

The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria and Ways to Seek Justice for Them



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The Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria discussed the needs and priorities of the victims in north and northeast Syria, aiming to seek justice for them and advocate for their top issues. The Forum yielded recommendations that contribute to uncovering the truth, accountability and achieving justice from their perspective

Background:

The ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011 has affected all joints of life in the country. Parties to the conflict have varied and Syria's geography has been divided into different areas of influence/control between them. Regional and international parties got involved in the Syrian conflict, further complicating the situation. War crimes and countless of human rights violations have been committed by most parties to the conflict across Syria under the absence of accountability and continued impunity.

Repercussions of continuing the conflict in Syria 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 several of which, above them Turkey, used the file of refugees as a bargaining paper/tool to blackmail the international community and to ultimately intervene in Syria. Furthermore, Syrian people have been facing gross violations of human rights within the different areas of control. More than 350,000 Syrians were [killed](#) due to the conflict over a decade, 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, torture, including sexual violence or died in custody. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and other ill-treatment continue to be rife and committed by all parties to the conflict amid the increase of numbers of notorious detention facilities across the country. Arbitrary detention and arrest are used deliberately to instill fear and quell the opponent public opinion, or sometimes less to achieve financial gains.

Other violations also accompanied the conflict and were committed on a wide scale, among them the [seizure](#), destruction or occupation of property in an illegal way, [forcing](#) the populations to leave their houses, and [obstructing the return of native people](#). These violations were mostly practiced by the Syrian Government and its allied armed groups in the areas they recaptured from the control of the armed opposition forces. They were also practiced by Turkish forces and the opposition factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî in northern Syria which were occupied by Turkey due to “Olive Branch” Operation in 2018 and “Peace Spring” Operation in 2019.

Religious and ethnic minorities were also 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 brought together by civil peace and common coexistence.

Millions of people, in northeast and northwest Syria, many of whom are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), depend on cross-border food, medicine and other necessary aid. In 2020, Russia vetoed to force the UN Security Council to close three out of the four authorized border crossings towards northern Syria. This, as a result, cut the international cross-border aid

totally to northeast Syria and increased the difficulty of distributing aid in the northwest. Currently, people in northwest Syria depend, completely and exclusively, on Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkish border, given it is the solely border crossing left in the northwest to receive all humanitarian aid and medical supplies provided by the UN to the civilians. Food insecurity, as a consequence, reached high levels in northern Syria while the prices of food continue to hike sharply. Basic services remain very limited and there are around three million IDPs, 1.8 million out of them live in makeshift camps.

Introduction:

Syrians, both men and women, from all components, various ethnicities and orientations are victims of a prolonged conflict over a decade to the extent that no Syrian is spared from the conflict's ramifications; everyone is a victim to varying degrees. However, certain circumstances heightened the agony of some victims, such as conditions of internal displacement in which forcible displacement accompanied the majority of cases. This was prevalent in the aftermath of the Turkish military operations in northern Syria, i.e the Operation Ankara dubbed "Olive Branch" in 2018 which resulted in the occupation of Afrin Region and similarly the "Peace Spring" Operation in 2019 which led to the occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî Regions.

Lacking sufficient knowledge on their fundamental rights and the mechanisms to defend such rights double the victims' suffering and expose them to more violations. Moreover, impunity enriches and exacerbates grave violations of human rights. Therefore, Synergy Association for Victims works to document all violations of human rights committed by all parties to the conflict and seeks to an effective contribution in accountability and justice processes on Syria with the aim to achieve justice for the victims and fight impunity.

In the midst of its pursuit to understand the needs and priorities of victims, among them the IDPs and the enforced migrants, and provide a space for discussions among themselves, [Synergy](#) organized three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) over September 2023, in which 25 persons from the victims, survivors and their families in north and northeast Syria took part. The Association also prepared a survey targeting 200 participants, including the victims, survivors, human rights defenders, and civil society activists.

