

# Northeast Syria: More than 120 People Disappeared Following Operation Peace Spring





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*A joint report by Hevdestî - Synergy and Syrians for Truth and Justice sheds light on the people who went missing during the Turkish offensive and provides a voice for the families searching for them*





## Executive Summary

Contrary to its name, Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, which began 9 October 2019, only brought woes to the people of Syria's northeast, specifically the area lying between Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad. Since late 2012, this same area has been subjected to several [attacks](#) by different armed groups, the last of which was the Islamic State (IS)

With support from the [International Commission of Missing Persons \(ICMP\)](#), [Synergy](#) and [Syrians for Truth and Justice \(STJ\)](#) have documented the disappearance of at least 120 indigenous people of different ethnic and religious affiliations since the launch of Turkish Operation Peace Spring until March 2022.

Most of the documented disappearance cases took place in the cities of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, Tell Abyad and their suburbs during the first days of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring. Data collected revealed that most of those disappeared were civilian adult males who never participated in hostilities, according to their families. Other families reported cases of missing persons who worked within the Autonomous Administration institutions, and others fought alongside the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and/or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

According to the information gathered by the two organizations for the present report, families of the majority of those missed following Operation Peace Spring suppose that their loved ones may be in prisons inside Turkish territory or held by the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Syria. In addition, one of the families accused the SDF of arresting and hiding their son.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines "[missing persons](#)" as individuals of whom their families have no news and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, have been reported missing as a result of armed conflict, whether international or non-international, internal violence, natural disaster or other humanitarian crises.

[Syria's Personal Status Law](#) attempted to address the financial challenges facing the families of missing and absent persons by rectifying the suspension of the disposal of the properties of missing and absent people. The Personal Status Law defines [absent and missing persons](#) in Articles 202 to 206 as:

- a) *Article (202):* A "missing person" is a person who has disappeared and whose status as alive or dead cannot be confirmed. This means that a person could still be alive, but their whereabouts remains unknown.
- b) *Article (203):* An "absentee" is defined as a person who is unable to return to his home due to unforeseen circumstances and is therefore unable to manage their affairs for a period of more than one year and his/her absence causes serious prejudice to their other interests.

Families of missing persons in northeastern Syria faced enormous barriers in finding information about their loved ones – especially after their displacement – amid the lack of legal protection and the unclear procedures. Many of those families sought in vain to reach the Turkish government's prisons after news about the transfer of dozens of detainees to Helwan prison in Turkey's Urfa.

Here it is important to note that missing persons' families are among the most important actors in the process of tracing and identifying missing persons. That is why their participation in this





process must be given priority. Nonetheless, families of the missing were not provided with adequate protection, nor were they enabled to officially participate in the documentation process of the disappearance cases resulting from Operation Peace Spring. Instead, they were completely excluded.

The circumstances of the missing cases in northeastern Syria are still vague. This is due to security fears, which made missing persons' families and other documentation actors reluctant to investigate such cases. Moreover, the frequent changes of political and military groups that control Syria's northeast, and the military confrontations there that have not ended, contribute to increasing the number of disappearance cases so that they now number in the hundreds, and perhaps thousands, in the region. This is especially true in the areas Turkey took from the IS and areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government.

The main actors that control northeastern Syria, including the Syrian government and [IS](#), are responsible for thousands of disappearance cases. Nonetheless, the Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups killed and concealed many detainees during Operation Peace Spring of 2019 and the years since. In addition, it has been documented that since its establishment, the Autonomous Administration conducted arrests through its [security organs](#) which led to disappearances.,

Missing persons' families were left to search for their loved ones by themselves with no help of any official body. This increased their daily suffering, especially in light of the unstable security situation, the dire economic conditions, and the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Despite that, families worked tirelessly to obtain information about their loved ones, but without significant results to date.

A [report](#) by Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued on 3 February 2021, confirmed that Turkey and allied SNA groups arrested and illegally transferred at least 63 Syrian nationals from northeast Syria to Turkey to face trials on serious charges that could lead to life in prison. Documents obtained by HRW show that the detainees were arrested in Syria and transferred to Turkey in violation of Turkey's obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention as an occupying power in northeast Syria. The report said:

“Turkey is an occupying power in parts of Northeast Syria that it invaded in October 2019, as it exercises effective control in the area without the consent of the Syrian government in Damascus. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention provides that “individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power ... are prohibited, regardless of their motive.” The prohibition applies irrespective of whether those subject to forcible transfer or deportation are civilians or fighters.”

