



The Third Forum for the Victims: Victims' Visions to Achieve Justice in Syria



The report highlights the most prominent discussions and recommendations of the Third Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria, which was held in Qamishli and virtually on November 15, 2024, under the slogan "Equity and Justice for All"

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Introduction:

Under the slogan “Equity and Justice for All”, [The Third Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria](#) was held on November 15, 2024. The Forum addressed key issues related to needs and priorities of victims, including revealing the fate of the missing and the forcibly disappeared, ways for safe and voluntary return for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the enforced migrants, addressing challenges to stability, ensuring accountability for perpetrators, and exploring available justice pathways for victims within the context of the Syrian conflict.

The Forum was held in Qamishli City, with virtual participation available, and it was organized by [Synergy](#) Association for Victims, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression ([SCM](#)), Syrians for Truth and Justice ([STJ](#)) Organization, [Dar](#) Association for Victims of Enforced Displacement, the Missing Persons’ Families Platform in North and East Syria ([MPFP-NES](#)), [Afrin Social Association](#) (in Kurdish: Komabende Efrîn A Civakî), and the [Committee of Serê Kaniyê/Ras al-Ayn Displaced Persons](#).

The Forum’s significance lies in the context of recent major political transformations in Syria, most notably the [fall](#) of the al-Assad regime on December 8, 2024. The discussions and recommendations issued by the Forum represent a critical step in addressing the challenges of the upcoming phase, which brings hopes for a new future after 14 years of conflict. The fall of the regime places a profound responsibility on the Syrians to work diligently toward building a state founded on justice, and where citizens enjoy freedom and security. This can be achieved through a path of transitional justice that restores justice for victims, reinstates rights for their owners, and ensures an inclusive accountability for perpetrator of violations, regardless of their affiliation.

The Forum hosted 11 panelists and brought together over 130 participants, including 80 attending in person and 52 joining virtually. The attendees comprised public affairs activists, human rights defenders, and representatives from civil society and the media.

The Forum addressed three main themes. [The first axis](#) addressed the situation of human rights in Northern Syria, the victims’ needs and priorities, ways to enhance stability, and the safe and voluntary return of the IDPs and the forcibly displaced. [The second theme](#) tackled the issue of missing persons and the enforced disappeared, while [the third one](#) explored the available justice mechanisms for victims within the Syrian context.

The Forum is held annually to highlight issues related to victims’ rights in Northern Syria and to advocate for its recommendations- with both local and international actors. The Second Edition of Forum, [The Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria](#), was held on October 27, 2023, under the slogan “Together, Our Voice is Stronger”, while the [First Edition](#) took place on October 9, 2022 under the theme “The Right in Truth and Justice”.

Background:

The Syrians, from all different backgrounds, have been victims of a conflict that has lasted over 14 years, with the lives of all of them affected to varying degrees. Certain circumstances have intensified the suffering of specific victim groups, such as the IDPs, who have often been subjected to enforced displacement.

The Syrians have endured gross violations of human rights; as more than 350,000 Syrians were [killed](#) due to the conflict over the first decade (2011-2021), according to the [United Nations](#). Tens of thousands of civilians who were arbitrarily detained remain [forcibly disappeared](#), while thousands more were subjected to ill-treatment and torture, including sexual violence or death in custody.

Other violations also accompanied the conflict and were committed on a wide scale, among them the illegal [seizure](#), destruction or occupation of property, [forcing](#) the populations to leave their houses, and [obstructing the return of native people](#). Religious and ethnic minorities were also systematically targeted, especially in Northern Syria, an area that is characterized for its ethnic, religious, and national diversity. Muslims, Christians and Yezidis, among them the Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Syriacs, Assyrians, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmens all live together.

Repercussions of the conflict were the destruction of infrastructure and deterioration of social services which left massive humanitarian needs and pushed millions of Syrians to leave the country and seek asylum in Europe or in neighboring countries, some of which exploited the file of refugees as a political tool to blackmail the international community and intervene in Syria.

The lack of or limited knowledge among the victims about their fundamental rights and the mechanisms to defend such rights doubles their suffering and makes them more vulnerable to violations. Moreover, impunity contributes to worsening the grave violations of human rights. Hereby, this Forum aims at providing a platform to empower the victims to represent themselves and claim their rights, and enhance coordination between them and other victims in the pursuit of justice.

Session One: The Situation of Human Rights in Northern Syria, and the Victims' Needs and Priorities:

The first session included many key themes, in which six panelists participated, physically and virtually, to discuss the situation of human rights in Syria, the victims' needs and priorities, avenues for a dignified, safe and voluntary return for the IDPs and the forcibly displaced to their original places of residence. The session emphasized the need to address challenges to stability to ensure the sustainability for these efforts and achieve a decent living for all.

