

The Media Digest of the Victim Support Project

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A protest stand in Al-Hijaz Square, Damascus, on December 27, 2024.

Collaborative Efforts of Victims' Groups in Achieving Justice after the fall of the Assad Regime

Introduction:

The issue of enforced disappearances in Syria remains one of the most urgent human rights and humanitarian concerns, requiring a comprehensive response to ensure accountability, justice, and the prevention of future violations. Following the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, and the release of thousands of detainees from the former government's detention centers, this issue has faced complex challenges related to preserving evidence, securing official records, and uncovering the fate of those forcibly disappeared.

Despite gaining access to some detention centers and records that were previously withheld from international and local entities, the absence of immediate legal protection mechanisms has led to the loss of numerous documents and files. Suspected mass grave sites have also been at risk of tampering or neglect, potentially hindering investigations into serious violations of international humanitarian law. Additionally, delays in deploying international investigative teams and insufficient legal safeguards have exacerbated the suffering of families still searching for answers about the fate of their loved ones.

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Amid these challenges, victims' groups continue their efforts to ensure the truth is revealed and justice is achieved. They are documenting violations, presenting evidence to human rights and judicial bodies, and mobilizing international support to hold those responsible for enforced disappearances accountable. These groups are also working to protect the rights of victims and their families, increasing pressure on transitional authorities to disclose detention sites, identify mass graves, and ensure accountability in accordance with international standards.

In addition to their role in accountability, the victims' groups contribute to providing psychological and social support to the families of the forcibly disappeared and survivors of detention. They also play a key role in ensuring that victims' issues are integrated into any transitional justice process and the rebuilding of the state on foundations that respect human rights. The role of these groups is not limited to documenting violations but extends to being part of efforts to achieve justice, ensure impunity is not tolerated, and put an end to enforced disappearance as a tool of political repression in the future Syria.

Updates on the Issue of Enforced Disappearances in Syria:



people gathering to search for their loved ones at Saydnaya prison. Dec 9 2024. Omar Haj Kadour / AFP

The Fall of the Assad Regime In Syria

The launch of the military operations department of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on November 27, 2024, the operation of "Deterring Aggression," led to the recapture of the cities of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. On December 8, 2024, the military forces of the Syrian opposition reached Damascus, and it was announced that Bashar al-Assad and his family had fled to Moscow, marking the fall of the Ba'ath regime, which had ruled for five decades. The recapture of these cities and the liberation of the country coincided with opening prisons and security branches, where detainees were released and prisons were emptied following the escape of regime forces. While there is no official number documenting the released detainees, the Syrian [Network](#) for Human Rights estimated the number of those freed from all prisons and detention centers to be approximately 24,000, with approximately 101,103 people remaining forcibly disappeared, according to the statistics of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

In this regard, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression issued a [statement](#) calling on all relevant parties in Syria to achieve comprehensive transitional justice by holding accountable all those involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes, whether from the former regime or any other party during the years of conflict. The statement also called for the establishment of independent courts, reparations, and compensation for victims, as well as the creation of programs to rehabilitate survivors and uncover the fate of victims of enforced disappearance and the missing. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression also appealed to all political and military forces, international organizations, friendly nations, and the sons and daughters of the Syrian people, both inside and outside the country, to unite their efforts in supporting this transitional phase to achieve the goals of the Syrian revolution, for which Syrians have paid a heavy price.

Karla Quintana Appointed to Lead Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria

On December 19, 2024, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [announced](#) the appointment of Ms. Carla Quintana of Mexico as the head of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. The institution was established by the UN General Assembly in June/July 2023 with the aim of clarifying the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and providing adequate support to victims, including survivors and the families of the missing, in close and comprehensive cooperation with all relevant parties.

The institution [announced](#) that it is currently receiving information relevant to its work, including primary data sources on archives, records, and lists from detention centers, prisons, courts, cemeteries, forensic doctors, and information on potential or known burial sites.

Head of the Syria Accountability Mechanism Visits the Country for the First Time

Robert Petit, Head of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), [made](#) his first visit to Damascus on December 22, 2024, to discuss justice and accountability with Syrian officials. He met with representatives of the caretaker authorities and visited sites of former regime prisons and institutions in Syria.



“Our ongoing work is to safeguard evidence and support justice processes for the countless victims impacted over the past 14 years,” said Mr. Petit. “The fall of the Assad rule is a significant opportunity for us to fulfill our mandate on the ground.”

