



VOICES OF THE MISSING

Understanding and Responding to the Needs of Syrian Families of Missing Persons

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An overview of the Findings of the Family Needs Assessment (FNA)

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International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Rural Damascus, Homs, Lattakia, Aleppo, Idleb, Hassakeh, and Qamishli | 2025–2026

The ICRC, together with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies around the world, works across borders to search for missing persons and reconnect families separated by wars, disasters and migration. The core of this work has a simple premise: everyone has the right to know the fate of their loved ones.

In Syria, like in many other countries affected by armed conflicts and violence, the ICRC knows that those left behind do not only suffer from the physical absence of their loved ones. Very often, they also face legal, administrative, psychosocial, economic and social challenges that also require to be urgently considered and addressed.

The search for answers about the whereabouts and fate of missing persons is not only a humanitarian duty but also a legal obligation. International humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the 1949 Geneva Conventions, their 1977 Additional Protocols, and customary IHL rules, as well as international human rights law (IHRL), contain relevant obligations regarding missing persons and their families. To fulfil this obligation, states should endeavour to determine the fate of those who went missing and remain unaccounted for, and to provide answers and support to their families. Syria has established the National Commission of the Missing Persons (NCMP) and tasked it with this mission. The ICRC, in accordance with its humanitarian mandate and institutional priorities, has been supporting the NCMP and the families of the missing to help them find answers about their loved ones.

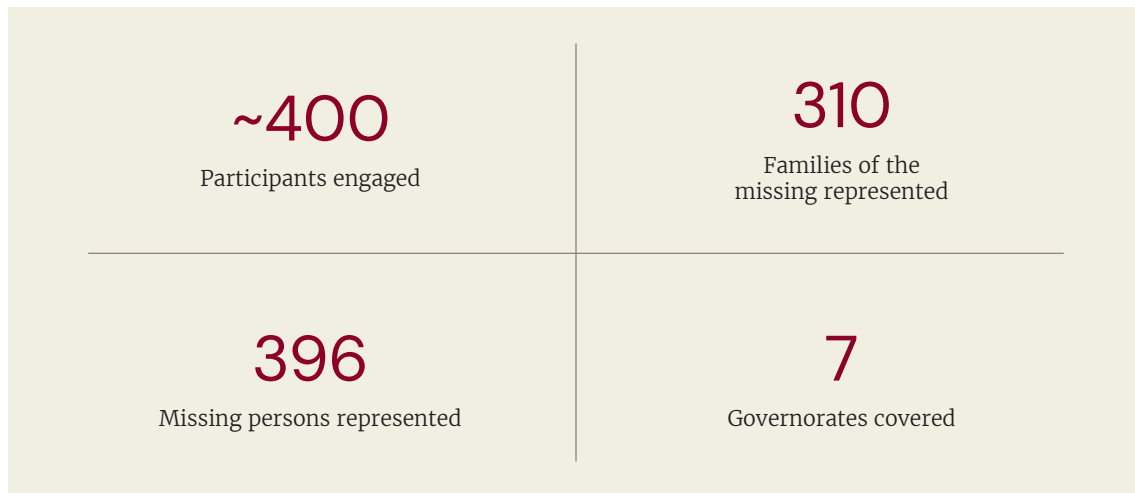
In an effort to give visibility to the wide and complex array of needs faced by the families of the missing in Syria, and in view of supporting all relevant actors – including national authorities, international organizations, and civil society actors – to work together to find solutions, the ICRC conducted a participative Family Needs Assessment with those affected by a disappearance. The present report presents the results of this assessment and describes all the specific humanitarian challenges faced by families and relatives of missing persons, but also their hopes and aspirations to be included in the efforts to clarify the fate of their loved ones.



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01. Executive Summary

Disappearance is one of the most painful and enduring humanitarian legacies of the Syrian conflict. Based on structured interviews, focus group discussions, and results validation workshops with families of missing persons across seven governorates, this assessment sets out to understand what disappearance does to families who lost a loved one and what families themselves say they need most.



The findings are unambiguous. Uncertainty about a loved one's fate — not economic hardship, not legal limbo, not even grief itself — is the central, organizing experience of every family consulted. Yet that uncertainty has a ripple effect, reshaping household incomes, mental health, legal status, and trust in institutions for years, often decades, after a disappearance occurs.



We are also prisoners, not only them.