The FGDs and analysis of the survey results yielded in identifying the victims' different needs and priorities, in addition to drafting and developing the agenda of Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria with the aim to provide a platform and a space for the victims, survivors and their families in north and northeast Syria to represent themselves, claim their rights, and coordinate among each other to achieve their goals.

The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria:

On October 27, 2023, [Synergy Association for Victims](#), [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) Organization, and [Dar](#) Association for Victims of Forced Displacement jointly organized the Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria, under the slogan “Together, Our Voice is Stronger”.

The Forum highlighted the needs and priorities of victims in northern Syria, seeking justice and advocating for their top concerns and issues. These include the right to safe and voluntary return, revealing the fate of those missing and forcibly disappeared, achieving peace and stability. In addition to restoring confiscated property and rights, holding perpetrators accountable, compensation and reparation, along with improving the economic situation and the conditions of the camps.

The Forum was held in [al-Qamishli/Qamishlo](#) City in northeast Syria, with the participation of 57 people, most of whom attended in person while others joined virtually, among them six panelists. The participants were victims and survivors, including the IDPs, enforced migrants, activists, human rights defenders, and decision makers, in addition to various local, regional and international media agencies and outlets.



The Right to Safe and Voluntary Return:

Results of the survey conducted by Synergy, and which targeted 200 individuals of the victims, survivors, their families, human rights defenders, and civil society activists in north and northeast Syria showed that the “safe and voluntary return” was their most pressing issue of top priority. It was also the most frequently mentioned demand in the FGDs, which involved victims, survivors, and their families. Meanwhile, more than 350,000 people from Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî in north and northeast Syria are still IDPs and enforced migrants due to the two Turkish operations “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch”, among them 36,000 people who reside in makeshift camps in [Washo Kani/al-Twaina](#), [Serê Kaniyê/al-Talae’](#), and [Tel al-Samen](#) in al-Hasakah and Raqqa Governorates, in addition to more than 7,000 IDPs in five makeshift camps in al-Awda, Afrin, al-Shahba, Barkhadan/al-Muqawama, and Sardam/al-Asr set up in Shahba Region in northern Aleppo.

More than 150,000 indigenous people from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî continue to be IDPs and enforced migrants due to the Turkish occupation. Turkey and the Turkish-backed factions affiliated with the opposition SNA have resettled more than 2,815 displaced families from elsewhere in Syria in the homes of these IDPs and enforced migrants.

Four years have passed since the Turkish occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê City, yet [more than %85](#) of its native people is still forcibly displaced. The city has lost its diversity; its Kurds who used to be 75,000 people prior to the Turkish occupation are now no more than 45 people. The number of the Armenians, Syriacs, and Yazidis who stayed there is less than 10 while most of its Arabs, Chechens, and Circassians among others have displaced. Meanwhile, Turkey settled, in the original people’s homes, more than 2,000 displaced families from elsewhere in Syria as well as the refugees it deported, including Iraqi families who comprise women and children of the Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. Similarly, the Kurdish residents in Afrin were estimated to be [more than 92%](#) out of the total population prior to 2011, but human rights reports confirm today that this percentage has [decreased](#) to make up 20% or even less following the Turkish occupation.

Rule 132 of the Customary International Humanitarian Law (Customary IHL) explicitly states that “IDPs 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.” However, the majority of the IDPs and the enforced migrants are unable to return. In a report published on February 26, 2023, Synergy Association for Victims [documented](#) aspects of instability in “Peace Spring” Strip which experiences a state of armed chaos and insecurity let alone the non-stop infighting among the SNA factions on dividing the IDPs’ properties among themselves, power and influence, drug dealing, and the trafficking of human beings between Syria and Turkey. In another report published on January 19, 2023, Synergy [documented](#) systematic repeated patterns of looting and seizure of civilians’ properties in “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch” Strips, mostly the appropriations outside the context of hostilities, such as the unlawful seizure, selling, scorching, and destruction of property and real estates, expelling the native

people and pushing them to leave the area which lead to changes in the region's demographic architecture, undermine civil peace and common coexistence that characterize it.