Robert Petit, Head of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), December 23, 2024

During his visit, Mr. Petit met with a number of Syrians impacted by the crimes committed during the past decade, including those who have recently returned to the country after years of exile. Their testimonies underscored a widespread demand for truth, justice and inclusion. He stressed that achieving accountability in Syria will require cooperation and coordination among a wide range of actors.

He noted that “No single entity can address this challenge on its own,” and that accountability requires “a collective and concerted effort; Syrians, civil society organizations, and international partners leveraging their complementary mandates. As a priority all of us must work to preserve evidence of the crimes committed, avoid duplication, and ensure that all victims are inclusively represented in the pursuit of justice.” He added, “The IIIM was specifically created to assist this effort and is ready to play its part in full. The time to act is now.”

Achievements Section



Joint Statements by Victims' Groups

Statement Issued by Syrian Women Relatives of the Forcibly Disappeared, Regarding Recent Developments

On December 11, 2024, a group of Syrian women whose family members have been forcibly disappeared issued a [statement](#), relayed by victims' groups networks, addressing the recent developments following the fall of the Assad regime. The statement urged relevant international organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the ruling authorities on the ground, and the current interim government, to take immediate action to uncover the fate of the missing and prioritize this issue during the current transitional phase.

The statement called for documenting the names and locations of detainees released from Assad regime prisons and ensuring their safety, providing released detainees with necessary medical and psychological care, ensuring the protection and well-being of women and children who have survived detention, securing and retrieving stolen documents and properties from prisons and security branches, and conducting a transparent and independent international investigation to determine the locations of mass graves in Syria.

The Truth and Justice Charter Networks in Syria Reject the Call for a “National Day of Mourning” on December 27, 2024

In a joint [statement](#), multiple victims' groups—including Massar, Families Of Truth & Justice, Families for Freedom, Release Me, Taafi, Synergy, and the Caesar Families Association—rejected a call made by Syrian activists to declare Friday, December 27, 2024, a national day of mourning and public grieving. The networks deemed this call inappropriate and untimely, as thousands of Syrian families are still grappling with the shock of their detained and missing loved ones following the opening of Saydnaya Prison.

The statement, published on December 25, 2024, emphasized that selecting a national mourning day should be part of a comprehensive and agreed-upon transitional justice program, symbolizing the immense sacrifices Syrians have made throughout the revolution. The organizations stressed that

mourning is a right of the families of the martyrs and disappeared, rather than a subject for political disputes or short-term agendas.

The networks also warned that such a call could create the false impression that the issue of detainees and missing persons—many of whom are presumed dead—has reached its conclusion. This, they argued, could weaken the position of families who are still demanding their right to truth, justice, and accountability. The statement concluded by affirming that genuine mourning for the disappeared can only be achieved when their remains are recovered and given proper burial. The loss of these individuals is not merely an administrative or political matter; families of the missing need tangible proof before they can come to terms with their loss.

Legal Paper: Human Rights Response After the fall of the Syrian Regime

On December 24, 2024, a group of Syrian civil society organizations including victims' groups issued a legal paper titled "[Human Rights Response After the Fall of the Syrian Regime](#)." The paper provides a comprehensive framework for addressing human rights issues during Syria's transitional phase. The paper called for preserving evidence and securing sensitive sites to ensure justice and accountability, establishing a temporary judicial body composed of independent and qualified judges and legal experts to oversee the fair and systematic release of detainees, documenting cases of missing persons and supporting released detainees and their families to ensure their reintegration and access to justice, enhancing cooperation with international and local organizations to facilitate access for United Nations teams and humanitarian actors to affected individuals, and ensuring the unrestricted operation of Syrian civil society organizations within the country to aid the documentation and accountability process.

Advocacy Activities

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression Organizes an Advocacy Tour in Collaboration with Victims' Groups on the Sidelines of the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

As part of the Victims' Groups Support Project, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, in collaboration with its partners from Families for Freedom and Dawlaty Foundation, organized a three-day advocacy tour in New York City from October 9 to October 11, 2024. The tour coincided with the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The delegation held ten bilateral meetings with permanent missions to the United Nations from Austria, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, the United States, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, France, and Germany. The participating delegation included activists Amina Al-Khoulani, Fatima Saad, and Asmaa Al-Faraj from Families for Freedom, accompanied by Sally Shubot from the Syrian Forum.