– Father, focus group discussion

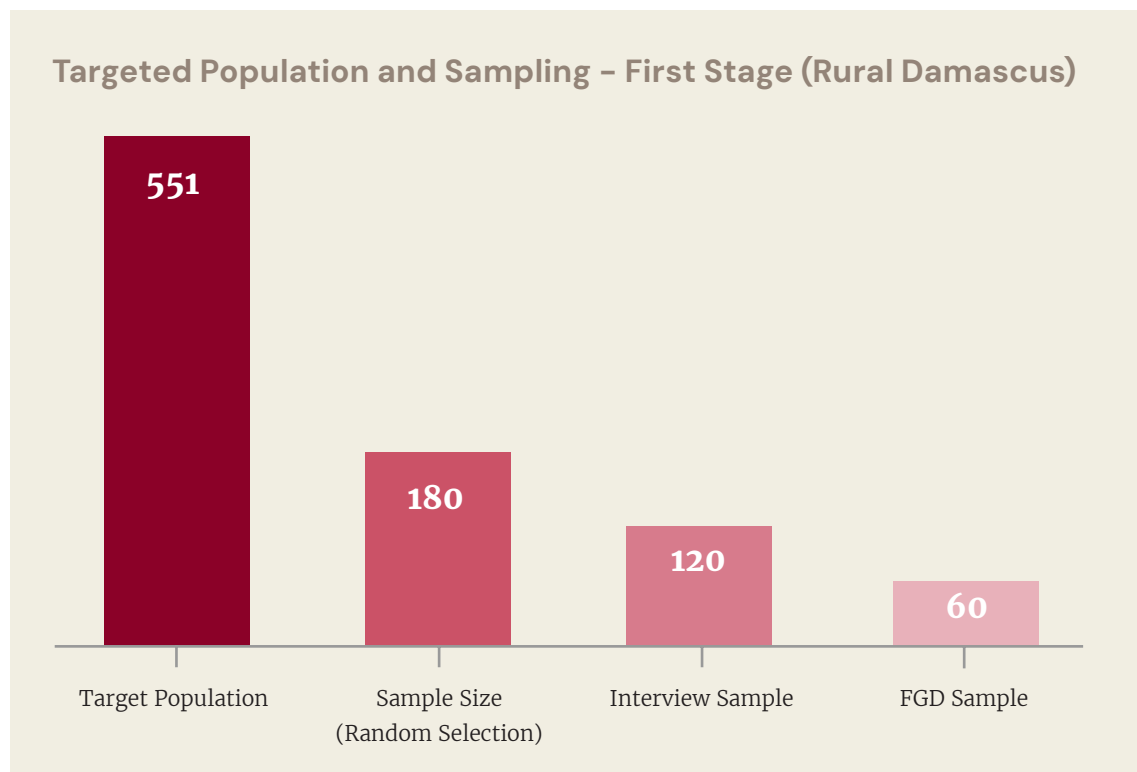


This briefing summarizes the assessment's key findings and translates them into a concrete agenda for engagement — for the National Commission for Missing Persons, national authorities, and humanitarian and civil society partners working alongside Syrian families of the missing.

02. About the Assessment

A mixed-methodology, family-centred and evidence based

The present Family Needs Assessment combined structured household interviews, profile-based focus group discussions (FGD) between December 2025–March 2026, and results validation workshops May 2026 –June 2026 to build a comprehensive, evidence-based picture of how disappearance affects families over time. The first stage targeted Rural Damascus; the assessment was then expanded geographically to other governorates to validate and enrich the findings.



From a target population of 551 eligible families in Rural Damascus, a random sample of 180 was selected ($\approx 95\%$ confidence, $\approx 5\%$ margin of error): 120 households for structured interviews and 60 families for the initial focus group discussions. The assessment was subsequently expanded through 15 additional validation workshops across Homs, Lattakia, Aleppo, Idleb, Hassakeh, and Qamishli, reaching approximately 220 further participants.

A Note on Timing

The assessment was conducted during a period of major change in Syria. Developments following the 8th of December 2024 — including the release of detainees and the circulation of prison-related information — created new expectations amongst families, while simultaneously generating new distress when their missing loved one did not reappear. Families describe this moment as a “second trauma,” and it shapes much of what follows in this briefing.

As the assessment subsequently expanded beyond the first stage in Rural Damascus to include results validation workshops across additional governorates, the broader sampling framework was based on the cases collected by ICRC focusing on families with recent engagement during 2025. For the purposes of planning this cross-governorate expansion, a further 303 eligible families of missing persons across Syria were identified— a refined cross-governorate dataset distinct from the 551-family Rural Damascus-specific frame described above, reflecting the subsequent stage of geographic expansion.

Governorate	Eligible Families	% of Total participants
Rural Damascus	178	59%
Homs	36	12%
Aleppo	33	11%
Hassakeh	24	8%
Idleb	17	6%
Latakia	9	3%
Hama	5	2%



The concentration of cases in Rural Damascus reflects the historical pattern of disappearances linked to the conflict and the extensive ICRC engagement with families over the years. The inclusion of families from other governorates allowed the assessment to capture regional variation and strengthen national representation.

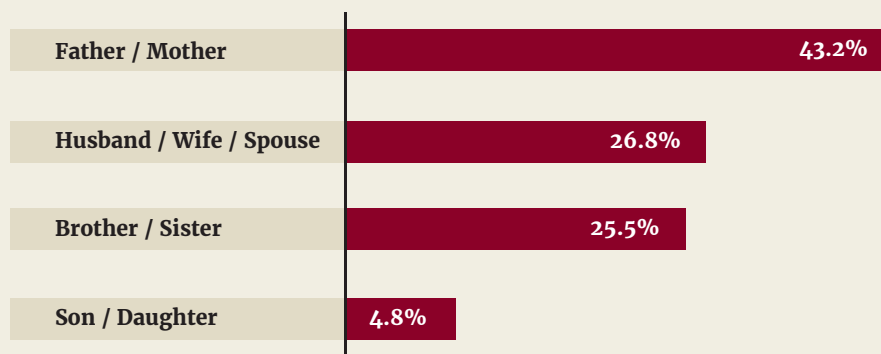
Representation of Different Disappearance Profiles

The sampling framework also incorporated different disappearance categories —disappearances linked to all parties to the conflict in Syria from 2011 until the time the study was conducted — enabling comparison across conflict periods and perpetrator profile.

