

The Newsletter of the Victim Support Project

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

Introduction:

The legal and political movement emerging from the pain and suffering of the families of the forcibly disappeared, missing, and detained individuals in Syria represents a prominent form of resilience and resistance against the injustice and oppression practiced by the Syrian authorities and other de facto powers in various areas of control. The issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is one of the most sensitive and humanitarian crises in Syria, with thousands of families suffering from the disappearance of their loved ones in prisons run by parties to the Syrian conflict, where they endure torture, mistreatment, and a lack of fair trials.

The movement of associations founded by the families and relatives of the missing and forcibly disappeared reflects a strong will to seek truth and justice. These families organize peaceful protests and events to demand the immediate release of their loved ones and to uncover the fate of the missing. Participants in these peaceful movements utilize various media platforms, including social media, public demonstrations, and activities aimed at rallying public opinion, to spread their message and draw attention to the suffering of detainees, forcibly disappeared persons, and their families.

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Overview of Victims' Associations

Families for Freedom:

«Families for Freedom» is a movement that unites the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared individuals who have lost their sons and daughters in various ways at the hands of different parties in the Syrian conflict. It was launched in Geneva in February 2017 by five women from the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

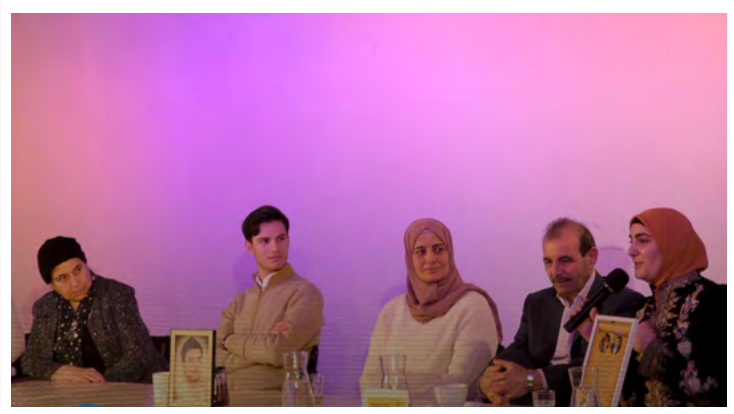


To date, the movement works to raise public awareness among all families who have a relative that has been arrested, detained, or forcibly disappeared, regardless of race, religion, sect, political belief, or ideology. The goal is to pressure all parties involved in the Syrian conflict, whether local or international, to comply with the demands of the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared individuals.

Caesars Families Association:

The association was founded in February 2018 by 11 families and has since expanded to include around 85 families, with the number of affiliated families continuing to grow.

The Caesar Families Association was formed by the families of victims who perished under torture and were identified through the photographs smuggled out by Caesar, the Syrian photographer who shared images documenting acts of torture in Syrian prisons.



The association is committed to demanding the prosecution of those responsible for violating the law in Syria and considers all victims of the «Syrian Arab Republic» who appeared in the Caesar photos to be the sons and daughters of the «Caesar Families.» The documentation department of the association works intensively to assist Syrian families in identifying their loved ones within the Caesar photos and provides them with legal support.

Massar:

Massar Families was established in April 2019, initially under the name «The Coalition of Families of Persons Kidnapped by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).» It was formed by the relatives of individuals who were kidnapped by ISIS during its control of areas in Syria between 2013 and 2019.

Since its inception, Massar has been working on three main pillars: Documenting the cases of the kidnapped and the names of the perpetrators, networking with the families of the kidnapped to organize and create effective action around their cause, and advocating for the cause of the kidnapped, linking it to the broader issue of the missing in Syria.



Taafi Initiative :

«Taafi» was founded in 2017 by survivors of arbitrary detention in Syria. Its mission is to provide support and protection to individuals who have survived detention, empowering them to resume their struggle for justice, accountability, and victims' rights. Taafi encourages advocacy efforts to end arbitrary detention and torture, while ensuring freedom of expression and human rights.



Synergy:

It is a community initiative aimed at achieving justice for the victims of the conflict in Syria by empowering them to represent themselves, claim their rights, and actively participate in accountability and justice efforts.

