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## STJ's Contribution to the Call for Inputs: What are Minority Issues?

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), respectfully submit this input to the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues in response to the thematic inquiry "What are Minority Issues?"

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May 2025

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## **STJ's Contribution to the Call for Inputs: What are Minority Issues?**

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Syrians for Truth and Justice submitted this document in February 2025 as a set of responses to questions, addressing the call titled “What Are Minority Issues?” issued by the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Mr. Nicolas Levrat.

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- **Q1: Which country (or countries) does your civil society organization operate in or from?**
  - **Q2: Is the country where you are based the country you are working on/with?**

[Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) is an independent, impartial, international, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, based in France, but operating mainly across Syria, through a large network of field researchers on the ground (staff & volunteers).<sup>1</sup>

- **Q3: What is the main focus of your organization regarding minority issues?**

Convinced that Syria's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity has historically defined and essentially benefitted the country, our dedicated team works to expose human rights violations in Syria, promote inclusivity, and ensure that all Syrians are equally represented and everyone's fundamental rights are respected.

STJ observed that efforts to build a monochromatic national identity based on a single ethnicity, language, or religion continue to result in inadequate protection of minority rights.<sup>2</sup> In this context, STJ focused on *Syria's past and present legal framework* and reported on the *concrete situation of several religious minorities* in Syria, such as the **Christians, Yazidis, and Druze, as well as ethnic minorities**, in particular the **Kurds**.<sup>3</sup>

- **Q4: What is your role within the organization?**

This input was submitted by a group of STJ researchers.

- **Q5: What are minority issues as perceived by your organization?**

Minority issues arise when groups of people defined as *minorities* are *consistently and systematically denied equal rights and citizenship, opportunities, and recognition, with the consequences of limiting their ability to freely practice their culture, language, and/or religion, fully express their identity, and effectively participate in political life.*

To identify *minorities*, STJ uses the **definition** promoted by the UN SR on minority issues in his 2019 report: “An ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority is any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population in the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion, or language, or a combination of any of these. A person can freely

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/history/>, <https://stj-sy.org/en/what-we-do/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Diversity and the Syrian Constitution: Overbroad Texts that Fail to Protect Minority Rights*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> See several reports by STJ about minorities and the issues they face in Syria: [Killing Mother Tongues as a form of the Continued Cultural Genocide in Syria](#), [Curricula in Afrin: Between “Turkification” and Restrictions on the Kurdish Language](#), [Idlib's Christians Disenfranchised Until Their Church Bells Ring Again](#), [Christians of Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor Under and After the IS](#), [Idlib's Druze Complain of Persecution](#), [Yazidis in Syria: Decades of Denial of Existence and Discrimination](#), [Syria: Legal Provisions Prevent Citizens from Political Participation](#), [Diversity and the Syrian Constitution: Overbroad Texts that Fail to Protect Minority Rights](#).

*belong to an ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority without any requirement of citizenship, residence, official recognition, or any other status.”<sup>4</sup>*

- **Q6: Which groups (and if relevant, in which country) does your organization identify as facing minority issues?**

Syria is a pluralistic, diversity-rich country and has historically been multi-ethnic, -cultural, -linguistic, and -religious. It forms a mosaic of diverse ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>5</sup>

While Arabs represent the *ethnic* majority in Syria (80 %), Syria is also home to Kurds (15 %)<sup>6</sup>, and other ethnic groups, such as Assyrians/Arameans, Turkmen, Circassians, and Armenians.

In terms of *religion*, the majority of Syrians identify with Islam (74 % Sunni). However, there are many *religious* minorities, including within Islam (16 % Shia, Alawi, and Druze), Christians (10 % Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Roman Catholic, and Greek Catholic), Yazidis and Jews. While Arabic is the official language, other languages spoken in Syria are Kurdish (Kürmancî), Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, and Turkish.<sup>7</sup>

With a view to the **Syrian legal framework**, any minority in Syria **faces minority issues**, as it presents a fertile ground for discrimination as to ethnicity and religion. Moreover, during the Syrian conflict, all minorities faced discrimination, some to the extent of persecution, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Compared to other minorities in Syria (Assyrians, Turkmen), the **Kurds** have historically been the most discriminated against. The most religious minorities affected have been the **Yazidis, Christians, Druze, and Jews**.