03. Who We Heard From

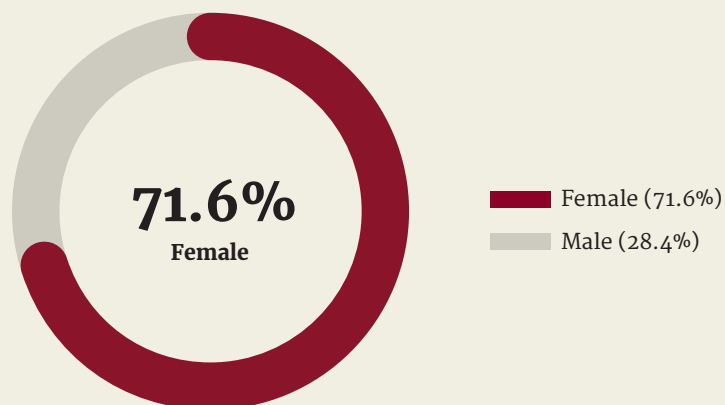
The assessment deliberately sought a broad cross-section of affected families — different relationships to the missing person, genders, ages, and locations — to capture how disappearance is experienced differently across a family system.

Participants by Relationship to the Missing Person (N=310)



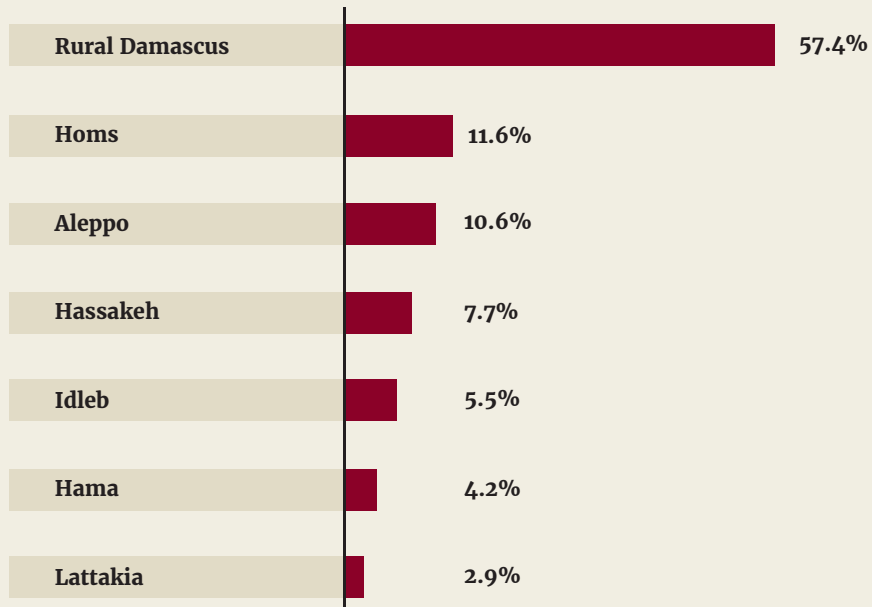
Parents are the largest group of participants (43%), followed by spouses (27%) and siblings (26%).

Participants by Gender (N=310)



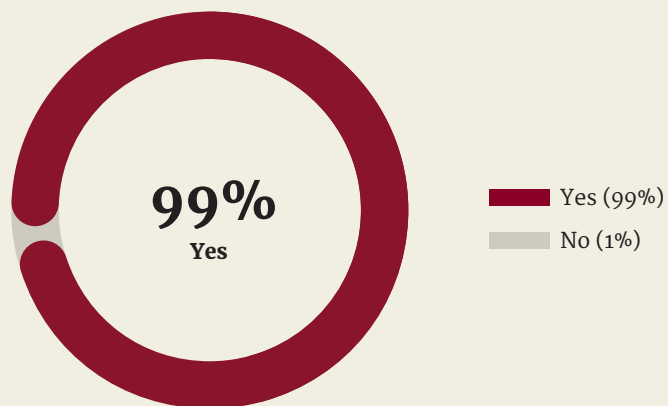
Women represent 72% of participants, reflecting their central role in sustaining the search and family engagement.

Participants by Governorate (N=310)



Rural Damascus accounts for the majority of participants (57%), followed by Homs and Aleppo.

