

SNHR

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Jasmine of Remembrance

March Eighteenth a Syrian National Day for Martyrs and Missing Persons

A Proposal to Commemorate this National Day
within the Framework of Transitional Justice in Syria





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 analyses in Syria.

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FIRST: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian conflict, now in its fourth decade, has inflicted immense human suffering, necessitating a national and institutional framework for commemoration commensurate with the scale of the losses. With **231,000 civilians** killed, over **177,000 forcibly disappeared**, and nearly **13.8 million displaced**, Syria's devastation stands among the most documented chapters of mass atrocities in the 21st century.

This report proposes adopting the jasmine flower as a national symbol of remembrance in Syria and designating March 18, the anniversary of the first martyrs of the Syrian revolution in Daraa in 2011, as a national day for martyrs and the missing. This proposal draws on international experiences in commemorating victims of conflict, particularly Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom and the poppy tradition, while ensuring the proposed symbol and rituals are firmly rooted in Syrian cultural identity and popular commemoration practices. Jasmine, which has shaped the sensory and literary character of Damascus for centuries, is an authentic symbol in terms of cultural significance, deeply emotionally resonant, and naturally associated with existing commemoration movements.

The report places this proposal in the context of the emerging transitional justice process in Syria, and argues that commemoration is not a secondary dimension of transitional justice, but rather a recognized tool for symbolic reparation in international law, performing interrelated functions that include reconciliation, recognition, and civic education.

The proposed rituals center around distributing white jasmine to the families of martyrs and the missing on March 18, accompanied by a national minute of silence. This gesture aims to highlight those who have lost loved ones, rather than focusing on the individual carrying or wearing the symbol, thus transforming commemoration from a personal practice into an act of collective solidarity. The report identifies key challenges, including the risk of selective memory, the relationship between commemoration and truth-seeking processes, and the necessity of an inclusive national dialogue. It also offers recommendations to the Syrian transitional government, the Commission for Transitional Justice and the Commission on Missing Persons, and international partners.

Methodology

The factual and statistical basis of this report rests on the Syrian Network for Human Rights' systematic documentation of human rights violations during the fourteen-year Syrian conflict. The documentation methodology has been recognized by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, UNICEF, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and other international bodies. The comparative analysis also draws on established literature and institutional practices in post-conflict commemoration, as well as the documented experiences of truth commissions and national commemoration frameworks in several post-conflict countries.

SECOND: SCALE OF LOSSES IN SYRIA

Documented Victims: Martyrs, Victims of Death due Torture, Forcibly Disappeared:

The Syrian conflict has resulted in devastating losses, placing it among the most destructive chapters of state-sponsored violence in modern history. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented the killing of **231,000 civilians** during the conflict, including approximately **202,000 killed** by forces of the former Assad regime. Among these, nearly **46,000 died** under torture, and at least **177,057 people** are classified as forcibly disappeared, with approximately **90%** of documented cases attributed to the security services of the former regime. Some **13.8 million** Syrians have been displaced, both within the country and abroad, constituting one of the world's largest forced displacement crises.

Each number represents a name, a family, a neighborhood or village, a community torn apart by loss. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian mothers, fathers, siblings, and children carry a grief that has never been publicly acknowledged or addressed within any established institutional framework. The regime's system of enforced disappearances aimed not merely to eliminate individuals, but to erase them from public consciousness and deprive families even of certainty about the fate of their loved ones. The result is a society where grief has been stripped of its right to be expressed and silenced by the very state that caused it.

Families and the Need for a National Commemoration Framework

The fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2014, provided a space for the public expression of grief that had been suppressed for decades. The spontaneous commemorations that followed revealed the profound need for a structured and sustained commemoration. For the first time, families in Damascus publicly commemorated the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances on August 30, 2015. In Raqqa, the Missing Families Platform organized an exhibition entitled "Immortal Faces," where families held up photographs of their disappeared relatives, while visitors wrote letters to the missing—letters described as words imbued with longing and hope, symbolically connecting the present with those who have vanished.

