

The Media Digest of the Victim Support Project

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Photo: The Syria Campaign / Zakaria Abdelkafi

Introduction:

Syrian organizations and associations established by the families of detainees remain at the forefront of the struggle for truth and justice in cases of enforced disappearances throughout the country. These victims' groups represent a glimmer of hope for many in achieving justice for victims, working to highlight the suffering of affected families and exert pressure on authorities to provide clear information about the fate of detainees and missing persons. They also advocate for holding those responsible for violations accountable.

Activists within these groups document cases of detention and enforced disappearance, offering legal and psychological support to families of the missing and raising awareness of these issues at both local and international levels. Through their efforts, these human rights associations aim to lay a common foundation for achieving peace and stability in Syria, rooted in the principle of justice as a cornerstone for rebuilding trust among community members and fostering reconciliation.

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Overview of Victims 'Groups

Families for Freedom:

Families For Freedom is a movement that unites the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons at the hands of various parties to the Syrian conflict .Launched in February 2017 in Geneva ,the movement was founded by five women from families of detainees and forcibly disappeared individuals in Syria.

The movement works to raise public awareness ,encompassing every family with a member who has been detained ,arrested ,or forcibly disappeared .Its goal is to exert pressure on all parties ,whether local or international ,to comply with the demands of families of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons.

The group advocates for the disclosure of the names of all detainees held by the Syrian regime and other conflict parties ,demanding accountability for all those responsible for these violations–particularly Syrian government officials–who have perpetrated and continue to perpetrate abuses against detainees and forcibly disappeared persons.



Caesar Families Association:

The Caesar Families Association was established in February 2018 by the families of victims who lost their lives under torture and were identified through the photos leaked by” Caesar “a Syrian photographer who documented acts of torture in Syrian prisons.

The association is committed to advocating for the prosecution of law violators in Syria and considers all victims depicted in the Caesar photos as members of the “Caesar Families.”

The association strives to uncover the truth, seek justice, and restore dignity to all victims of torture and enforced disappearance in Syria. It also supports family members in pursuing legal actions against perpetrators of human rights violations committed in Syria.



Massar:

The Massar Association—also known as the Coalition of Families of Persons Abducted by ISIS—was founded in April 2019 by relatives of individuals kidnapped by ISIS during its control of parts of Syria from 2013 to 2019.

The association primarily works to uncover the fate of those disappeared by the group, document cases of abduction and the names of perpetrators, and build networks among the families of abductees to establish a structured and effective response to their plight.

Additionally, Massar advocates for the cause of abductees and integrates their issue into the broader case of missing persons in Syria.



Taafi Initiative:

The Taafi Initiative was established in 2017 by survivors of arbitrary detention in Syria. Its mission is to provide support and protection for those who have survived detention, assist them in recovery and reintegration into active life, and support their struggle for legal accountability and justice.

The initiative collaborates with human rights organizations and victim advocacy groups to press decision-makers for policy and legislative changes related to combating torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, and field executions.



Synergy:

Synergy is a community initiative founded on March 11, 2021, by a group of Syrian victims with the goal of securing justice for those affected by the conflict in Syria. It empowers victims to represent themselves, advocate for their rights, and actively participate in accountability and justice efforts.

The association focuses on documenting human rights violations in northern and northeastern Syria, preserving evidence, testimonies, and documentation to contribute to truth-seeking and accountability processes. It also works to strengthen the capacities of victims and advocate for their cases.



Families Of Truth & Justice:

Families Of Truth & Justice is a Syrian organization established in Turkey in 2021 by the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared in Syria. The organization was officially licensed by the Turkish Directorate of Associations in October 2022 and opened a formal office in the city Antakya.

Its mission includes advocating for the rights of detainees and the forcibly disappeared, providing legal, psychological, and economic support to the families of victims, and documenting cases of enforced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence. The organization also supports the refugee and displaced communities, with a special focus on women and children, offering both legal and psychological assistance.



Release Me:

Release Me is a civil organization established in 2017 as a shelter for women survivors of detention residing in northwest Syria. In 2019, it expanded into a feminist organization aimed at empowering survivors of violence, including former detainees and the families of forcibly disappeared persons.

