

# The Media Digest of the Victim Support Project

Edition Number: 5 || From January 1, 2025, to March 31, 2025)



Photos of missing people in Marjeh Square in central Damascus (Al Jazeera)

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

### Introduction:

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria brought significant changes in the issue of the missing. Prisons and detention centers formerly operated by the regime were emptied, and several mass graves containing the remains of victims of enforced disappearance were discovered. This also created opportunities for international organizations, as well as some Syrian civil society groups and victims' groups, to enter Syria, work on the ground, and engage directly with the families and loved ones of the missing.

Despite these developments, thousands of Syrian families continue to suffer from ongoing crimes of enforced disappearance, torture, and ill-treatment at the hands of various de facto authorities across Syria. The prisons operated by these groups remain closed to investigations, while dozens of mass graves still require efforts to uncover, in order to achieve justice for all victims and their families.

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Amid these transformations ,civil society organizations and victims 'groups are striving to rebuild the social fabric and support transitional justice efforts by documenting violations and providing assistance to victims and their loved ones .These groups play a critical role in uncovering the truth and ensuring non-repetition of such crimes ,contributing to justice and national recovery .Their work also includes legal and psychological support ,and the promotion of democratic values and human rights to help lay the foundation for a stable and prosperous future in Syria.

In recent months ,victims 'groups have intensified their efforts on the issue of the missing, including documentation of violations ,and implementing advocacy campaigns at both the local and international levels to pressure all relevant actors to reveal the fate of the missing and to demand the establishment of a national body responsible for addressing this file inside Syria .Additionally ,these groups have launched awareness campaigns aimed at protecting mass graves ,educating the public about the rights of the missing and their families ,and promoting legal awareness surrounding this issue – all of which contribute to greater public understanding and support national healing and reconciliation processes in Syria.

# Updates on the Issue of Enforced Disappearances in Syria:



Syria's civil defense collects human remains at a mass grave in Damascus. Aris Messinis/AFP/Getty Images

## Mass Graves in Syria

After the fall of the Assad regime, mass graves were uncovered containing the remains of thousands of Syrians—men and women—who had been arrested or forcibly disappeared by the forces of the former regime and systematically executed in ways intended to conceal their identities and obscure the evidence of the crimes committed against them. This has made it difficult for their families to know their fate or where they are buried. While the exact number of mass graves in Syria remains unclear, the majority of those discovered since the regime's collapse are concentrated in the governorates of Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Homs.



Anadolu Ajansı captures footage of mass grave discovered in Damascus, Syria 12.2024

The discovery of these mass graves has prompted victims' groups and Syrian civil society organizations to call for the protection of these sites and for them to be handled with the utmost care, to allow forensic experts to conduct proper investigations and preserve evidence for potential justice and accountability processes.

In this context, Yasmen Almashan, Director of Caesar Families, [stated](#): "This is a profoundly sensitive matter for us ...It suggests that those we've been waiting for all these years might be among the dead in these graves". She stressed the importance of uncovering the fate of the missing, adding that if they are deceased, their remains must be returned to their families for a proper and dignified burial, in honor of their sacrifices.

Ahmad Helmi ,Director of Taafi Initiative ,emphasized that preserving these sites is essential not only for the dignity of the dead but also for building a foundation of truth and accountability for the living. Helmi stressed that the process is neither quick nor inexpensive ,stating“ ,It’s a long undertaking that will take years ,involving collaboration with international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Independent Commission on Missing Persons ”.He noted that the role of these bodies is to coordinate efforts among all parties involved in this issue.