The report added that both Turkish forces and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army are obligated to abide by international humanitarian and human rights laws, including the obligation to treat detainees humanely and ensure that they are provided with the full spectrum of their rights. International law prohibits arbitrary detention and requires the authorities to record all detentions properly and to provide anyone seeking information about a detained person with information about their status and whereabouts. Detainees should be allowed to contact their families.





## Recommendations

To all parties to the conflict, our organizations recommend that:

1. Missing persons' families, impartial international, and human rights organizations should be given access to detention facilities. In addition, a database containing the names of all detainees and prisoners that families can access as part of their search for their loved ones must be created.
2. All parties to the conflict, including state and non-state actors, should reveal the names of all civilian detainees and prisoners of war under their held. Inmates have the right to contact their families, and to be release if there are no charges against them, or to be brought to fair courts, without any delay if proved guilty.
3. All parties to the conflict should abide by their responsibility to search for dead civilians or soldiers/combatants, determine their identities and places of burial, and to provide related information to their families or relevant international organizations.
4. All parties to the conflict must hand over the corpses of war victims, whether civilians or fighters, in their possession to their families or relatives. Parties also must open an investigation into the violations those victims have been subjected to in case war crimes or crimes against humanity are suspected.
5. All parties to the conflict must refrain from any act that would lead to enforced disappearance, such as arbitrary arrest and extrajudicial detention, and work for prosecuting and holding any groups or individuals involved in such acts accountable.
6. All parties to the conflict must refrain from transferring prisoners and detainees outside the borders, or to unofficial places of detention.
7. All parties to the conflict must return all detainee who have been transferred outside the occupied areas and release them or bring them before a fair court, if they are believed to be involved in committing violations.

Our organizations also make the following recommendations specifically regarding recommendations on documentation and data sharing. We recommend that:

1. Action must be taken to establish a central, secure national database containing information on missing persons. This is because the collection, processing, and protection of data in a centralized and secure data system is essential to finding missing persons. Data sources should range from families of the missing, to civil society organizations, to international organizations, to those responsible for investigations, including government authorities.
2. International organizations can provide support as impartial channels for collecting, processing and protecting data from a variety of sources and locations, and by exchanging data with the written permission of families of missing persons and others for the specific purpose of finding a missing person and ensuring the rights of survivors, including the right to justice. International support is particularly necessary in the aftermath of conflict, human rights abuses, disasters and organized crime, and in the context of irregular displacement.
3. The documentation of detailed information on missing persons should rely on their families and communities in northeastern Syria. The use of awareness-raising sessions on the importance of documenting disappearance cases, including those of women, should also be increased. In addition, local communities, including families of the missing, must be supported financially and technically to document disappearance





cases in a more comprehensive and systematic manner, building on previous efforts in this area.

To international organizations and donors, our organizations recommend:

1. Providing financial, legal, and other technical support to families of missing persons; increased support should be provided to families of missing persons to organize themselves in meaningful ways. That would be achieved through facilitating training sessions to families on the process of locating and identifying missing persons. That is because families of the disappeared should be counted on as an essential partner in the process of documenting on missing persons, thus they should be provided by support in any current and future accountability mechanisms.
2. Providing psychosocial support to families of missing persons in northeastern Syria, given that those families are traumatized by the loss of their loved ones, as well as through their efforts to obtain information about them.

## Background

On 9 October 2019, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [announced](#) the start of a military operation in Syria, calling it Peace Spring, with the direct participation of Syrian armed opposition groups, operating under the National Army, affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government, an offshoot of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

According to the United Nations, the Turkish attack had serious repercussions on the civilian population, as it directly led to the [displacement](#) of more than 180,000 people, including tens of thousands of women and children, from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad, during the first days of the operation. The waves of displacements were rapid and uncoordinated.

On 17 October 2019, Turkey signed an [agreement](#) with the United States, in which it agreed to pause its offensive in northern Syria for 120 hours. This was followed by the cessation of Operation Peace Spring after the completion of the SDF's withdrawal from the area. The two governments pledged to "protect religious and national minorities in the region."

