

Death is not the worst that can happen... It is also the waiting!



**addressed to the Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**

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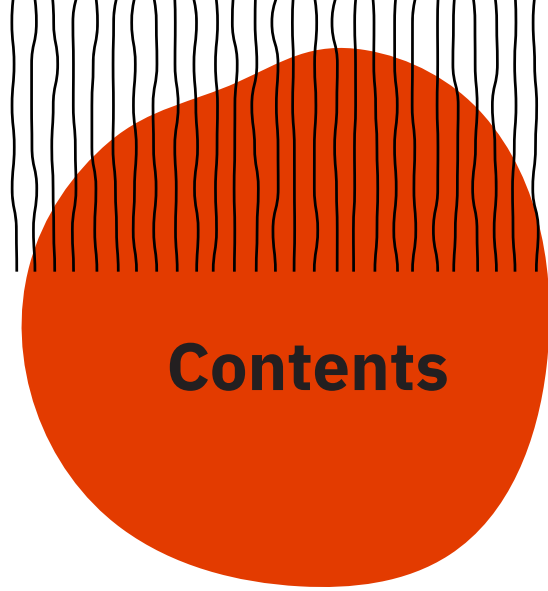
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Introduction

Enforced disappearance is one of the most serious human rights violations, due to its impact on the disappeared person, their relatives, their community, and as a result, society as a whole; its impact on them does not end with the end of conflict. The Syrian government has used disappearance as a strategy to get rid of its opponents and terrorize and silence its opposition since the 1970s. It has been the government's most important weapon in crushing the popular movement against it. Enforced disappearances resulting from arbitrary detention, abduction, deprivation of liberty, deprivation of the right to protection by the law, to security and to not being subjected to torture and other inhuman treatment have been systematically practiced, amounting to a crime against humanity.

The Syrian government's denial of access to Syrian and international human rights bodies to detention centres, the imposition of a complete blackout on these bodies, and the fear of reprisals by the government against family members of the disappeared, if the disappearance is reported, has made it impossible to know the true number of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. The lowest estimates indicate that more than **100,000** people have disappeared over the past eleven years, and to date people continue to disappear regularly in the most terrible ways.

Other parties, such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and other armed factions, have committed the crime of **enforced disappearance**. This complicated situation has been compounded by the protracted conflict, forced migration and the shifting political/military control over the same geographical area, in the chaos of the wide spread of weapons and ongoing impunity. Thousands of families have lived for years in uncertainty, because of the lack of information about the fate of their relatives.

Enforced disappearance has gendered repercussions that particularly affect women, as mothers, wives, sisters and children bear the direct consequences of enforced disappearance in addition to the **pain of waiting**. Women often lead the search for the truth and try to find out the fate of their loved ones, while being responsible for caring for their children and protecting the rest of the family. Over the course of searching, they are exposed to various risks, including arbitrary detention, additional enforced disappearances, sexual abuse, physical and sexual extortion and other forms of violence.

This report sheds light on the consequences of enforced disappearance on **women**, children and affected communities, and highlights the obstacles faced by women in particular, and families of the disappeared in general, during their search for their loved ones after nearly eleven years of conflict in Syria. It is based on the analysis of interviews conducted with family members of forcibly disappeared persons, most of whom are women. Special emphasis was placed on women in the families of the forcibly disappeared, including those who were previously victims of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance. In an attempt to have a presentative sample, the research team reached out to families impacted from diverse parts of Syria, who are differing situations, and whose relatives went missing at the hands of multiple perpetrators, in an attempt to have a representative sample in order to capture all challenges.



Methodology

For the purposes of this report, the research team conducted 22 individual interviews, including 17 women and 5 men who are relatives of 40 victims of enforced disappearance (24 females and 16 males) including 7 children. The list of victims included people who had disappeared between 2012 and 2021.

The interviews took place in April and May 2022. Those interviewed were from various areas including those under the control of the Syrian government, armed opposition factions, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS - Al-Nusra Front), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and border camps. It also included individuals in neighbouring countries, Europe, the United States (US), and Canada.

One of the concerns was to ensure diversity of the entities responsible for the crime of enforced disappearance. This included the Syrian government, ISIS, HTS, Jaysh al-Islam, and the Turkish-backed National Army. While most of the interviews were conducted online due to the lack of access to everyone's location, where possible interviews were conducted in person.

The purpose of interview and usage of the information collected was explained to the interviewees who all were above the age of 28. All interviewees gave their informed consent, and the research team was clear that participants could stop the interview at any point or refuse to answer any questions if they were not comfortable doing so.

Interviewees received no remuneration or reward for their participation.

