

# Women-Led Transitional Justice and Family Empowerment in Gaziantep

From Lived Experience to Policy Change: Strengthening Legal Frameworks for Families of the Missing in Syria

**PROJECT DURATION**

15 December – 15 April

**LOCATION**

Gaziantep, Türkiye

**DEVELOPED BY**

Amal Healing and Advocacy Center (AHAC)

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH**

Shuaa Al-Amal Family Association

**FUNDED BY**

International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP)

With support from the European Union

**DATE OF PUBLICATION**

April 2026

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WOMEN-LED • FAMILY-CENTERED • TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Executive Summary

The issue of missing persons in Syria represents one of the most profound and unresolved legacies of the war, affecting hundreds of thousands of individuals and leaving families in prolonged states of uncertainty, legal limbo, and psychological distress. For families—particularly women—the absence of truth and accountability is not only a humanitarian concern but a structural barrier to justice, dignity, and social stability. Addressing this crisis is therefore central to any meaningful transitional justice process and to the broader prospects for sustainable peace, reconciliation, and safe return.

This policy brief is developed within the framework of the project “Women-Led Transitional Justice and Family Empowerment in Gaziantep,” implemented to amplify the voices of families of the missing and strengthen their role in shaping justice processes. The project recognizes families, and especially women, not as passive victims but as key actors in truth-seeking, documentation, and advocacy. It aims to bridge the gap between lived experiences and policy-making by translating community-based insights into actionable recommendations for national and international stakeholders.

At the core of this effort are five structured community dialogues conducted in Gaziantep, engaging women family members of the missing. These dialogues created safe, participatory spaces for reflection on justice, accountability, participation, return, and the role of international mechanisms. Through facilitated discussions, participants shared their experiences, articulated priorities, and collectively identified barriers and opportunities within current justice frameworks. This approach ensured that the findings presented in this brief are grounded in first-hand perspectives and lived realities, providing a credible and contextually relevant evidence base.

The dialogues revealed several cross-cutting insights. First, justice is understood not as a purely legal concept, but as a lived condition rooted in truth, dignity, and equality. A significant gap persists between formal legal frameworks and the everyday realities of affected families. Second, women have emerged as central actors in the pursuit of justice, yet their participation remains constrained by structural, legal, and social barriers. Third, truth and accountability are non-negotiable demands for families, with the right to know the fate of the missing positioned as the foundation of any justice process. Fourth, trust in institutions—both national and international—remains fragile, shaped by past experiences of exclusion, inaction, and politicization. Finally, justice is directly linked to broader recovery dynamics, including decisions related to return, social cohesion, and long-term stability.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Executive Summary

In response to these findings, the policy brief proposes a set of targeted recommendations across three levels. At the national level, priorities include the legal recognition and criminalization of enforced disappearance, strengthening the mandate and operational capacity of the National Commission for the Missing, and institutionalizing gender-sensitive transitional justice frameworks. At the international level, the focus is on linking documentation to accountability pathways, ensuring sustained support for family-centered initiatives, and providing flexible, long-term funding to civil society actors. At the civil society level, recommendations emphasize strengthening family-led networks, standardizing and protecting documentation practices, and enhancing strategic advocacy and policy engagement.

### OVERALL IMPLICATION

Together, these recommendations highlight the need for a holistic, inclusive, and victim-centered approach to transitional justice in Syria—one that places families of the missing at its core, integrates legal, social, and economic dimensions, and builds trust through transparency and meaningful participation. Without such an approach, efforts toward accountability and recovery risk remaining incomplete. With it, there is a real opportunity to transform lived experiences of loss into pathways for justice, dignity, and sustainable peace.