Operation Peace Spring, which was ceased on 22 October 2019, led to the control of Turkey and the SNA armed groups supported by Ankara on a 120 km border strip between the two cities of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, northwest of al-Hasakah, and Tell Abyad, north of Raqqa, at a depth of 32 km.

The Turkish invasion was accompanied and followed by a wide range of [human rights violations and war crimes](#) that were successively documented and published by local Syrian human rights organizations, international organizations, and UN investigative committees. The violations included [extrajudicial executions](#) and the prevention of indigenous people from returning home by Turkish-backed armed groups.

## Methodology

Synergy and Syrians for Truth and Justice Organizations present this summary report as part of a broader joint effort to monitor the deliberate disregard of the issue of people who went missing because of Operation Peace Spring.





For the purposes of this report, Synergy and STJ talked to the families of 12 missing persons, including eight civilians and four fighters of the SDF. Only five families agreed to provide information about their missing loved ones. Interviews were conducted either online or in person between mid-November 2021 and December 2021. Identities of some of the witnesses will be concealed at their request for their safety.

The two organizations also relied on publicly available materials, including reports and news articles. Yet, since there is some contradiction in open source information, we made sure to verify all testimonies using direct sources.





## Family Testimonies: Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê

### She was asked for a large sum of money to find out what happened to her husband

Walid Sheikho, born in 1979, was living with his family in the city of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Walid's two wives and children fled their city following the Turkish offensive of October 2019. However, Walid remained in the city to look after his home and the flock of pigeons he was raising.

With the intensification of the battles in mid-October 2019, Walid's family lost contact with him. He has been missing since then. Walid's wife, Ameena Sheikho, confirmed that she lost contact with him in 14 October 2019 and went on to say:

“When I called Walid that day, a stranger answered me saying his name is Turki. He told me that he found the mobile in the street and that he did not know Walid. After that, that person called me back and asked for a large sum of money to reveal the fate of my husband.”

Ameena knew it was an extortion plot and, regardless, she could not afford the requested sum. She did not pay the man. Instead, she searched tirelessly for her husband, but to no avail. Ameena recounted:

“We searched for him in all the hospitals in al-Hasakah, but we did not find him. We also searched in the mortuaries, and among the martyrs' pictures, but to no avail. We have not heard from him”.

Walid's two wives and their eight children are living in Qamishli/Qamishlo city, where they were displaced following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring. The loss of the family's breadwinner has affected the lives of its members. Ameena mourned:

“My 12-year-old son and my 10-year-old stepson work to support us. Our children dropped out of school. We do not have a heater or fuel. No one has helped us”.

The family has not given up hope that Walid will return.

### Her son was tortured before her eyes and disappeared

In Qamishli/Qamishlo, Sharifa Suleiman holds a picture of her missing special needs son Mahmoud, hoping to hear any news about him. Sharifa Suleiman is one of those displaced from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring of October 2019. On 24 November 2019, she returned with her special needs son, Mahmoud, to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to check on their home and other property. Fighters of Syrian armed opposition groups beat Sharifa's son in front of his elderly mother and arrested him for entering his own home. Sharifa recounted:

“As we walked through the door, someone shouted: ‘You have nothing here’. I looked back to see four armed young men, all the same height. I replied, ‘it is OK, as you like’ I tried to get Mahmoud out so we could leave, but he stopped me and said to the militias: ‘This is my home and I will go in’. The men threw him to the ground and started kicking and beating him with hosepipes. I tried to shield my son and save him but one of the







armed men put the barrel of his gun on Mahmoud's neck and threatened to shoot him if I did not step back.”

After beating him, the fighters with the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division of the SNA arrested Mahmoud. His mother tried over seven months to get news about her son after his arrest. In mid-July 2020, Mahmoud's family learned that he had died as a result of torture a week after his arrest. However, the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division did not give Mahmoud's body to his family, nor give them any confirmation of his death.

“Eventually; however, the Division fighters told us that Mahmoud had died as a result of torture, but they refused to give us his body or to tell us where he was buried,” Umm Mahmoud said. More than two years have passed, and Mahmoud's family still does not know anything about the fate of their son, who was suffering from cerebral palsy.

Umm Mahmoud sobbed:

“May God not forgive them for what they did to us. Today, I with my husband and two daughters move from one rented house to another. We have changed three houses so far. All I can do is say may God not forgive them.”