To ensure that the challenges faced by different groups were covered, the people interviewed for the report were selected from different backgrounds and social conditions. Fictitious names were used in the report to protect the privacy of the women and to respect the wishes of the families, while committing to send the full true information to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).



Main findings

Enforced disappearance is defined under international law as the arrest or detention of a person, by agents of the State, or by persons or groups acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the state, followed by the refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.

The percentage of forcibly disappeared women may be small compared to that of men, but they are the most affected by the consequences of crime. The analysis of the interviews shows the gendered dimension of enforced disappearance and how it affects women differently. It impacts them psychologically, economically and socially, as a continuation of the cycle of deep-rooted violence mainly due to gender inequality and ongoing social injustice prevailing in Syrian society.

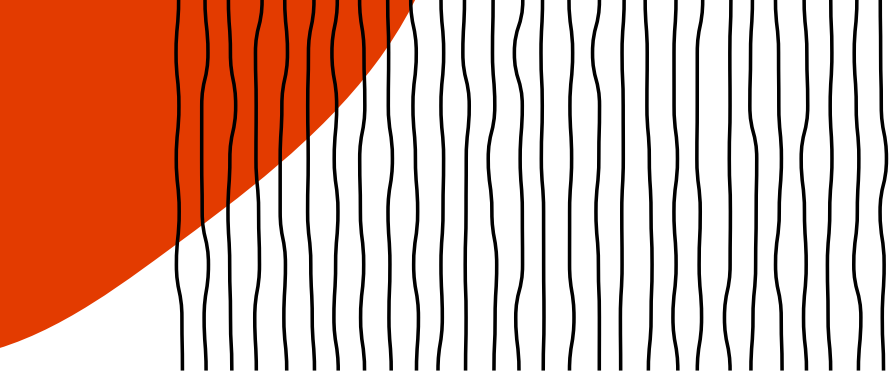
The interviewed women related to victims agreed that knowing the truth about what happened to their loved ones is a basic requirement that cannot in any way be waived. They want to know if their relatives are dead, alive or imprisoned somewhere, not only for all the compelling social and economic reasons, but also because of the emotional burden that weighs on them. Over the course of the search they face serious threats and

have to meet with intermediaries in dangerous places, and communicate with influential people or those who claim to be able to help without any guarantees, making themselves vulnerable to various violations to no avail.

The interviews highlighted the terrible psychological suffering of these families, especially women, as a result of the loss and pain of waiting for years without any information about the whereabouts and fate of their loved ones. However, none of the families received psychological support from specialized bodies to enable them to overcome and deal with psychological trauma, including that of children who also witnessed serious violations, whose effects are difficult to break away from even years later.

The interviews also showed the strong relationship between enforced disappearance as a violation of civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other, and how the protection of each is essential for the enjoyment of the other.

Most of the families interviewed, especially those living inside Syria, suffered from dire economic conditions, as many of those who disappeared - including women - were the breadwinners of their families. The women



of the family, despite stigma, social isolation, grief and sometimes inexperience, had then to take responsibility for supporting themselves and their families, in addition to the financial burden of searching for a disappeared person. Women have paid most of their savings, including their wedding ring, in order to obtain information about their missing relative, and have been vulnerable to material blackmail and fraud in light of an unprecedented economic crisis in the country. Some families have stopped searching until their financial situation improved.

Complex legal burdens and administrative obstacles impact the entire family when they refuse to declare the disappeared person dead. In the absence of certainty, the disposition of assets and property, the payment of pensions and the distribution of the inheritance becomes difficult and pending for an unknown period. Hence, in addition to the human loss, the family loses the financial resources it had. Wives and children are affected differently: their husbands are neither alive nor dead, they are neither single mothers nor widows, which makes them economically disempowered and vulnerable to exploitation.

These consequences are compounded by the discriminatory Personal Status Law, whereby guardianship of children is automatically transferred to paternal uncles and relatives, subjecting women to the authori-

ty of the husband's family, who can threaten to deprive her of her children in the event of disputes.

Although the majority of interviewees reported that they had documented the disappearance, the families' attitudes regarding the process and the entities they had resorted to varied according to their geographical location inside and outside Syria and the forces in control, if the families were inside Syria. Some families do not recognize the difference between documentation and advocacy campaigns for disappeared persons. The interviews revealed the families' deep frustration with the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, particularly those concerned with documentation, as they have been unable to help, protect and support victims or make progress on cases of disappearances, eleven years into the conflict.

A scene in the video filmed in Damascus-one day after the issuance of the last presidential pardon on April 30th, 2022, shows thousands of families of the disappeared running behind the prison truck transporting 20 to 30 prisoners at most, with the hope to find their loved ones among them, or at least manage to ask the survivors about them.