## New Arrest Warrant Issued Against Bashar al-Assad for War Crimes

On January ,2025 ,20 a French investigative judge issued a new arrest [warrant](#) against deposed president Bashar al-Assad for complicity in war crimes .The warrant follows a judicial investigation that began in 2017 following a complaint filed by Mr .Omar Abu Nabut ,the son of Salah Abu Nabut ,who was killed in an attack by Syrian government forces using barrel bombs in the city of Daraa on June.2017 ,7

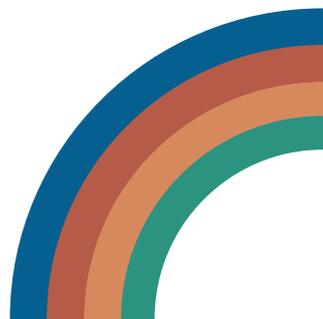


A damaged poster of Bashar al-Assad in the city of Aleppo ,Syria .Mahmoud Hassano/Reuters

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression(SCM)joined the case as a civil party, contributing to building the case file and providing evidence and supporting testimonies .The investigation confirmed that this attack was part of a systematic strategy targeting schools ,hospitals, and civilian infrastructure ,resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 civilians during air and ground strikes on Daraa between June 3 and June.2017 ,17

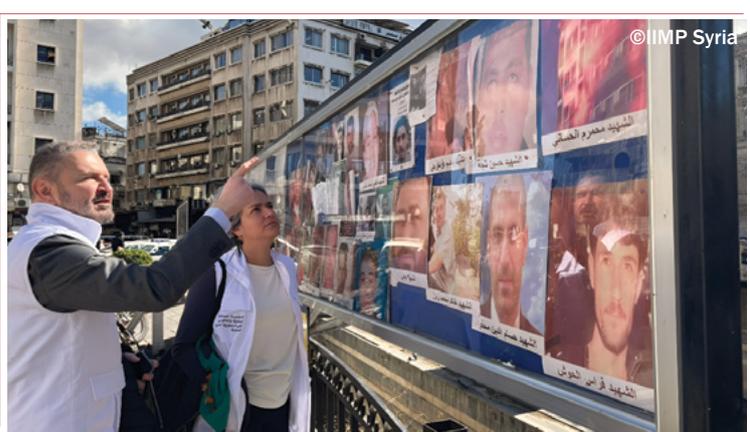
This warrant is the second of its kind issued against Bashar al-Assad in France for complicity in war crimes( deliberately targeting civilians and killing persons protected under international humanitarian law), The first warrant was issued in October 2023 in relation to chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta in August.2013

This complaint follows a series of judicial actions taken by the French judiciary against Syrian officials. Between 2023 and ,2024 six senior Syrian officers were subject to international arrest warrants in connection with this case .In total ,the French judiciary has issued 14 arrest warrants against senior Syrian regime officials.



## The Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria Visits Damascus

On Sunday, February 10, 2025, Karla Quintana, Head of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, concluded her first [visit](#) to Damascus. During the visit, she and the Independent Institution team, together with international forensic specialists and family members of missing persons, met with key actors, including Syrian authorities, families, civil society organizations, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the White Helmets, and the International



©IIMP Syria Karla Quintana visits Al Marjeh Square in Damascus

Committee of the Red Cross.

Quintana expressed her gratitude for their cooperation and frank discussions, which included the need to coordinate efforts among relevant actors working on this issue and the Institution's future role and engagement in Syria. As part of this inaugural mission, the Institution's team also visited Daraya, the Tadamon—places, Sednaya Prison, and the Baghdad Bridge burial site in the suburbs of Damascus.

On February 6, 2025, the Independent Institution held a meeting in Damascus with several victims' and survivors' groups, including ["Release Me"](#), ["Caesar Families"](#), and ["Taafi"](#). During the meeting, the Institution listened to testimonies from families about their struggles to find their loved ones and their fears concerning the future of the issue. Karla Quintana emphasized the Institution's role in supporting international cooperation and



working alongside both the government and local groups, underscoring that Syria's future must be shaped first and foremost by the Syrian people. She stated that the Institution will propose a project to the authorities for discussion with both officials and families, to help in the collective efforts to know the fate and whereabouts of the missing and to help open a path to truth".