## He returned to check on his property and disappeared

R. A. displaced with her family from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city following Operation Peace Spring of October 2019. After the family fled, R.A's husband returned to the city on 13 October 2019 to check on their home. He has since disappeared. R. A. said: “We tried to call him, but his phone was off. We knew nothing about what happened to him.”

R. A. is living in the town of Al-Maabadah/Girkê legê and working as a teacher to provide for her seven children under the difficult conditions of displacement. However, this is not enough to compensate them for the loss of their father. R. A. lamented:

“Four of my children dropped out of school due to our deteriorating situation. Only my three youngest children attend school. No matter what we do, our lives will never be as they used to be. When their father was around, we were fine, but we are not fine today. His loss has affected us greatly, both financially and emotionally.”

## A Family Blackmailed

Laila al-Ahmed, from Syria's northeast, is searching for her husband who disappeared in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê while doing work in foodstuff distribution on 7 March 2020. Laila is living now in al-Hasakah province. She confirmed that the Memati Bash Battalion of the Sultan Murad Division kidnapped her husband:

“Members of the Memati Bash Battalion called my father-in-law telling him that they kidnapped my husband and that they want \$15,000 in exchange for his release or they would kill him.”

Laila's family secured the amount and transferred it to a fighter of the group in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. However, Laila's husband has not returned and the group members never answered the phone after taking the money. Laila gave birth to her first child months after her husband's disappearance. Laila's child has never met his father, who remains missing. Laila mourns:





“My husband went missing only three months after our marriage. I am raising my one-year-old child alone. It grieves me that my child will grow up as an orphan. The disappearance of my husband has greatly affected his parents, especially since they already lost their oldest son in a bombing raid on rural Aleppo by Russian jets. When my mother-in-law heard the news of my husband’s disappearance, she had a heart attack and her health has been deteriorating since then, while my father-in-law’s psychological condition worsened.”

The family has not given up hope yet, and is looking forward to their son's return, or to learning something about his fate.

## **No crucial information on the fate of his son**

Saleh Othman, a father to a missing son, along with the four other witnesses, believe that their missing loved ones are held by Turkey or its allied SNA. Saleh Othman fled Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê following the Turkish invasion of October 2019. Saleh’s family is staying in a school in rural Tell Tamer housing people displaced following Operation Peace Spring.

For more than two years, Saleh has been searching for his son, who went missing during the attack on northeastern Syria. The family lost contact with their son in the first days of the attack. He was then 22. Saleh recounted:

“We have received conflicting information on his fate. Some said he was lost and others said the Turkish forces arrested him. However, we obtained no proof or evidence to confirm that he is alive or dead.”

Saleh’s missing son volunteered within the ranks of the SDF to support his family. His mother was looking forward to his wedding. However, months after his loss, the SDF declared him a martyr, although there was no evidence of that. Saleh mourned:

“I always say to myself that if me, his dad, has a heart burning over his absence, how does his mother feel? She who gave him birth, breastfed him, and raised him? Even though it has been more than two years since he went missing, I avoid talking about him in her presence. Still, she always talks about what he likes or wears. As she speaks, I feel my tongue is tied so I prefer to leave.”

Despite their difficult living conditions, Saleh’s 13-member family is still looking for their missing son with hopes for a reunion. Saleh went on to say:

“We call upon the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the other effective international organizations to find our missing son. We know he might be dead, but it is our right to know if our son is alive or dead, free or detained.”

## **The family accused forces affiliated to the Autonomous Administration to be behind the disappearance of its son**

Hikmat Muhammed was displaced from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê following the Turkish invasion of October 2019. His brother, Hassan Muhammed, a farmer, tried to take his agricultural tractor out of the city while people fled. Since then, he has disappeared. Hassan’s family heard that the SDF arrested him on 11 October 2019, in Tell Tawil village northwest of the town of





Tell Tamer. Since then, Hassan's family has heard nothing about him, and demands the SDF reveal his fate. He told our researchers:

“My brother was arrested without charge and we don’t know where he is. We do not know why he was arrested, or where he is. He has not been brought to any trial. If he did wrong, the SDF must disclose it.”

Hassan’s family has displaced to the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo. Difficult circumstances forced Hassan’s wife to work to provide for her children.