- **The Situation of Human Rights in Northern Syria:**

The session initiated with a [videographic](#) showcasing the developments in the human rights situation from the beginning of the conflict in 2011 to date. The video highlighted the impact of the conflict on civilians, including the killing of more than 350,000 civilians according to United Nations estimates, along with thousands of cases of arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, in addition to various forms of physical and psychological violence, and sexual violence.

[Izzadin Saleh](#), the Executive Director of Synergy Association, then presented a comprehensive overview of the human rights situation in Syria, with a focus on the northern regions in the country. He addressed ongoing violations, such as arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, forced displacement, and property seizure. He also discussed the impact of the Syrian-Russian bombardment on Northwest Syria and the Turkish airstrikes against Syria's Northeast, which have destroyed infrastructure and energy sources, heightening the suffering of millions of residents in those areas.



- **The Victims' Needs and Priorities:**

The session hosted panelists from Afrin Social Association and the Committee of Serê Kaniyê/Ras al-Ayn Displaced Persons, who discussed with the attendees the needs and priorities of the victims, including the IDPs and those forcibly displaced, both inside and outside camps. The discussions focused on the challenges faced by these individuals, particularly those residing in unofficial or unrecognized camps by United Nations agencies, such as those in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, Tall Abyad, and Afrin.

Over 350,000 individuals from Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad in Northern Syria remain IDPs and forcibly displaced due to the Turkish operations “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch”.

Most tents within the camps are deteriorated and there are no clear plans for their replacement, especially with the advent of winter. The issue of arbitrary evictions of IDPs from the camps and the impact of the withdrawal of some humanitarian organizations on the provision of essential supplies was also raised.

The session further discussed the role of [the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria](#) (AANES) in addressing these needs, particularly in light of the arrival of new IDPs, such as Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon, amid the absence of clear and effective plans to respond to the crises facing camp residents.

- **Ways for Safe and Voluntary Return:**

The discussions focused on achieving a safe, dignified, and voluntary return of the IDPs and forcibly displaced persons to their original areas. [Muhyedine Issa](#), the Executive Director of Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement, emphasized the need to pressure the Turkish government to provide a safe and neutral environment in the occupied areas, such as in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad, to enable the IDPs and displaced persons to return voluntarily. He also called for an immediate cessation for demographic change policies and the removal of these practices’ consequences.

Rule 132 of Customary International Humanitarian Law (IHL) states: “**Displaced persons have a right to voluntary return in safety to their homes or places of habitual residence as soon as the reasons for their displacement cease to exist.**” Nevertheless, the IDPs and the forcibly displaced from Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad remain unable to return due to the continuation of violations and the absence of the rule of law.

- **Forced Displacement and its Consequences:**

Despite the passage of five years since the occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, more than 150,000 indigenous people remain forcibly displaced. Out of them, 40,000 live in dire humanitarian conditions in makeshift camps and shelters that lack the basic necessities of life, without any support or official recognition from UN agencies.

Under the Turkish occupation, the region has undergone “massive demographic changes” that have significantly impacted its ethnic, religious, and language diversity. More than 85% of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê inhabitants were forcibly displaced, and the Kurds became a minority as their number dwindled from 70,000 to less than 50 individuals. On the other hand, in Tall Abyad, the Kurdish population, once comprising about 30% of the residents, has completely disappeared. The number of Armenian, Syriac, and Yezidi residents have also fallen to be very few, while the Arab population has been notably impacted as well.

In a [report](#) released on October 9, 2024 regarding human rights situations in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, Synergy documented that these regions are rife with countless of human rights violations since the Turkish occupation in October 2019, amid the absence of accountability and the persistence of impunity.

In the Syrian Kurdish region of Afrin, despite more than six years having passed since its occupation, over 200,000 of its Kurdish residents remain IDPs and forcibly displaced, including more than 120,000 who had been living in Tall Rifaat and unofficial camps in al-Shahba Region, Northern Aleppo.

Update:

In the context of the fall of al-Assad regime, the “Dawn of Freedom” Operation [launched](#) by the Syrian National Army (SNA) since November 30 against al-Shahaba Region, Northern Aleppo, has forcibly displaced more than 120,000 people, the majority of whom are Kurdish people from Afrin. Over 90,000 of them have displaced to areas in Northeast Syria, amid severe shortage of shelter, food, water, and medical services. In another [report](#) published on December 19, 2024, Synergy Association documented a new wave of violations committed by SNA factions against Kurdish civilians in Afrin. These violations included preventing families from returning to their homes or forcing them to pay exorbitant sums of money for their return.