## A High Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Syria

On February 27, 2025, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Al-Shaibani [announced](#) the establishment of a High Commission to address the issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared. During a recorded address to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Al-Shaibani affirmed that the new government is committed to transitional justice and to ensuring the rights of victims and the missing.

According to Al-Shaibani, the government has already begun implementing measures to advance justice, including allowing international investigative bodies to enter the country for the first time, hosting a visit from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons—described as historic—and cooperating with the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). Al-Shaibani reaffirmed the government's commitment to holding perpetrators of past crimes accountable. He also called on the international community to support the government's efforts in achieving transitional justice and ending the suffering of Syrians that has continued for more than 14 years.

Earlier in February ,2025 [victims' groups](#) and families of detainees held a meeting with Syrian President Ahmad Al-Sharaa ,attended by Foreign Minister Asaad Al-Shaibani, to address mechanisms for handling the issue of the missing persons in Syria .During the meeting, participants called for the disclosure of the fate of the missing and for the truth to be revealed about what occurred in detention centers and places of arrest .They emphasized that“ holding those responsible for



violations accountable is a non-negotiable right and a fundamental condition for achieving justice, and that transitional justice must go beyond criminal accountability to include institutional reform and memorialization”.

President Al-Shar'a reiterated the government's commitment to prioritizing the issue of the missing, pledging to establish a specialized entity for missing persons and to prevent the recurrence of past violations .He affirmed the importance of ongoing engagement with families of the missing and victims 'groups ,and stressed that those forcibly disappeared should not be considered deceased without concrete evidence.



# Achievements Section



## Joint events by Victims 'Groups

### First World Congress on Enforced Disappearances in Geneva

In cooperation with the [Syrian Center](#) for Media and Freedom of Expression ,the victims 'groups; Release Me ,Synergy ,Taafi, Families for Freedom and Caesar Families participated in the first World Congress on Enforced Disappearances ,held in Geneva on January .2025 ,16-15 The event was organized by the Convention against Enforced Disappearances Initiative ,the Committee on Enforced Disappearances(CED), the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances ,and UN Human Rights .The event shed light on the ongoing practice of enforced disappearance worldwide and its devastating impact on victims ,their families ,and communities.



Key topics discussed included strengthening mechanisms for locating the forcibly disappeared, international responsibility toward victims ,and protecting human rights defenders and journalists .The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights ,[Nada Al-Nashif](#) ,opened the event by commemorating the release of prisoners in Syria who had previously been forcibly disappeared under the Assad regime .Al-Nashif stressed that the prevailing insecurity ,human rights violations ,and entrenched impunity have created an environment of repression that perpetuates disappearances and obstructs the pursuit of truth and justice.

On the sidelines of the congress ,Izzadin Saleh ,Executive Director of” Synergy “association ,held two separate [meetings](#) on January ,2025 ,16-15 with the team of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria(IIMP)and representatives from victims 'groups and Syrian civil society organizations. The discussions focused on IIMP's work priorities and both current and future plans ,including operations inside Syria.

The final day of the congress concluded with [protests](#) held by victims 'families ,calling for the disclosure of the fate of their loved ones and the realization of justice.

## Syrian Dialogue :On Justice ,Truth ,and Reparation

On January ,2025 ,25-24 a group of civil society organizations and victims 'and survivors 'groups—including Taafi ,Release Me ,Synergy, Caesar Families ,[Families of Truth and Justice](#) ,Families for Freedom, and Massar ,alongside the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression—convened a Syrian [Dialogue](#) Conference on Justice, Truth ,and Reparation in Damascus. The conference was attended by Judge Khitam Haddad ,Deputy Minister of Justice for Legal Affairs—



and Studies. The primary goal of the meeting was to launch a Syrian-led dialogue that paves the way for a comprehensive transitional justice process placing victims 'rights and the dignity of Syrians at the heart of political transition and reconstruction efforts .Participants emphasized that the justice file is a national and inclusive issue ,and that the pursuit of truth and accountability must be a core component of building Syria's future.

