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# Daraya: Nine Years After the Mass Killing

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## **Daraya: Nine Years After the Mass Killing**

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Eid al-Fitr used to bring joy and merriness to the people of the Syrian city of Daraya; however, since 19 August 2012, the holiday has been haunted by a painful memory which makes celebrations difficult. In 2012, beginning the second day of Eid al-Fitr, Syrian government forces surrounded and began bombarding the city. The attack, first by air and then by land, culminated in the brutal massacre of over 700 of Daraya's people, mostly civilians, at the hands of Syrian government forces and security services.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reached out to the massacre's survivors to compile this report, published on the ninth anniversary of the massacre, recounting what happened in Daraya in 2012 to commemorate the victims of the mass killing.

[Daraya city](#) is located near the capital Damascus and the [Mezzeh Military Airport](#)—a Syrian Air Force military air base. However, it was not the city's geographical location that turned the city into the icon it is today. The city gained its symbolic value at the beginning of the Syrian uprising when Daraya's residents organized mass, peaceful protests. Daraya's male and female activists were determined to channel their voices through nonviolent means and organized protests in 2011 like "Water and Roses", where the activists approached government forces with bottles of water tied to roses and notes as tokens of the bonds between the Syrian people and the army. The rest of the country, and the world, watched as government forces responded with bullets and arrests.

Following the protests, in 2012, Daraya city became an epicenter for peaceful, civil, and social action after government forces retreated from its neighborhoods.

The city's new reality did not last long.

On 20 August 2012, the second day of Eid al-Fitr, the city's landmarks, and its people's memories, changed forever. Government forces laid a suffocating siege on the city. They cut off power and disrupted all communication networks, then bombarded the city with artillery systems and attack helicopters.

At the time, Daraya was home to dozens of young men who joined the then-Free Syrian Army (FSA), who fought under the then-banner of all armed opposition groups. Most of these local fighters were civilians who chose to arm themselves, in addition to several soldiers who defected from the Syrian regular army.

The local fighters failed to resist the extensive shelling at the beginning of the military campaign government forces launched against the city. Therefore, they withdrew to areas surrounding Daraya on its eastern side. Twelve of these local fighters died during the government forces' invasion of the city; however, they were only the first of the casualties.

The Violations Documentation Center in Syria ([VDC](#)) provided Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) with the names of 512 casualties of the 2012 massacre. The death toll includes the 12 fighters, as well as 39 women and 52 children. There were an additional 200 victims whose bodies were too burned and mutilated to be identified.

## 1. The Mass Killings on 24 August 2012

As the Syrian government began shelling the city of Daraya on 20 August, its residents hid in their basements. Locals knew the city would soon be invaded — government forces and security services' personnel were circling the city. After four days of bombardment, on 24 August 2012, government forces entered the city from two fronts. They entered from the north, in the direction of the Mezzeh Military Airport, and from the northeast, in the direction of the Daraa International Highway.

Government forces advanced into the city with tanks and heavy vehicles. They cordoned off neighborhoods from one another. Then, within closed-off neighborhoods, government forces raided the homes and basements where Daraya's civilians were hiding and began carrying out extrajudicial executions, sparing neither women nor children.

STJ spoke with an eyewitness and survivor of the Daraya massacre. In this report, he asked to use the pseudonym "Abu Muhammad" because he fears for his life as he lives in Idlib province. Abu Muhammad described to STJ the extrajudicial killings government forces carried out against Daraya's civilians and the horrific events which took place in the city in 2012. He recounted:

"On 24 August, regime forces and militias stormed the city and began to carry out extrajudicial executions against people in each of the neighborhoods they entered, showing no one mercy, not even to children, women, or the elderly. That day, I tried to reach my grandparents' house, in the city's eastern part, but I could not access the area because tanks and snipers were deployed across the Kournish Street— at the city's entrance from the northeastern side. The tanks and snipers targeted everything that moved. I hurried back home. My home was located in al-Thawra Street, in the city's center. To my dismay, half of the house was destroyed in a mortar shell attack. None of my family members were hurt. I started collecting some of our valuable belongings from beneath the rubble, wondering: Where should I hide? What should I do? How am I supposed to protect my family?"