Households with Vulnerable Members

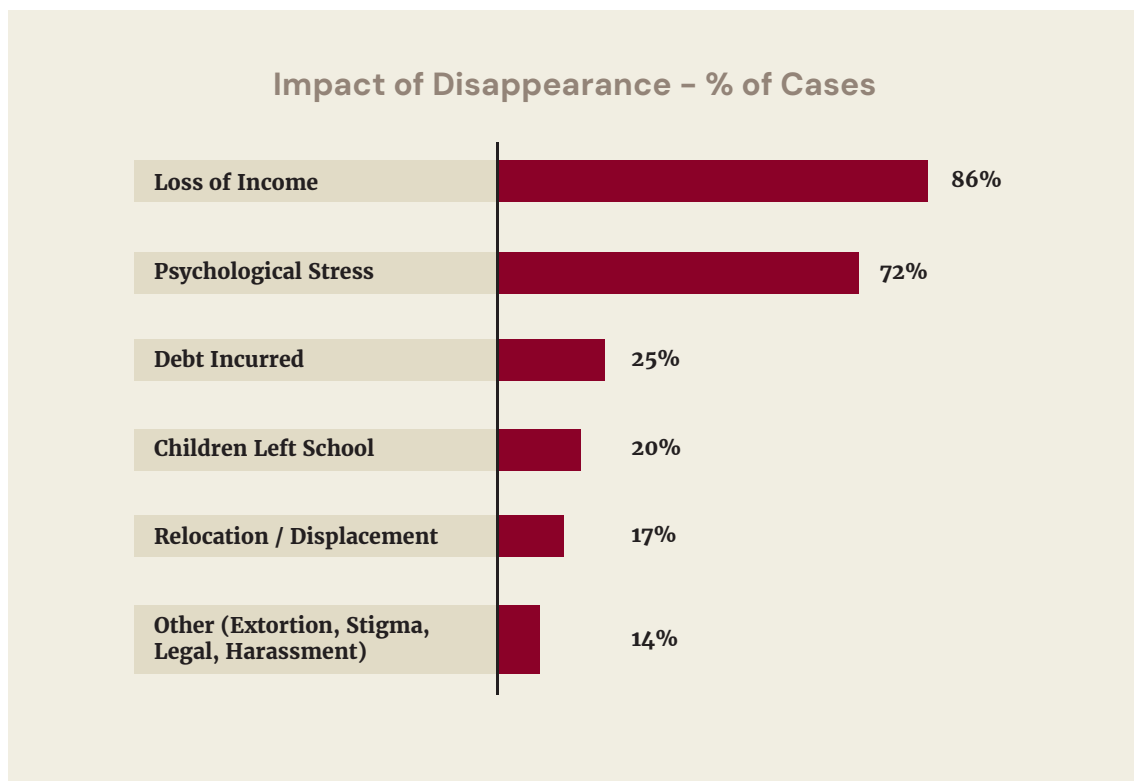


99% of households include at least one vulnerable member — most often a child or an elderly relative.

04. Finding 1 — Living with Uncertainty

The defining experience of every family consulted

Families do not experience disappearance as a single event. It is a prolonged condition that evolves — and typically worsens — over time. More than half of families say their challenges changed as years passed, and nearly nine in ten of those say the changes made their situation more complex, not less.

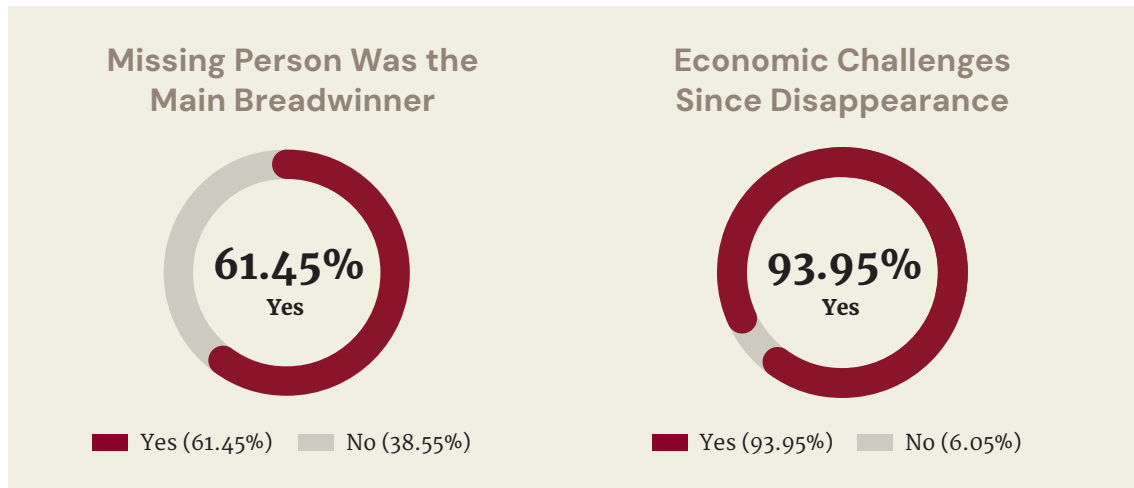


Loss of income (86%) and psychological stress (72%) are the two dominant, mutually reinforcing impacts of disappearance.

Unlike bereavement following a confirmed death, disappearance denies families the possibility of closure. Hope and grief coexist for years, often decades — and that unresolved coexistence, more than any single hardship, is what families consistently describe as the hardest part of their experience.

05. Finding 2 – Economic Collapse

In six out of ten families, the missing person was the household's main breadwinner. Their disappearance does not just remove a loved one — it removes the main source of income and frequently triggers a long-term spiral of debt and asset depletion.