The session concluded with the necessity of ensuring a safe, voluntary and dignified return for the IDPs and forcibly displaced persons, promoting accountability, and halting policies of demographic change, with concerted efforts of local and international actors to achieve justice and guarantee the victims’ rights.

The Second Session: The Issue of the Missing Persons and Forcibly Disappeared:

The second session of the Forum discussed the latest developments related to the issue of the missing and the forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. The discussions included a review of the work of [the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic](#) (IIMP), its future plans, and its role in addressing this complex file. The session also highlighted the role of civil society and victims' associations, emphasizing the importance of active and leadership participation from families in achieving tangible progress on this matter.

Additionally, the session addressed the plans of the ["Missing Persons Committee in North and East Syria"](#), affiliated with the AANES, to cooperate with the IIMP and the families of the missing persons, as well as the regional complexities related to the issues of the abducted and missing persons by the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq. This includes efforts to search for the missing and abducted Yazidi women.



- **The Independent Institution: Achievements and Challenges:**

The issue of the missing and the forcibly disappeared remains one of the most pressing humanitarian concerns in Syria due to the involvement of all parties to the conflict in carrying out enforced disappearances. Estimates indicate that the number of the missing and the forcibly disappeared people in Syria has exceeded 100,000.

Despite the complexity of the issue, the victims' associations and civil society organizations have worked for years to address this issue. These efforts culminated in June 2023 with a [resolution](#) from the United Nations to establish an Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP), aimed at clarifying the fate and whereabouts of all the missing in Syria, supporting the victims, including survivors and families of the missing, in close and comprehensive collaboration with all concerned parties.

The IIMP is a precedent in the United Nations work, following extensive consultations with families, victims' associations, and Syrian civil society organizations. According to the Institution's [Terms of Reference](#), a victim- and survivor-centered approach shall be applied, which will be inclusive of families of the missing and forcibly disappeared people; Victims and families will have an active and integral role in all stages of the institution's work.

The Independent Institution will work to determine the fate and whereabouts of the missing persons, identify the burial sites of the deceased among them, determine their identities, and return them to their families. Additionally, it will provide support to the victims, survivors, and their families.

Despite delays in practical steps, such as building the institutional structure and appointing the Head of the Institution, IIMP team has not ceased its efforts. They have held a series of

regular online briefings, personal consultations, and bilateral meetings to keep Syrian civil society informed of developments regarding the establishment of the institution, gather recommendations and opinions.

Update: On December 19, 2024, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, announced the [appointment](#) of Ms. Karla Quintana from Mexico as the Head of the IIMP.

▪ **The Role of Families and Civil Society Organizations:**

Families of the missing persons play an essential role that goes beyond just waiting; they are active partners in the efforts of uncovering the fate of their loved ones and achieving justice. To support this, Synergy Association contributed in establishing [the Missing Persons' Families Platform in North and East Syria](#) (MPFP-NES) in June 2024. The platform- has so far-gathered over 550 families of the missing and forcibly disappeared people by all parties to the conflict in Syria, representing diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Its goals is to amplify their voices before the Independent Institution and all relevant parties.

Victims' associations, groups and Syrian civil society organizations also play an active role. The issue of missing persons in Syria is not just a human rights matter but also a humanitarian one that reflects the suffering of tens of thousands of families. Making progress on this issue, therefore requires- both local and international efforts- ensuring the effective participation of families to achieve justice and reconciliation in Syria.