## 3. CONTEXT &amp; PROBLEM FRAMING

## Context & Problem Framing

The missing persons crisis in Syria is of an unprecedented and staggering scale, with hundreds of thousands of individuals unaccounted for after more than fourteen years of conflict. The International Commission on Missing Persons estimates the total number of missing persons to be as high as 200,000, a massive figure that encompasses individuals lost due to summary executions, arbitrary and incommunicado detentions, kidnappings, forced displacement, and perilous migration attempts across the Mediterranean (International Commission on Missing Persons, 2025). Detailed documentation further underscores the severity of the situation, as records from August 2025 indicate that at least 177,057 of those individuals specifically classified as forcibly disappeared (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2025).

**300,000**

ESTIMATED MISSING PERSONS

**177,057**RECORDED AS FORCIBLY  
DISAPPEARED**88–90%**ATTRIBUTED TO REGIME  
PRACTICES

The vast majority of these disappearances are the result of systematic practices by state actors, though multiple parties to the conflict share responsibility. Data indicates that the Bashar al-Assad regime is responsible for approximately 88% to 90% of all documented enforced disappearances, utilizing the practice as a calculated tool of repression and terror against civil society. Other warring parties have also contributed significantly to the crisis; for instance, statistics up to late 2024 show that ISIS was responsible for 8,684 disappearances, the Syrian Democratic Forces for 5,281, and various armed opposition factions for thousands more. This widespread pattern of violations has targeted civilians across various regions and affiliations, profoundly tearing apart the social fabric of the country (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2024, 2025).

Beyond the numbers, the crisis has produced a prolonged condition of uncertainty for families, often described within transitional justice literature as “ambiguous loss.” Families remain trapped between hope and grief, unable to access closure, legal recognition, or basic rights tied to the status of their missing relatives. The absence of acknowledgment or credible investigation mechanisms transforms disappearance into a continuous harm, extending victimhood across generations. This condition directly intersects with core transitional justice principles, particularly the right to truth, justice, and reparations, which remain largely unmet in the Syrian context (International Center for Transitional Justice, *The Disappeared and Invisible Report*).

### 3. CONTEXT & PROBLEM FRAMING

## Context & Problem Framing

#### INSTITUTIONAL OPENING

In positive developments, the establishment of national mechanisms such as the National Commission for Transitional Justice and the National Commission for the Missing represents a significant and promising step toward institutionalizing accountability and truth-seeking processes in Syria. These bodies reflect an emerging political and institutional recognition of the need to address past violations and respond to the demands of victims and their families. As foundational structures, they offer an important opportunity to build coherent national frameworks for documenting cases, clarifying the fate of the missing, and advancing transitional justice pathways.

#### STRENGTHENING EMERGING MECHANISMS

At the same time, as these institutions evolve, there is strong potential to further strengthen their mandates and operational capacities to ensure they can fully respond to the complexity and scale of the Syrian context. Expanding their scope to encompass a broader range of violations, and reinforcing their roles in investigation, accountability, and victim-centered support would contribute to maximizing their impact. With continued development and engagement from national and international stakeholders, these commissions can play a central role in shaping a credible, inclusive, and sustainable transitional justice process in Syria (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2025; Syrian Dialogue Center, 2025).

#### INSTITUTIONAL GAPS AND LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

However, maximizing this potential requires addressing a number of emerging structural and operational gaps. These include the need for clearer legal frameworks that define mandates, stronger coordination between institutions, and more accessible pathways for victims and families to engage with these mechanisms. Ensuring broader outreach, transparency, and inclusivity—particularly for displaced populations and those outside Syria—will be essential to strengthen trust and participation. Additionally, reinforcing the link between documentation, investigation, and accountability processes will be critical to ensure that these mechanisms move beyond data collection toward tangible justice outcomes.

These institutional gaps are compounded by a fragmented legal and governance framework. Syrian law does not adequately address the status of missing persons, leaving families without accessible legal pathways to resolve issues such as inheritance, custody, or marital status. The absence of mechanisms such as a formal “declaration of absence” forces families into legally and ethically problematic processes, including premature death certification. In addition, limited participation channels and the lack of widely accessible reporting mechanisms—both for Syrians inside the country and those in the diaspora—continue to restrict engagement, effectively excluding large segments of affected families and weakening the overall data ecosystem required for credible truth-seeking processes.

