

ICMP Syria/Mena Program

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# Progress to Date

## November 2024

# I. Background

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A large number of Syrians are missing, from atrocities before 2011, from conflict and from the on going crisis. They include persons missing as a consequence of summary executions, arbitrary and incommunicado detention, kidnapping and abduction, enslavement, sarin gas attacks, and other human rights abuses. Fighting and day-to-day ravages of war have also resulted in combatants and civilians of many nationalities going missing. In addition, migrants and refugees fleeing the region are missing, including children who have been separated from their families, victims who have died while crossing the Mediterranean, and victims of human trafficking.

A strategy is needed in order to locate and identify the missing and secure the rights of their families to justice, truth and reparations, including provisions such as inheritance, economic benefits and custody of children. To create such a strategy, cooperation and a common understanding among all stakeholders – civil society, families of the missing, international organizations, states that host Syrian refugees, and Syrian authorities – is essential.

## II. Overall Objectives

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To ensure that Syria takes full responsibility for accounting for all missing persons, regardless of their sectarian or national background, or their role in the conflict. This strategy includes the following objectives:

- Syrian civil society, including families of the missing are actively engaged, including through the provision and collection of data, in finding the missing;
- A secure, centralized and impartial database is created that supports finding missing persons;
- Syrian civil society, including families of the missing are unified in supporting and influencing policy measures to find all missing persons and to ensure the rights of all families;
- States hosting Syrian refugees, migrants and displaced persons, cooperate through the facilitation of efforts to work with Syrian groups and to allow them to report missing persons cases;
- Cooperation among relevant international organizations and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) is enhanced; and,
- The capacity of relevant Syrian groups and institutions to document cases is enhanced. Documentation of evidence in missing persons cases is undertaken to international standards.

# III. Progress to Date

- **Creating a secure, centralized and impartial database of missing and disappeared persons, using the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) Integrated Data Management System (iDMS) has exceeded expectations:**

- Through ICMP and participating civil society and other organizations, more than 76,200 family members have reported up to 28,600 missing persons to a shared repository hosted on the iDMS. This data was collected from persons living in Syria and among refugee populations living outside Syria, in neighboring countries and in Europe. In addition, ICMP has received reports concerning the location of 66 sites of mass graves in addition to 2 sites of Detention, through ICMP's Online Inquiry Center (OIC) Site Locator;
- ICMP has completed three targeted DNA reference sample collection campaigns in Europe, particularly focusing on the Syrian population currently living in Germany. Additionally, ICMP has collected DNA samples from families residing in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Up to 704 family members have provided DNA samples to ICMP, representing 510 different missing persons;
- Following the shipwreck off the coast of Pylos in Greece in June 2023, and the Evros wildfires in August 2023, ICMP received reports from 504 relatives of 207 missing persons. Of this number, ICMP collected 34 genetic reference samples. These samples were profiled at ICMP's laboratories and with the permission of the relevant families of the missing the profiles were shared with the Greek authorities in support of the DNA-based identification process;
- ICMP convened and facilitated twelve meetings of the Syria Data Governance Group (DGG) comprising Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that concluded Data Partnership Agreements with ICMP. The DGG serves as an advisory mechanism to advance good data governance through the sharing

of experiences, providing mutual support and problem-solving, and ensuring the transparency and utility of data partnerships and data processing. During the last DGG meeting in Istanbul, the participants discussed the creation of two working groups within the DGG focusing on data processing and validation and the collection of DNA samples.