The discussions addressed several key issues, including arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in Syria, their impact on victims and their families, and pathways to achieving justice for detainees and missing persons. The meetings also explored mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable for these violations.

In addition to these concerns, the meetings highlighted the ongoing violations against Syrian refugees, particularly incidents of violence, arbitrary detention, and forced repatriation.

During November 2024, the Executive Director of the Families Of Truth & Justice organization, with the support of the organization Impunity Watch, [participated](#) in a week-long visit to Colombia to study the Colombian experience in uncovering the fate of the disappeared, documentation, reparations, and ongoing trials at the Colombian Special Jurisdiction for Peace. The delegation also explored the work of the Search Unit and the museum as well.



The Third Victims' Forum in Northern Syria

The **Synergy Association** held the **Third Annual Victims' Forum in Northern Syria** on November 15, 2024, under the theme “**Equity and Justice for All.**” The forum addressed key issues concerning victims' needs and priorities, including uncovering the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, ensuring the safe and voluntary return of displaced individuals, tackling stability challenges, and holding perpetrators of violations



accountable. Additionally, the forum reviewed available justice mechanisms for victims within the context of the Syrian conflict. The event -partially funded by the EU- was held in **Qamishli**, with online participation available. It was organized by the **Synergy Victims' Association** in partnership with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (**SCM**), Syrians for Truth and Justice (**STJ**), **Dar** Association for Victims of Forced Displacement, the Families of the Missing Platform in Northern and Eastern Syria (**MPFP-NES**), the **Afrin** Social Association, and the Committee of **Displaced** Persons from Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ain. The forum hosted 11 speakers and was attended by more than 130 participants—80 in person and 52 online—including public affairs activists, human rights defenders, civil society representatives, and media professionals.

On **December 8, 2024**, the **Good seed Association** joined its members, along with children and relatives of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, in celebrating the **fall of the regime**. The association also participated in a **civil society demonstration** on the same day.

Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, the **Caesar Families Association** launched a campaign on December 10, 2024, titled “[Justice for Peace](#),” demanding accountability for perpetrators of torture and enforced disappearances in Syria. With Assad fleeing to Moscow, the campaign emphasized the need to implement justice and reject any leniency toward those involved in **crimes against humanity**. It urged all Syrians to work towards uncovering the truth and ensuring justice for the victims.

A press release from the Missing Persons' Families Platform in North and East Syria (MPFP-NES)

On December 11, 2024, the **Missing Persons' Families Platform in North and East Syria** issued a [statement](#) following the fall of the Syrian regime. The statement noted that while the regime's downfall had revived the hopes of families seeking to uncover the fate of their loved ones, it also raised concerns about the fate of evidence and documents that could reveal the truth and bring justice.

The platform emphasized that "the issue of the missing and the enforced disappearance remains one of the most pressing humanitarian ones in Syria, and the opening of prisons and the release of prisoners cannot be considered a final solution to this tragedy. This issue exceeds beyond the previous regime, as all parties to the conflict have been involved in committing crimes of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture that have claimed the lives of thousands. Moreover, there are dozens of mass graves that require intensive efforts to uncover and ensure justice for the victims and their families". The platform called on the international community, including member states and international bodies, in particular the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP), to continue joint efforts through timely and effective plans. It also urged all armed groups and active parties in Syria to cooperate fully and contribute to uncovering the truth and achieving justice.

On December 14, 2024, the **Taafi Initiative**, in collaboration with **victim advocacy groups and families of survivors under the Truth and Justice Charter**, released an awareness [paper](#) emphasizing the urgent need to protect mass graves in Syria. The paper highlighted the risks associated with tampering with gravesites, which could lead to the destruction of crucial evidence and hinder the pursuit of justice. It also included a reporting form for individuals with information about newly discovered mass graves, allowing them to submit details to the relevant authorities.

On the same day, Taafi Initiative, along with survivor networks and victims' groups under the Truth and Justice Charter, [issued](#) an urgent appeal to the interim government, relevant authorities, and families of the missing, demanding the protection of mass graves in Syria. The statement called on the interim government and responsible entities to authorize specialized teams to secure and protect these sites, prevent any tampering, and collaborate with the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, which is responsible for identifying grave locations, analyzing evidence, and professionally engaging with the families of the missing.