- **Q7: What are the main challenges these groups encounter in their country?**

To properly elaborate on the main challenges faced by these minorities in Syria, we need to take into account the **special context of Syria** with regard to the **Syrian conflict**, looking at their situation before and during the war.

**Prior to the conflict**, the **Kurds** have historically suffered the most from strict government prohibitions concerning their linguistic and cultural rights. Successive Syrian governments focused on suppressing the Kurdish identity by prohibiting Kurdish holidays (e.g. Nowruz) and restricting the use of the Kurdish language for decades.<sup>8</sup> Kurds were banned from speaking, studying, and teaching Kurdish; releasing publications in Kurdish was outlawed, and the names of many villages and towns in Kurdish-majority areas were Arabized<sup>9</sup>, as were many family names. Those who tried to teach Kurdish or published in their mother tongue were persecuted and arrested. The only exception in Syria's history was during the French Mandate (1920-1946).<sup>10</sup>

Successive governments in Syria, since the 1930s, have launched several Arabisation campaigns and policies to settle Arabs in the originally Kurdish-inhabited areas of northern Syria and

<sup>4</sup> [Diversity and the Syrian Constitution: Overbroad Texts that Fail to Protect Minority Rights](#), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/governance-of-diversity-in-syria/>, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/country/syria/#current-issues>, « Communities ».

<sup>8</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> [Diversity and the Syrian Constitution: Overbroad Texts that Fail to Protect Minority Rights](#), p. 10; <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>, p. 5.

displace the Kurds, the so-called “Arab Belt Project” alongside the Turkish border.<sup>11</sup> These policies aimed to create a homogenous society by separating Syrian Kurds from Kurds in neighboring countries and assimilating them into the Arab population (“Syrian Arab identity”).

In 1962, the Syrian government carried out the exceptional Al-Hasakah Census Decree in north-eastern Syria (Kurdish majority).<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, thousands of Syrian Kurds were deprived of their nationality.<sup>13</sup> In total, more than 500.000 Syrian Kurds became **stateless** between 1962-2011, with severe repercussions for their basic civil, political, social, and economic human rights (access to education, health care, political participation, etc.).<sup>14</sup> Without Syrian citizenship, they couldn't prove ownership of land and property, which led to a government policy of depriving stateless Kurds of their property without compensation and granting it to Syrian Arabs.<sup>15</sup>

The **Yazidi community** has historically been denied the ability to perform their religious rituals, learn or pass down their teachings, and build or renovate places of worship. Worse yet, thousands were registered as Muslims and were forced to attend Islamic education classes in schools and were subjected to Islamic Sharia-based personal status laws leading to coercive conversion to Islam (Q8).<sup>16</sup>

**During the Syrian conflict**, minorities have suffered severely from incitement, hate speech, persecution, humiliation, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

In 2016, the **Kurds** in the north established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and included the recognition of various ethnic minorities in its social contract.<sup>17</sup> However, Turkey's settlement plans, aimed at resettling thousands of Syrian refugees in the northeast, have been perceived as aligning with demographic shifts in northern Syria, echoing elements of the historical “Arab Belt” project in a region traditionally inhabited by Kurds.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of Turkey's military operations in 2018 and 2019, the situation of the Kurdish minority in the occupied areas (Afrîn, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tell Abyad) has deteriorated rapidly and severely, as they've been subjected to continuous harassment and humiliation by Turkish forces/authorities and affiliated factions. There are verified reports of Kurds being deprived of property<sup>19</sup>, arbitrarily detained, arrested, and kidnapped for ransom.<sup>20</sup> The legal vacuum created led to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurds.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, pp. 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/statelessness-in-syria-an-enduring-dilemma/>, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-10-facts-about-the-1962-special-census-of-al-hasakah/>, pp. 3-4; <https://stj-sy.org/en/statelessness-in-syria-an-enduring-dilemma/>, pp. 6-16.