At the same time, the broader institutional environment remains deeply constrained. Weak judicial capacity, combined with low levels of public trust in state institutions shaped by the legacy of the previous regime, continues to undermine the prospects for impartial investigations and accountability. Transitional justice in Syria therefore operates within a fragile context where institutional rebuilding must occur simultaneously with justice-seeking, rather than sequentially. This creates a sensitive environment in which the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends heavily on careful design, sustained support, and inclusive engagement to ensure they contribute to accountability rather than risk reinforcing existing gaps.

### 3. CONTEXT & PROBLEM FRAMING

## Context & Problem Framing

#### GENDER DIMENSION

The crisis also has a pronounced gender dimension. With the disappearance of male family members, many women have been pushed into the role of heads of households under conditions of economic precarity and social vulnerability. Female-headed households face disproportionate levels of poverty, food insecurity, and restricted access to livelihoods, while also carrying the burden of caregiving and navigating complex bureaucratic systems in search of information. In addition, women are often exposed to heightened risks of exploitation and abuse when engaging with formal and informal actors to trace missing relatives, highlighting the intersection between enforced disappearance and gender-based violence (OCHA, 2026).

#### FAMILY AGENCY

Despite these constraints, families of the missing have emerged as central actors in the justice landscape. Rather than remaining passive recipients of aid, they have organized into networks and associations, actively documenting cases, advocating for legal reforms, and engaging with international mechanisms. Their role aligns with contemporary transitional justice approaches that emphasize victim-centered processes and participatory accountability. In Syria, these families represent one of the most credible and resilient drivers of truth-seeking and social mobilization, challenging dominant narratives and demanding recognition of their rights.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of return and recovery processes. As displacement patterns shift and returns increase, unresolved disappearance cases pose a direct barrier to safe, voluntary, and dignified return. Families are unlikely to reintegrate into communities or engage with state institutions in the absence of credible accountability and truth mechanisms. Issues related to housing, land, and property (HLP), civil documentation, and inheritance are directly linked to the legal status of missing persons, making their resolution a prerequisite for sustainable reintegration and social stability.

Consequently, addressing the missing persons crisis is not a standalone humanitarian issue but a foundational pillar of Syria's transition. Effective responses require a holistic approach that integrates legal reform, institutional strengthening, gender-sensitive programming, and meaningful participation of families. Without this, both transitional justice efforts and broader recovery processes risk remaining incomplete, undermining long-term peacebuilding and governance reconstruction.

#### REFERENCES

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## 4. METHODOLOGY

## Methodology

**5**

STRUCTURED DIALOGUES

**74**

PARTICIPANTS

**1**

LOCATION: GAZIANTEP

This policy brief is grounded in a participatory, community-led approach that centers the lived experiences of families of the missing, particularly women. Data was collected through five structured community dialogues, bringing together a total of 74 participants in Gaziantep within a safe and facilitated environment that encouraged open discussion, trust-building, and peer exchange.

The dialogues were designed as guided discussions focusing on key themes:

1. Inclusive Justice in Syria from the Perspective of Women.
2. Women's Participation in Justice and Decision-Making: Opportunities and Barriers.
3. The Missing: Red Lines, Fears, and Non-Negotiables.
4. Justice, Return, and the Future of Families.
5. International Mechanisms and Their Role in the Case of the Missing.

Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences, perceptions, and priorities, allowing for the emergence of collective insights rooted in real-life challenges. The methodology prioritized inclusivity, confidentiality, and participant ownership, ensuring that discussions were not extractive but empowering.

Rather than treating participants as subjects of research, they were engaged as active contributors to knowledge production and policy reflection. This approach aligns with victim-centered transitional justice principles, emphasizing the importance of participation, dignity, and agency.

The findings presented in this brief are therefore derived directly from first-hand accounts, facilitated discussions, and collective reflection processes, providing a credible and contextually grounded evidence base for the policy recommendations.