Challenges faced by families of disappeared persons

The families spoke of a range of security, social, economic, psychological and other obstacles they face in their search for the disappeared. These challenges vary depending on their location, the authorities in control, the political affiliation of the family, as well as the personal circumstances of its members.

Security challenges

In areas controlled by the Syrian regime

Family members are afraid to check with Syrian government authorities or file a complaint, or even just to check with the military police, because of the fear of persecution. The women of the family carry the burden of the search and undertake travel for this purpose. Heba has been forcibly disappeared since 2013.


Her brother, and several other family members were detained for months because of their attempts to search for her, which led them to stop following up on her case after their release and displacement to northern Syria.

Families fear persecution if they file complaints with the UN or document their missing relative with human rights organizations, as it is prohibited by the Syrian security services to communicate with these bodies, considering it as communication with "external entities".

As a result, families often postpone this procedure until they leave areas under the control of the Syrian government.

Jeehan, who disappeared in the custody of the Syrian government in 2014, has ten children. Four of her daughters and a son had been detained, all of whom left after their release, while only one daughter remained in Damascus. Although she did not initiate any action to search for her mother, she was summoned by the security forces after her sister, who is living abroad, spoke with a UN body. They warned her that if her sister abroad did not stop, the consequences will be paid by their mother: "We (the Security Forces) are in charge of releasing your mother, not the UN".

Yaman has been missing since 2015, in the custody of HTS. Similarly, his brother was interrogated and detained for 25 days by the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Latakia for communicating with an opposition member in Idlib province, with the intention of mediating his brother's release. This of course made Yaman's wife refrain from any initiative on her part. On another occasion, the family was prevented from going to Damascus and



organizing a sit-in in front of the Republican Palace, after a lieutenant colonel from the political security branch visited the family's home, warning the wife of the great repercussions of such an initiative. Yaman's wife was also defrauded by an officer who had promised her to include her husband's name in a prospective prisoner exchange, but she was unable to file a complaint for fear of arrest.

The suffering of women is also linked to the patriarchal nature of Syrian society. At the level of power and relationships between family members, social injustice prevails as one of the social, cultural and economic structures.

One of the interviewees described the pressure exerted by an influential relative on the women of the family. The relative sought to prevent them from claiming or taking any action for the disappeared daughter, lest they harm his interests.


While May has been missing since 2013, her uncle - a former People's Assembly member and faculty dean at Damascus University - refused to intervene on her behalf so that his status would not be affected, or his family accused of including anti-government members. He also prevented his poor sister (May's mother) from asking about her daughter and threatened to deprive her of her right to the family home where she lives. He also threatened to withhold the small financial assistance he has provided since her detention, as May was the breadwinner of the family.

The family remains in constant fear of being punished and retaliated against for the circulation and posting of information about their daughter on social media against the family will.

After Doctor Omar's disappearance in 2017, his remaining family members fled to northern Syria. His wife Qatoof was detained since 2017 when she was nine months pregnant.

Omar's mother-in-law was left alone in the face of potential security risks. She sent her eldest son away out of fear for him, so that she could search for her daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter without worrying about her son getting arrested. When she finally obtained the right of her granddaughter's guardianship, she had to undergo a thorough investigation as to why she wanted her. How is her relationship with the father's family currently? Why is she interested in this child? There were many more questions. She was forced to sign a pledge not to send the child abroad or hand her over to the father's family, but she was unsure whether she was forbidden to hand her over to her mother as well. This was one of the reasons why Omar's mother-in-law could not return to Syria.

The family was unable to communicate with any human rights organisation, due to security fears. All communication was carried out by Qatoof's uncle, a doctor based in Spain. After Qatoof's release, everyone dreaded getting in contact with her for fear of being pursued by the security forces, because she was in areas outside government control and the mother did not feel safe until after



she left Syria in coordination with a Turkish party. When she arrived at the Lebanese Syrian border, despite having a guardianship paper with her, the border officer asked her: "Where are you taking the girls: do you want to sell them?" At this moment the Turkish person who helped them arrived and saved her from answering. Until now, no relative or stranger in Homs has accepted to help her with obtaining any paper belonging to her or her husband because of security concerns.

Many women interviewed reported that they, or members of their families, had been beaten, threatened, and abused, and their houses raided by "shabiha" and intelligence agents due to their links to disappeared persons. Several cases of sexual extortion and attempted rape of women by individuals promising to provide them with information about their disappeared relatives, were also reported.

The biggest concern of families remains the fear of reprisals against the disappeared person and their execution in prison, if the family reports the disappearance and files a complaint.