The association was established on March 11, 2021, by a group of Syrian victims and follows a community organizing approach to unite victims, develop their capacities, and engage them in building plans and policies,



as well as implementing activities aimed at uncovering the truth. Synergy works on documenting all human rights violations in northern and northeast Syria, preserving evidence, documents, and testimonies to contribute to truth-seeking, accountability, and the pursuit of justice.

Families of Truth and Justice:

It is a Syrian collective that was officially launched in 2021 in the city of Antakya in southern Turkey. The organization was founded by the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared in Syria, and it was officially registered with the Turkish Directorate of Associations in October 2022, with the opening of its office in Antakya.



The organization aims to advocate for the rights of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, empowers their families to claim their rights, and provides them with legal, psychological, and economic support. It also works to document cases of enforced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence, supports efforts to develop mechanisms for transitional justice and accountability in Syria, and assists refugee and displaced communities, with a particular focus on women and children.

Release Me:

A feminist, non-profit civil organization established in 2017 as a shelter for women survivors of detention in northwest Syria. The organization opened its first center in Kafranbel, Syria, aiming to support and empower survivors to integrate into new communities after undergoing psychological recovery and to enable them to make decisions about their life paths. After about two years, Release Me began working with survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as survivors of detention, and established a center in Kafr Takharim. However, due to ongoing military operations and the center being bombed, it was decided to relocate the center to the city of Afrin. With the opening of the organization's main office in Afrin in 2019, Release Me continued its efforts as a feminist organization to empower female survivors of violence, including those who have endured detention, and women-led families of the missing, following the enforced disappearance of their traditional breadwinners.



Achievements section:

Advocacy Activities:



Between December 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024, the victims' groups participated in several advocacy activities at regional and international levels, which had an impact on mobilizing public opinion:

Families of Truth and Justice organization participated, through its representatives, in all meetings of the founding team of the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, which was voted into existence in late June 2023. A bilateral meeting was also held between members of the founding team and members of Families of Truth and Justice in Gaziantep, Turkey, to exchange views and consider opinions related to the new Institution and the demands of the victims' families. This took place prior to the issuance of the [Institutions](#) mandate and the determination of its headquarters.

Additionally, Families Of Truth and Justice held regular virtual meetings with the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, to discuss some recent developments in Syria, such as the issuance of the [general amnesty](#) under Legislative Decree No. 36, the [abolition of military field courts](#), and all regional and international updates that specifically impact the Syrian context.

Represented by Ms. Mariam Halak, The Caesar Families Association participated in a panel [discussion](#) with human rights activists titled «The Syrians in Exile Forum - Renewed Hope». The session was held under the sponsorship of the Syria Coordination Group within Amnesty International Germany, in Berlin on December 2, 2023.

During the session, Ms. Mariam Halak recounted the story of her son Ayham, who was arrested and tortured at the Faculty of Medicine, which had been converted into a security branch within the university. She pointed out that members of the colleges' student union were the ones torturing Ayham and his colleagues, leading to his death five days after his arrest due to an intracranial hemorrhage.

Ms. Halak lived for a year and a half holding onto the hope of seeing her son again, as she was misled and emotionally manipulated into believing he was still alive, until she eventually received his death certificate. She noted that she met over 50 women who had lost family members to torture, each with her own story. After fleeing to Lebanon, Mrs. Halak began her journey of advocacy for her late son Ayham and for all the Syrian men and women who fell victim to such atrocities.

On January 19, 2024, the Caesar Families Association organized an event with «Beit Al-Kul» Forum as part of [Detainees Week](#) activities in the city of Al-Bab, northern Syria. The event featured a screening of the documentary «The Silent Witness to Assad’s Crimes» and included a speech by the Caesar Families Association to introduce the organization and its activities with the families of martyrs and forcibly disappeared individuals. Additionally, during the International Women’s Day on March 8, 2024, the Caesar Families Association held a gathering in the city of Azaz. The event aimed to highlight the association’s efforts and the Syrian women’s ability to advocate for their rights to uncover the fate of the missing and hold perpetrators accountable. The gathering was organized in collaboration with a group of survivors of detention.