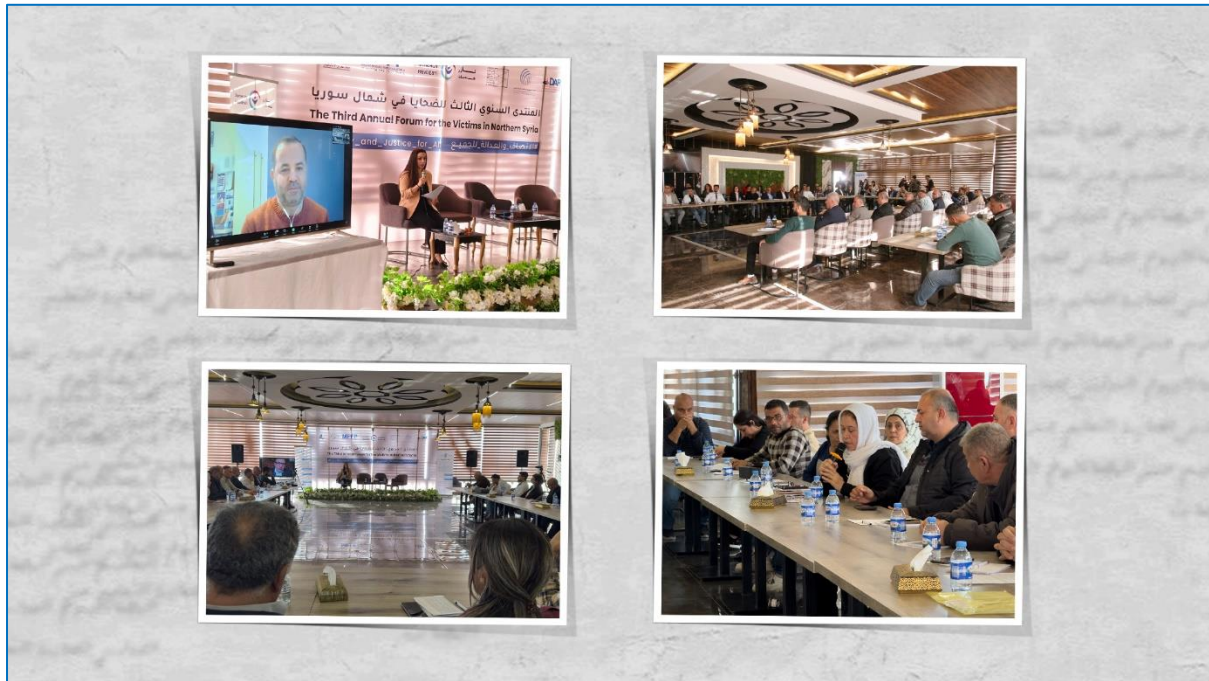
Update: The fall of the Syrian regime on December 8, 2024, led to the release of thousands of prisoners following the opening many prisons. However, the fate of tens of thousands of missing and enforced disappeared people remains unknown. The opening of the regime's prisons cannot be considered a final solution to this tragedy. This issue goes beyond the former regime, as all parties to the conflict have been involved in committing crimes of enforced disappearance and torture that have claimed the lives of thousands. Moreover, there are dozens of mass graves requiring intensive efforts to uncover and ensure justice for the victims and their families.

The Third Session: Justice Mechanisms Available for Victims

The [third session](#) focused on justice pathways available to Syrian victims- at both the local and international levels- with an emphasis on the central role of the participation of victims, survivors, and their families in efforts to uncover the truth, achieve accountability, and ensure justice.

The session hosted [Bassam al-Ahmed](#), the Executive Director of STJ Organization, and [Mazen Darwish](#), the General Director of the SCM. The session featured an extensive discussion with the participants on the current accountability pathways, such as universal jurisdiction, and explored possible avenues for justice, both present and future.

In conclusion, the session emphasized the need for concerted international and local efforts to achieve justice, highlighting that independent and systematic documentation remains an essential foundation indispensable for the credibility and effectiveness of various accountability tracks.



- **Documentation as a Fundamental Foundation for Justice:**

[Bassam al-Ahmad](#), the Executive Director of STJ Organization, emphasized the critical role of documentation as the foundation for all justice-related processes. He explained that documentation is essential for uncovering the truth, holding perpetrators accountable, and preventing the recurrence of violations. The process involves monitoring, collecting evidence, and verifying information. Al-Ahmad underscored that achieving justice and accountability requires building an accurate and comprehensive database to support legal and human rights efforts.

Documentation, according to al-Ahmed, is not merely a preliminary step, rather the backbone of all subsequent efforts, including human rights reports, advocacy campaigns, and the submission of evidence to national or international courts. He stressed that documentation must be carried out in accordance with precise and professional criteria that consider the associated context with the violations, while ensuring that the information is systematically organized for effective and accessible use.

One of the main challenges facing documentation efforts is the complexity of investigating grave violations, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity. This challenge is exacerbated by years of restrictions imposed by various parties to the conflict, preventing local, international, and UN organizations from freely documenting violations in Syria.

Despite these obstacles, independent, accurate, and unbiased documentation remains an essential tool for achieving justice and holding perpetrators accountable, making it a critical step toward ensuring that such violations are not repeated.

- **Justice Mechanisms and Accountability Pathways:**

[Mazen Darwish](#), the General Director of the SCM, discussed justice mechanisms available to victims within the Syrian context, emphasizing that justice is neither revenge nor a weapon wielded by opponents against one another. Instead, it is an impartial means to deliver justice to victims and a cornerstone for achieving sustainable peace.