In a [report](#) published on July 10, 2023, titled "No End in Sight: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023", the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic said "the Commission has previously found that in the context of detention, the SNA committed war crimes of torture and cruel treatment, hostage-taking, rape and sexual violence, as well as acts tantamount to enforced disappearances."

Camps Are An Ongoing Ordeal:

One of the ongoing challenges is the camps inhabited by the IDPs and the enforced migrants, notably the makeshift ones or those unrecognized by the UN bodies, such as the camps of ([Washo Kani](#)/al-Twaina, [Serê Kaniyê](#)/al-Talae', and [Tel al-Samen](#)) in al-Hasakah and Raqqa Governorates, and the camps of al-Awda, Afrin, al-Shahba, Barkhadan/al-Muqawama, and Sardam/al-Asr in Shahba Region in northern Aleppo which have yet to be officially acknowledged or supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or other UN bodies or agencies. These camps do not even get services or assistance from international humanitarian organizations except in the minimum limits.

Suffering of the camps residents is exacerbated by cases of water shortage or pollution due to the repeated interruption of water flowing from Allouk Water Station by Turkey and the SNA factions. The station is located in the east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and supplies al-Hasakah City along with its countryside, including the camps, with safe water for drinking and usage. Since early 2023, dozens of scabies cases have been recorded among the children in Washo Kani and Serê Kaniyê Camps in al-Hasakah. The challenges for camp residents also multiply in terms of health, as they lack regular and effective healthcare services. For example, in Tel al-Samen Camp, accommodating 1,246 families (estimated 6,448 individuals) there is only one medical point, and this point is under-equipped and staffed by a solo midwife and few nurses.

Mrs. Aziza Mar'i, a resident and a management member in Tel al-Samen Camp that houses IDPs and enforced migrants from Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî, participated in the FGDs as well as in the Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria. She underscored the continuing agony of the camp's residents as saying:

"The camp's residents are enforced migrants and unable to return to their places, where Turkey claimed will establish a safe zone. They lost all their properties which were seized by the factions trusted by Turkey to administer the areas there since October 2019. The people here, in the camp, live in hope to safe and voluntary return someday".

The Importance of Effective Participation of Victims and Survivors in Efforts of Uncovering the Truth, Accountability and Justice:

The Executive Director of Synergy Association for Victims, Izzadin Saleh, commenced the Forum by giving a speech on the escalating human rights violations due to the ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011 and its impact on the victims, survivors and their families. He emphasized the importance of coordination between the victims and survivors to represent themselves and lead campaigns to defend their rights. He also stressed that a comprehensive and sustainable peace in Syria is impossible without seeking justice for the victims and without their active participation in truth-revealing, accountability, and justice processes.

A video illustrating the human rights situation in Syria and the catastrophic humanitarian crisis that has persisted since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 was presented in the Forum. The video also included statistics about the victims of severe human rights violations in Syria, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, among others.



Four panelists participated in the first theme of the Forum, titled “The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria”. The literary writer and critic, Abdul Wahab Pirani, talked about the needs and priorities of the victims, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, whether residing inside or outside the camps, and the role of literature and art, both prominent and neglected, in documenting the reality and stories of the victims. Meanwhile, the journalist and civil activist, Avin Youssef, discussed the role of media in advocating for the victims’ issues on the local, regional, and international levels. Khalaf Dawood, a member of the Public Relations Bureau in the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), spoke about the duties and responsibilities of the Autonomous Administration and the necessary diplomatic efforts regarding priority issues for the victims and the northern and eastern regions of Syria generally. Lastly, the academic and political researcher, Ibrahim Muslim, who is based in France and participated virtually via Zoom, addressed human rights situation in the areas of northern Syria under the Turkish occupation.



Available Justice Mechanisms, Both Locally and Internationally, Currently and in the Future:

The second theme of the Forum featured an effective and a meaningful dialogue among the participants regarding available justice mechanisms in the Syrian context, both on the local and international level, currently and in the future, as well as the importance of effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in processes of accountability and transitional justice in Syria.