<sup>15</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, pp. 9, 116.

<sup>16</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/yazidis-in-syria-decades-of-denial-of-existence-and-discrimination/>, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/1418-2/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>; <https://stj-sy.org/en/my-entire-life-savings-vanished-overnight-housing-land-and-property-rights-violations-in-peace-spring-strip/>, pp. 2, 26-28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

In contemporary Syria, the Kurdish language has never been officially recognised, its use constantly banned in the official and public sphere.<sup>22</sup> Kurds in regime-held areas were not allowed to teach their language in state schools or to open schools specialized in teaching Kurdish.<sup>23</sup> The first time that educational institutions managed to develop Kurdish curricula was after the sweeping March 2011 protests, and the withdrawal of the Syrian government from Kurdish-majority areas. The Kurdish Autonomous Administration declared Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac as three official languages in its areas of governance.<sup>24</sup> However, following the Turkish invasion of northern Syria in Afrîn (90 % Kurdish), the new Turkish authorities changed the curriculum for children, teaching mainly Turkish and Arabic, leaving only 2 hours of Kurdish taught by often unqualified teachers. The new curricula included Turkish ideology, history, religious figures, and personalities, alien to the culture of the region.<sup>25</sup> As a result of systematic harassment, marginalisation and discrimination by fellow students and teachers, the number of Kurdish students has dropped to 30 %, compared to 95 % before the military operations. Today 70% of Afrîn's school attendees are Arab and Turkmen.<sup>26</sup>

The **Yazidis** have been subjected to severe human rights violations since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Having been targeted by extremist Islamist groups as early as 2011, they suffered the latest genocide by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq in 2014, and continued to face unimaginable atrocities after being transported to Syria.<sup>27</sup> Smear campaigns in Syria have targeted the community's beliefs, faith, customs, and origin with the aim of spreading disinformation about the religion and its rituals, and dehumanising its practitioners. This incitement, the lack of religious tolerance and mutual understanding, and the refusal of Syrian institutions to recognise the right of smaller religious beliefs to freely practice their rituals and traditions, led to a hostile environment, killings, and displacement of the Yazidis.<sup>28</sup> The situation of the Yazidis worsened dramatically, when Turkey occupied north-eastern Syrian territory, including areas with a high Yazidi population density (e.g. Afrîn). Yazidis were again subjected to arbitrary arrests, killings, disappearances<sup>29</sup>, and harassment, as well as coercion to convert to Islam.<sup>30</sup> The Turkish military operations have resulted in the forced displacement of approximately 90 % of Afrîn's Yazidi population.<sup>31</sup>

Recently, **Christian** parties commemorated the victims of the Islamic State attacks on villages in the Tal Tamr countryside, north of Al-Hasakah. The "Consultative Committee of National Parties" (Assyrian Democratic Party, the Syriac Union Party and the Assyrian Democratic Organization) drew attention to a massacre against the Assyrian people in 2015, when the IS killed and kidnapped nearly 200 Assyrians. Assyrians called on the United Nations to stabilise the rights of the Christian people and preserve the beautiful Syrian mosaic through a secular and pluralistic *new Syrian constitution*.<sup>32</sup> Christians also experienced discrimination in Idlib when the IS, and later the Al-Nusra (later HTS) controlled the region. Christians were banned from openly practicing their rituals, ringing church bells, and displaying crosses. Moreover, cases of

<sup>22</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/killing-mother-tongues-as-a-form-of-the-continued-cultural-genocide/>, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 5-6, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15, 21.

<sup>27</sup> A/HRC/32/CRP.2, 15 June 2016.

<sup>28</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/yazidis-in-syria-decades-of-denial-of-existence-and-discrimination/>, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/yazidis-in-syria-decades-of-denial-of-existence-and-discrimination/>, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> A/HRC/45/31, paras. 55, 56. 15 September 2020.