The organization seeks to promote feminist activism and enhance women's representation in decision-making at all levels. It provides rehabilitation for survivors of detention and victims of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, supporting them in reclaiming their lives and advancing their rights.



A Good Seed:

A Good Seed is an initiative launched in 2020 by a group of women from the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. It aims to provide psychological and social support for the children of detainees and the missing.

The initiative creates safe spaces for children to express their feelings and alleviate the suffering they have endured through various activities designed to boost self-confidence, such as art and writing. It also raises awareness about human rights and works independently while maintaining coordination with the Families for Freedom movement.



Regional and International Updates on the Issue of Enforced Disappearances in Syria



France Sentences Three Syrian Officials to Life Imprisonment in the Dabbagh Case

On May 24, 2024, the Criminal Court of Paris sentenced three senior Syrian officials to life imprisonment in absentia for complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against French-Syrians Mazen Dabbagh and his son, Patrick Dabbagh.

Ali Mamlouk, Jamil Hassan, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud were convicted for their complicity in crimes of imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearance, and murder, which constitute crimes against humanity, as well as the war crime of property confiscation.

Commenting on the court's ruling, Obaida Dabbagh, brother of victim Mazen, stated, "My family and I are very pleased with this judgment, which we had hoped and worked tirelessly to achieve. While this ruling cannot bring Mazen and Patrick back to life, it undoubtedly brings us great comfort."

The verdict followed four days of witness testimony, including accounts from survivors of Mezzeh Military Airport Prison, where Mazen and Patrick were detained, as well as testimonies from civil parties such as Obaida and Hanan Dabbagh and Mazen Darwish, General Director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). Representatives from Families for Freedom, the Caesar Families Association, the Release Me Organization, and the Taafi Initiative attended the court sessions.

Mazem Darwish, lawyer, SCM General Director, and Secretary-General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), remarked, "This conviction reflects not only the gravity of the crimes committed against Patrick and Mazen Dabbagh but also the numerous crimes committed against countless other Syrians. Efforts to combat impunity for crimes committed by the Syrian regime and all conflict parties will persist."

Clémence Bectarte, lawyer for the Dabbagh family, FIDH, and SCM, added, "This victory is for all Syrians, for human rights defenders, and for all who demand justice. Above all, it is for the dignity of the victims—they all deserve justice, and today, they have achieved it."

This trial marked the first time Syrian regime officials were convicted of war crimes in a French court.

In conjunction with the Paris Criminal Court's decision, the victims' [groups](#) of the Charter of Truth and Justice alongside with [SCM](#), organized solidarity vigils in May 2024 to support justice and solidarity with victims of torture and enforced disappearance, in the city of Paris and several Syrian [cities](#).



Paris Court of Appeals Upholds Arrest Warrant For Bashar al-Assad

On June 26, 2024, the Paris Court of Appeals [confirmed](#) the validity of arrest warrants issued against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, his brother Maher al-Assad, and two senior Syrian military officials. The charges relate to their alleged responsibility for chemical attacks on Ghouta and Douma in August 2013. This decision followed a request in May 2024 by France's National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor's Office to revoke Bashar al-Assad's



arrest warrant on the grounds of "personal immunity for sitting presidents".

In a joint statement, the civil parties to the case [described](#) the court's decision as "an important step forward, both for the victims and survivors of these attacks and for international justice. It underscores that those responsible for such atrocities—regardless of their rank—cannot hide behind immunity to evade accountability".

Commenting on the decision, Mazen Darwish, lawyer and founder of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), (stated: "We commend the Court of Appeal in Paris for upholding the arrest warrants issued against Bashar al-Assad. This historic decision marks a crucial step towards justice for the victims of chemical attacks. It sends a clear message that impunity for serious crimes will not be tolerated, and the era when immunity could serve as a shield for impunity has come to an end".

The French judicial authorities had originally issued international arrest warrants in November 2023 against Bashar al-Assad, his brother Maher al-Assad, commander of the Syrian Army Fourth Division, (Brigadier General Ghassan Abbas) Director of Branch 450 at the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center, (and Brigadier General Bassam Hassan) strategic advisor to the president and liaison officer between the presidential palace and the Scientific Studies and Research Center. (They are accused of complicity in attacks that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Achievements section:

Joint Activities and Statements by Victims' Groups



A Joint Statement by Syrian Civil Society Organizations and Victims' Groups Welcoming the Paris Criminal Court's Ruling in the Dabbagh Case

On June 4, 2024, Syrian civil society organizations, alongside victim and survivor groups, [issued](#) a joint statement welcoming the Paris Criminal Court's decision to sentence three senior Syrian security officials to life imprisonment for the enforced disappearance and murder of Mazen and Patrick Dabbagh.