As part of the «Supporting Victims Groups» project funded by the European Union, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, along with representatives from victims’ groups; Taafi Initiative, Massar Families, and Release Me Organization, held several meetings on March 18, 2024, during the [55th session](#) of the Human Rights Council. These meetings were conducted with representatives of states’ permanent missions, international organizations, and UN entities. These meetings called for support for victims and survivors and urged efforts to uncover the fate of the missing, during a two-day advocacy round on March 18 and 19, 2024.



The mission included several key meetings, beginning with a session with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI), followed by a meeting with members of the founding team of the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. On the following day, participants headed to the United Nations headquarters to attend the interactive dialogue [session](#) with the COI. A representative from Taafi Initiative delivered an oral statement during the session, calling on all member states to support the Institution, so that it can carry out its mandate and reach all detention centers in Syria, emphasizing that ending impunity is the inevitable solution to the settlement in Syria.

Another meeting was organized with the team from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, where the forced return of refugees, particularly from neighboring countries to Syria, was discussed. The delegation highlighted the real threat to their safety, given the continued arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances practiced by the Syrian authorities.

The advocacy tour concluded with a meeting with the European Union’s permanent mission to the United Nations. The delegation reaffirmed the necessity of supporting the victims, implementing accountability mechanisms, and pursuing justice in Syria, while also working to end the culture of impunity that is widespread in Syrian territories, to prevent it from becoming a reality on both the regional and international levels.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

Victims' groups 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:



Families for Freedom staged a demonstration in front of the UAE embassy in London, demanding an immediate halt to normalization with the Syrian government, which is responsible for violations and war crimes, including the detention and disappearance of thousands in its prisons. The protesters called on participants of the UAE Climate Change Conference to press Syrian officials for answers about their loved ones who have been missing since 2011. They also urged them to address the state of prisons and detention centers, often described as human slaughterhouses.

Coordinated by Families for Freedom and as part of [Detainees Week](#) activities in Sweida, families of detainees, in collaboration with several activists, unveiled the longest art canvas in Karama Square in Sweida, Syria, on January 20, 2024. The 300-meter-long canvas displayed images of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in regime prisons, as well as martyrs who died under torture in detention centers.

On January 30, 2024, Families of Truth and Justice met with the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss several topics related to the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, including advocating for its funding.

On March 6, 2024, Families Of Truth and Justice attended a session with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) to discuss a paper titled «Towards a Convention on Crimes Against Humanity and Its Relevance to the Syrian Context».

Contributions to Statements & Position Papers:

On November 17, 2023, Synergy and its partners in the Truth and Justice Charter issued a [statement](#) regarding the International Court of Justice's ruling against Syria to prevent acts of torture. The Charter group welcomed the court's decision on the request for provisional measures and acknowledged the potential role it could play as a preventive tool aimed at protecting individuals from torture in Syrian prisons and detention centers. However, the statement also noted that the mandated measures are insufficient and called on all UN member states to fully assume their responsibilities to ensure that the Syrian government complies with the ordered measures and guarantees their swift implementation.

Additionally, Synergy participated in the drafting and publication of a [statement](#) signed by 158 Syrian organizations at the end of December 2023. The statement called on the United Nations Security Council to protect civilians and their livelihoods and to stop targeting vital infrastructure in northeastern Syria, which is essential for the survival of the population

On December 18, 2023, Families Of Truth and Justice signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism ([IIIM](#)). The purpose of this MoU is to cooperate with the Mechanism by providing available information and evidence regarding war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria since March 2011. This cooperation aims to assist in the investigation and prosecution of individuals responsible for the most serious crimes, as classified under international law.

Synergy has documented the continued practice of arbitrary detention by factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which is supported and funded by Turkey, in the areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tal Abyad/Girê spî. These factions have committed war crimes, including torture and cruel treatment, leaving catastrophic effects on the victims and their families.

Based on documentation from Synergy, during 2023, at least 431 people, including 22 women and 27 children, were arrested in the areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tal Abyad/Girê spî in northern Syria by Turkish forces and factions of the SNA. While only 93 individuals were released from detention, 338 remain in custody. In light of these findings, Synergy published a thematic [report](#) titled «Northern Syria: Arbitrary Detention and Torture as Systematic Policy in SNA-Held Areas.»