The participating organizations and associations drafted a set of recommendations to be submitted to the Ministry of Justice in the new government ,urging for accelerated efforts toward implementing transitional justice and providing the necessary support to secure victims 'rights and those of their families.

## Exchange of Views on Truth Justice ,and Accountability in Syria

On January ,2025 ,28 The Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs ,invited both the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression—represented by its director ,Mazen Darwish—and Caesar Families Association—represented by founding member Yasmin Almshaan —to participate in a panel [session](#) titled“ Exchange of Views on Truth ,Justice ,and Accountability in Syria”.

At the start of the session ,Ms .Almshaan spoke about returning to Damascus for the first time in 13years ,emphasizing that the presence of victims 'groups in the capital was not merely a personal return ,but an act of resilience asserting their rightful place at the center of any conversation about truth and justice in Syria .She called for support to the new government to help safeguard records, evidence ,and burial sites ,stressing that justice is not only about addressing suffering but also about ensuring such crimes are never repeated .Almshaan highlighted the need to support victims' groups and civil society organizations by providing resources and funding to strengthen their work in documentation ,advocacy ,and in offering psychological and legal support to families and survivors.

In his remarks ,Mazen Darwish pointed to the enormous challenges following the fall of the dictator, particularly the challenge of securing justice for victims and preventing impunity through a national transitional justice process that fosters joint efforts and guarantees non-repetition—ultimately paving the way toward sustainable peace.

Addressing the issue of forcibly disappeared and missing persons in Syria ,Darwish emphasized the importance of establishing a mixed national-international body with a structural role for victims at its core to uncover the fate of missing persons and those forcibly disappeared both inside and outside Syria .He urged that recovery and reconstruction programs be designed in a way that guarantees victims 'rights .He stressed that justice in Syria is a political priority on par with international recognition and economic recovery .Darwish warned that failure in Syria would have serious repercussions not only domestically but also across the region.

The session concluded with both participants responding to journalists 'questions regarding the issue of missing persons and the future of transitional justice in Syria.

## Advocacy Activities

A group of survivors in the [Taafi Initiative](#) ,alongside families of the forcibly disappeared ,organized a protest in Damascus on January,16 ,2025. During the protest ,they issued an urgent call demanding an end to the violations committed in prisons, security branches ,and detention centers across Syria following the fall of the regime .Participants emphasized the importance of protecting these sites and preventing tampering with documents and records that contain information about the fate of thousands of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.



In a similar context ,Caesar Families held a [protest](#) on January ,2025 ,24 in support of victims of torture in Assad regime detention centers .The participants called for holding the perpetrators accountable and achieving justice ,while also stressing the need to protect mass graves .The association invited several influential Syrian figures to attend the protest ,in addition to a number of media outlets that covered the event and conducted interviews with families of victims and the forcibly disappeared.



On February ,2025 ,2 Caesar Families ,in cooperation with other associations and civil organizations, launched an [advocacy](#) campaign under the title "Where Are the Children of the Detainees .?"The campaign called on the authorities of the new Syrian government to determine the fate of detainees' children and investigate the crimes of hiding them in orphanages or offering them for adoption outside Syria .Activists in the campaign demanded the immediate suspension of orphanage directors, an investigation into their actions ,and the release of an official statement disclosing the findings .The campaign also called on the detainees 'children themselves to get in touch through the campaign's page.

On February ,2025 ,7 and upon the invitation of EuroMed Rights, ,represented by Mr .Anas Dello, participated in a reflective [session](#) on Syria to assess the geopolitical context of the Syrian transitional phase and explore possibilities for joint action .The session was held in Istanbul with the participation of Syrian civil society actors and resulted in recommendations being sent to the European Union.