<sup>31</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/yazidis-in-syria-decades-of-denial-of-existence-and-discrimination/>, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> <https://npasyria.com/206006/>.



property confiscation, kidnapping, and killings for ransom were reported, resulting in the displacement of Christians and distribution of their property to foreign fighters.<sup>33</sup>

The **Druze** have also suffered from human rights violations (seizure of property, kidnapping, arrests, killings, and coercion to convert to Islam<sup>34</sup>) perpetrated by extremist Islamic groups. In 2015, a former leader of Al-Nusra, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Tunisi, commanded his fighters to gun down at least 20 Druze residents in the village of Qalb Loze.<sup>35</sup>

**After the fall of the Assad regime**, STJ welcomes the promises by the current interim Syrian government to ensure the rights of minorities and to put an end to the violence in Syria. However, STJ stresses that it is not sufficient to give assurances, but that actions and positive results in practice must follow to protect and empower Syria's minorities.

- **Q8: How effective do you think current policies are in addressing these minority issues? Please choose between the following options and explain your choice:**
  1. Very effective;
  2. Somewhat effective; or
  3. Not effective.

The current Syrian legal framework does not provide for the protection of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria and is, therefore, **ineffective**.

Ethnic and religious **minorities** are **not recognised** in national laws, decrees, circulars or censuses, except for the **Personal Status Law**, which regulates marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills. Although specific Personal Status Laws exist for Muslims, the Druze community, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Catholics, the Evangelic community, and Jews, there is no similar law for the **Yazidis**.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, several provisions **discriminate religious minorities**. **Yazidis** fall under the Syrian Personal Status, which applies to Muslims. Given the fact that some Yazidis are registered as Muslims in the civil registry while others are registered as Yazidis, they cannot legally inherit from each other if they marry, and they cannot officially register their marriage, with serious practical consequences, as they cannot register the birth of their children. As a result, many Yazidi children face statelessness, or registered Yazidis are forced to declare their conversion to Islam because a Muslim cannot convert to Yazidism. In addition, many Yazidis have been registered as Muslims against their will.<sup>37</sup> **Christian women** suffer under personal status laws as they are based on male guardianship. Some laws restrict the wife's right to work by requiring her husband's consent. Regarding the right to inheritance, the Personal Status Laws prohibit inter-religious inheritance, including that of spouses and their children, if the spouses do not share the same religion (Islam, Christianity). Furthermore, in the event of divorce, Syrian courts usually decide that the child's custody is to be given to the parent whose religion is Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Regarding the Syrian Constitution, a **new constitution** is to be drafted by the transitional government and relevant stakeholders. The previous Syrian Constitution of 2012 theoretically

<sup>33</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/idlibs-christians-disenfranchised-until-their-church-bells-ring-again/>, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/idlibs-druze-complain-of-persecution/>, pp. 7-8, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-a-brief-guide-to-protecting-the-rights-of-religious-minorities/>, pp. 23-24.

<sup>37</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-a-brief-guide-to-protecting-the-rights-of-religious-minorities/>, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/christian-womens-status-in-syrian-law/>, pp. 4-7.

provided fundamental laws to every Syrian citizen (non-discrimination, participation in political life, freedom of expression and association, and protection of cultural diversity). However, it also used an exclusionary language and included Articles that contradicted the aforementioned rights by favoring ethnic Arabs and Islam as the majority's religion.

STJ, therefore, calls on the current interim and subsequent governments to include Articles in the new Syrian Constitution that officially recognise Syria's minorities, refrain from any exclusionary language that favors one ethnicity or religion, and enshrine fundamental rights in accordance with international human rights standards that specifically protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. Furthermore, the government must guarantee these rights not only by protecting minorities but also by actively empowering them and building the necessary capacity to preserve and revitalise their heritage, culture, language, and religion in practice.<sup>39</sup>

- **Q9: Do you consider that the perceptions of minority issues are shared by persons belonging to minority groups and by persons belonging to majority groups? Please elaborate.**

Following the fall of the Assad regime, the situation in Syria is complex and rapidly changing. The Syrian conflict has shown in an alarming way how incitement and hate speech can affect the rights of minorities. Minorities in Syria have suffered extensively during the war as they have been the target of serious human rights violations. Now the Syrian people ask for nothing more than peace. However, lasting peace in Syria is inevitably connected to the recognition and active protection of ethnic and religious minorities. The current transitional government in Syria must, therefore, abide by international human rights standards, including the ratified ICCPR, and fully acknowledge and recognise the fundamental rights of every person in Syria, regardless of their affiliation to a specific ethnic or religious minority. This includes active government measures and policies that promote ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, and ensure the right to speak and learn one's mother tongue.