Complaint to the United Nations Regarding Arbitrary Detention and Torture in Northern Syria

In late December 2024, the Synergy Association submitted a formal [complaint](#) to the UN Human Rights Council's Special Procedures, addressing the arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances in Northern Syria. The complaint urged the United Nations to prioritize this issue due to the severity of violations and the lack of legal protections for hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk.

The letter highlighted an ongoing and systematic pattern of arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearance carried out by factions of the "Syrian National Army" under Turkish command and funding against residents in the areas under their control. The complaint urged the UN to launch investigations into the current situation and take immediate action to address these violations and hold those responsible accountable.

It is worth noting that Synergy had previously submitted a [similar](#) complaint in September 2023 regarding the same patterns of violations and alleged perpetrators; however, no action had been taken at that time.

On December 21, 2024, Yasmin Al-Mashaan, President of the Caesar Families Association, attended a consultative [session](#) at the invitation of Germany's Minister of State, Reem Radovan, to discuss the future of Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the status of Syrian refugees in Germany. The session also explored ways in which Germany could support efforts to achieve peace in Syria. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz participated



in the meeting, extending his congratulations to the attendees on Syria's liberation and the end of the dictatorial rule. He also commended the role of Syrians in Germany, emphasizing that they have become an integral part of German society. Scholz expressed his hope for a peaceful and stable future for Syria.

On December 27, 2024, the Truth and Justice Charter networks, families of the missing, and civil society activists organized protests in [Damascus](#), [Afrin](#), and [Suwayda](#), as well as other provinces. The demonstrations called for revealing the fate of the missing, preserving evidence, protecting mass graves, holding those responsible for these crimes accountable, and rejecting impunity. Protesters also demanded the retrieval of victims' remains for



proper burial and recognition, ensuring families receive their right to know the fate of their loved ones. The demonstrations urged the new government to fulfill its responsibilities regarding this issue.

At the same time, Release Me Organization, in collaboration with victims' groups, launched [awareness](#) campaigns on the importance of safeguarding mass grave sites, preventing their tampering, and reporting any findings. The organization created a reporting [form](#) for locating mass graves, ensuring that relevant authorities could document and investigate them appropriately. Additionally, Release Me initiated an awareness campaign on accountability, fair trials, and the prevention of individual acts of revenge to protect the right to truth. The organization also distributed a medical care [guide](#) for recently released detainees, aiming to raise public awareness about the community's role in providing adequate support and healthcare to survivors.

During December 2024, the Families for Freedom Association held a meeting with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to discuss its recent policies concerning detainees. During the meeting, ICRC faced criticism, particularly regarding its handling of the prisoner release process and its lack of preparedness for post-regime collapse scenarios, including the sudden opening of detention facilities.

As part of broader efforts to preserve truth and accountability, the association issued a [statement](#) urging the public to protect evidence that could help determine the fate of the disappeared. It also visited mass graves and engaged with government officials to ensure proper protection of these sites and to enable forensic teams to document violations. Additionally, dedicated communication lines

were established for recently released detainees to provide them with mental health and medical support.

During the same period, Families for Freedom also held a meeting with the Attorney General in Damascus to discuss the status of detainees and missing persons. The meeting included a review of available evidence, which consisted of documents from detention centers and judicial records, with detainees categorized by case type. Discussions also addressed the creation of a centralized database for missing persons and mass graves, alongside efforts to collect DNA samples from families of the missing to match with available evidence. The meeting proposed the formation of a high-level committee on missing persons and detainees to consolidate efforts and establish a centralized search and documentation system.

In December 2024, Families for Freedom conducted various initiatives aimed at supporting the cause of the missing, including awareness sessions on the Independent Institution for Missing Persons in Syria in Gaziantep, European cities, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, discussions were held regarding a gender-focused policy paper developed by human rights organizations.

Training and Projects to Support the Cause of the Missing – Assistance for Families and Victims

Training Sessions for Survivors of Detention and Enforced Disappearance

On November 19, 2024, the Taafi Initiative held the fourth and final awareness session as part of its Missing Persons Project, focusing on the role of survivors and families of the forcibly disappeared in Syria's justice process. The session covered various topics, including the evolution of the concept of justice, the struggle for truth, and the psychological motivations behind these efforts. Taafi conducted three sessions with a group of former detainees who had been subjected to arbitrary detention, culminating in a policy paper with recommendations for prison reform in Syria. The sessions included testimonies from survivors detailing the dire conditions inside detention centers, ranging from torture and inhumane treatment to medical neglect and poor sanitary conditions.

