



## Syria: The Promise of Healing and Justice and the Need for Urgent Support

Five decades of terror, torture, arbitrary detentions and the killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrians ended with the toppling of the Assad regime earlier this week, leaving an entire country deeply wounded and survivors of torture with the immense task of rebuilding their lives.

The scale, horror and duration of the crimes perpetrated by Syrian officials, under direct orders from former dictator Hafez al-Assad and then his son Bashar al-Assad, against unlawfully detained prisoners at a network of State detention facilities are unprecedented in the past half century.

“These are places where human dignity is violated and humiliated, where crimes against humanity are committed, including torture and enforced disappearance. We want truth and justice so that the souls of all those killed may rest in peace, their memory may be immortalised, and to ensure that there is no recurrence,” said a survivor from Syria’s Sednaya prison. “As a former detainee who was tortured for his opinion, I hope that in the future justice will prevail in Syria and that Syrians will not fear their government.”

As organisations already supporting Syrian survivors, we call on all our members, partners and other stakeholders to join us in prioritising comprehensive and long-term support for Syrian civil society. This will serve as the backbone for reconstruction efforts, and pave the way for healing and justice processes to be set in motion.

In 2021, the Syrian Network for Human Rights verified the names of nearly 15,000 Syrians tortured to death at the hands of Assad’s officials over the previous ten years. In 2022, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that more than 100,000 people had died in Syrian prisons in that time. The real toll will only be known after mass graves and documents from the detention centres are examined and authenticated by trained experts. This documentation must be preserved from destruction.

As Syria emerges from 53 years of dictatorship, bereaved families and all those who suffered torture at the hands of the Assad regime must be given the opportunity to play a central role in seeking justice and accountability for the crimes against humanity committed against them. While a limited number of universal jurisdiction prosecutions against Syrian officials have been undertaken by Germany, France and other EU states, and some convictions secured, a broader collective effort will be necessary to achieve meaningful accountability for the people of Syria.

Our experience in supporting survivors of torture and other ill-treatment shows us that healing and justice are often mutually re-enforcing. As the Convention Against Torture established, all survivors of torture have the right to redress for the crime that has been committed against them, which includes amongst other forms of reparations, “the means for as full rehabilitation as possible”.

Thousands of survivors released from prisons this past week will need medical care, emergency psychological support, and support to re-establish, wherever possible, their own livelihoods. They are returning to a country in a deep economic crisis, with many urgent and competing needs.

Many survivors were subjected to sexual torture, a topic still stigmatised in families and communities across Syria. Addressing stigma and shifting the perceived shame to the real shame of the perpetrators will require thoughtful intervention at the community level, and continuous support.

Beyond the immediate needs of survivors, five decades of torture and 13 years of uprising and civil war have inflicted very deep trauma across the entire society. Many survivors of Assad's regime have physical and psychological wounds that will last a lifetime, and which can negatively impact future generations. Left untreated, mental health conditions can worsen and result in serious impairments, leading to family breakdown. Through appropriate and effective support, counselling and therapy, the impact of mental health conditions can be contained and reduced. Mental health services and professionals are critically needed in Syria.

Syrian organisations must be at the forefront of the response to the needs for healing and justice in their new country. Together we mark this momentous moment in Syria with hope for the future and a determination to bear witness to the past.

*About the signatories:*

***The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)*** is the world's largest network of civil society organisations and independent experts supporting survivors of torture to heal and rebuild their lives through rehabilitation, including medical, psychological, legal and social support.

***The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)*** was formed in 2017 by a coalition of Sednaya survivors, victims, and their families with the goal of uncovering the truth and achieving justice for those detained in Sednaya Prison. ADMSP has provided psychosocial support to over 800 Syrian survivors living as refugees in southern Turkey and has established databases with thousands of names and details of ex detainees and of persons still missing in Syria. Today, it is leading the work inside Syria to gather evidence from the hundreds of Assad regime detention centres across the country.

***Global Survivors Fund (GSF)*** works with survivors, local partners, technical experts, and government stakeholders to enhance access to reparations for and with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

***Synergy for Justice*** is a women-led, multidisciplinary team working to advance justice and end impunity for human rights violations. In collaboration with partners, we ensure that victims and survivors of torture and sexual violence can access justice, receive the care they need to heal, and fully participate in society.

***The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT)*** offers culturally-competent and interdisciplinary care to survivors, along with initiatives to end torture, enhance the skills and resilience of human rights defenders and organisations, and to facilitate justice for survivors.

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