The statement described the conviction of Major General Ali Mamlouk, Major General Jamil Hassan, and Brigadier General Abdel Salam Mahmoud as a significant step toward justice. It affirmed the commitment to fighting impunity until all perpetrators of violations in Syria are held accountable, ensuring justice and appropriate reparations for victims and their families.

International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

On June 26, 2024, marking the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, survivors and families of victims and the disappeared, represented under the Truth and Justice Charter, [issued](#) a joint statement condemning the Syrian government's non-compliance with the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding Syria's violations of the Convention Against Torture. It highlighted the ongoing use of torture in Syrian government detention centers and the deliberate destruction and concealment of evidence, actions that represent a continued breach of international obligations under the Convention Against Torture.

International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

On August 30, marking the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, families of victims gathered alongside survivors from the Truth and Justice Charter groups, including [Families Of Truth & Justice](#), [Synergy](#), [Caesar Families Association](#), [Families for Freedom](#), and the Release Me Organization. Joined by the Campaign for Syria, they assembled outside the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, carrying photos of their loved ones in a powerful event demanding the release of detainees and information on forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.



During the event, families wrote heartfelt messages to their missing loved ones on the sculpture King of Holes, created by Syrian artist Khaled Dawwa. The artwork symbolizes the tyrant responsible for the enforced disappearance of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, creating a poignant visual reminder of the scale of the tragedy.

On the same day, the Massar Association organized a collective activity where families of those abducted by ISIS remembered their loved ones in a symbolic way by preparing their favorite dishes. Women gathered to prepare these nostalgic meals in northern rural Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor countryside in Syria, and Şanlıurfa in Turkey, keeping the memory of their missing family members alive through the cherished traditions they shared.

Advocacy Activities

On April 17 and 18, 2024, Synergy Association organized two discussion sessions in Raqqa and Kobani/Ain al-Arab with the families of the forcibly disappeared and missing persons. The sessions aimed to provide updates on the issue of the missing, particularly regarding the work of the Independent [Institution on Missing Persons in Syria \(IIMP\)](#). The discussions also focused on the needs and priorities of families, emphasizing the importance of their active participation in efforts to search for the truth and achieve justice.



On June 12, 2024, Synergy released a [report](#) detailing the escalating arbitrary arrests in areas controlled by Turkey in northern Syria. Additionally, on June 29, 2024, the association published a [statement](#) marking the one-year anniversary of the establishment of the independent institution for missing persons in Syria.



On July 23, 2024, Synergy issued a report titled "[Unheard Cries](#)", addressing the issue of arbitrary detention and torture in the so-called "safe zones" in northern Syria. Later, on August 8, 2024, the organization released a report titled "[Death Shadows Us](#)", which discussed the effects of Turkish military operations in northeastern Syria during the first half of 2024. On August 15, 2024, Synergy also published a [report](#) detailing the violations faced by Syrians at the hands of Turkish forces in northern Syria.

On its part, "Release Me," as a member of the Truth and Justice Charter network, in collaboration with "[Impunity Watch](#)," organized and conducted a side event on the margins of the Eighth Brussels Conference on April 29, 2024, titled "Seeking Answers: Syrian Families' Engagement with the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP)." The side event highlighted the pivotal role of families and survivors in advocacy



efforts to address the issue of missing persons in Syria. It also explored ways for the international community to support the Independent Institution in its search operations and in assisting affected families.

In a related context, and marking the first anniversary of the decision to establish the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, [survivors](#) from the "Taafi" initiative, alongside families of victims and missing persons under the umbrella of the Truth and Justice Charter network, issued a statement on June 29, 2024. They called for expediting the implementation of the decision to establish the institution, determining the fate and whereabouts of the missing, and alleviating the suffering of their families and loved ones.