- **Unifying Syrian civil society and families of the missing on policy measures**

- Building on the [Policy Process with Syrian Civil Society Organizations and Families of the Missing](#), which ICMP launched in 2018, ICMP facilitated the creation of a Syrian-led Policy Coordination Group (PCG), which was driven by Syrian families of the missing and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from all communities. The goal of the PCG was to help Syrian stakeholders develop recommendations and a policy framework for a sustainable missing person process, including addressing issues such as the release of detainees and other measures that can be undertaken urgently to find missing persons, the creation of a future Syrian Commission on Missing Persons, a Central Record, and purpose-specific legislation, and the inclusion of the issue in a future constitution and peace agreement. The PCG:
  - Published an [Ethical Charter for Data Collection and Documentation of Syria's Missing](#) on standards and codes of conduct to be followed during data collection and documentation of missing persons. The Charter was published at a virtual event on 30 August marking the International Day of the Disappeared;
  - Sent a [submission](#) to the Human Rights Council's 40th session, for the Universal Periodic Review of Syria. The report titled "Syria: Towards Addressing the Issue of Missing Persons" examined the issue of persons missing at the hands of the Syrian government and concluded with

- recommendations related to international agencies and instruments and recommendations related to domestic matters;
- Recommended a set of [provisions](#) for a future Syrian constitution to enable a sustainable and just process to account for more than 100,000 persons missing from the conflict. These recommendations include guarantees related to the right to a fair trial, protection of the physical and mental integrity of those under detention or arrest, reform of the security services, the independence of the judiciary, and transitional justice measures, including the establishment of a Syrian Commission on Missing Persons and purpose-specific legislation designed to secure the rights of relatives of the missing to justice, truth and reparations;
  - Published a [paper](#) on missing persons legislation and institutions to enable a sustainable and just process to account for hundreds of thousands of missing persons due to the conflict;
  - Published a [policy paper on mass graves](#) proposing legal provisions that will ensure the proper protection and processing of mass graves and help to unveil the identity of victims and the collection of evidence for future prosecutions;
  - Published a [policy paper regarding the Syrian amnesty laws](#), calling on the Syrian authorities to reveal the fate of missing persons, release all political detainees, and adopt an amnesty law in line with international standards;
  - Agreed on an advocacy plan to promote the dissemination of the PCG's papers on a larger scale, securing recognition and implementation of proposed recommendations; and,
  - Shortly after the February 2023 earthquakes, [committed](#) to review the developed papers and incorporate measures to account for those who had gone missing in the earthquakes.
- In January 2024, ICMP facilitated the final meeting of the PCG in Istanbul. The proposals from the meeting included uniting families and CSOs across political lines, collaborating with host states on data collection from refugees, and conducting systematic investigations in Syria with the highest scientific standards. Recommendations also called for a Syrian law on missing persons, an inter-ministerial commission, and a central record. Emphasizing the need for a unified data system, participants also highlighted the potential of the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP) to deliver results, contingent on the active participation of Syrian families of the missing.
- **Ensuring cooperation among States hosting Syrian refugees and between relevant international organizations**
    - **Intergovernmental Roundtable**  
ICMP has held three high-level meetings of government representatives from countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees in the MENA region and in Europe, including Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Germany and the Netherlands. Representatives from foreign ministries and ambassadors in the Netherlands participated in these meetings, which are critical to ensuring political support from governments, including the collection of data from Syrian refugee communities. ICMP will host a fourth meeting during October 2024.
    - **Collaboration with the United Nations Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP)**  
ICMP is engaged in regular meetings with the IIMP to discuss the establishment of a shared repository on missing persons data and to support DNA testing and matching. This collaboration aims to unify Syrian civil society on policy measures and to promote regional cooperation for data collection and processing, including genetic data from Syrian refugees.

- **Capacity Building for representatives of CSOs, family associations, survivor groups and families of the missing**

- **Learning and Development – The Wim Kok Centre for Excellence and Learning (CEL)**

Up to December 2022, ICMP had provided six learning and development training courses to first responders and stakeholders directly involved in excavations in northeast Syria on how to safeguard evidence: one course in 2020, two in 2021, and three in the first half of 2022. Also, between December 2022 and March 2023, ICMP delivered six additional training courses on the reporting and safeguarding of mass graves. Two of these targeted medical personnel in Syria's northwest and four involved civil society representatives in the northeast.