As government forces moved through Daraya, residents were unaware of the scale of violence and the number of executions being committed across the city. They had very limited access to news because communication networks were disrupted, and they were separated from each other within their neighborhoods. Abu Muhammad said:

"I never imagined the situation would spiral that far, reaching that extent of killings and executions. . . After my house was bombed, young men from the neighborhood assigned themselves tasks. Some monitored the progress of regime forces from roof tops. Others inspected basements, searching for places to hide children, women, and the elderly. At some point, we saw regime forces advancing towards the al-Thawra street. My friend was on that street, so I ran there to alert him. We could not use phones, because the government broke the connections. I arrived on the street, informed my friend, and we decided to head back to my home together. However, we were surprised to find that



government forces had sealed off the entire neighborhood. We could not go inside. So, we decided to head towards the western part of the city, in the direction of the al-Moadamyeh, which is all farmlands. While we walked in that direction, we saw dozens of young men escaping towards the same area. I told my friend that we better go back and hide in one of the buildings under construction. My friend refused to accompany me, and we parted ways. He walked towards the farms, and I returned and hid in the loft of an unfinished building.”

## 2. A Bloody Night and A Painful Morning

At sunset, on 24 August 2012, the Syrian government redeployed the forces that carried out the raids into the neighborhoods to specific points within the city. One of the posts that forces took as a station was at the building adjacent to the building Abu Muhammad hid in. Abu Muhammad described what he saw and heard during the night as he took refuge:

“At sunset, regime forces arrived in the al-Wihdah neighborhood— near the train station— which was the area where I was hiding. These forces took position in the building next to mine. I was lucky because they did not search the buildings under construction. At night, the forces set up checkpoints across the area. I managed to watch them through the holes in the wall. The checkpoints arrested anyone who went out into the street. All night, I listened as the soldiers tortured the detainees at the checkpoints. I was paralyzed by fear and dared not move the whole night.”

He added:

“In the morning, regime forces left the area to continue raids in the remaining neighborhoods. It was then that I emerged from my hiding place and headed to the adjacent building, where the regime forces had spent the previous night . . . the scene before me was extremely painful. I saw 24 dead bodies, abandoned at the building’s entrance and in the basement. The bodies displayed the marks of excessive torture.”

Abu Muhammad narrated how he barely shook himself out of the horrors of that scene, only to witness another, equally heart wrenching. He recounted:

“I pulled myself together after the shock of the horrific scene before me. I headed towards my neighborhood to check on my family. Before I arrived at the place where they were hiding, a neighbor called me and told me to come and see... We went down into a basement that was full of bodies, all of them shot in the head. I couldn’t recognize any of them because their bodies were so badly mutilated. A couple of young men and I began removing the bodies so we could bury them in the city’s cemetery. When we reached the cemetery, a worker there told us to move the bodies to the Abu Sulaiman al-Diarani Mosque because there were so many bodies that they opened a mass grave. When we reached the mosque, we saw a sight that couldn’t be believed. There were hundreds of bodies piled on top of each other inside the mosque,

waiting for the bulldozer to dig mass graves. Dead bodies were photographed before they were buried. The burials were hastily carried out. There were no gravestones, and many bodies were buried unidentified because we were afraid the government forces would return.”



Image 1- Screenshot from a [video](#) posted by Daraya-based media outlets on 28 August 2012. The photo is of a mass grave and corroborates the eyewitness Abu Muhammad’s account of the means residents used to bury the victims of the massacre.

### 3. The Locations of the Mass Killings

Government forces escalated raids into Daraya’s neighborhoods and repeatedly stormed locations across the city between 24 and 27 August 2012, committing the largest number of killings. The colossal death toll was corroborated by a [video](#) pro-government Addounia TV published on 25 August 2012. The video showed a number of the people killed in the city and government-staged rescue operations for civilians. No paramedics nor ambulances appear in the footage, and the scene is dominated by government forces and security services.

In addition to Abu Muhammad, STJ reached out to several survivors who gave first-hand accounts of the terrifying violence government forces plunged the city into back in 2012. The eyewitnesses confirmed that government forces carried out mass killings in several neighborhoods across the city and individual extrajudicial killings against civilians. Moreover, the eyewitnesses said that still more people were killed in the bombardment of the city before government forces entered by land.

The eyewitnesses identified eight locations, a few among many, where government forces committed mass killings against civilians. These included the Abu Suleiman al-Dairani

Mosque, a building— near the train station where government forces were stationed for a day, leaving behind 24 dead bodies—a building on the main al-Thawra street— near the Daraya High School for Girls—a site near the Ali Mosque, and another near the Electricity Corporation.



Image 2- A map created by STJ locating the places eyewitnesses defined as the sites where government forces carried out mass killings.