On July 7, 2024, “[Release Me](#),” representing the Truth and Justice Charter, participated in a side event held during the Human Rights Council session at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva. The event focused on women’s rights to housing and property ownership in Syria. Discussions emphasized the severe challenges faced by Syrian women regarding housing and property rights, particularly those linked to detention and property violations. The discussions also underscored the critical role of the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP) and the importance of international support in addressing these pressing issues.

Separately, on July 11, 2024, the “Massar Association” convened a meeting that brought together families of individuals abducted by ISIS with the launch team of the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in Syria. The team provided an overview of efforts leading to the decision to establish the institution on June 29, 2023. They elaborated on the two main pillars of the institution’s work—search operations and support for families—as well as the structural role of victims in its operations. The team also outlined their plans for completing the institution’s administrative framework in the coming months.

The participating families of abductees raised questions about the institution’s role in uncovering the fate of the missing, proposed recommendations for enhancing its operations, and facilitating its engagement with affected families. They also urged the launch team to expedite search activities to help families uncover the fate of their loved ones.

On July 20, 2024, the “Families for Freedom” movement [held](#) a protest in Berlin against the forced deportation of Syrian refugees from Turkey and Lebanon to Syria. Protesters highlighted the grave risks deported refugees face, including arbitrary detention, torture, mistreatment, enforced disappearance, and abduction.

In August 2024, the “Families for Freedom” team held several diplomatic meetings in Geneva. Women representatives from the movement attended meetings with the permanent missions of the United Kingdom, Italy, the United States, and Colombia. During these meetings, they introduced the movement, discussed its demands, and highlighted the launch of the Independent [Institution](#) on Missing Persons in Syria. The representatives



provided an overview of the Syrian context and the plight of detainees while addressing the dangers of normalizing relations with the Syrian government and its impact on the political trajectory of the Syrian cause. The team also met with the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to explore their engagement on Syrian issues and inquire about their relationship with the Syrian government and the Independent Institution on Missing Persons. Additional meetings were held with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP), and the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria.

On September 12, 2024, the “Caesar Families Association” released a [report](#) titled “Not Our Choice, But We Are Bound by Hope”. The report shed light on the psychological and social impact of enforced disappearance and the legal challenges faced by affected women. It presented an analysis based on interviews with fifty women whose male family members had been forcibly disappeared in Syria. The report aimed to compare the actual experiences of these



women with the effects of existing legal and social frameworks in the country. The findings sought to raise awareness about enforced disappearance through a victim-centered, rights-based approach.

The “Caesar Families Association” organized two seminars to launch the report, one in the city of [Al-Bab](#) on September 6, 2024, and another in Azaz on September 13, 2024.

New Criminal Complaint Against Syrian Regime Officials

With the support of the “Caesar Families Association” and the [European](#) Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, the families of four detainees arrested by Syrian intelligence [filed](#) a legal complaint with the Federal Prosecutor in Karlsruhe, Germany, on September 23, 2024. The complaint targeted senior Syrian officials, accusing them of crimes against humanity, including murder, arbitrary detention, and torture.

The case pertains to four victims who were detained in 2012 and 2013 and were identified by their families through the “Caesar Photos,” which document severe violations in Syrian government prisons. Yasmin Al-Mashaan, a founding member of the “Caesar Families Association,” emphasized that “the complaint seeks justice for all Syrians and aims to expose the systematic torture practices employed by the Syrian regime in its prisons.”

Trainings and Projects Supporting the Cause of the Missing – Assistance for Families and Victims

The Massar Association conducted a series of training sessions addressing the issue of individuals missing at the hands of ISIS starting in January 2024. During April and May, families of abductees participated in a training program on documentation and reporting mechanisms, clarifying the documentation process and its subsequent procedures.

The association concluded the training package in May 2024 by introducing advocacy goals and strategies, drawing on the model presented by the Charter for Truth and Justice Links in Syria.

Meanwhile, on June 1, 2024, Families Of Truth & Justice signed a partnership agreement with the [Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders](#) as part of the project “Documenting New Cases and Supporting Families of the Missing in Antakya to Access Available Services.” The initiative aimed to add 900 new cases to its database, offer legal support [workshops](#) to those affected



by the earthquakes in Turkey, and facilitate their integration into host communities. The movement conducted legal support [sessions](#) across three areas in Hatay Province (Reyhanlı, Altınözü, and Antakya), reaching 135 family members of missing individuals affected by the earthquakes. Additionally, it organized three full-day training workshops for 45 beneficiaries from the general assembly members to empower families of the missing.