In other areas outside the regime control and families abroad

Security challenges do not end with the exit from the regime areas. A number of interviews have indicated that some family members have been subjected to security investigations by authorities in neighbouring countries from time to time.

One woman, who had no connection to any activity, was summoned to a security interview, and was asked about people she had never heard of, "They asked me about the

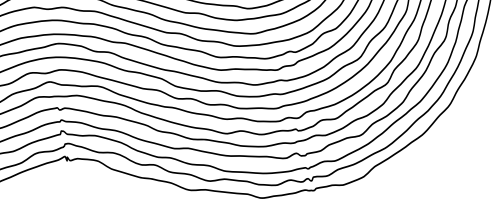
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and about someone from the Rifai family and I didn't know anyone. I later learned that he was the Mufti and that these were Kurdish organizations."

Women, especially activists, who fled from regime areas to the north where armed factions and HTS are in control, have been subjected to pressure and security threats. They have been summoned for investigation and prevented from engaging in activism. One received armed threats that she must close the office of the organization she founded for women survivors.

Kurdish families living in Afrin are afraid to ask about their relatives who disappeared in custody of the National Army for fear of being arrested as well. Even when the families confirm that the detainees are held in a specific prison, they refrain from visiting the detained relative for fear of arrest and abuse.

Despite the safety felt by family members who obtained refuge in Europe, the US and Canada, they still feel many restrictions and remain cautious in terms of communicating with other relatives in regime-controlled areas, inquiring about their disappeared loved ones, or using social media to advocate for the cause. They fear exposing family members to government retaliation and consider them as hostages as long as they are under its authority.

Families of the forcibly disappeared are subjected to enormous physical and emotional extortion by individuals who claim to be intermediaries who are able to provide them with information about their loved ones. Families abroad cannot verify the backgrounds of such intermediaries in Syria to know whether they are lying or if they ac-



tually have links to the regime, so they have to deal with them without the possibility of checking anything.

Social challenges

Families whose members were arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared by the Syrian government are subjected to social isolation due to community fear of communicating with or visiting them. This affects their psychological stability, makes them feel alienated and bitter, and pushes them to decide to emigrate. Some families are persecuted and blamed by relatives and friends with different political affiliations.

Women are isolated by their neighbours and sometimes shopkeepers will not deal with them out of fear.

The disappearance of women in particular has an additional impact on single women and girls in the family, as men refrain from associating with them.

Linda's father stated that in the past he had refused many marriage offers for his educated, beautiful, reputable, and wealthy daughters, but no one has knocked on his door since his eldest daughter's arrest and enforced disappearance. He immigrated with his family for their sake, since there was no future in Damascus for them anymore.

The wife of one of the disappeared said "I became a lonely woman. As a refugee, my legal status is not clear. I am not single, divorced or widowed, I do not know what my social status is. I appreciate people's compassion, but it bothers me that they pity me.

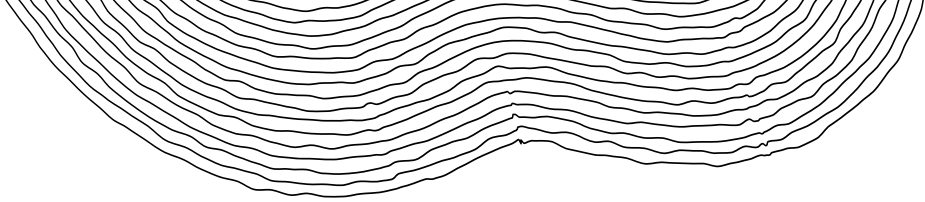
Before I left Syria, my colleagues avoided me because my husband is an opposition figure and a detainee."

The wife of one of the forcibly disappeared in custody of the Syrian government described being subjected to social isolation abroad, imposed on her by the conservative Syrian society because of her different affiliation as a minority.

Fear has led to the displacement and separation of many families, due to the dispersal of their members between regime-controlled areas and other areas, sometimes in camps or in other countries of asylum. Furthermore, Kurdish families who have disappeared relatives in custody of Turkish-backed factions are isolated because the family is accused of terrorism and supporting the SDF. Their mass detention has left them isolated from their surroundings, and people, including those close to them, refrain from contacting them and giving them moral or financial support for fear of being charged.

Mohammed, a father of three disappeared women, said that his sons lived with him in areas controlled by the US-backed SDF, while his daughters lived with their husbands in areas controlled by the Turkish-backed National Army. He added, "They tore the family apart and we cannot visit each other. After the women's detention, how will the men dare to visit their sisters even if they get released?"

Women are blamed if they choose to marry after their husbands have disappeared for many years, sometimes under the pretext of depriving the disappeared person's parents of his children or of their dissatisfaction with the background of the new husband and his ways of raising their grandchildren. Only one



woman reported that her husband's family was not opposed to her marriage after their son disappeared for over nine years, and that it was the family that asked her to file a complaint to divorce him and pursue her life.

