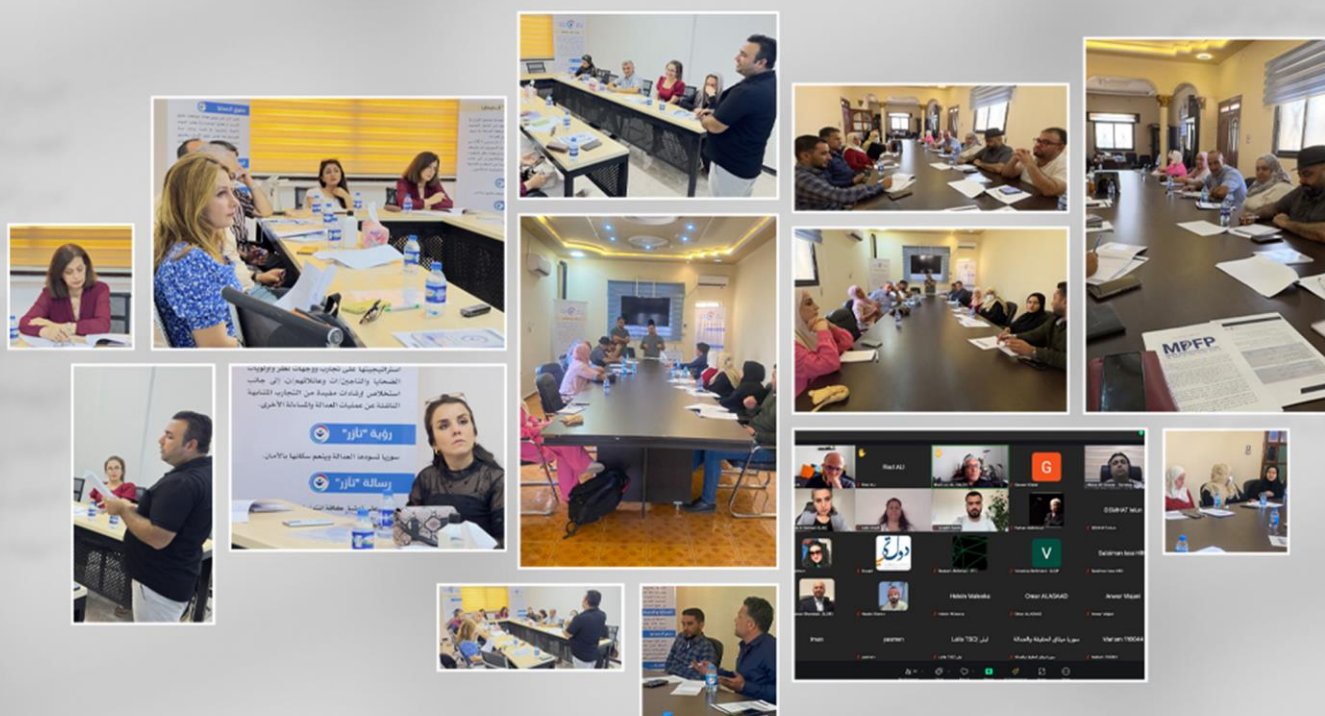


# On the Path to Truth: Towards Concerted Efforts to Address the Issue of the Missing Persons in Syria



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*Despite the establishment of the UN “Independent Institution/IIMP”, the issue of the missing persons in Syria remains a major challenge that requires concerted efforts from the civil society and developing effective mechanisms to collect and exchange information that contribute in uncovering the fate of the missing persons and the enforced disappeared and making justice for them and their families*

## Background:

The ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011 has affected all joints of life in the country. Syria's geography has been divided, and the country has turned into an arena for multi-faceted conflict involving local, regional and international parties, ensuing a huge humanitarian crisis and pushing millions of Syrians to immigrate.

One of the most tragic aspects of this conflict is the grave human rights violations that Syrian people have faced and continue to face in various areas of control. More than 350,000 Syrians were killed according to the [United Nations](#). Furthermore, tens of thousands of civilians have been arbitrarily detained and remain [forcibly disappeared](#), while thousands more were subjected to ill-treatment, torture, including sexual violence or death in custody

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance are intrinsic features of the Syrian conflict; they represent major reasons for enforced asylum and displacement. They pose the most significant barriers to achieving peace, and thus, represent the greatest challenges to genuine transitional justice in subsequent stages.

Today, the exact number of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria cannot be determined precisely, as the vast majority of prisons and detention centers remain inaccessible to monitors. However, Syrian organizations indicate that their number amounts to tens of thousands.

The UN Security Council [Resolution](#) 2139, adopted in February 2014, strongly condemned the abductions and enforced disappearances in Syria and demanded the prompt cease of such practices and the release of all those forcibly detained. Nevertheless, no concrete steps have been taken to implement this resolution, and multiple attempts at political negotiations have failed to achieve any progress.

After 2016, associations of victims, survivors, and their families began to emerge, leading efforts, alongside partners of the Syrian civil society, to demand the establishment of an international mechanism to reveal the fate of the missing persons in Syria and achieve justice. These efforts culminated in June 2023 with a [resolution](#) from the United Nations General Assembly to establish an Independent Institution aimed at clarifying the fate of the missing in Syria and supporting their families.

Although the President of the [Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria/IIMP](#) has not been appointed yet, the IIMP is making practical strides. By the end of this year, it is anticipated to begin collecting, organizing, and analyzing data on missing persons, as well as developing a clear strategy to provide essential support to the victims and their families.