“Since his loss, Hassan’s family suffers financially, as he was the only breadwinner. My brother has a twelve-year-old son and four school-age daughters; they cannot work. Their financial situation is deteriorating. They struggle to meet their daily needs.”





## Family Testimonies: Tell Abyad

### Her missing husband was seen in a detention center of the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East

Fatima's husband disappeared in mid-October 2019. He went missing while on his way from his hometown, Tell Abyad, to Raqqa, where he was displaced with his family following Operation Peace Spring. Fatima said that her husband went to Tell Abyad to attend a funeral following the loss of one of his relatives. Fatima lost contact with her husband while on his way back to Raqqa. Fatima recounted:

“In our last call, he told me that he was near Suluk town, controlled by Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction of the SNA. A person who has been released from a prison of Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction confirmed seeing my husband there in the same prison, but the faction; however, denied holding him. I have heard nothing about him since then. What can I do? I am stranded.”

Months after her husband went missing, Fatima lost her son to cancer. She is now living in Raqqa raising her remaining two children alone amid the difficulty of displacement.

“Alas, I could not afford my child's cancer treatment. He died six months after his father's disappearance. I am going through hell to support my two children after losing our only breadwinner.”

### Her brother was kidnapped anonymously

Lama misses her brother. After her father's death, Lama lived with her brother near Suluk town in rural Tell Abyad, where he took care of her. However, he went missing in early December 2019. That day, Lama's brother went to work but did not return. Lama confirmed that she searched for her brother but to no avail. She could not obtain any information about his whereabouts or his fate. Lama said:

“My brother is never late coming home and never would leave me alone – but he did it that day. So, I called his co-worker, who told me that he saw him in a Hyundai H100 car with someone he didn't know. That was the last time he was seen. I searched for him in hospitals and in SNA offices and headquarters but to no avail”.

Lama's life was seriously affected after the loss of her brother. She went through a short, failed marriage. Now she is living with a friend of hers and searching for a job to earn a living.

### He remained in his city to guard his home and other property

Najwa al-Ali's husband went missing in the first days of Operation Peace Spring of October 2019 while he attempted to flee the city during hostilities. Najwa's husband worked as a private taxi driver. He remained in his city, Tell Abyad, to guard his property while Najwa fled with their children to the town of Ayn Issa. Najwa urged her husband to leave Tell Abyad, fearing for his safety. He finally agreed to flee – but disappeared in the process. Najwa recounted:

“My husband tried to flee Tell Abyad at my request following the intensification of military operations. In our last call he told me that he was still inside the city and then I lost contact with him. He has since disappeared.”





It has been two years since the disappearance of Najwa's husband. She is now living with her family in Ayn Issa raising her two children alone. She said:

“I have two children, the eldest of whom is five years old. I am raising them alone with the help of my parents. I had to work as a teacher in order to support my children, who do not stop asking about their father. I always answer them with tears filling my eyes that he will return soon, and I hope that this will come true one day.”

### **He suspects the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya are behind his brother's disappearance**

Mohammed lost his brother, who remained in his village, southern Tell Abyad, to take care of his house and agricultural land, during Turkey's Operation Peace Spring of October 2019.

Following the Turkish offensive, Mohammed fled with his family from Tell Abyad to Raqqa. A week after the beginning of the military operations, Mohammed lost contact with his brother. Mohammed confirmed that he has searched tirelessly for his brother but has not yet obtained any proven information about his fate.

“My brother is a civilian. He was a farmer. I searched for him at the security service branches and headquarters of military factions but to no avail. I heard later that the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction arrested my brother, but the faction; however, refuted that. We still do not have certain information about his whereabouts or his fate. My missing brother is married and has four children. His loss affected his family greatly. About a year after my brother's disappearance, his wife abandoned the children and married another man. The children are now living with their uncle, who is trying to compensate them for the loss of their father.”

Mohammad's brother said that displacement had seriously affected their lives.

“Displacement has affected our lives; we are facing dire circumstances, which deprived my nephews from their right to education. Moreover, my mother got diabetes by the grief over her son's loss and her grandchildren's suffering.”

Mohammed's family, like other families of missing persons, hopes for the return of its missing son soon, and appeals to reveal his fate.





*This article expresses the views of Hevdestî (Synergy) Association and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) and is not attributed to the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), its donors, or member states.*