One woman had two brothers who were forcibly disappeared (one in custody of the Syrian government and another by ISIS), three other brothers who were killed, and her husband was abroad. She stated that she was prevented from going to give birth at her parents' because there was no male guardian (Muharram) accompanying her from the camp. The authorities in charge of the camp severely restricted the movement of women.

Psychological challenges

Women who are relatives of the forcibly disappeared experience great psychological stress, which may lead to suicide attempts and may cause diseases or health problems of psychological origin that are difficult for doctors to diagnose and solve. It is also as difficult to treat the acute pain that accompany these illnesses. The psychological support provided in these cases, if any, is mere group sessions with the support of volunteer local teams, while most interviews indicated no specialized psychological support.

Moreover, some wives of disappeared men are also subjected to severe psychological stress, as the family does not want to believe that he is dead. One of the women said, "They do not allow me to believe this, despite the death statement from the civil status department at the ministry of interior, because they do not trust state institutions and there is no transparent and clear information about what has happened since the

arrest." Some families continue to press and follow up with Islamist factions to include the names of the disappeared in prisoner exchanges. In the previous example, the wife, mother, and sisters had been included in earlier exchanges. The same woman continued her description of the situation saying, "Every couple of months they tell me that they have put his name on the list of exchanges, and a few days afterwards I learn these efforts failed. So, I feel like he died again, and I grieve as if it were the first time, I received the news of his death. The cycle of mourning does not end and will not end until his family and I are sure of his fate... People die only once and not every couple of months". She felt confused about how to raise her children. She couldn't tell them that he might be dead because of her fear of informing his family, and at the same time she couldn't make them wait for an illusion.

She added "When I was released and met my daughters, they were not surprised, although they were young when I was gone. But even my daughter, who had not seen me since she was 40 days old, knew about my existence and waited for me, because my mother used to show them my pictures, describe me to them and talk about me all the time, so that they would not forget me. She was able to do that because she knew that I was alive. However, how can I talk to them about their father and push them to wait for someone that I do not know if there will come a day when they really meet, or if they have lost him forever! I'm afraid of giving them false hope because it will be painful, and I cannot tell them he is dead, because I am not sure. I need to believe it first, and his parents need to believe it, and then I will be able to tell the children (...). I'm afraid to deny him the prayers of his daughters if he is alive. I say to my oldest daughter, 'do not be upset

if he is not released', and she says, 'but will he be released or not?'

Another woman, married to one of the forcibly disappeared, was detained then released via one of the exchanges. She said she was constantly worried about her young daughter, who was born during her detention and stayed with her only 40 days in the horrendous conditions at the Air Force intelligence detention centre, where she was sick, and her colour was scary. "Now she feels different from her sisters in everything. I hold the government and the SOS [Children's Villages] responsible. This child lived every year and a half of her age in a different place, a year and a half at the SOS Children's Villages, a year and a half at her grandmother's, and a year and a half in Turkey. How can a child grow normally in abnormal conditions?!"

She added, "This child needs affection, but who will make up for this absence of affection?" Her mother has trouble sleeping and became a heavy smoker. However, the specialist told her that he could not help her daughter, and the mother agreed with his statement. She said, "Yes, I have no problem in the world but this injustice. If it ends, all my problems will end! I will never forget they detained my daughter for a year and a half... I will never forget... I can forgive my imprisonment and that of my husband, but I will never forgive what happened to my daughter."

Qatoof was detained for 3 years, while her husband has been forcibly disappeared to this day. Her mother was also greatly affected by the enormous pressure she endured while following up on the situation of her daughter and son-in-law and raising her grandchildren. Qatoof observed, "My mother is not the same mother I knew before. She

does not smile anymore and is no longer the perfect dynamic pharmacist who performed her work outside and inside the house to the fullest and found time to engage in social events and visits. After my detention, she has not been herself. She would not engage in anything. You feel all the time that joy is her enemy, and that raising children is a burden. She is sad because the future of the family is lost, and she had to change her future plans late in life."

The suffering of the mothers of the disappeared is beyond all possible description. May's cousin stated that her mother remained for years in a state of shock, waiting for her daughter's mistaken detention to be rectified. She had no activity or voice. She repeatedly begged her brother, who was in a position of power and wealth, to help her but to no avail. She got sick and died because she was unable to do anything about her daughter's disappearance. After the mother's death, the father's mental and physical health deteriorated, and he went into a severe depression that prevented him from doing anything other than smoking.