## 5. DIALOGUE-BASED FINDINGS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

## Dialogue-Based Findings and Policy Insights

## DIALOGUE 1

### Inclusive Justice from the Perspective of Women

This dialogue explored how women, particularly family members of the missing, understand and experience justice within the Syrian context. Participants framed justice as a lived reality rooted in truth, dignity, and equality, rather than a purely legal concept.

“Justice means that every person receives their rightful place and that the truth is revealed.”

Participants also emphasized the gap between formal legal systems and everyday experiences. Legal justice was described as something that “exists in laws but not in reality,” reflecting a broader perception that justice mechanisms remain disconnected from the lived realities of women and families of the missing. This disconnect reinforces feelings of exclusion and mistrust toward institutional processes.

The discussion further highlighted patterns of systemic exclusion, particularly affecting women, refugees, and families of the missing. Barriers such as lack of documentation, economic hardship, and political constraints were identified as limiting access to justice pathways. At the same time, participants stressed that women have increasingly taken active roles in advocating for truth and accountability, with one participant noting that “women have become stronger and continue to demand their rights.” However, this agency remains constrained by structural inequalities and discriminatory legal frameworks.

Finally, participants underscored the importance of economic empowerment as a condition for justice, emphasizing that without financial independence, women are unable to fully access their rights or participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. This reflects a broader understanding of justice as interconnected with social and economic realities.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- Justice is understood as a lived experience, centered on truth, dignity, and equality, rather than a purely legal framework.
- There is a clear gap between legal justice and lived justice, with formal systems perceived as disconnected from reality.
- Women and families of the missing face systemic exclusion due to legal, economic, and political barriers.
- Women act as key agents of justice, but their impact is limited by structural inequalities and lack of institutional support.
- Economic empowerment is seen as a prerequisite for accessing justice and enabling meaningful participation.

#### DIALOGUE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Bridge legal and lived justice by designing transitional justice mechanisms that respond to daily realities and not only formal legal frameworks.
- Ensure inclusive access to justice pathways, particularly for refugees, women, and families of the missing, including improved documentation and support systems.
- Institutionalize women’s participation in justice and decision-making processes, ensuring meaningful rather than symbolic inclusion.
- Advance gender-sensitive legal reforms to address discriminatory laws that limit women’s rights and access to justice.
- Integrate economic empowerment into justice programming to enable women’s sustained participation and access to rights.

## 5. DIALOGUE-BASED FINDINGS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

## Dialogue 2

### Women's Participation in Justice and Decision-Making: Opportunities and Barriers

This dialogue explored the extent to which women from family members of the missing are able to participate in justice processes and decision-making spaces, as well as the barriers shaping their engagement. Participants described women's participation as a dynamic and evolving process, shifting from symbolic inclusion toward more active involvement.

"Women are no longer silent; they are documenting, searching, and organizing."

A central theme emerging from the discussion is the incomplete transition from symbolic to meaningful participation. While women are increasingly visible in justice-related activities such as documenting cases, advocating for detainees, and engaging with institutions, participants emphasized that their roles are not yet formalized or guaranteed. Fear, psychological pressure, and social stigma continue to limit engagement, with one participant highlighting that "many women are ready, but they are still afraid of the consequences."

Participants also stressed the critical consequences of women's exclusion from decision-making spaces. Their absence was described as directly contributing to injustice, particularly in issues affecting families of detainees and the missing. As one participant stated, "without women, there is no real representation," pointing to the failure of existing systems to reflect the needs of affected families.

The dialogue further identified structural and systemic barriers as the primary obstacles to participation. Participants emphasized that these barriers are not merely cultural but deeply institutional, including weak legal protections, male-dominated governance systems, and the absence of gender-sensitive policies.

Finally, participants highlighted that safe and meaningful participation requires enabling conditions, not just individual willingness. Legal protection was repeatedly described as a "shield," while family backing, transparent processes, and protection from harassment were identified as essential factors.