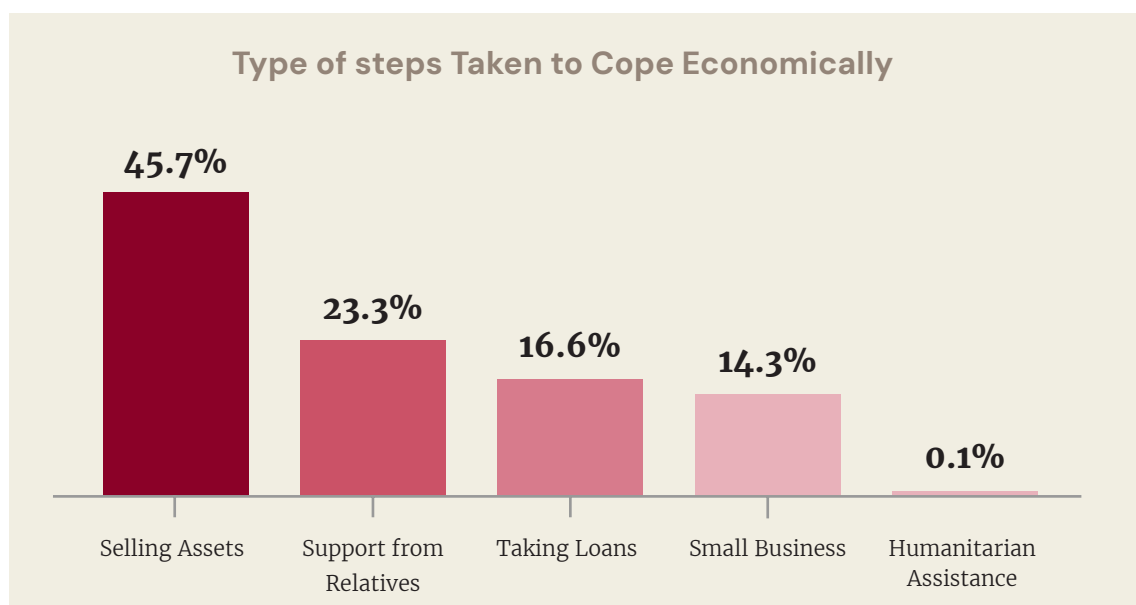
61% of missing persons were the household's main breadwinner.

94% of families report ongoing economic challenges linked to the disappearance.



We sold our house and gold and still received no answers.

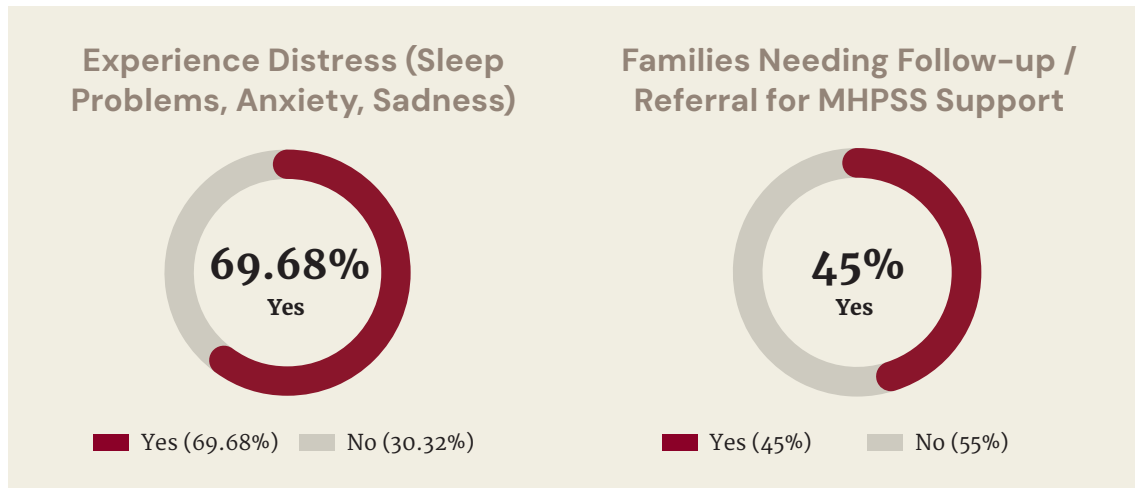
– Family member, validation workshop



Selling assets (46%) is the most common survival strategy — ahead of borrowing from relatives or taking on debt.

06. Finding 3 — A Mental Health Crisis

Psychological distress is the most widespread consequence of disappearance documented in this assessment — and the one for which families have the least access to support.



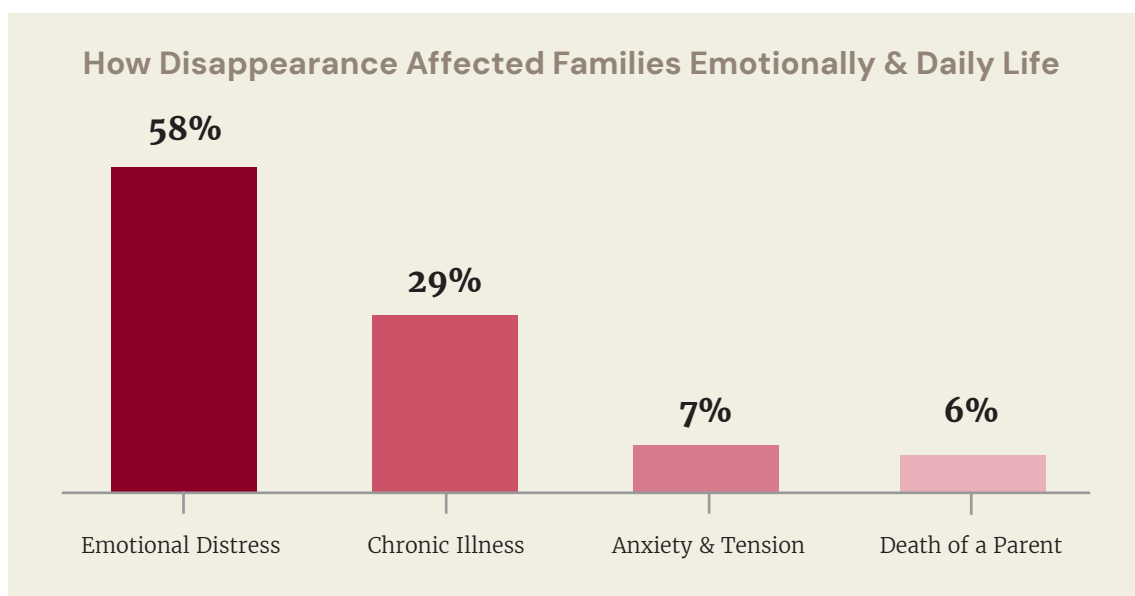
70% of families report distress such as sleep problems, anxiety, or persistent sadness.