Another woman, whose son has been missing since 2013, refuses to stay warm in winter, stating that her heart does not allow her to feel warm if she does not know whether her son is well covered.

The mother of Dunia, who has been disappeared since 2018, speaks with great sadness about her daughter. The last news she received was that her daughter was in a dire psychological condition. The mother was devastated because of Dunia's detention. Although the court supposedly released her in 2017, she is considered a hostage waiting for a swap that does not seem to be tak-

ing place, and she has not known anything about her children for 5 years. The mother is also in a bad psychological state, as she has not only lost her daughter but also her only son and her son-in-law. She must now raise two children and be both mother and father. She lost her city, her home, and her stability - and her family are afraid to contact her because she lives in an area controlled by an extremist Islamist faction. She feels marginalized, with no sense of belonging, and excluded even from playing a role in the search for her daughter, which makes her very sad.

After a long and fruitless struggle to find her younger sister, Khadija feels devastated and guilty as she decides to move to France. Paris has always been her sister's favourite city. Her sister is an architect and a poet, and it was her life dream to go to Paris. Khadija said that she constantly feels miserable.

"I was like the angel of death who carried the terrible news to the family". This is how Yara, a media activist reporting on the war, described her feeling. She did not expect that she would have to tell her family about the loss of their fifth son. The eldest brother collapsed - he was the only son who remained alive. He fully succumbed to his grief, even abandoned his family, gave up on the Syrian cause and could not engage in any activity, refusing to see any specialists. The women of the family (Yara and her mother) had to calm the men and alleviate the consequences of the collapse. They had to bear the burdens of their family and the families of her five brothers who were martyred. She also stopped documenting the violations against women in the camp, as a result of intense psychological pressure and her frustration about its relevance.

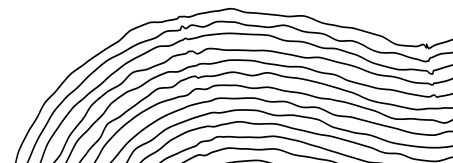
She feels a lot of frustration because of the poor work on the case of the disappeared and the grim political landscape.

Despite being outspoken and having the platform to reach out and talk about the family tragedy, she silently endures the psychological burdens and refrains from seeking help, for fear of being accused of exploiting her access for personal benefits. She feels that there are restrictions on her stories. She wants to talk spontaneously about the beauty of her brothers and how they pampered her, not what the media likes to hear. "I like to talk about them, about their lives, our memories and how we used to spend our time together."

What distresses the family the most is living with the thought that their refusal to leave while they were waiting to learn about their missing brother, may have caused the loss of the four other brothers while he was dead.

All the people who were interviewed in this report were deeply worried about the fate of the disappeared, and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder including nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks and feelings of guilt. They do not know if they have done all they can for their missing relatives, or if in some way they have caused them harm. They also feel constantly anxious and have trouble sleeping, due to the horrifying experience when their relative went missing, their experiences during the war, killings, and torture they witnessed, their own detention or possible sexual extortion while pursuing their relatives' cases.

Children also suffer from the emotional loss of their disappeared loved ones, which may cause them psychological and cognitive development disorders if they do not receive appropriate psychological support.



Most of them witnessed the brutal arrest and enforced disappearance of relatives, and all of them suffer from bitterness, disappointment, and a sense of despair.

Economic challenges

The absence of a breadwinner has in many cases caused great economic pressure on families, especially on women who take on this role for their families. The seizure of family funds sometimes changed the family's material conditions, placing them in a difficult economic situation. This is especially the case for families who were blackmailed by powerful people in the regime and forced to pay bribes in the hope of obtaining information about the disappeared relative or being able to visit them. Others faced extortion by intermediaries and influential figures from various parties who offered to put missing relatives' names on exchange lists. Despite their dire financial situation, they also had to pay legal fees to obtain information, which often proved to be unreliable. Women heads of household were subjected to exploitation by men in order to meet the material needs of the family, because of the conditions and material destitution these women faced.

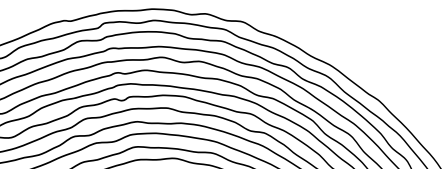
In Walid's case, the family's properties were confiscated, and everything related to them was seized. They even confiscated the debts owed to the family business. Just like that, the family went from wealth to poverty.

The brother offered a thoroughbred Arabian horse as a bribe to a national security official in exchange for the release of Walid's detained wife, Alia, and his detained sister. He thought it was so guaranteed when they told them that they would be released after 30 days, the detained women distributed

their prison belongings and clothes – simple as they may be – to the other detainees. However, when they were not released, Alia got extremely sick and depressed and almost died.