**KEY INSIGHTS**

- Women's participation is transitioning from symbolic to active, but remains inconsistent and not yet institutionalized.
- The absence of women in decision-making directly contributes to structural injustice, particularly in issues affecting families of the missing.
- Barriers to participation are primarily institutional and legal, reinforced by social and economic constraints.
- Women are ready and increasingly active, but participation is limited by fear, stigma, and lack of protection.
- Safe participation depends on enabling systems, including legal safeguards, institutional accountability, and social support.

**DIALOGUE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Institutionalize women's participation through formal quotas and guaranteed representation in justice and decision-making bodies.
- Reform discriminatory legal frameworks, particularly in guardianship, custody, and personal status law, to reflect women's roles and rights.
- Strengthen legal protection mechanisms, including anti-harassment policies, complaint systems, and independent oversight bodies.
- Expand legal awareness and capacity-building programs to enable women to understand and claim their rights.
- Address economic barriers to participation by linking justice engagement with livelihood and financial support initiatives.
- Ensure transparent and merit-based appointment processes to prevent exclusion and build trust in institutions.

## 5. DIALOGUE-BASED FINDINGS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

## Dialogue 3

### The Missing: Red Lines, Fears, and Non-Negotiables

This dialogue focused on the boundaries, fears, and fundamental demands of families of the missing in relation to truth-seeking and justice processes. Unlike previous discussions, this session revealed a deeply emotional and principled dimension of transitional justice, where participants articulated clear non-negotiable positions that must shape any future accountability framework.

“We cannot forgive without knowing what happened.”

A central theme emerging from the dialogue is the absolute priority of truth and accountability. Participants repeatedly emphasized that knowing the fate of their loved ones is the first and most essential step toward justice, while also rejecting premature closure such as declaring death without conclusive evidence.

The discussion also highlighted a complex set of fears surrounding justice processes. Participants expressed concern that truth may never be revealed, or that if revealed, it may come without accountability. Some feared the emotional consequences of knowing the truth, while others warned about revenge dynamics, the return of perpetrators to positions of power, and exposure of perpetrators’ identities without meaningful consequences.

Another key dimension is the strong connection between justice and human dignity. Participants consistently framed justice as a process that restores dignity not only through legal accountability but through recognition, acknowledgment, and social rehabilitation.

The dialogue further revealed a strong demand for ownership and protection of the issue by families themselves. Participants expressed concern about politicization and exploitation, emphasizing transparency, collective organization, and trusted mechanisms.

**KEY INSIGHTS**

- Truth and accountability are absolute non-negotiables, with truth-seeking as the first step toward justice.
- Justice processes carry significant emotional and social risks, including re-traumatization, fear of truth, and potential revenge dynamics.
- Justice is deeply linked to human dignity, requiring recognition, moral restoration, and removal of stigma.
- Families demand ownership, transparency, and protection from politicization or exploitation.
- Poorly designed justice processes risk undermining trust and creating further harm.

**DIALOGUE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Prioritize truth-seeking mechanisms as the entry point to all justice processes, ensuring clarity on the fate of the missing.
- Ensure accountability before reconciliation, preventing reintegration of alleged perpetrators without proper investigation.
- Establish family-led or family-inclusive oversight structures to ensure transparency and trust in justice processes.
- Provide psychosocial support throughout justice processes, particularly during truth disclosure and identification phases.
- Develop dignified communication protocols when sharing sensitive information about the fate of the missing.
- Strengthen evidence documentation and preservation systems in cooperation with trusted national and international actors.

## 5. DIALOGUE-BASED FINDINGS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

## Dialogue 4

### Justice, Return, and the Future of Families

This dialogue examined the relationship between justice and the future of families of the missing, particularly in the context of return to Syria. Participants clearly articulated that justice is not an abstract or symbolic concept, but a decisive factor shaping return decisions, perceptions of safety, and long-term stability.

“How can we return when those responsible are still there?”