These events were not the product of official planning, but rather arose spontaneously from the communities most affected by the loss, drawing their emotional and moral strength from this very spontaneity. They demonstrate that the need for commemoration is vital for thousands of families. However, these events also highlight the limitations of spontaneous action alone. Without a national institutional framework, the practice of commemoration remains fragmented, geographically dispersed, and vulnerable to the pressures of political shifts and competing narratives. Therefore, adopting a structured national framework becomes essential to ensure that acknowledging the loss is not confined to isolated local initiatives, but is integrated into the permanent structure of the state as a public commitment to the victims and their families.

THIRD: COMMEMORATION AS A PILLAR OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

International Standards and Comparative Precedents

Commemoration occupies a specific and increasingly important position within the framework of international transitional justice. It is a recognized tool for symbolic reparation and plays a vital role in post-conflict reconstruction. The updated set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through combating impunity, known as the Gwyneth/Orientlicher Principles, enshrines the right to know as a foundational element of post-conflict justice. This right not only empowers victims and their families to learn the truth but also extends to the right of society, as a political and moral community, to know its history. Commemoration institutionalizes this collective right by establishing permanent structures for public recognition, safeguarding memory from erosion and politicization and moving it beyond sporadic initiatives. Similarly, the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation identify measures for achieving satisfaction, including public monuments, commemorations, and honoring victims, as integral components of the reparation system due to victims of gross violations.

The Conscience Network (of which the Syrian Network for Human Rights is a member) has documented that commemoration, when designed as a community practice that transcends mere sanctification or symbolic gesture, can serve three vital functions in post-conflict societies: reconciliation, by bringing together conflicting groups in shared commemorative endeavors; recognition, by providing a space where victims are formally acknowledged by the state and society; and civic education, by ensuring that future generations understand the causes and consequences of the conflict. Truth commissions in South Africa, Ghana, and Peru have recommended the establishment of memorials within the framework of reparations. In South Africa, the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission defined symbolic reparations as measures that facilitate the collective process of remembering and commemorating past pains and triumphs, including exhumations, gravestones, memorials, monuments, and the re-naming of public spaces.

Comparative experiences demonstrate the institutional power of organized national remembrance. The UK's Remembrance Day tradition, which originated after the First World War, offers a particularly telling example, not only because of the poppy as a symbol but also because of the institutional and ritualistic structure surrounding it. The red poppy became a symbol of remembrance after the war, inspired by the Flanders fields where it flourished amidst the devastation, and immortalized in Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae's poem "In the Fields of Flanders." However, what transformed the poppy from a battlefield flower into a firmly established national symbol was the accompanying ritual: at 11 o'clock on the 11th day of the 11th month, normal activities cease for a minute of national silence. This ritual was proposed to King George V by Edward George Honey and Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, and its practice was established by a royal directive calling for a complete suspension of normal activities so that everyone could, in complete silence, pay tribute to the victims by commemorating them. This ritual persists more than a century later, supported not by a direct legislative obligation but by the moral authority of collective recognition. The institutional infrastructure that has supported this tradition, including the production of poppies by disabled veterans across the British Legion since 1922, also reveals how commemoration can generate ongoing social and economic engagement alongside its memorial function.

Other national contexts offer additional dimensions. In Argentina, the National Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice is observed on March 24 to commemorate the military coup, representing a lasting national commitment to the principles of truth and justice for victims of state terrorism. In Rwanda, the Kuybuka Remembrance Day is observed annually from April 7 to July 4 as part of a national period of mourning, encompassing official ceremonies, educational programs, and community events. These experiences exemplify a shared principle: that organized national commemorations, linked to a specific date and expressed through established rituals, fulfill functions that spontaneous or impromptu commemorations cannot achieve with the same degree of sustainability, breadth, and capacity to solidify public meaning.

SNHR' transitional justice framework emphasizes the importance of commemorative initiatives as a pathway to moral redress. This vision includes the establishment of national memorials, museums, and documentation centers that display victims' testimonies and photographs documenting the uprising, along with publicly accessible digital archives. It also extends to an educational dimension, integrating the history of the Syrian revolution into school curricula and developing human rights education programs based on the lessons of the revolution. This approach rests on the overarching principle that commemoration without justice is meaningless, and justice without commemoration remains incomplete. Material redress, including direct financial assistance, restitution of property, and access to healthcare and education, addresses immediate suffering. Moral redress, including public acknowledgment, official apologies, and commemorative events, addresses the deeper wound of the erasure of identity from public memory. Both paths are essential and cannot replace one another.