The Executive Director of Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement, Muhyedin Isso, based in Germany, joined virtually via Zoom and talked about the prospects of achieving peace and stability, the right to a dignified, voluntary and safe return, and the significance of ongoing work to achieve these goals.

On the other hand, Ahmed Helmi, a human rights defender, founder and manager of Ta'afi Initiative to Support Survivors of Detention and Torture, stressed on the importance of effective participation of victims in processes of uncovering the truth, accountability and justice. Furthermore, he talked about the experience of the "[Truth and Justice Charter](#)", which brings together 10 Syrian victims' associations working collaboratively to uncover the truth, ensure justice for the detainees and the enforced disappeared and their families as the cornerstone for achieving a lasting peace in Syria. Families and Charter associations, including Synergy, as well as partners' organizations of the civil society, have been engaged in years of advocacy and struggle to call on the establishment of an independent institution tasked with disclosing the fate of those missing and disappeared by all parties to the conflict. On June 29, 2023, these efforts were fruitful, as the United Nations adopted a [resolution](#) for the establishment of this body, which will be a center to collect and manage the missing persons-relevant available data and unify its criteria in coordination with other existing mechanisms. Its goal is to determine the whereabouts of the living missing persons, locate the burial site of remains of the deceased, identify and restore them to their families. Additionally, the new body will provide a support to the victims, survivors and their families.

The participants and the panelists engaged in extensive and focused discussions about the priority issues for the victims, survivors and their families, including the IDPs, and the enforced migrants, and they explored ways to achieve justice from their perspective.

The discussions emphasized the necessity of disseminating awareness about the significance of documentation with a view to reveal the truth and an effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in accountability efforts as a fundamental right and a form of effective redress for the victims in their endeavor to hold perpetrators accountable and achieve justice.

Referring to the wide-scale and wrongful logging of olive and forest trees in Afrin Region at the hands of the Turkish-backed SNA factions, the writer and the historian Abdullah Shkaki, who is also an enforced migrant from Afrin as a result of Operation “Olive Branch”, said:

“Not only the residents of Afrin were victims, so was the nature. It has been targeted and proscribed so far.”

On April 12, 2023, [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) Organization and [Lêlûn](#)/Lelun Association for Victims published a joint [report](#) documenting the large-scale and illegal cutting off forest/wild trees in 114 forest sites in Afrin, among them were 57 patches that were completely destroyed at the hands of the Turkish-backed SNA factions.

Regarding the importance of victims’ participation in efforts of uncovering the truth, accountability and justice, the journalist Abdulhalim Abdulhalim, an IDP from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê said in the Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria:

“Awareness of the importance of documentation along with the victims’ participation is the key step towards achieving justice. Migration to other countries seeking asylum is increasing, particularly the migration of victims and IDPs, and is causing the loss of witnesses and evidences. Therefore, we should intensify our documentation efforts.”

The writer and critic, Abdul Wahab Pirani, added that documentation is not only limited to the legal effort, rather there are other patterns of documentation efforts aiming to truth-revealing and strengthening solidarity with the victims. He said:

“Documentation through literature and art is as important as the legal and human rights documentation. We are in need of such kind of documentation for the victims’ sake.”

Highlighting the importance of adopting an approach that focuses on experiences, perspectives and priorities of the victims, survivors and their families, the author and novelist, Reidi Misho, said:

“The top priority is to struggle for the victims’ issues from a humanitarian and non-political perspective, focus on humanitarian and legal aspects, and strengthen humanitarian solidarity with the victims.”



Recommendations:

The discussions during the Forum, the FGDs, and our direct dialogue with the victims, survivors and their families resulted in several recommendations, the most important of which are:

To the Conflict Victims in Syria:

- Coordinate among the victims- the cause owners -organize themselves, and lead efforts aiming to defend their rights and advocate for their priority issues.
- Raise awareness on the importance of a victims-led and initiated documentation process. This can play a leading role in building a comprehensive and unified narrative for the victims and develop their perspective on effective justice and redress.
- Ongoing struggle to ensure effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in revealing the truth, accountability and justice processes in Syria, as a fundamental right indispensable for a sustainable comprehensive peace in the country.

