disappeared in Ukraine and political prisoners abducted and detained by Russia, in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.



\* Kyiv/Ukraine 21-08- 2023

During this meeting, shared stories were discussed, and the need for justice for all detainees and the missing, whether in Syria or Ukraine, was emphasized.



## 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.



\* Idlib/Syria 30-08-2023

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.

In Lebanon, “Families for Freedom” participated in the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances alongside a group of representatives from Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. Wadad Halawani from “the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon,” expressed her gratitude to “Families for Freedom,” saying: “I would like to thank Fadwa and the families of the missing Syrians for their success in reaching a decision at the United Nations regarding a mechanism to address the disappeared, and we hope to achieve the same.”



\* Lebanon 30-08-2023

## The 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. The families hung pictures of detainees and forcibly disappeared individuals in Syria on the bus to convey their message and emphasize the need for justice.



It is also important to note that the War Crimes Unit of the Paris Judicial Court has brought charges against [three senior officials](#) in the Syrian government for complicity in crimes against humanity. This comes in connection with the killing of Mazen and Patrick Al-Dabbagh, who were forcibly disappeared in 2013.

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