A dominant theme throughout the discussion was the direct link between justice and the willingness to return. Participants overwhelmingly stated that in the absence of justice, return would mean exposure to insecurity, fear, and uncertainty. The continued presence or reintegration of perpetrators was identified as a major deterrent.

The dialogue also identified a set of interconnected conditions required for safe and dignified return. These go beyond security guarantees to include legal, economic, and social dimensions. Participants emphasized the need for rule of law, accountability mechanisms, legal reforms regarding guardianship rights for mothers, economic stability, access to livelihoods, protection in public spaces, and educational reform.

Participants further reflected on future scenarios with and without justice, highlighting the long-term consequences of both pathways. In the absence of justice, they anticipated continued frustration, resentment, and potential intergenerational anger. Conversely, justice was associated with psychological healing, social cohesion, and the possibility of rebuilding communities.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- Justice is a primary determinant of return decisions, directly shaping perceptions of safety and willingness to return.
- Safe and dignified return requires legal, economic, and social guarantees, not security alone.
- The presence or reintegration of perpetrators is a major barrier to return and trust-building.
- Lack of justice risks intergenerational resentment and long-term instability.
- Justice contributes to healing, reintegration, and social cohesion, but must be fair and proportionate.

#### DIALOGUE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Link transitional justice processes directly to return policies, ensuring accountability is integrated into reintegration frameworks.
- Reform legal frameworks affecting families, particularly guardianship laws, to ensure women’s full legal authority.
- Develop economic reintegration programs targeting families of the missing to support sustainable return.
- Establish credible and transparent accountability mechanisms to build trust and enable safe return.
- Ensure protection of minority and vulnerable groups through clear legal and constitutional guarantees.
- Invest in education and social cohesion programs to address long-term impacts of conflict and prevent future instability.

## 5. DIALOGUE-BASED FINDINGS AND POLICY INSIGHTS

## Dialogue 5

### International Mechanisms and Their Role in the Case of the Missing

This dialogue explored how families of the missing perceive international mechanisms, particularly in relation to documentation, accountability, and justice outcomes. Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the role of international actors, primarily associating them with documentation and evidence preservation.

“We documented everything so that the truth is not lost.”

At the same time, the discussion revealed a significant gap between documentation efforts and tangible results. While participants acknowledged the importance of documentation, many expressed frustration over the lack of visible progress, pointing to the absence of clear outcomes such as identification of remains, official confirmations, or legal accountability.

The dialogue also highlighted a deep trust deficit toward international mechanisms. Participants expressed mixed views, with some recognizing the importance of international pressure, while others questioned the effectiveness and neutrality of international institutions. Concerns about politicization, lack of political will, and previous experiences of inaction were frequently raised.

Despite these concerns, participants showed a conditional willingness to engage with international mechanisms, particularly in sharing documentation. Trust, however, was identified as the key determining factor. Families also underscored a shift in how they position themselves—not as passive recipients of international processes, but as active agents of advocacy and mobilization.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- Documentation is widely understood as a core tool for preserving rights, but it is insufficient without tangible outcomes.
- There is a significant gap between documentation and justice, leading to frustration among families.
- A strong trust deficit exists toward international mechanisms, driven by perceived inaction and politicization.
- Willingness to engage with international actors is conditional on trust, transparency, and credibility.
- Families are shifting toward active advocacy and self-mobilization, rather than relying solely on external actors.

#### DIALOGUE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve communication and feedback mechanisms to provide families with regular updates on documentation and investigation processes.
- Strengthen forensic identification systems, including DNA analysis and identification of remains, to provide clarity and closure.
- Enhance transparency of international mechanisms, clearly communicating mandates, limitations, and timelines.
- Build trust through partnerships with local organizations, ensuring safe and accessible documentation channels.
- Develop survivor-centered documentation systems that prioritize confidentiality, consent, and data protection.
- Link documentation to clear legal pathways, demonstrating how evidence contributes to accountability and reparations.
- Support and protect family-led advocacy efforts, while preventing politicization or exploitation of the issue.