- **Learning and Development Seminars – Civil Society Initiative (CSI)**

ICMP conducted 17 learning seminars targeting families and civil society leaders to deepen their understanding of how they can shape policies to account for missing persons and hold authorities accountable. These seminars provided participants with tools and know-how, strengthening their capacity to influence and participate meaningfully in Syria's missing persons process. The latest seminars strengthened the knowledge of Syrian civil society actors about the principle of universal jurisdiction and the work of the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. In total, the seminars were attended by 320 civil society representatives, a majority of whom are based in Syria and its neighboring countries. More than 70 percent of the total number of attendees were women (229 out of 320 participants).

- **Learning and Development – Publications**

ICMP produced five awareness videos that are available online and were shared with families through WhatsApp. In addition, ICMP produced several publications including [The Family guide](#) for Syrian families of missing persons, a booklet on ambiguous loss and trauma, and a legal-support awareness document dedicated to Syrian women – specifically, the wives of missing persons.

- **Facilitated Seminars**

ICMP conducted 54 facilitated seminars with representatives of CSOs, family and survivor groups, including 16 facilitated seminars with women-led CSOs. The latest facilitated seminars focused on the present effort to enact an international convention on crimes against humanity within the UN framework and on strategies for holding foreign ISIS combatants accountable for international crimes, including the crime of enforced disappearance.

- **Outreach Seminars**

ICMP conducted 281 outreach seminars for a total of 4,835 family members, around 65 percent of whom are women (3,141 women participants). During these seminars, participants learned about the importance of data collection, the crucial role that families can play in the process of accounting for their missing relatives, ICMP's data protection policies, and ICMP's [OIC](#). Participants also learned about their rights as victims of the crime of enforced disappearance and discussed the latest developments in the missing persons issue, including the creation of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria. ICMP connected 11 families who had expressed interest in playing a more active role with existing family associations.

- **Small Grants**

ICMP has provided Small Grants to 55 Syrian CSOs (and their partners) to help build their capacity and independence and to support advocacy efforts. The small grants were implemented in northeast Syria, northwest Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Europe.

ICMP has worked with **more than 70 Syrian CSOs** on capacity-building programs.

## IV. Bibliography of Reports and other Documents on Syria

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- [Accounting for Missing Persons is an Investment in Peace: Policy Process with Syrian Civil Society Organizations and Families of the Missing;](#)
- [Assessment and Recommendations: Committee of Syrians for Detainees and Abductees\\*](#);
- [Missing Persons in Northeast Syria: A Stocktaking\\*](#);
- [Syrian Women: Advocates for the Rights of the Missing\\*](#);
- [Overview: Intergovernmental Roundtable Accounting for the Missing Is an Investment in Peace\\*](#);
- [Concept Note: An International Mechanism on Missing, Disappeared and Detained Persons in Syria\\*](#);
- [Syria: Towards Addressing the Issue of Missing Persons - Submission for the Universal Periodic Review - Syrian Arab Republic 40th session - July 2021;](#)
- [Ethical Charter for Data Collection and Documentation of Syria's Missing;](#)
- [Proposed Constitutional Principles Related to Syria's Missing;](#)
- [Syrian Legislation Related to Missing Persons Towards the Adoption of a Law on Missing and Disappeared Persons in Syria;](#)
- Draft research paper on transitional Justice and political settlement in Syria;
- Draft research paper on mass graves;
- Five awareness videos:
  - [Mass Graves and the Importance of Their Protection,](#)
  - [ICMP's Missing Persons Process,](#)
  - [How Does ICMP Store and Protect Your Data?](#)
  - [Syria's Missing: How to Report a Missing Person through ICMP's Secure, Centralized Data Repository,](#)
  - [ICMP: How it helps Syrian families of the missing.](#)



\*Document available upon request.

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