45% of households assessed require referral for MHPSS support.



We are tired. The uncertainty never ends.

– Father, participant feedback



Emotional distress (58%) and chronic illness (29%) dominate how disappearance is felt in daily life.



Mothers: Living Between Hope and Grief

Mothers emerged as the group most affected by prolonged emotional distress, with narratives characterized by continuous search efforts, chronic grief, and persistent hope, and the highest reported psychosocial distress of any group (88%).

Fathers: Silent Suffering and Accountability

Fathers tend to frame their suffering through responsibility, justice, and accountability. Cultural expectations often discourage open expression of grief; fathers place strong emphasis on obtaining information, investigating detention facilities, and holding institutions accountable.

Wives: Survival Under Uncertainty

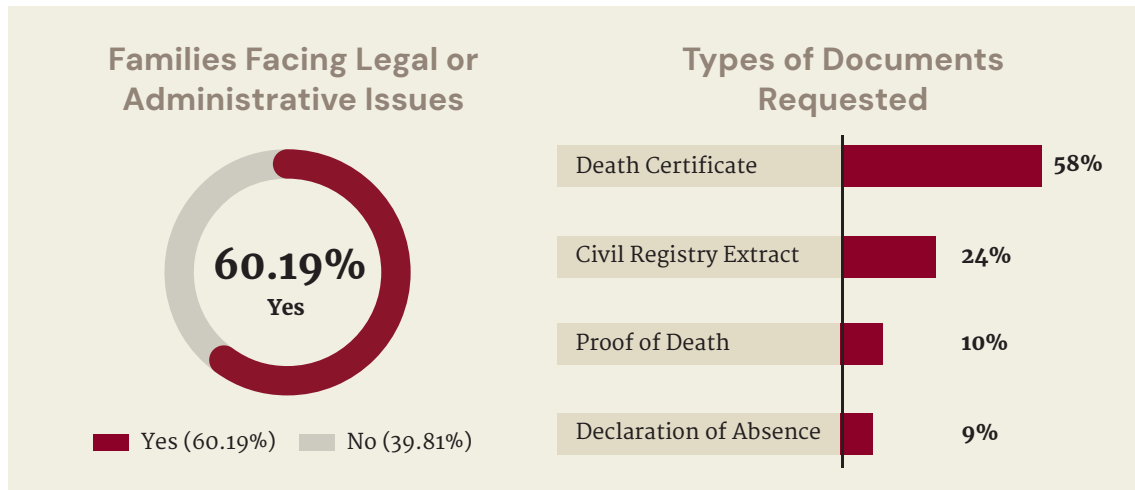
Wives experience disappearance as both an emotional and economic crisis, carrying responsibility for children, income generation, and household management while navigating legal ambiguity and social isolation. Many children have grown up without ever knowing their fathers.

Siblings: Family Stabilizers

Siblings frequently occupy intermediary roles between parents, children, institutions, and humanitarian actors, absorbing emotional pressure from multiple directions while managing practical responsibilities. They are also among the groups most exposed to misinformation and fraud.

07. Finding 4 — Legal Limbo and Protection Risks

A loved one's disappearance places families in a legal grey zone: administrative systems require certainty — alive or dead — that families, by definition, do not have. Six in ten families report legal or administrative difficulties as a direct result.



60% of families face legal or administrative barriers linked to the disappearance.

Death certificates (58%) are the most commonly requested — and most emotionally fraught — documents.

“

I went to register my brother's death, but how can I do that when I still hope he is alive?

”

– Brother, focus group discussion

Protection concerns compound these barriers: many families described fear of retaliation, stigma, and reduced trust in formal institutions, particularly during the early years following a disappearance.

08. Finding 5 — The Search for Answers

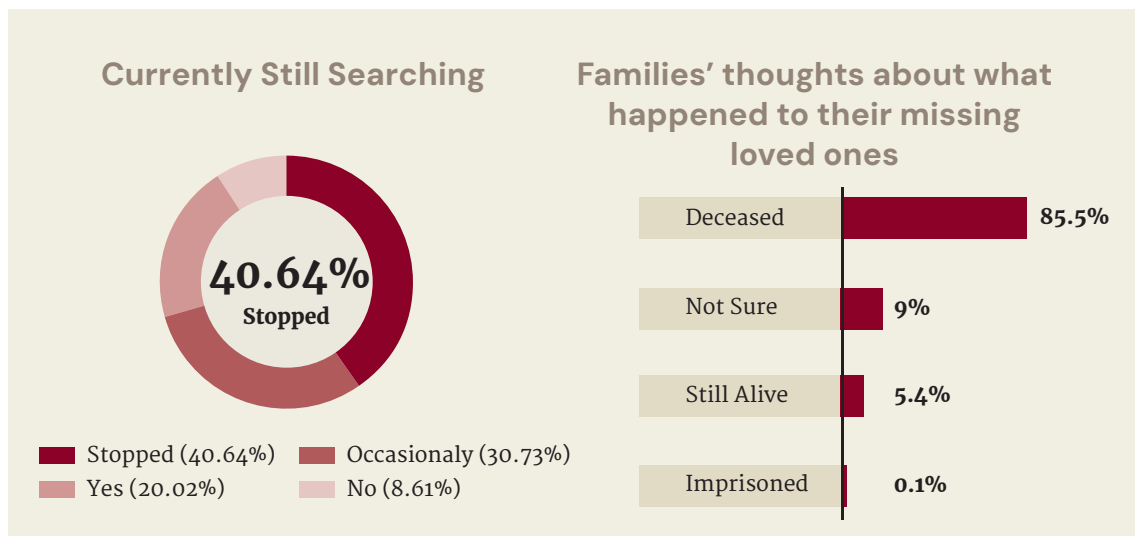
Searching is both a coping mechanism and a major source of harm. Families pursue every available channel — official and informal — often at significant financial and emotional cost, and frequently at the hands of fraudulent intermediaries.