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

# Policy Recommendations

## A. NATIONAL / SYRIAN FUTURE FRAMEWORK

## 1 Legal Recognition of the Status of Missing Persons

A foundational step toward addressing the missing persons crisis in Syria is the formal legal recognition of enforced disappearance and the status of missing persons within national legislation. This requires Syria's accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the alignment of domestic legal frameworks with international human rights standards. Enforced disappearance should be clearly defined and criminalized within the Syrian penal code, with penalties proportionate to the gravity of the crime and aggravated in cases involving public officials or individuals acting in an official capacity.

Beyond legal codification, this recognition must translate into practical enforcement. Judicial, security, and law enforcement actors require systematic training on human rights principles, investigation standards, and detention procedures, supported by clear codes of conduct and accountability mechanisms. These frameworks must integrate gender-sensitive approaches and establish a clear legal status for missing persons so families can access their rights without resorting to premature death declarations.

## 2 Strengthening the Mandate and Operational Capacity of the National Commission for the Missing

The establishment of the National Commission for the Missing represents a critical institutional opportunity to address one of the most pressing legacies of the conflict. To fulfill this role effectively, its mandate must be strengthened and operationalized in a way that goes beyond documentation to encompass investigation, coordination, and victim support. This includes expanding its authority to actively investigate cases, access detention records, coordinate with judicial bodies, and collaborate with international mechanisms involved in forensic identification and accountability processes.

Operationally, the Commission requires sustained investment in technical capacity, including a unified and secure national database, forensic and DNA identification systems, and clear case management procedures. Transparent communication channels with families, including those in the diaspora, alongside psychosocial and legal support services, are essential to ensure that the Commission remains accessible, trusted, and victim-centered.

## 3 Institutionalization of Gender-Sensitive Transitional Justice Frameworks

Transitional justice processes in Syria must be designed and implemented in a manner that systematically integrates gender perspectives, ensuring that women are not only beneficiaries but active agents in shaping justice outcomes. This requires institutionalizing gender-sensitive frameworks across truth-seeking bodies, reparations programs, and accountability processes. Legal reforms must address discriminatory provisions—particularly in areas such as guardianship, inheritance, and personal status—that directly affect women's ability to claim rights and participate in justice processes.

In parallel, mechanisms should guarantee the meaningful participation of women in decision-making structures through formal representation measures and inclusive governance models. Gender-sensitive reparations programs should also respond to the specific harms experienced by women, including economic vulnerability, social stigma, and exposure to gender-based violence.

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

# Policy Recommendations

## B. INTERNATIONAL ACTORS (ICMP, UN, DONORS)

### 1 Strengthening Accountability-Oriented Documentation Pathways

International actors play a central role in supporting documentation efforts related to the missing in Syria. However, to maximize impact, documentation must be systematically linked to clear accountability pathways. This requires moving beyond evidence collection as an isolated activity toward integrated systems that connect documentation with investigation, prosecution, reparations, and official recognition processes.

Strengthening these pathways includes investing in standardized documentation methodologies, ensuring interoperability between databases, and supporting forensic identification mechanisms such as DNA analysis. Equally important is improving transparency and communication with affected families regarding how their data is used, stored, and translated into outcomes.

### 2 Sustained Support for Family-Centered Justice Initiatives

Families of the missing have emerged as key actors in truth-seeking and advocacy processes, yet their efforts often remain under-supported and fragmented. International actors should prioritize long-term, flexible support for family-centered initiatives that place affected communities at the core of justice processes. This includes supporting family associations, facilitating their participation in national and international forums, and strengthening their capacity to engage in documentation, advocacy, and policy dialogue.

Such support must move beyond short-term project cycles toward sustained engagement that recognizes the long-term nature of the missing persons issue. Ensuring that families are not only consulted but meaningfully involved in shaping justice processes is essential for building legitimacy, ownership, and effectiveness.