Despite these positive developments, significant challenges still remain. The families of missing persons require legal and psychological support, as well as greater awareness of how to defend their rights. Furthermore, there is a lack of experience in engaging with relevant international mechanisms. Enhancing advocacy and awareness efforts will

therefore be essential to ensure the success of the new institution in achieving justice and reconciliation.

### Introduction:

Despite the efforts made, associations and assemblies of victims and survivors, along with civil society organizations, continuously need to discuss issues related to missing persons. This is essential to exchange updates, share recommendations, and achieve integration that contribute to tangible progress in this complex issue, especially regarding search efforts and methods for collecting and sharing information and data. Between June and August 2024, Synergy Association for Victims organized three consultative sessions with the participation of 48 representatives to discuss the latest developments regarding the issue of missing persons in Syria, including discussions on the IIMP, and explored ways to collect and exchange information and data about the missing, to provide guidance and support for search efforts.

Two sessions were held in person in Raqqa and Qamishli, with the participation of 22 representatives from victims' associations, families, and civil society organizations operating and active in al-Jazira region (al-Hasakah Governorate), Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Kobani, and Manbij. While the third session was conducted virtually, with 26 representatives from victims' associations, families, and civil society organizations, both inside and outside Syria, ensuring inclusive participation and a broader dialogue scope.

These sessions focused on improving mechanisms for collecting and exchanging information on the missing and addressed the challenges faced by organizations working in this field. The discussions concluded with practical recommendations, aimed at unifying efforts and enhancing the effectiveness of joint work.

### The Independent Institution, Challenges and Future Prospects:

Following the adoption of the UN General Assembly [Resolution](#) establishing the Independent Institution/IIMP dedicated to the issue of the missing persons in Syria, the UN Secretary-General issued a report, in early December, outlining the new Institution's [terms of reference](#), mandate and scope, legal framework, working methods, structure, composition and cooperation with other relevant actors.

Despite delays in practical steps, the team of the IIMP has not ceased its efforts. They have held a series of regular online briefings, personal consultations, and bilateral meetings to keep Syrian civil society informed of developments regarding the establishment of the institution, gather recommendations, and listen to opinions. Additionally, the IIMP team participated in sessions, organized by Synergy, with the families of the missing on one hand, and with victims' associations and organizations working on the issue of missing persons on the other. However, the delay in forming the institutional structure and appointing the

President—a crucial step for continuing the institution's work—remains a significant obstacle.

The appointment of the Institution's Presidents is scheduled to take place soon. The selected individual is expected to have expertise in issues related to missing persons and transitional justice, as well as the ability to collaborate effectively with relevant international organizations and stakeholders.

This position holds great significance. The Truth and Justice Charter has presented a vision for the criteria that the individual leading the Independent Institution should meet. The President will embody the institution's charter and will be required to fulfill complex responsibilities, including high-level diplomatic work, cooperation with victims' associations and organizations involved in this issue, and having deep understanding of the political and cultural context of the region to effectively address the issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

The IIMP faces major challenges, including ensuring independence amid political complexity in the region. Furthermore, the institution works on building a precise and comprehensive database of missing persons and developing a robust documentation mechanism, with these efforts expected to be completed by the end of 2024.

The success of this institution largely depends on the cooperation of the civil society organizations and victims' associations to ensure achieving justice and reconciliation in Syria.

## Future Recommendations and Initiatives to Support the Issue of the Missing Persons in Syria:

In order to effectively address the issue of the missing persons in Syria, it is essential to strengthen coordination among various concerned parties. The discussions, facilitated by Synergy, have yielded a set of recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of the efforts to address the issue of the missing persons in Syria and achieve justice for them and their families.

- 1. Promoting cooperation and coordination between Syrian associations and organizations:** through holding regular meetings among the associations, organizations, and relevant actors to coordinate efforts and exchange perspectives and information on the issue of the missing persons and the forcibly disappeared in Syria.
- 2. Providing psychosocial support for families of the missing persons:** Organizing regular psychological support sessions for families of the missing persons, with a particular focus on providing specialized psychological support for women who are affected by the loss.

### **3. Developing and standardizing methodologies and criteria for data documentation and saving:**

- ✓ Coordinating and standardizing criteria for data collection, and documentation of missing persons' cases to ensure the accuracy and continuous updating of information.
- ✓ Launching training programs to enhance the capacity of local organizations in documentation and data collection, aligning their efforts with international standards.
- ✓ Establishing a periodic review system to update data and assess its compliance with the established criteria.
- ✓ Developing transparent consent forms to obtain informed consent from the families of missing persons, ensuring respect for their rights and protecting them from any risks that may arise from cooperating with international entities.

### **4. Avoiding burdensome re-documentation:**

- ✓ Conducting a thorough assessment to determine the actual need for re-documentation, and avoiding placing psychological pressure on the families by repeatedly collecting the same information.
- ✓ Developing effective communication methods with the families to offer appropriate support and alleviate their psychological burden.

### **5. Promoting outreach, media, and advocacy on the issue of missing persons:**

- ✓ Developing effective communication strategies to raise public awareness of the importance of IIMP's work.
- ✓ Enhancing international advocacy by leveraging the momentum from the UN Resolution for the establishment of the IIMP, and unifying voices to call for genuine progress on the ground.
- ✓ Coordinating efforts with partners to pressure the responsible parties (parties to the conflict in Syria) to achieve tangible progress on this issue.

### **6. Identifying the Missing Persons:**

- ✓ Intensifying efforts to analyze the remains exhumed from mass graves, and identifying the missing persons in cooperation with international experts.
- ✓ Pressuring all parties to the conflict and relevant actors in the Syrian file to allow international monitors access to prisons and work towards uncovering the fate of missing persons and those forcibly disappeared.