Darwish emphasized that documentation is the cornerstone of any future justice pathway, serving as the foundation for achieving accountability. He highlighted that legal advocacy is a series of cumulative steps aimed at ultimately achieving comprehensive justice. Darwish also stressed that justice necessitates the rejection of all crimes without exception, regardless of the identity or affiliation of the perpetrators, while maintaining a steadfast commitment to defending the rights of all victims.

According to Darwish, achieving justice in Syria requires a comprehensive political consensus. In the absence of a fair national process, current efforts through universal jurisdiction serve as vital and necessary alternative pathways to provide redress for victims.

Justice process has recently witnessed significant achievements, including the [issuance of arrest warrants](#) against the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, his brother Maher, and two high-ranking Syrian military officials for their alleged responsibility in the chemical attacks on Ghouta and Douma in August 2013. Another milestone was the in absentia life sentences handed down to Ali Mamlouk, Jamil Hassan, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud in connection with the case of [Mazen Dabbagh and Patrick Dabbagh](#). Moreover, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a decision on the provisional measures in the case filed by the Netherlands and Canada against the Syrian government for its violations of the Convention Against Torture.

Recommendations:

The Forum's sessions yielded a set of recommendations aimed at ensuring justice for victims, uncovering the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, and enhancing accountability efforts to achieve justice. These recommendations emphasize the need for coordinated efforts among all stakeholders—local and international—to establish a comprehensive and sustainable approach that prioritizes the rights and dignity of victims at the core of the process.

First: Improving the Conditions of Displaced Persons in Camps

1. Call on the United Nations to officially recognize informal camps in Northeast Syria and provide the necessary support to meet the basic needs of displaced persons.
2. Provide sustainable infrastructure for the camps, including the improvement of essential services, such as healthcare, education, water, and electricity.

Second: Enhancing Stability

1. Urge the international community to demand that the Turkish government cease attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure in Northeast Syria and hold those responsible for war crimes accountable.
2. Pressure the Turkish government to cease weaponizing water against the population and ensure depoliticization of water resources.
3. Ensure unhindered cross-border humanitarian aid access to Northeast Syria through Al-Yarubiyah/Tal Kocher and Semalka/Fishkhabour crossings, given the life-saving nature of this aid.

Third: Ensuring Safe and Voluntary Return of IDPs and Forcibly Displaced

1. Pressure the Turkish government to acknowledge its occupation of areas in Northern Syria, including Afrin, Ras al-Ayn /Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad, and to fulfill its obligations as an occupying power under the IV Geneva Convention, including immediate withdrawal from the occupied areas.
2. Ensure the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of IDPs and forcibly displaced individuals to their original areas, in accordance with international standards.
3. Eliminate the effects of demographic change policies in the occupied areas and ensure the restitution of rights and properties confiscated from the indigenous populations.

Fourth: Uncovering the Fate of the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons

1. Pressure all parties to the conflict in Syria to disclose the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons, identify burial sites of the deceased, determine their identities, and return the remains to their families while providing necessary support and facilitation for survivors and their families.
2. Support the efforts of the IIMP to ensure tangible progress on this issue.
3. Strengthen the role of families of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons, enabling their active and leading participation in efforts to uncover the truth and achieve justice.
4. Collaborate with local and international organizations to develop effective mechanisms for uncovering the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons and safeguarding the rights of their families.

Fifth: Transitional Justice and Accountability for Violations

1. Support independent and comprehensive documentation of human rights violations as a cornerstone for achieving justice.
2. Collaborate with international and local courts to ensure accountability for perpetrators and develop effective mechanisms for transitional justice.
3. Provide legal and humanitarian support to victims and establish effective remedies aligned with their vision of justice.

Sixth: Empowering Victims and Enhancing Their Participation

1. Organize training programs to raise victims' awareness of their rights and the available mechanisms to claim them.
2. Support local organizations and community initiatives that empower victims and enhance their role in uncovering the truth and achieving justice.
3. Provide comprehensive and effective support—legal, medical, psychological, and social—to victims, survivors, displaced persons, and forcibly displaced individuals.

Seventh: Supporting Documentation and Advocacy Efforts

1. Document all human rights violations, regardless of the victims or perpetrators, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, forced displacement, and violations of Land, Housing, and Property (HLP) rights, among others.
2. Submit documentation and evidence to UN bodies and national and international justice mechanisms to support efforts for truth-seeking, accountability, and justice in Syria.
3. Empower victims, survivors, and their families to lead advocacy campaigns and represent their cases directly.

Eighth: Coordination with Local and International Entities

1. Strengthen cooperation and coordination with international and local actors to ensure the implementation and advocacy of the recommendations at all levels.
2. Call on the international community to support justice pathways in Syria, including the establishment of a fund to compensate victims.