### 3 Flexible and Long-Term Funding for Civil Society Organizations Working on the Missing

International donors should prioritize the provision of flexible, multi-year funding to civil society organizations working on missing persons, particularly women-led and family-based organizations. These actors operate at the frontline of documentation, legal support, psychosocial assistance, and advocacy, yet often face funding constraints that limit their sustainability and impact.

Funding models should move away from rigid, short-term project frameworks toward more adaptable mechanisms that allow organizations to respond to evolving needs on the ground. This includes supporting core operational costs, capacity-building, and institutional development, rather than only activity-based funding.

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

# Policy Recommendations

### C. CIVIL SOCIETY / FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS

#### **1 Consolidation of Family-Led Networks and Coalitions**

Family associations have emerged as some of the most credible and resilient actors in addressing the issue of the missing in Syria. Strengthening their collective impact requires the consolidation of these groups into coordinated networks and coalitions that can amplify their voices and increase their influence at national and international levels. Building stronger alliances among family-led initiatives enables more unified demands, reduces fragmentation, and enhances their ability to engage effectively with policymakers, institutions, and international mechanisms.

Such consolidation should be supported through platforms for coordination, knowledge-sharing, and joint advocacy, while preserving the independence and diversity of individual groups.

#### **2 Standardization and Protection of Documentation Practices**

Civil society and family associations play a critical role in documenting cases of missing persons, often acting as the first point of contact for affected families. To ensure the credibility and usability of this documentation, there is a need to standardize practices in line with international human rights and forensic standards. This includes developing unified methodologies for data collection, verification, and storage, as well as ensuring compatibility with national and international systems.

At the same time, the protection of sensitive information must be prioritized. Documentation processes should be guided by clear protocols on confidentiality, informed consent, and data security to prevent misuse or exploitation.

#### **3 Strategic Advocacy and Policy Engagement Coordination**

Family associations and civil society organizations have demonstrated the capacity to advocate for truth and accountability. To enhance their impact, advocacy efforts should be more strategically coordinated, linking grassroots mobilization with policy engagement at national and international levels. This involves developing clear advocacy agendas, aligning messaging across actors, and identifying key entry points for influencing decision-makers.

Effective coordination also requires building the skills and capacities of organizations in areas such as policy analysis, communication, and engagement with legal and institutional processes. By strengthening their ability to translate lived experiences into policy demands, civil society actors can play a decisive role in shaping transitional justice frameworks.

## CONCLUSION

## Conclusion

### CLOSING REFLECTION

The findings of this policy brief make one point unmistakably clear: families of the missing are not passive beneficiaries of justice processes; they are central actors shaping them. Across all dialogues, women and family members demonstrated not only a deep understanding of justice, but an active and sustained commitment to truth-seeking, documentation, and advocacy. Their lived experiences, collective organization, and persistent demands for accountability position them as indispensable partners in any credible transitional justice process in Syria.

Women, in particular, stand at the forefront of this effort. As heads of households, caregivers, and advocates, they navigate legal, social, and economic barriers while continuing to demand truth and dignity for their loved ones. Their role is not secondary or symbolic; it is structural. Without their meaningful participation, justice processes risk reproducing the very inequalities they seek to address. Ensuring their inclusion is therefore not only a matter of representation, but a prerequisite for legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability.

At the same time, the absence of credible, inclusive, and accountable mechanisms continues to undermine trust and delay progress. Families have made it clear that truth and accountability are non-negotiable. Efforts that overlook these priorities, or attempt to bypass them in favor of political expediency, risk deepening grievances, reinforcing cycles of injustice, and weakening prospects for long-term stability. Transitional justice in Syria cannot be symbolic or partial; it must respond directly to the realities, demands, and rights of those most affected.

Ultimately, there can be no meaningful transitional justice in Syria without the full recognition, inclusion, and leadership of families of the missing. Their voices define the contours of justice, their participation determines its legitimacy, and their resilience sustains its pursuit. Centering them is not an option; it is the foundation upon which any just and durable future must be built.