In December 2024, Taafi organized seven additional training sessions for survivors, focusing on the process of searching for the missing in Syria and the practical expertise required for such efforts. The sessions covered a range of topics, including distinguishing between key terms such as "missing persons," "forcibly disappeared," and "mass graves," procedures for identifying missing individuals, comparative analysis of international experiences in searching for the missing, forensic investigative techniques and their application to missing persons cases, introduction to forensic archaeology, including methods for locating mass graves and technologies used for their detection, forensic genetics and DNA analysis for identifying missing persons, and final steps in confirming the identities of missing individuals.

Separately, on December 3, 2024, the Families Of Truth & Justice Association signed a new agreement with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) to collaborate on joint initiatives, particularly in the fields of translation and the submission of complaints to UN special mechanisms. Following the signing of the agreement, ten complaints were submitted, including eight to the UN Special Rapporteur on Enforced Disappearances and one to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. Additionally, Families Of Truth & Justice documented 224 new cases of enforced disappearance through five field researchers based in Turkey and Syria.

Families Of Truth & Justice [held](#) four awareness sessions for 40 relatives of detainees on fraud and extortion schemes targeting families, primarily carried out by organized groups and individuals, most of whom were women. These lectures were conducted in December 2024 in collaboration with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. The sessions focused mainly on financial fraud and extortion, providing attendees with key tips and recommendations to avoid falling victim to such schemes. Discussions also covered recent events in Syria, efforts to uncover the fate of missing persons, and the available support networks. In detail, the lectures addressed necessary precautionary measures, psychological skills to recognize and avoid fraud tactics used by criminal networks, and how to identify individuals involved in these schemes. Participants were also trained on detecting document forgery, recognizing different types of falsified papers, and analyzing examples of tampered documents to pinpoint fraudulent alterations.



On December 29, 2024, the Caesar Families Association launched “[Yageen](#),” an artificial intelligence-powered application designed to help families report missing persons with accuracy and clarity. This platform enables families to easily connect with the association through its website or WhatsApp. Users can submit photos and preliminary information confidentially about missing persons from 2011 to 2013, which the association then cross-references with the “Caesar Files” using advanced facial recognition technology.

In a related effort, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression activated an online [form](#) for reporting human rights violations or disappearances. This form allows Syrians to submit initial information regarding human rights abuses or cases of missing persons inside Syria or affecting Syrians abroad. A specialized staff member from the center then follows up with the submitter within seven working days and securely stores the provided information in the center’s database.

Between October 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, the Good Seed Association launched a campaign to shelter and accommodate displaced Syrian families from southern Lebanon who were forced to flee due to the Israeli aggression. The association provided shelter to 30 individuals from six Syrian families, some of whom had relatives who were detainees, after they were denied entry to Lebanese refugee centers. Additionally, the association



organized group psychological support activities for 70 children within the shelters, incorporating recreational activities and art therapy.

In December 2024, Good Seed also launched the “Positive Memory of Syria” initiative for the relatives of detainees. Two sessions have been held so far, with the initiative set to continue in the coming period.

Between October and December 2024, the Release Me Organization conducted a series of activities targeting female survivors of detention and women from families of victims of enforced disappearance in Syria. Participants engaged in a creative writing program, which was a significant step toward empowering them to document their experiences in a gender-sensitive manner, respecting their privacy and helping them overcome the negative effects of war. This initiative resulted in a published book titled "[We, the Brave](#), Tell Our Stories," featuring the narratives of participating women.



The organization also facilitated a popular education [program](#) that provided participants with the opportunity to share their personal stories and experiences, discussing the various impacts of certain ideas on their decisions and actions, as well as those of others. The objective was to help them take conscious steps toward breaking free from negative social practices. The initiative included 64 participants across eight groups, with four groups based in Salkin and four in Afrin.

Separately, the Massar Association conducted a narrative training program between October and December 2024 to help families develop their personal narratives and use them to advocate for the cause of those forcibly disappeared by ISIS. The initiative involved 30 women and 10 men from families of individuals who had gone missing under ISIS control. The program led to the creation of 12 complete stories, with an additional 28 narratives still requiring further development.

During the same period, Massar continued to operate safe spaces for women in the cities of Azaz and Raqqa in Syria. Each location hosted 10 women, with a total of 16 sessions held in each city. The sessions concluded with celebratory events in which the women expressed their joy over Syria's liberation, despite the ongoing challenges faced by families of the missing.



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