

The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria and Ways to Seek Justice for Them



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The Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria discussed the needs and priorities of the victims in north and northeast Syria, aiming to seek justice for them and advocate for their top issues. The Forum yielded recommendations that would contribute to uncovering the truth, accountability and achieve justice from their perspective

Introduction

On October 27, 2023, [Synergy Association for Victims](#), [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) Organization, and Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement jointly organized the Second Annual Forum for the Victims in Northern Syria, under the slogan “Together, Our Voice is Stronger”.

The Forum highlighted the needs and priorities of victims in northern Syria, seeking justice and advocating for their top concerns and issues. These include the right to safe and voluntary return, revealing the fate of those missing and forcibly disappeared, achieving peace and stability. In addition to restoring confiscated property and rights, holding perpetrators accountable, compensation and reparation, along with improving the economic situation and the reality of the camps.

The Forum was held in al-Qamishli/Qamishlo City in northeast Syria, with the participation of 57 people (23 women and 34 men), most of whom attended in person while others joined virtually, among them six panelists. The participants were victims and survivors, including the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), enforced migrants, activists, human rights defenders, and decision makers, in addition to various local, regional and international media agencies and outlets.



This Forum is held annually with the aim to provide a platform and a space for the victims, survivors and their families in north and northeast Syria to represent themselves, claim their rights, and coordinate among each other to achieve their goals.

The victims were engaged in drafting the general agenda of the Forum through organizing several Focus Group Discussions over September 2023, to identify the various priorities and needs of the victims, along with the results of the survey targeting 200 participants, including victims, survivors, and their families.

The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria:

The Executive Director of Synergy Association for Victims, Izzadin Saleh, commenced the Forum by giving a speech on the escalating human rights violations due to the ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011 and its impact on the victims, survivors and their families. He emphasized the importance of coordination between the victims and survivors to represent themselves and lead campaigns to defend their rights. He also stressed that a comprehensive and sustainable peace in Syria is impossible without seeking justice for the victims and without their active participation in truth-revealing, accountability, and justice processes.

A video illustrating the human rights situation in Syria and the catastrophic humanitarian crisis that has persisted since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 was presented in the Forum. The video also included statistics about the victims of severe human rights violations in Syria, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, among others.



Four panelists participated in the first theme of the Forum, titled “The Needs and Priorities of the Victims in Northern Syria”. The literary writer and critic, Abdul Wahab Pirani, talked about the needs and priorities of the victims, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, whether residing inside or outside the makeshift camps, and the role of literature and art, both prominent and neglected, in documenting the reality and stories of the victims. Meanwhile, the journalist and civil activist, Avin Youssef, discussed the role of media in advocating for the victims’ issues on the local, regional, and international levels. Khalaf Dawood, a member of the Public Relations Bureau in the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), spoke about the duties and responsibilities of the Autonomous Administration and the necessary diplomatic efforts regarding priority issues for the victims and the northern and eastern regions of Syria generally. Lastly, the academic and political researcher, Ibrahim Muslim, who is based in France and participated virtually via Zoom, addressed human rights situation in the areas of northern Syria under the Turkish occupation.





Available Justice Mechanisms, Both Locally and Internationally, Currently and in the Future:

The second theme of the Forum featured an effective and a meaningful dialogue among the participants regarding available justice mechanisms in the Syrian context, both on the local and international level, currently and in the future, as well as the importance of effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in processes of accountability and transitional justice in Syria.

The Executive Director of Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement, Muhyedin Isso, who is based in Germany, joined virtually via Zoom and talked about the prospects of achieving peace and stability, the right to a dignified, voluntary and safe return, and the significance of ongoing work to achieve these goals.

On the other hand, Ahmed Helmi, a human rights defender, founder and manager of Ta'afi Initiative to Support Survivors of Detention and Torture, stressed on the importance of effective participation of victims in processes of uncovering the truth, accountability and justice. Furthermore, he talked about the experience of the "[Truth and Justice Charter](#)", which brings together 10 Syrian victims' associations working collaboratively to uncover the truth, ensure justice for the detainees and the enforced disappeared and their families as the

cornerstone for achieving a lasting peace in Syria. Families and Charter associations, including Synergy, as well as partners' organizations of the civil society, have been engaged in years of advocacy and struggle to call on the establishment of an independent institution tasked with disclosing the fate of the those missing and disappeared by all parties to the conflict. On June 29, 2023, these efforts were fruitful, as the United Nations adopted a [resolution](#) for the establishment of this body, which will be a center to collect and manage the missing persons-relevant available data and unify its criteria in coordination with other existing mechanisms. Its goal is to determine the whereabouts of the living missing persons, locate the burial site of remains of the deceased, identify and restore them to their families. Additionally, the new body will provide a support to the victims, survivors and their families.

The participants and the panelists engaged in extensive and focused discussions about the priority issues for the victims, survivors and their families, including the IDPs, and the enforced migrants, and they explored ways to achieve justice from their perspective.