FOURTH: JASMINE: A QUINTESSENTIAL SYMBOL OF REMEMBRANCE IN SYRIA

Cultural roots and social significance

The effectiveness of a national symbol in carrying moral weight across generations depends on the depth of its roots in a society's culture and collective memory. By this criterion, the jasmine flower possesses profound authenticity and significance. Damascus has long been known as the City of Jasmine, its white blossoms cascading over courtyard walls, adorning balconies, and filling the alleyways of the Old City with their fragrance. This flower is interwoven into the fabric of Syrian social life: it is woven into small bouquets, cultivated in homes as a symbol of generosity and hospitality, and accompanies the rituals of daily life, embodying simplicity and humility. This connection is also reflected in poetic expression, which sees in jasmine the alphabet of the city and its memory. Thus, in the Syrian context, jasmine becomes a tangible sign of belonging and a natural medium for evoking memory without the need for explanation.

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March 18: Historical Significance and the Path to Institutional Recognition

On March 18, 2011, the Syrian revolution transitioned from protest to sacrifice. On that day, after Friday prayers at the Omari Mosque in Daraa, thousands of Syrians took to the streets demanding the release of school students arrested and tortured by regime security forces for writing anti-government slogans, an end to corruption, and greater political freedoms. The regime's response was immediate and brutal: water cannons were used first, followed by live ammunition. Hussam Ayash and Mahmoud al-Jawabra were killed, becoming among the first martyrs of the Syrian uprising. Ayham al-Hariri also fell, and Adnan Akrad died the following day from his wounds.

The blood spilled in Daraa that day transformed a local protest into a nationwide revolution, setting in motion a path that led to one of the most destructive conflicts of the century, ultimately culminating in the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024. This date has acquired profound moral significance as the moment when the first lives were sacrificed in defense of freedom and dignity, a sentiment deeply ingrained in the Syrian public consciousness. In October 2025, Presidential Decree No. 188 designated March 18 as the anniversary of the Syrian Revolution, replacing the March 8 holiday that had been observed under the Ba'ath Party.

Proposed Rituals: Structure and Elements

The memorial framework proposed by the Syrian Network for Human Rights aims to combine institutional seriousness with a humanitarian dimension, drawing on structural lessons from international experiences and adapting them to an authentic Syrian context. Its core elements include a national minute of silence to be observed at noon in all Syrian cities, and the distribution of white jasmine to the families of martyrs and missing persons on March 18th.

The national minute of silence will reflect the power of collective rituals that transform remembrance into a simultaneous public practice. In the Syrian context, this silence can be observed in mosques, churches, and various other places of worship, reflecting the pluralism of Syrian society and affirming that the losses of the conflict transcend sectarian divisions. This silence will be a collective moral acknowledgment that the freedoms being built today have come at a great price, and that this price must not be forgotten.

The distribution of white jasmine to the families of martyrs and the missing is the central element of these rituals, with community leaders, civil society organizations, and government officials presenting the jasmine directly to the bereaved. This initiative represents a deliberate departure from traditional commemorative practices that focus on wearing the symbol as a personal expression; here, the gesture is directed toward others, toward those who have suffered loss. The act of giving, rather than wearing, transforms remembrance from an individual practice into a collective act of solidarity, conveying a clear message to every grieving mother, father, brother, and child: your loss is visible, your pain is acknowledged, and the nation shares your burden of sorrow and is committed to the duty of justice.

Jasmine is also placed at memorial sites, mass graves, and the gates of former detention centers, transforming sites of horror into sites of remembrance and reintegrating them into a moral narrative of recognition and justice. In schools, children carry jasmine in processions accompanied by age-appropriate educational programs, teaching them early on that the nation's freedom was paid for with lives, and that these lives impose a lasting obligation on the national conscience. This educational dimension ensures that commemoration does not become a mere ceremonial display, but rather a productive practice that cultivates citizens aware of the responsibilities that memory entails.

