

# Syrian victims and survivors demand truth and justice at Brussels IV

Summary of side event proceedings and demands put forward by victim representatives

Syrian victims and survivors of enforced disappearance, kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and forced displacement by the Assad regime, ISIS and other parties to the ongoing conflict demanded truth, justice and redress during an online side event held on 23 June on the margins of the Brussels IV conference Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. The event was convened by six Syrian victim and survivor-led organisations that have been demanding truth and justice for the crimes whose affects they continue to suffer:

- Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison – a group of former political detainees, advocating for truth and justice for crimes that took place at the infamous Sednaya prison.
- Caesar Families Association – a group of family members of detainees tortured and killed in detention in Syria and subsequently identified in the Caesar photos demanding truth, justice, and redress
- Coalition of Families of those Kidnapped by ISIS – a collective of family members seeking truth and justice for their family members kidnapped by ISIS during its occupation of Syrian territory.
- Families for Freedom – a women-led collective of family members of those unlawfully detained by all parties to the Syrian conflict demanding the return of their relatives.
- Ta'afi – a victim led and centred initiative supporting survivors of detention and torture with a network of 120 survivors advocating for victims' rights to justice, accountability, and participation.
- Women Survivors' Group – a group of Syrian female former detainees fighting for victims' rights and justice.

The four representatives of victim and survivor associations (Yasmin Almashan, Hiba Alhamed, Ahmed Helmi, and Mouna Khaity) addressed the international community members represented at the Brussels conference to demand:

- A political process in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 with meaningful victim and survivor participation, in continuation of their active role in the 2019 Brussels III conference and despite the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic
- Justice, redress, and accountability to remain high on the Brussels conference agenda as part of a comprehensive and gender-transformative approach with meaningful participation of victims, survivors, affected communities and grassroots civil society. This should include:
  - Support for action to ensure the cessation of ongoing human rights violations, the release of detainees, to reveal the fate of the missing and disappeared, and to return remains to family members for dignified burial.
  - Efforts to ensure accountability for all perpetrators of international crimes in Syria, and especially the Asad regime, including via support for and enabling of universal jurisdiction trials in European states.
  - Regarding the legacy of ISIS, charges should relate to the specific crimes committed, not solely affiliation to a terrorist group. Professional exhumation of mass graves is required, especially those currently accessible in north-eastern Syria, in coordination with the families of the disappeared and missing, along with investigation of

documentary evidence left behind by ISIS in this region and into prisons housing alleged ISIS fighters there.

- Recognition of the war crime of forcible population transfers and of housing, land and property rights as key justice and peacebuilding issues to be addressed in political, accountability and assistance strategies, along with pressure on Syria's neighbouring countries to respect their international obligations and especially the principals of non-refoulement and of safe, dignified and voluntary returns.
- Political and financial support to Syrian civil society engaged in the pursuit of justice, and especially victim and survivor-led associations.

The first speaker, Yasmen Almashan from the Caesar Families Association, found out her brother Oqba had been killed under torture by security forces when his picture was among the Caesar photos smuggled out of the country and circulated on social media years after his arrest, and lost four other brothers to the Syrian regime and ISIS. 'Mine is just one of thousands of families living a life of endless, painful waiting,' she says. 'I am heartbroken when I see my nieces growing up without a father – they tell me I am the only thing they have left of him. We, as a group of families, demand to know the truth about our loved ones, accountability for the perpetrators of these crimes, and to recover the remains of our sons to give them a burial that dignifies them as human beings.'

Hiba Alhamed's father Ismail, a doctor, was kidnapped by ISIS in Raqqa in late 2013, and his fate remains unknown. She and a coalition of other families torn apart by ISIS abductions demand professional exhumations for ISIS mass graves in north-eastern Syria and answers from the de facto authorities now responsible for territories formerly held by ISIS. 'Enforced disappearance is the cruellest crime, because its suffering and pain extends to the whole family and continues without end. It can only end with the return of the disappeared, revealing the truth, and holding those responsible accountable. We as families have not and will not lose hope for the return of our loved ones, and the international community, including the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, has a responsibility to help us.'

Ahmed Helmi, co-founder of Ta'afi, spent three years in various detention facilities of the Syrian regime. 'My mother tried to call me day and night during my detention,' said Helmi. 'Can you imagine the pain and terror she felt? She is a tiny person, but she fought fear and weakness and the authorities to get me out. I wouldn't be here without her. The willpower of my mother and those like her can cause miracles – they push, lobby, hold their ground, and keep fighting. We need more support for victim participation in justice efforts from states who share our values of justice and human rights.'

Mouna Khaity is a feminist activist and advocate on behalf of the forcibly displaced currently working with Women Now who was transferred from eastern Ghouta to Idlib via the green buses that became a symbol of the coercive settlement deals which were made with no input from women or from civil activists like her. 'When forcible displacement is seen as an issue for a political settlement, rather than as a war crime as laid out in international law, this only adds to our suffering and our tragedy,' said Khaity. 'Countries with universal jurisdiction must display the political will to investigate and initiate judicial proceedings for this war crime.'

'Accountability is one of the top priorities of Dutch foreign policy,' said Dutch special envoy for Syria Emiel de Bont during opening remarks to the event. 'Without justice, it is our belief that there cannot be peace... Syrian NGOs are the real champions of the search for accountability, and it is essential that the voices of victims and survivors are heard, in the Brussels IV conference and beyond.'

The event was co-hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Impunity Watch, PAX and Women Now for Development.



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