

Statement

SNHR Calls on the New Syrian Authority to Invite the ICMP to Operate in Syria

The New Syrian Authority Must Give the the Missing Persons Issue Top Priority and Focus on Meeting With Victims' Families and Seriously Addressing Their Issues



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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

The Assad regime used enforced disappearance as one of its many monstrous instruments of torture and oppression against Syrian society. The effects of enforced disappearance in particular are not limited to the victim, but also devastate the lives of the families and friends of forcibly disappeared persons, who must endure constant agony as long as their loved ones are missing. Since 2011, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has worked diligently to document arbitrary arrests, the majority of which are subsequently categorized as enforced disappearances. Thanks to a dedicated team that has worked daily on this issue and monitored these cases, SNHR has managed to build an accurate database that draws upon a scientific methodology based on accounts from survivors and victims' families, as well as numerous other documents and articles of evidence.

No Syrian government or Syrian civil society organization can handle such a complex issue of such a momentous scale on its own. There is an urgent need to enlist the help, expertise, and efforts of international organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), and the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic in properly addressing this vitally important issue.

While the ICRC is already operating in Syria and the COI visited Syria recently to set up its operations, the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic still needs a few more months to launch its operations in Syria. Nonetheless, the ICMP, which was founded in 1996, has an instrumental role to play in Syria given its extensive expertise in issues of discovering the fate of missing persons and dealing with the many issues around mass graves over the course of multiple conflicts, including Syria.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT MUST TAKE PRACTICAL STEPS

The new government in Syria must take the initiative in this matter by sending an official invitation to the ICMP which determines the framework of the required cooperation and assistance. A viable path to follow is that pursued by the Ukrainian government in 2022, when it ensured access for the ICMP's experts to mass graves. In the case of Syria, this can be done in coordination with Syrian civil society organizations.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO COOPERATE WITH THE ICMP

1. To ensure that the missing persons issue is being treated in an effective and competent way

- International documentation mechanisms: The ICMP has extensive expertise in documenting missing persons' data, using a strict working methodology that further enhances the credibility of the information gained, so as to have reliable and verified sources.
- Modern techniques: The ICMP relies on the latest cutting-edge technology, including DNA analysis, to identify victims and retrieve their remains. The ICMP can first deploy expert teams to excavate mass graves and retrieve human remains in a systematic way and in accordance with international standards. Thereafter, DNA samples from these remains are analyzed and matched with reference to genetic data provided by the families of the missing persons. This process contributes to identifying the victims and returning their remains to their families.

2. Enhance trust and national reconciliation

- Restore public trust: Collaboration with the ICMP helps to determine the fate of missing persons, alleviating the suffering of affected families and supporting national reconciliation.
- Reduce social divisions: Resolving the issue of missing persons can ease societal tensions and foster national unity.
- Promote transparency: Partnering with a reputable international organization like the ICMP establishes transparency and credibility for the new Syrian government.

3. Improving international relations

- Rebuilding Syria's image: Cooperation with the ICMP demonstrates the new government's commitment to upholding international human rights standards.
- Encouraging international support: Donor countries and international organizations will be more inclined to provide assistance if the issue of missing persons is addressed seriously and transparently.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NEW SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

1. Cooperate with the ICMP

- Issue a formal invitation to the ICMP, offering to cooperate in uncovering the fate of missing persons in Syria and ensuring comprehensive management of the mass graves issue.

2. Protect crime sites

- Take immediate measures to prevent any tampering with prisons and mass graves, ensuring the preservation of evidence and documents related to crimes of enforced disappearance.

3. Ensure psychological and social support and counselling are provided to the families of the missing

- Offer sustainable psychological and social support to families of the missing in coordination with local and international organizations.

4. Develop transitional justice strategies

- Adopt comprehensive strategies, including holding those responsible for enforced disappearances and torture accountable, ensuring victims' rights, providing fair compensation to their families, and rebuilding trust between the government and society.

5. Coordinate international efforts

- Enhance cooperation with the international community and relevant institutions to improve mechanisms for addressing the missing persons issue and support local efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ICMP

1. Enhance cooperation with the future Syrian government

- Provide technical and technological support to ensure the use of modern techniques in documenting cases of missing persons and identifying victims.

2. Build local capacities

- Organize training programs for local organizations to teach evidence collection methods and documentation of enforced disappearance cases in accordance with international standards.

3. Include civil society

- Strengthen collaboration with victims' families and civil society organizations by involving them in documentation and search operations and supporting them in coping with any psychological and legal challenges.

4. Advance international advocacy

- Highlight the missing persons issue in Syria through coordination with international organizations and donor countries, supporting transitional justice efforts and national reconciliation.

5. Utilize the expertise of human rights organizations

- Establish partnerships with human rights organizations that possess extensive databases and documented expertise regarding violations, arbitrarily detained individuals, and forcibly disappeared persons.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. International cooperation

- Support the ICMP's efforts by providing necessary resources and training local personnel to use modern technologies for identifying missing persons.

2. Expand support for transitional justice

- Provide the necessary backing to establish national institutions specializing in addressing missing persons cases and prosecuting those responsible for crimes and human rights violations.

3. Promote national reconciliation:

- Support initiatives aimed at enhancing national reconciliation by offering psychological and social assistance to families of the missing and working to reduce societal divisions.

4. Freeze and confiscate funds of the former regime:

- Work on freezing and confiscating funds held by Assad and his close associates, redirecting them to the new government to support transitional justice and reconciliation efforts.

5. Bring the Assad family to justice

- Pressure the Russian government to hand over Assad and his family to international courts, in order to hold them accountable for crimes committed during their rule, including enforced disappearances and torture.



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