Separately, Synergy association, represented by its Executive Director Mr. Izzadin Saleh, participated on February 12, 2025, in an event organized by Madaniya Initiative in Paris titled "Justice and Accountability in Syria's Political Transition." The event was held on the sidelines of a ministerial meeting on Syria attended by Arab and Western states, aimed at coordinating regional and international efforts to support Syria's transitional phase. The event brought together several



Syrian civil society organizations and victims' groups. Discussions were based on the outcomes of the Conference on Truth, Justice, and Reparation, which had been organized by several Syrian civil society organizations and victims' groups in Damascus on January 24-25, 2025. The event also presented key challenges and opportunities related to achieving transitional justice and ensuring accountability in Syria's political future.

### Syrian Civil Society meeting with the Syrian and French Foreign Ministers in Paris

A delegation of Syrian civil society organizations and victims' groups—including Synergy, Families for Freedom, and the director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression—met with the French Foreign Minister and the Syrian Foreign Minister on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting on Syria on February 13, 2025, in Paris. The meeting followed the discussion session organized by Madaniya Initiative at the Arab World Institute, aiming to highlight the main priorities concerning justice and accountability, based on the outcomes of the Damascus Conference. The meeting sought to ensure that the voices of survivors and victims are reflected in international positions and decision-making processes.



During the meeting, Mr. Izzadin Saleh, Executive Director of Synergy, spoke about the justice for victims, the achievement of accountability, and the construction of a state based on rights and equal citizenship. He emphasized that achieving this requires guaranteeing the participation of victims at the heart of the transitional justice process. Saleh also explained that transitional justice should not be limited to accountability alone, but must also include institutional reform, memorialization, reparations, and redress.

For its part, Families for Freedom intensified its advocacy efforts between January and March 2025, both within Syria and internationally, to defend the rights of detainees and the forcibly disappeared in Syria. This period witnessed a series of meetings and advocacy activities. The association held a meeting with the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 23, 2025, urging the new government to formally engage with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP). On the same day, they also met with the United Nations Secretary-General to call for the inclusion of victims' groups in justice pathway planning and to emphasize the importance of transparency and survivor participation. Additionally, Families for Freedom met with the ICMP team on February 27, 2025, where an agreement was reached on the necessity of establishing a centralized database for the missing and enhancing continuous communication with families.

Internationally, Families for Freedom participated in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child session held in Geneva on March 12, 2025, where they monitored international efforts to combat child exploitation,

early marriage ,and child recruitment in armed conflicts ,and submitted documentation reports on these issues.

Regarding strategic developments ,Families for Freedom strengthened its collaboration with the International Center for Transitional Justice to advocate for victims 'rights .It also launched partnerships with the ICMP and the Independent Institution for Data and Information Consolidation. Moreover ,the association held internal workshops to define its organizational priorities ,including completing the procedures to register officially as an entity within Syria.

On March ,2025 ,28 [Taafi](#) Initiative director Ahmad Helmi participated in the first-ever side event hosted by the Permanent Syrian Mission to the United Nations in Geneva on justice and accountability. The event was organized by the Syrian Forum and the Global Legal Accountability Organization. It addressed issues related to accountability and the coordination between existing international mechanisms—such as fact-finding missions and national judiciaries—to ensure comprehensive justice. Participants stressed the need for a clear and transparent accountability roadmap that guarantees all Syrians access to justice .The event also emphasized the crucial role of civil society and the necessity of involving survivors of detention ,as well as victims and their families ,in shaping a unified national vision for transitional justice.

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

Between October 2024 and March 2025, Release Me organization, in cooperation with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression ,implemented the "Independent Survivors "project. The organization aimed to improve the living standards and support the economic independence of women survivors of detention and women-led families of the missing in the areas of Afrin ,Salqin ,Armanaz ,and Idlib city within Syria.



The project targeted women who had survived detention and female breadwinners from families of the missing ,in addition to young women from families of the forcibly disappeared .It sought to enhance their economic and social security ,while also building safe spaces for learning ,self-expression ,and capacity development.

The project's activities focused on women's economic empowerment through a training program consisting of ten hands-on sessions covering multiple topics .In response to emerging needs after the regime's fall ,additional sessions were added on managing currency exchange rates to help women entrepreneurs market their products in local markets that still use the Syrian pound.