Furthermore, Families Of Truth & Justice distributed 3,000 [brochures](#) in the legal support areas and documented 225 new cases of enforced disappearance and loss, which were added to the organization’s database.

Represented by its co-founder, attorney Anas Dallo, the movement also delivered a verbal [intervention](#) during an interactive dialogue session with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, held on the sidelines of the 56th session of the Human Rights Council. The intervention highlighted the increasing discrimination and hate speech against Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and the alarming rise in illegal deportations. It called on states to uphold their international obligations toward Syrian refugees.

The Platform of Missing Families in Northeast Syria

On June 6, 2024, the Synergy Association announced the launch of the Platform for Families of the Missing in Northeast Syria, an independent initiative uniting families of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in the region. The platform aims to provide an effective space for organizing efforts, exchanging information, and fostering the participation of victims and their families in efforts to uncover the truth and achieve justice, laying the groundwork for sustainable peace in Syria.



The platform was established through consultations with families of the missing, victim initiatives, and survivors in northeast Syria. Synergy will facilitate consultations, activities, and provide technical and advisory support to develop the platform's plans and policies. This initiative is part of Synergy's broader mission to support efforts to uncover the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared and assist their families in collaboration with the Charter for Truth and Justice and Syrian civil society.

Release Me concluded the first phase of its advocacy project for the Independent Institution for the Missing in Syria (IIMP). During this phase, the initiative focused on fostering communication with families, the local community, and stakeholders in northwest Syria, building a supportive community base that strengthens the institution's legitimacy and bolsters the position of victim and survivor associations. From February to July 2024, Release Me held 56 knowledge-building sessions—28 in Afrin and 28 in Salqin. A total of 676 family members of victims and survivors of enforced disappearance attended, with women making up 74% of participants. The initiative reported significant progress in enhancing families' understanding of the institution, and the sessions provided safe, interactive spaces for sharing stories and offering recommendations to the institution.



A Good Seed Initiative organized a storytelling activity between January and June 2024, involving 33 children from the families of detainees. Through this activity, children enhanced their writing skills and expressed themselves by creating fictional stories, which culminated in the publication of a book titled "Letters of Pain." During the same period, the initiative conducted therapeutic art sessions for 30 children, helping



them express their thoughts and emotions while reducing stress and psychological pressure. Using crayons, acrylic, watercolors, and chalk, the children created artworks displayed in an exhibition. The initiative compiled their stories and drawings in a book titled "[Scattered Dreams](#)."

Additionally, A Good Seed Organization collaborated with MAPS on the "Raising Great Children Program" from November 12, 2023, to May 21, 2024, targeting 30 mothers aged 35 and above. The program consisted of 14 sessions aimed at strengthening mother-child relationships, overcoming communication barriers, and increasing mothers' awareness of their children's unique strengths. The program successfully empowered one mother to help her smoking son quit the habit, with participants expressing high satisfaction with the sessions.

During June 2024, members of the "Families for Freedom" movement completed a community organizing training, and another on transitional justice last August.

Awareness and Training for Survivors and Families of Victims

As part of the "Searching for the Missing" project, the Taafi Initiative hosted an awareness session on June 6, 2024, about text extortion and exploitation targeting survivors and families of victims. Speaker Diab Serieh shed light on common fraudulent practices, often perpetrated by intermediaries linked to security branches, and explained ways to verify the authenticity of documents to protect victims' families from exploitation. In August 2024, Taafi conducted two separate trainings on transitional justice and advocacy, aiming to enhance the capacities of survivors. Each three-day training session introduced participants to key concepts of transitional justice and its role in addressing the issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared, while equipping them with the skills needed to run effective advocacy campaigns.

On September 15, 2024, Taafi held its third awareness session, focusing on psychological resilience tools for survivors and victims' families. The session, chosen by survivors, covered topics like psychological stress, trauma types, and self-care practices. Survivors shared their personal experiences with trauma, while facilitators provided strategies for recovery and coping with societal pressures. The session emphasized deep-breathing exercises to alleviate stress and was well-received, with participants requesting the continuation and expansion of such sessions to address their needs effectively.



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