In the context of academic [research](#), Taafi Initiative released an extensive study in three languages (English, Arabic, Kurdish) titled «Survivors of Detention: A Study on the Violation of Housing, Land, and Property Rights and Its Impact on Social Relationships». The research was based on surveys and a research study that included the experiences of survivors in this context. It was published on the Taafi website on December 18, 2023.

Projects Supporting the Missing Persons Cause – Support for Families & Victims:

On November 27, 2023, the Caesar Families Association began holding consultation [sessions](#) for a group of 45 women from families of the forcibly disappeared, who are facing legal challenges in their daily lives due to the absence of a family member. The aim of this five-month project was to raise legal awareness and empower families of the forcibly disappeared, particularly women, to facilitate access to legal advice and justice, thereby protecting them from threats, harassment, exploitation, and lack of knowledge about their legal rights.

Coordinated by Release Me Organization, A number of women and survivors of detention participated in a storytelling writing workshop in the last quarter of 2023. The outcome of the workshop was a [book](#) titled «When the Earth Trembles», which documents the stories and experiences of a group of women during the February 6, 2023 earthquake. The book focuses on their strength and ability to act.

Synergy Association organized three focused discussion sessions in September 2023. These sessions involved 25 participants from victims, survivors, and their families in northern and northeast Syria. The Association also conducted a survey targeting 200 individuals, including victims, survivors, human rights defenders, and civil society activists.

The discussion sessions and the analysis of the survey results led to the identification of the needs and priorities of the victims, which helped in shaping and developing the agenda for the Second Annual Victims' Forum in Northern Syria. A [report](#) was prepared in both Arabic and English to highlight the major issues faced by victims and IDPs in northeast Syria. A [video](#) in both Arabic and English was created about the human rights situation in northern Syria, which was displayed during the Forum. Additionally, a [video](#) summarizing the key points of the Forum was produced and is available in both Arabic and English languages.



Families Of Truth and Justice documented 94 cases of enforced disappearance and two cases of female survivors of detention and torture, who were released in November and December 2023. This documentation was conducted using forms developed by the organization as part of its activities to enhance its database, allowing for the addition of new cases in order to share them later with international human rights mechanisms.

The organization provided 31 legal consultations between November 2023 and March 2024, through its legal advisor, lawyer Ahmad Hassoun, for the families of the missing residing in Turkey via the designated hotline.

On February 1, 2024, the Caesar Families Association was [accepted](#) as a member of the International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses ([INOVAS](#)), an international network led by victims and survivors, providing them with an official platform to raise their voices.

Taafi Initiative created a podcast series titled “[Qa'da Zinzana](#)” (Prison Cell Gathering), which portrays discussions held within a virtual prison cell. These discussions are based on the memories of survivors of detention, focusing on intense and unconventional aspects of life inside the cell and the methods they used to create their own reality despite the darkness of imprisonment. The first episode was recorded in December 2023 and released on social media in February 2024. It featured a discussion between survivors of detention, sharing their experiences and their attempts to survive.

Other Contributions:

Synergy prepared a [fact sheet](#) outlining the context of the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. It provides information about the new [Institution](#), its role, mandate, reporting mechanisms, and the importance of active participation by victims, survivors, and families of the missing. The fact sheet aimed to equip families of the missing and forcibly disappeared with sufficient knowledge about the Institution, manage their expectations, and amplify their voices, thereby increasing the chances of achieving the desired progress in addressing this case. Furthermore, 14 promotional posters were published in Arabic and English to highlight the key points included in the fact sheet.



Between February 10th and March 15th, 2024, Release Me Organization held 17 knowledge-building sessions for families of the disappeared in the Salqin and Afrin regions of Syria and surrounding areas. The sessions included 246 participants. The organization will continue holding such sessions until the end of 2024 as part of a project funded by the DRL, in partnership with Impunity Watch.



Between January 25 and April 27, victims' groups had attended five workshops on transitional justice online and in Paris, organized by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. The primary goal of these activities was to build a shared vision of transitional justice in Syria among large and diverse groups of Syrian victims, survivors, and their families. The workshops addressed the issue of «narratives» of severe human rights violations from different perspectives and worked on building a common understanding of the various challenges surrounding the possibility for a national transitional process in Syria. This activity resulted in a policy paper reflecting the analysis, views, and recommendations of a group of Syrian civil society organizations regarding the issue of transitional justice.



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