



16 February 2022

Dear High Commissioner Bachelet

We welcome the study being conducted by the Secretary General, in consultation with your Office, on strengthening efforts to deal with missing persons in Syria (pursuant to [General Assembly resolution A/RES/76/228](#)). We take this occasion to share our recommendations with you and would welcome the opportunity to engage further on this initiative.

We recognise that the primary aim of this initiative is to locate and return to their family the tens of thousands of people who have been forcibly disappeared or detained since the start of the conflict. We welcome these long overdue efforts, which should be treated as a matter of highest priority by the international community.

In addition to those persons deliberately disappeared by parties to the conflict, many thousands of individuals have become missing, or are at risk of becoming missing, due to inadequate recording of casualties. As you noted in your [oral update on Syrian casualties to the Human Rights Council](#) in September, '[d]ocumenting deaths is directly complementary to efforts to account for missing people.' Our recommendations focus on addressing this aspect of the wider phenomenon of missing persons in Syria. Prompt, effective and transparent casualty recording can spare bereaved families the additional anguish of being left without knowledge of their loved one's fate. Casualty records can also be cross referenced with records of detainees and disappeared persons, to help narrow the search field.

Context: How the dead become the missing

Airstrikes and the use of other explosive weapons in populated areas have been a predominant feature of the conflict in Syria. However, it is difficult for military actors, particularly those with no ground presence, to accurately assess whether specific actions have caused casualties (and if so, how many, and who they were). Intense aerial bombardment of cities, as occurred in Raqqa and Aleppo, can leave many casualties buried beneath rubble, their remains unrecovered for an extended period. Explosive weapons may damage bodies beyond visual identification, and blast effects can displace human remains. The majority of fatalities in Syria have been civilians who, unlike military personnel, do not routinely wear identity disks or 'dog tags' to assist with post mortem identification.

In these circumstances, the remains of a significant number of persons killed in Syria have not been fully recovered or identified. As a result, many of these individuals are recorded as missing. They will remain missing unless and until their family receive credible certification of death or the return of their loved one's remains.



When human remains are successfully recovered following a fatal incident they are typically transferred to a medical, legal or religious institution. However, the lack of basic procedures such as standardised tracking, data recording, and assignment of case numbers, means that bodies can easily get 'lost' in the system or at final disposition. The disruption and damage caused to medical and legal institutions in Syria during the ongoing conflict further exacerbates these weaknesses. In refugee and IDP camps, the infrastructure for documenting deaths is even more precarious. As a result, many individuals who were identified at death may become missing and unidentifiable as they pass through the relevant systems. In these cases the bereaved, like other families of missing persons, do not know the final fate or location of their loved one's remains.

Recommendations

Recording of information on casualties at the earliest possible moment is a vital means of reducing the number of people becoming missing in Syria. Whilst casualty recording does not guarantee successful identification of the dead and missing, it can significantly reduce the number of families left with no knowledge of their loved one's fate.

In active conflict situations casualty records are often incomplete and provisional initially. However, even the most basic records provide a crucial base on which to build as further details become available. Prompt efforts to record any and all relevant information are essential to prevent future loss of evidence. International experience shows that the sooner recording work begins, the more effective efforts to identify the missing and deceased are in the long term.

We make the following recommendations to strengthen international efforts to deal with missing persons in Syria:

1. The international community should support the creation of a specialised independent mechanism to deal with missing persons in Syria, or designate responsibility for coordinating all international efforts on missing persons to a specific existing mechanism. With additional allocated funding, this role could be given to, for example, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the International Committee of the Red Cross, or the International Commission on Missing Persons.
2. The mechanism (whether this is a new or existing entity) should collaborate with all existing international initiatives currently mandated to address issues related to missing persons in Syria. It should also work directly with relevant local and international civil society organisations, including victims' and families' groups and casualty recording organisations. The mechanism should also endeavour, to the extent possible, to establish a continuous system of direct communication with Syrian health and death services, to receive regular reports of confirmed deaths.
3. The mechanism should be mandated to create and maintain a centralised, comprehensive database incorporating information on all persons reported as missing or killed as a direct consequence of the armed conflict in Syria. It is essential that information on those individuals reported as missing and those known / believed to be deceased are incorporated within the same database. This coordination facilitates efficient cross-referencing of cases,

allowing users to identify quickly whether an individual reported as missing has been recorded as deceased.

4. To ensure that information can be shared effectively and accurately, all entities working with the mechanism should apply a single, standardised approach for recording data on casualties / missing persons. This system should be agreed in advance, following consultation with all relevant parties. When developing this agreed approach, the mechanism should have regard to the [Standards for Casualty Recording](#) and the [ICRC Model Law on the Missing](#).
5. All parties to the conflict in Syria, including international actors, should cooperate with efforts to record and identify missing persons and casualties. This includes reporting publicly and promptly on military actions with maximum transparency whenever casualties may have occurred. Such reports should include the maximum information possible concerning battle damage assessments, civilian casualty reports, and any further relevant information which may help identify casualties.

We wish you and your office every success with this important endeavour, and remain at your service for any further assistance we can provide.

Yours sincerely

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