Alia's family had a share of the material losses as well, because of her and Walid's detention. Her family took care of their daughters and paid several thousand dollars in various unsuccessful attempts to release them or at least to transfer Alia from Adra Central Prison to Homs Prison to ease the travel burden. Alia's mother searched for other parents of detained persons in her city who wanted to visit their children in Damascus, in order to share the taxi fare. Alia also has a brother who suffers from autism and Aspergers Syndrome. Their mother was a pharmacist and used to take care of him. He went to the private Al-Rabih Association of Autism. But after Walid and Alia's detention, she could no longer afford the association's high costs, as she was then taking care of her granddaughters as well. This was an additional hardship, as he was one of the few autistic children in Syria who was integrated in an ordinary school thanks to his mother's great care. He had reached the elementary cycle when Walid and Alia were arrested. Then he stopped going to the specialized centres, because he needed private tutors to pursue his education due to his special situation.

After Alia's release and her arrival to the north, she lived with her husband's family. Her father-in-law gave her no more than a week to rest and then sent her to work for an organization because he could not afford to provide for her. A few months later she left Syria. While she had to bear all the burdens, Alia is fortunate to have received significant help from a Turkish entity who facilitated her reunion with her daughters and mother and





brought them from Syria. They also helped issue her residency card, the lack of which usually strains women in this situation. Alia now has two jobs to ensure her financial independence.

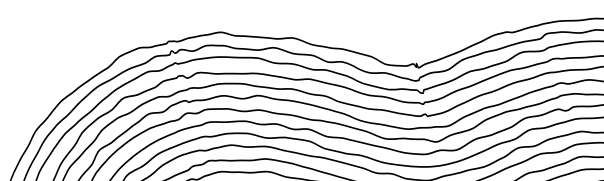
Alia responded emotionally when we asked her about having to work. She responded, "My husband was very protective. If only he knew the humiliation I was subjected to because of his disappearance. Do you know how men come in crowds when they see a broken woman alone? Whenever I ask for something, I am surprised that I should give something in return. I learned by heart the order of things. They bring a gift for the girls and then an expensive gift for me to make amends, then comes a secret marriage proposal and so on..."

Despite the poor living conditions and often destitution of the families with whom we spoke, including those in camps in northern Syria, they were reluctantly trying to help the rest of their family members inside the regime areas.

Dunia, who has been missing since 2018, comes from a well-off family who lost everything when she and her husband were detained. They escaped with only the clothes on their backs and left behind two houses, a farm and her husband's business. They could not dispose of them or rent or sell anything. Dunia's house was confiscated, and her mother-in-law was evicted from it.

The house was sealed, and no one was allowed in. Currently living in a rented house in HTS-controlled areas, they said, "We are lucky if we receive one relief basket, because the relief organizations usually disregard the HTS areas." Although her husband is unemployed, Dunia's mother is determined that her granddaughters will have the minimum components of a decent life, and she strives to compensate them for the loss of their mother and father. This made her health deteriorate early, due to the extreme fatigue of raising them. One person had asked for 18,000 USD for Dunia's release, which was far beyond the family's capacity. The family had raised the amount from donations, and paid it to the person, but despite that, Dunia remained in prison

The inability to establish the legal status of their husband hinders women who are breadwinners from some inheritance-related revenues, the transfer of property, or benefits and subsidies granted by some resettlement countries to the lone mothers.



Needs of the families of disappeared persons

Knowing the fate of the disappeared

Everyone interviewed said that their top priority is knowing the fate of the forcibly disappeared in a legal, official and documented manner from the entity responsible for their disappearance. This can make a real difference in ending the catastrophic period experienced by the families of the disappeared, either by the release/return of their relatives, by knowing the specific prison where they are held, or by proving their death and handing over the body to their family with all the details of the circumstances of the death.

Another priority is providing information about the places of detention or care of children and the possibility of tracing missing children to end this series of horrors. Only their release will alleviate the suffering of families that have missing children.

Legal support

Families need all the help they can get in clarifying their legal status. They need to be able to obtain official documents and papers, such as passports, original university degrees and death certificates.

These cost a lot in Syria, which people often cannot afford.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to raise awareness of the appropriate steps to report the disappearance of persons to international bodies, protect family members from reprisals and exploitation inside and outside Syria, and learn how to follow up on cases

of the disappeared, especially of missing children.

Economic support

Many families (included women-headed households) need economic support to be able to meet their livelihood needs, especially those inside Syria. They need decent and rewarding employment opportunities that protect them from exploitation, regular aid to meet their livelihood needs, or a fund to support the children of the missing persons while waiting for job opportunities to arise. Women in Syria expressed their preference for employment in productive projects that allow them and their families with financial sufficiency, and which would relieve them of the humiliation they feel when they receive food baskets and some meagre aid.