- **Q10: Is there sufficient understanding of minority issues among the general public? If so, please elaborate. If not, what are the main reasons or the explanatory factors for this insufficient understanding of minority issues amongst the general public?**

Unfortunately, there is not enough understanding of minority issues in Syria, due to decades of dictatorship since the Baath Party took power, successive Syrian governments preventing Syrian groups from getting to know each other, and the lack of any curriculum that enshrines Syrian diversity and reflects the diverse Syrian groups.

- **Q11: Does your organization work to improve the understanding and recognition of minority issues? If so, how?**

STJ works tirelessly to improve the understanding and recognition of minority issues in Syria through its comprehensive reports, capacity building and education programs in Syria. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to address both structural inequalities and cultural prejudices, while actively fostering and promoting inclusion, equal representation, and respect for diverse identities.

- **Q12: Do you consider that the perception of minority issues in your country is influenced by cultural, political, economic, historical or other factors?**

<sup>39</sup> [Diversity and the Syrian Constitution: Overbroad Texts that Fail to Protect Minority Rights](#), pp. 14, 15.



The perception of minority issues in Syria is strongly influenced by cultural, political, economic, historical, and other factors. As noted above, historically, successive Syrian governments have worked towards constructing an exclusive national identity that favors the ethnic and religious majority, which is reflected in the current Syrian legal framework.

- **Q13: In your opinion, would improving the conditions for minority groups benefit society as a whole? If so, how?**

STJ is convinced that improving the conditions for minority groups in Syria would contribute to long-term peace, stability, and prosperity, and thus benefit Syrian society as a whole.

The denial of fundamental rights to minorities and the favoring of the ethnic and religious majority in legal frameworks and policies have led to serious tensions and radicalization in the Syrian society, resulting in flagrant atrocities and severe human rights violations, particularly committed against minorities.

Ensuring the fundamental human rights of minorities is a sine qua non requirement for establishing peace and stability in Syria.

- **Q14: Is there any additional information you wish to share about minority issues, including how minority issues in your country can be better addressed and/or successful initiatives in this regard.**

STJ believes that the main cause of tension and hatred between different ethnic and religious groups in Syria is not diversity itself, but the governmental “mismanagement of diversity”<sup>40</sup>, particularly that of the Assad regime, and that now is the time for Syria to draft a **new constitution** that addresses the current urgent needs by incorporating articles that ensure equality and inclusiveness, promote diversity and pluralism, and protect minorities.

The Syrian interim government can draw from neighboring countries, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey, which have experienced conflicts of a similar nature, including sectarian tensions, foreign intervention, and long-standing political instability.

Although the 2005 Iraqi Constitution was written in haste and contained contradictory articles, it included multiple religions, ethnicities, and official languages, directly recognizing Iraq’s diversity in the constitution.<sup>41</sup> The Lebanese constitution is non-sectarian and defined as a civilized system that includes absolute freedom of belief and high human rights standards.<sup>42</sup> Syria can also draw on Turkey’s negative experience before and after the current president’s governance, including alarming changes to the Turkish constitution and the centralization of state power to the president.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/governance-of-diversity-in-syria/>, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/the-constitutional-process-in-syria-how-can-we-draw-on-the-iraqi-experience/>, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syrias-constitutional-process-how-to-benefit-from-the-lebanese-experience/>, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syrias-constitutional-process-lessons-learned-from-the-turkish-experience/>, pp. 12-15.

## ABOUT STJ

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Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.