The training showed a noticeable improvement among the participants in areas such as bookkeeping and marketing strategy planning .Many expressed serious interest in expanding their projects and improving production quality .The impact of the project extended beyond economic skills ,positively influencing self-confidence and self-expression—especially among young women from families of the forcibly disappeared.

As part of its efforts to support families of the missing in Syria ,Families of Truth & Justice [provided](#) legal services to 141 individuals between January and March .2025 Two awareness [sessions](#) were held with 20 relatives of the missing ,focusing on extortion and fraud commonly faced by families seeking information about their loved ones .The legal team offered guidance to help participants avoid falling victim to scams.

The association also held three legal support sessions in Turkey specifically for Syrian refugee families of the missing. These sessions aimed to introduce participants to Turkish laws and facilitate their access to refugee services provided by the Turkish government. A total of 70 individuals benefited, most of whom were directly affected by recent earthquakes.



In the same context, Families of Truth & Justice's legal advisor responded to 51 legal inquiries, delivered either in person or via phone. These consultations centered around the challenges families of the missing face, and participants were guided through appropriate legal steps to address their cases.

On the documentation front, the association's team succeeded in documenting 225 new cases of enforced disappearance in Afrin, Idlib, and Turkey. These cases were added to the association's official database as part of ongoing efforts to uncover the truth and achieve justice.

Between January 1 and March, 2025, A Good Seed carried out a series of psychosocial support activities for the children of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. Among these was the Positive Memory Activity, which ran from early January to March, 2025. The activity targeted 20 children, divided into two groups, with each group attending eight sessions. Its goal was to help children build a positive image of their homeland and culture, strengthen their sense of pride in their identity and belonging, and nurture their belief in their self-worth and role wherever they may be.

A Good Seed also implemented a Scented Candle Activity between January 1 and March, 2025, involving 20 children of detainees over the course of 12 sessions. This activity fell under the broader framework of psychosocial support, aiming to boost children's self-confidence and provide a safe space where they feel supported and accepted. Through the sessions, children learned how to craft scented candles by hand, gaining knowledge of the materials used, precise measurements, weights, and required temperatures.



Additionally, A Good Seed organized a Theater Activity between February 1 and March, 2025, with the participation of 20 children of detainees. Over nine sessions, the goal was to strengthen the children's connection with their families and communities through the recognition of their emotions and needs, by equipping them with effective tools for self-expression.

With the resumption of the European Union Project to Support Victims' groups in early February, 2025, Massar launched a strategic outreach plan targeting families of persons missing at the hands of ISIS. The association held two sessions via Zoom with 50 participants from Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, the al-Shaitat region, Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, Urfa, and Azaz, on March 26 and 28, 2025.

The first session addressed the varied contexts of abduction and enforced disappearance by ISIS, depending on the group's former areas of control in Syria .Participants from affected families shared personal accounts and experiences specific to their regions .The second session discussed the impact of recent political changes on the issue of ISIS detainees in Syria .Participants generally welcomed the constitutional declaration and held an extended discussion on Article .49 However ,they also expressed mixed feelings regarding the nature of the political transition in Syria ,including concerns over possible regression into violence and the potential for selective treatment of human rights cases in the broader context of transitional justice.

Separately ,on March ,2025 ,30 Taafi Initiative ,in cooperation with Women Now ,launched a specialized psychological support program for survivors of detention .The initiative seeks to alleviate the deep psychological impact of years of imprisonment and traumatic experiences.

The program includes both individual and group therapy sessions ,led by mental health and psychosocial care professionals .It emphasizes creating a safe and nurturing environment that allows participants to freely express their emotions and experiences without fear or judgment .The sessions aim to equip survivors with practical tools to manage trauma-related effects ,such as chronic anxiety, painful flashbacks ,feelings of isolation ,and disturbances in sleep or mood .The program also focuses on enhancing coping skills and reinforcing a sense of psychological stability and belonging through shared experiences and peer support.



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