The dire economic situation contributes significantly to the poor psychological status of these families, and even more to that of women. The lack of basic needs and stability, or the difficulty of accessing them, greatly affects their psychological situation and the development of children in these families.

Social support

Families dispersed because of migration and asylum need support and the means for family unification, especially parents who lost their children. This will help them endure the pain and try to settle and recover in a safe environment.

Some families noted the importance of raising awareness of the exploitation of women with missing relatives and providing them with social and legal protection. It is vital to raise awareness about the situation of families of the disappeared that suffer from stigma and isolation, especially inside Syria.

Addressing the gender dimension of detention may be one of the most complex issues because it is linked to an entire patriarchal system where blaming women is greater and more frequent. Women activists are blamed for their activism, and their wider family holds them responsible for the threats the family may face. In contrast, society does not deal with male detainees in this manner.

Women are also blamed by Islamist groups for their involvement in the movement. Women are blamed for taking the place of belligerent men in the exchange of prisoners, while they experience the bitterness of waiting for years in security branches after their names are included in these exchanges without having a say in it. Then when the exchange does take place, these groups brag about the liberation of women and promote the exchanges as a victory for the groups.

Families need greater solidarity with their cause from the society, where their demands are embraced. The families need support without discrimination based on who the perpetrators are.

Psychological support

All the interviewed families need free specialized psychological support, that does not require exhausting logistical arrangements to secure it. They also need health care for all family members.

The moral recognition of the sacrifice made by these families, by international bodies and local and community organisations, is important for their psychological recovery. They also require social support which will help their recovery. It is important in bringing them, especially the women, out of the social isolation they face. This will improve their mental health.

One of the women we interviewed said, "It may be too late to learn how to get back on our feet. My mother and I turned to spirituality and Eastern cultures for our inner peace, but we still hope for psychological support... Not just for us, but for all the families and parents of those who went missing."

The need to restore trust in international institutions

Many interviewees pointed to the need for international and UN institutions to restore the trust of families in them. These entities should take concrete steps to reveal the fate of families' loved ones.

They also stressed the importance of continuous communication with families and the bilateral exchange of information, instead of considering families as solely a source of information. They need to know what happened from their information, what actions were taken, and to be kept informed of any developments in the case. This will have a great impact in providing moral support to them and help them remain resilient.

Recommendations

- Ensure the right to know the fate and whereabouts of the missing and make genuine international efforts to find a radical solution to this humanitarian issue.
- Establish an international mechanism on the issue of the forcibly disappeared in Syria and address its impact on the parents and families in an integrated manner at all legal, economic and social levels.
- Protect children born while their mothers have been subjected to enforced disappearance, provide information about their places of detention or care, identify them and trace those who are missing.
- Take serious measures to force the Syrian government to provide data on the fate of the missing and use all the instruments of pressure that the UN has to achieve this end, such as requiring the serious commitment of the regime in this case to provide international assistance as an example.
- Adopt a victim / survivor-centred approach in all steps of mechanism building and collaborate closely with family and victim/survivor associations.
- Ensure the right of the families of those abducted by ISIS to know the fate of the missing, by conducting systematic investigations with ISIS members detained in the prisons.
- Take urgent steps to protect mass graves in Syria in order to safeguard and preserve evidence.
- Ensure the right to know the fate of the missing who are in custody of armed groups, such as Jaysh al-Islam, by investigating their leaders in Turkey and other countries. Establish an international database of the disappeared in Syria in custody of all parties, including contact information of parents to facilitate updates and encourage parents to document disappearances safely.
- Press the Syrian government to cooperate with the UN special procedures and respond to all outstanding claims that it has not responded to.
- Provide free specialized psychological support to family members of disappeared persons, especially mothers, wives and children.
- Provide economic support to the families of the disappeared, and support projects that provide decent job opportunities for women, especially the breadwinners.
- Seek to secure regular financial allocations for children and families of the disappeared, especially those residing inside Syria.
- Establish a fund to support the education of the children of the disappeared.
- Provide special facilities for the reunification of family members of the forcibly disappeared, especially mothers and fathers, and not limit it to the husband or wife and children under 18.
- Leverage the experiences of Syrian human rights defenders accumulated over more than eleven years in this cause, by establishing a regular dialogue platform with them.
- Establish mechanisms of communication and follow-up with the families by documentation entities.
- Finance small projects for women from these families, so that they can support their family without being exploited and provide material support that is sufficient to meet the needs of these families.

Death is not the worst that can happen...
It is also the waiting!

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