“

I know they are scamming me, but
I have hope.

– Mother, validation workshop

”

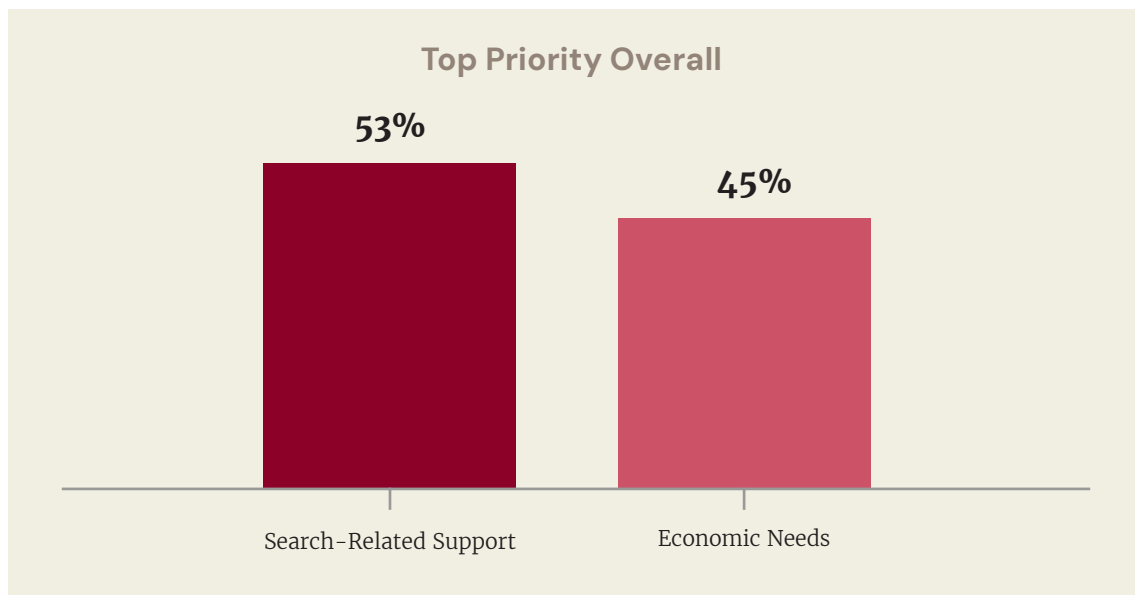
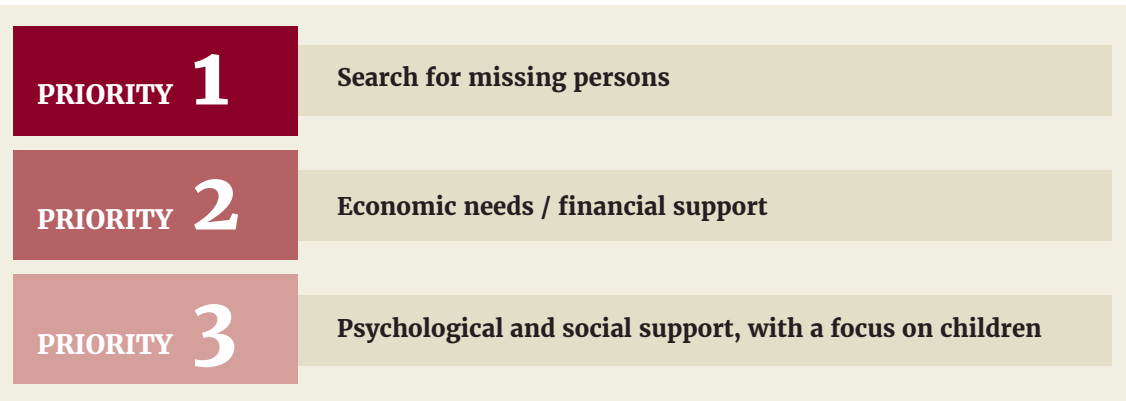


4 in 10 families have stopped searching, most after losing hope following the events of December 2024.

85.5% of families now believe their missing relative is deceased — yet nearly all insist they need proof before they can accept this.

09. What Families Prioritize

When asked to identify their first priority, research-related support (clarifying fate and the search for missing relatives) and economic needs together dominate, named by 53% and 45% of respondents respectively as their top concern. Search-related support is again the leading second priority (42%), ahead of psychosocial and social support (33%) and legal support and documentation (16%), reinforcing that families do not separate humanitarian assistance from efforts to clarify fate.



Top priority overall: search-related support (53%) narrowly leads economic needs (45%).