The discussions emphasized the necessity of disseminating awareness about the significance of documentation with a view to reveal the truth and an effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in accountability efforts as a fundamental right and a form of effective redress for the victims in their endeavor to hold perpetrators accountable and achieve justice.





Recommendations:

The discussions during the Forum and our direct dialogue with the victims, survivors and their families resulted in several recommendations, the most important of which are:

To the Conflict Victims in Syria:

- Coordinate among the victims- the cause owners/those closely connected to the issue, -organize themselves, and lead efforts aiming to defend their rights and advocate for their priority issues.
- Raise awareness on the importance of a victims-led and initiated documentation process. This can play a leading role in building a comprehensive and unified narrative for the victims and develop their perspective on effective justice and redress.
- Ongoing struggle to ensure effective participation of victims, survivors and their families in revealing the truth, accountability and justice processes in Syria, as a fundamental right indispensable for a sustainable comprehensive peace in the country.

To the United Nations, Decision Makers, and International Actors:

- Provide sufficient support to victims of the Syrian conflict, mostly to the IDPs and the enforced migrants, according to their needs and priorities.
- Support the camps that have yet gained an international recognition, such as the makeshift camps set up for IDPs of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad among others.
- Provide cross-border humanitarian assistance for the people of northeast Syria through border crossings like al-Yaarubiyah/Tal Kojar and Semalka/Fishkhabour without waiting the approval of the Syrian government and/or any other party to the conflict, recognizing that humanitarian aid is a life-saving necessity.
- Pressure the Syrian government to abide by its legal, humanitarian and ethic duties towards its own citizens and ensure the protection of their fundamental rights, in addition to cooperate with UN bodies to end the conflict, build peace and achieve justice.
- Pressure the Turkish government to acknowledge its occupation of the areas under its effective control in northern Syria, including Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad and fulfill its obligation as an occupying state as per the [IV Geneva Convention](#). In addition to the immediate withdrawal from the areas it occupies, forbidding its affiliated forces, factions and militias from committing violations against the civilian populations, and holding accountable all individuals involved in these violations.
- Impose sanctions on Syrian individuals, factions, and entities, as well as those entering Syria, involved in committing human rights violations and war crimes, and hold accountable the entities that support and fund them.
- Hold accountable the perpetrators of human rights violations, whether individuals and groups, and provide effective mechanisms of remedy for the victims that align with the victims' vision for justice and redress in Syria.
- Pressure the Turkish government to cease aggressions on civilian objects, infrastructures, and critical facilities in north and east Syria that exacerbate the catastrophic humanitarian crisis, destroy the population's livelihoods and threaten the already tenuous stability in the area, and to call on the Turkish government to hold accountable its officials who are involved in committing war crimes.
- Pressure the governments of Syria and Turkey to stop weaponizing water against the residents in north and northeast Syria and neutralize water resources from political rivalries.
- Pressure the Turkish government to provide a safe and impartial environment in the areas it occupies, ensuring the safe and dignified voluntary return of the IDPs and the

enforced migrants to their original homes, and to promptly halt any policies of demographic changes in the areas it occupies, as well as to remove the aftermath ensuing from those practices.

- Pressure all parties to the conflict in Syria to disclose the fate of the detainees, missing persons, and the enforced disappeared, locate the burying sites of remains of the deceased, identify and restore them to their families, and provide facilities needed for the survivors and their families.

To Victims' Associations and Civil Society Organizations:

- Continuously work to identify the needs and priorities of the victims, survivors and their families, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, engage them in building plans and policies, and design activities and appropriate interventions.
- Mobilize public opinion, both locally and globally, about the human rights violations committed by all parties to the conflict in areas of north and northeast Syria and work to seek justice and compensation for the victims.
- Document all human rights violations, regardless of the victims and perpetrators, such as extrajudicial killing, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, forced displacement, in addition to the violations of Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights, and submit these documentations to UN bodies and the available justice mechanisms about Syria, with the aim to contribute to uncovering the truth, accountability and justice on Syria.
- Amplify voices of the victims, survivors and their families, empower them to represent themselves and lead the campaigns that defend their rights and advocate for their issues.
- Provide all types of legal, medical, social, psychological, and service, support, sufficiently and effectively, to the victims, survivors, the IDPs and the enforced migrants.
- Intensify awareness campaigns and training activities for the IDPs and the enforced migrants to inform them about their seized rights, particularly those related to Housing, Land, Property (HLP) rights. As well as raise awareness about the importance of maintaining property documentation and assist them in issuing legal documents in case in case of loss, damage, or similar circumstances.

To the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES):

- Maintain continuous dialogue with the conflict victims in Syria, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, and engage them in decision-making processes.

- Ensure the provision of essential services to the IDPs and the enforced migrants in its areas (AANES's areas), notably the camps residents, guarantee their fundamental rights, provide job opportunities for them and help them integrate with the host communities.