It took Daraya’s survivors several days to document the number of victims after the massacre. The [Daraya City Local Council](#) said that the total number of the victims was 712, including 512 identified by name and 200 who remained unidentified due to how badly their bodies were burned and mutilated. In addition to the deaths, at least 1160 persons were wounded during the hostilities, and another 100 remain missing, while 250 were arrested.

As for the perpetrators, Daraya’s residents said that several government military groups and security services were involved in the massacre, including personnel from the 4th Division— affiliated with the Syrian regular army and commanded by Maher al-Assad, president Bashar al-Assad’s brother— forces from the Syrian Republican Guard— also affiliated with the Syrian regular army— and the Air Force Intelligence Service— which include Daraya as part of their zones of operation in the capital of Damascus and its suburbs.

## 4. The Mass Grave

Another group of eyewitnesses that STJ interviewed described the uncommon burial methods that Daraya’s residents resorted to accommodate the number of people killed in the



massacre. The eyewitnesses said that it took locals several days to collect the first batch of dead bodies. The victims were gathered in one place and then buried in a [mass grave](#) at the back of the [Abu Suleiman al-Diarani Mosque](#). In the days that followed the closing of the mass grave, residents continued finding bodies in the city, which they then buried in individual graves next to the mass grave.

Furthermore, the eyewitnesses said that the burials were urgent, and the identified victims were not even given gravestones that displayed their names. The locals followed two burial patterns, depending on the extent of deformation that befell the victims. With identifiable bodies, they just took a photo of the victim and gave it a number, to help people recognize the person later. With the excessively deformed bodies, they took photos of the victims' bodies, their clothes, and any distinct marks that might help identify them. Despite the residents' efforts, many of the victims remain unidentified.



Image 3- A satellite image taken on 18 August 2012, two days before the massacre. The imagery shows the Abu Suleiman al-Dirani Mosque, next to a patch of trees, and a plot of land with the marks of vehicles. Locals used this area as a parking lot.





Image 4- A second satellite image of the same location, taken on 28 August 2012. The plot of land seems a little changed, with what appears to be eight parallel lines of the reported mass graves.



Image 5- A third satellite image, from Google Earth, taken in January 2013. This photo offers a clearer view of the graves, in addition to a new set of graves that did not exist in Image 4.

In addition to the photos obtained from Google Earth, one of the massacre's survivors provided STJ with exclusive photos of the grave site after the graves were dug.





Image 6- The location where the victims of the Daraya massacre were buried, in addition to separate individual graves dug in the same place. The photo was taken in 2014. Credit: STJ.



Image 7- The mass graves where the victims of the Daraya massacre were buried. Credit: STJ.



## 5. The Videos of the Victims

Addounia TV published a shocking 13-minute video on 25 August 2012; namely, on the second day of the mass killing operations government forces carried out against civilians in Daraya city and which witnesses said continued until 27 August. The video shows the dead bodies of dozens of people who were either executed or burned to death. Additionally, the video exhibited several members of the Syrian government forces accompanying Addounia's reporter Michelin Azara. STJ took the following screenshots from the video (WARNING: the images are graphic):













The tragic death scenes from Daraya were also documented by other videos. Local activists published several reels of footage showing the condition of the dead bodies discovered after the military campaign ended, many of which were mutilated, bore clear signs of torture, or were badly burned — including the bodies of children. The videos also documented how locals collected the dead bodies in the evening ahead of their burial in the mass grave (WARNING: the images are extremely graphic):

The following photos are screenshots taken from a [video](#) published on 28 August 2012:











The photos below are screenshots taken from a [video](#) published on 25 August 2014:













After the massacre, thousands of the city's residents fled to neighboring areas. Others left the country. Those who remained were subjected to four years of suffocating sieges and intense bombardment by Syrian government forces. The city's fate was sealed when government forces took over and displaced its remaining residents in 2016. The bodies of the victims and the city's ruined neighborhoods remain as reminders of the horrors the city witnessed in 2012.

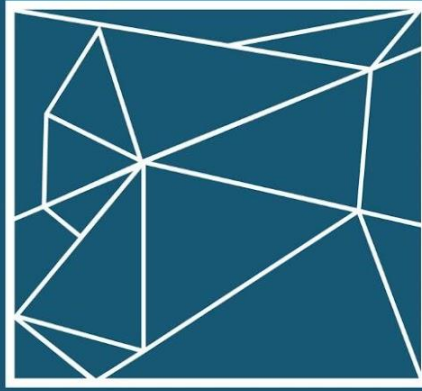
Nine years later, no one has held been accountable for the massacre. The survivors and victims are still waiting for justice.



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## History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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