This ritual is intended as a public expression of the institutional commitments that have crystallized within the framework of Syria's transitional architecture. The institutions tasked with truth-seeking, accountability, determining the fate of the missing, and protecting mass graves need a moment of direct human connection that translates promises into tangible action. The Jasmine Ceremony on March 18th will make this institutional discourse palpable: a moment when promises of truth-seeking and accountability are translated into an act of recognition and solidarity, when a flower is placed in the hands of those deserving of justice before any speech is given.

FIFTH: CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Inclusivity and the Risk of Selective Memory

The risk of selective memory is the most prominent challenge facing any national framework for commemorating victims of conflict. When commemoration is viewed as honoring the victims of one side or specific perpetrators, it transforms from a unifying moral obligation into a contentious narrative tool, undermining its legitimacy and limiting its ability to contribute to reconciliation.

A national symbol of remembrance cannot fulfill its purpose if it becomes a vehicle for implicit discrimination. Therefore, the principle must be clear: jasmine honors all victims of the conflict in Syria, regardless of the perpetrator's identity. Distributing jasmine to the families of all martyrs and missing persons without discrimination ensures the symbol's moral neutrality and practically establishes a standard of universal justice in the public sphere, potentially reinforcing this principle more effectively than texts and directives alone.

Timing and Institutional Sequence

The second challenge relates to the connection between commemoration and the stages and sequence of transitional justice. Premature commemoration, before the truth is established, before the disappeared are identified, and before mass graves are adequately protected, investigated, and documented, could be counterproductive. Families of victims might view the commemorative ritual not as an acknowledgment, but as a symbolic closure imposed from above, suggesting that the state has fulfilled its duty while the core of that duty has yet to begin.

Therefore, the commemorative framework should be designed as an evolving, not a static, practice. In its initial stages, the commemoration of March 18 should explicitly acknowledge the incompleteness of the search for truth and the ongoing commitment to identifying and investigating mass atrocities. As the work of the relevant institutions progresses and destinies are determined, the commemorative framework should deepen accordingly, so that commemoration grows alongside and strengthens justice, without becoming a substitute for it or a premature declaration of a conclusion yet to be reached.

Participatory Process and National Dialogue

The legitimacy of any national symbol depends, in essence, on the mechanism of its adoption as much as on its symbolic content. A national commemorative symbol should reflect societal diversity and emerge from a national dialogue.

The deep roots of jasmine in Syrian culture, coupled with its established use in popular commemorative practices, provide a strong foundation for its widespread adoption and acceptance. However, transforming this foundation into a stable national legitimacy requires a consultative and transparent process of adoption that considers the perspectives of communities in different regions and across diverse religious and social backgrounds. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the symbol will not be determined solely by its cultural impact, however broad, but rather by the inclusiveness of the process by which it is transformed into a national institution that represents everyone.

SIXTH: RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Syrian Transitional Government

The government should declare March 18th a National Day of Martyrs and Missing Persons through appropriate legislation, thereby reinforcing its status as a commemoration of the Syrian revolution and giving it a structured memorial content focused on the families of the victims. We also propose adopting the jasmine flower as the official national symbol of the commemoration through a comprehensive national consultation process involving the families of the victims, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and representatives of various Syrian communities. Furthermore, a national minute of silence should be observed at a specific time (we suggest 12:00 PM) on March 18th, and resources should be allocated to develop memorial infrastructure, including memorial sites, museums, documentation centers, and digital archives.

To the National Committee for Transitional Justice and the National Committee for the Missing

Both commissions should integrate commemoration programs into their institutional mandates, ensuring that these programs are functionally linked to and based upon truth-seeking, identification, and accountability processes. The commissions must also ensure that the scope of commemorations reflects the principle of comprehensive, non-selective justice, honoring all victims regardless of the perpetrator's identity.

To the United Nations and the international community:

International partners should provide technical and financial support for developing the infrastructure to commemorate the victims of Syria, drawing on comparative experiences accumulated in post-conflict contexts. Donor frameworks and transitional justice programs should recognize commemoration as an element of reparation and allocate resources accordingly. International cooperation with Syrian transitional justice institutions should ideally include a standing item on commemoration to ensure that the symbolic dimensions of justice are not marginalized in comparison to the judicial and institutional dimensions.

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