To the United Nations, Decision Makers, and International Actors:

- Provide sufficient support to victims of the Syrian conflict, mostly to the IDPs and the enforced migrants, according to their needs and priorities.
- Support the camps that have yet gained an international recognition, such as the makeshift camps set up for IDPs of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî among others.
- Provide cross-border humanitarian assistance for the people of northeast Syria through border crossings like al-Yaarubiyah/Tal Kojar and Semalka/Fishkhabour without waiting the approval of the Syrian government and/or any other party to the conflict, recognizing that humanitarian aid is a life-saving necessity.
- Pressure the Syrian government to abide by its legal, humanitarian and ethic duties towards its own citizens and ensure the protection of their fundamental rights, in addition to cooperate with UN bodies to end the conflict, build peace and achieve justice.
- Pressure the Turkish government to acknowledge its occupation of the areas under its effective control in northern Syria, including Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî and fulfill its obligation as an occupying state as per the [IV Geneva Convention](#). In addition to the immediate withdrawal from the areas it occupies, forbidding its affiliated forces, factions and militias from committing violations against the civilian populations, and holding accountable all individuals involved in these violations.
- Impose sanctions on Syrian individuals, factions, and entities, as well as those entering Syria, involved in committing human rights violations and war crimes, and hold accountable the entities that support and fund them.

- Hold accountable the perpetrators of human rights violations, whether individuals and groups, and provide effective mechanisms of remedy for the victims that align with the victims' vision for justice and redress in Syria.
- Pressure the Turkish government to cease aggressions on civilian objects, infrastructures, and critical facilities in north and east Syria that exacerbate the catastrophic humanitarian crisis, destroy the population's livelihoods and threaten the already tenuous stability in the area, and to call on the Turkish government to hold accountable its officials who are involved in committing war crimes.
- Pressure the governments of Syria and Turkey to stop weaponizing water against the residents in north and northeast Syria and neutralize water resources from political rivalries.
- Pressure the Turkish government to provide a safe and impartial environment in the areas it occupies, ensuring the safe and dignified voluntary return of the IDPs and the enforced migrants to their original homes, and to promptly halt any policies of demographic changes in the areas it occupies, as well as to remove the aftermath ensuing from those practices.
- Pressure all parties to the conflict in Syria to disclose the fate of the detainees, missing persons, and the enforced disappeared, locate the burying sites of remains of the deceased, identify and restore them to their families, and provide facilities needed for the survivors and their families.

To Victims' Associations and Civil Society Organizations:

- Continuously work to identify the needs and priorities of the victims, survivors and their families, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, engage them in building plans and policies, and design activities and appropriate interventions.
- Mobilize public opinion, both locally and globally, about the human rights violations committed by all parties to the conflict in areas of north and northeast Syria and work to seek justice and compensation for the victims.
- Document all human rights violations, regardless of the victims and perpetrators, such as extrajudicial killing, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, forced displacement, in addition to the violations of Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights, and submit these documentations to UN bodies and the available justice mechanisms about Syria, with the aim to contribute to uncovering the truth, accountability and justice on Syria.
- Amplify voices of the victims, survivors and their families, empower them to represent themselves and lead the campaigns that defend their rights and advocate for their issues.

- Provide all types of legal, medical, social, psychological, and service support, sufficiently and effectively, to the victims, survivors, the IDPs and the enforced migrants.
- Intensify awareness campaigns and training activities for the IDPs and the enforced migrants to inform them about their seized rights, particularly those related to Housing, Land, Property (HLP) rights. As well as raise awareness about the importance of maintaining property documentation and assist them in issuing legal documents in case of loss, damage, or similar circumstances.

To the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES):

- Maintain continuous dialogue with the conflict victims in Syria, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, and engage them in decision-making processes.
- Ensure the provision of essential services to the IDPs and the enforced migrants in its areas (AANES's areas), notably the camps residents, guarantee their fundamental rights, provide job opportunities for them and help them integrate with the host communities.