“

We cannot stop searching, but we also cannot stop feeding our children.

– Participant, validation workshop

”



Second priority: search-related support remains dominant (42%), ahead of psychosocial support (33%).

“

If he is dead, we want to know where he was buried. If he is detained, we want to know where he is.

”

– Participant, cross-cutting finding

Psychosocial support was the most frequently identified third priority, while legal assistance and documentation needs became increasingly prominent in fourth- and fifth-priority rankings. Community-based support emerged most strongly among fourth- and fifth-priority rankings — not because it is unimportant, but because participants tend to view family and peer solidarity as an existing source of resilience rather than a service that must be actively sought.

Priority Levels by Domain and Relationship to the Missing Person

Priorities also differ by relationship to the missing person. The matrix below summarizes, for each domain of need, the relative level of priority expressed by spouses, parents, children, siblings, and in-laws/relatives. Economic and psychosocial support, and search continuation, are rated “very high” most consistently among spouses, parents, siblings, and children alike, while assistance from relevant authorities is rated comparatively low, particularly among spouses — reflecting the broader finding that families place greater trust in family and peer engagement than in formal institutions.

Domain	Spouses	Parents	Children	Siblings	In-Laws & Relatives
Economic support	Very high	High	High	Very high	High
Legal support and documentation	High	High	Low	Very high	High
Psychological and social support	Very high	High	Very high	High	High
Search continuation	High	Very high	Very high	High	High
Assistance from relevant authorities	Low	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Community support	High	High	High	High	Medium

Across nearly every regional Focus group discussion families converged on a consistent three-part priority structure, even where the order varied slightly: clarification of fate / search, financial support, and MHPSS — frequently with explicit emphasis on psychosocial support for children. Several FGDs (Homs recent cases, Aleppo, Idleb, Latakia) specifically flagged the needs of children as a distinct and urgent sub-priority within MHPSS.

What Families Prioritize Most

1. Clarification of Fate and Whereabouts — search efforts, information sharing, identification processes
2. Economic Security — income support, livelihood opportunities, household stability
3. Psychosocial Wellbeing — emotional support, peer support, coping with uncertainty
4. Legal and Administrative Assistance — documentation, inheritance, property and civil status issues
5. Community and Family Support — social networks, family associations, peer engagement

The focus group discussions reveal that disappearance is experienced not as a single event but as a prolonged condition of uncertainty that reshapes family identity, social roles, economic stability, and psychological wellbeing. While the quantitative findings identify psychosocial distress, economic hardship, search efforts, and legal barriers as the primary domains of vulnerability, the qualitative findings show how these dimensions interact and reinforce one another over time.

Theme 1:

Ambiguous Loss and the Burden of Uncertainty

The most consistent finding across all focus groups is that uncertainty regarding the fate and whereabouts of the missing person remains the central source of suffering known as ambiguous loss. Families experience a sense of uncertainty not knowing the fate of their missing loved ones giving them a sense of loss that has no closure or resolution. Consequently, this loss can permeate their day-to-day lives and personal relationships leading to an overwhelming sense of isolation. Many participants explained that they no longer know what outcome they are hoping for; some expressed that confirmation of death would be less painful than continuing to live with uncertainty, yet even those who increasingly suspect death often resist formal declarations for fear of abandoning hope.

Families in Hassakeh repeatedly stated that they would rather see the bodies of their loved ones than continue living without answers, describing uncertainty itself as a form of suffering often more difficult to bear than death.

Theme 2:

The Emergence of a “Second Trauma” After 8 December 2024

A striking finding emerging across all focus group discussions is the extent to which developments following 8th of December 2024 generated renewed trauma. Rather than providing closure, exposure to images, videos, lists, and testimonies often intensified emotional suffering.

“

When Sednaya was opened, there was hope, but also shock. It felt as if the loss happened again.

”

– Sister

Across all locations, families reported heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression, and intrusive thoughts following exposure to detention-related content, highlighting the need for safe, ethical, and supported approaches to information-sharing.

Theme 3:

The Search for Answers as a Source of Vulnerability

Searching for missing relatives is not only a coping strategy but also a major source of vulnerability. Families described spending years pursuing information through formal institutions, former detainees, lawyers, intermediaries, social media, and informal networks, often exposing them to fraud, exploitation, and further psychological harm. In Homs, one mother described paying USD 7,000 in an attempt to secure information about her son, only to discover she had been scammed.

The search process is characterized by a paradox: families understand that many promises are false, yet desperation often compels them to continue pursuing any lead. This persistent vulnerability to exploitation reflects the absence of trusted and transparent information channels.

Theme 4:

Disappearance Reshapes Family Roles and Responsibilities

Disappearance fundamentally alters family structures and redistributes responsibilities. Women frequently assume leadership roles in searching, caregiving, and economic survival; mothers become primary search actors and emotional anchors; wives often become sole heads of households; sisters assume caregiving and administrative responsibilities while supporting ageing parents. Fathers, meanwhile, often carry the burden of maintaining emotional stability within the household, frequently suppressing their own grief to protect other family members.

“

We bottle everything inside so that
our families do not collapse.

– Father

”

Theme 5:

Isolation, Stigma, and the Need for Recognition

Across locations, participants described disappearance as a profoundly isolating experience. Many families reported avoiding conversations about missing relatives due to fear, stigma, or emotional pain, and some concealed disappearances for years by telling neighbours that relatives had travelled abroad or relocated. Particularly in Homs and Idleb, families described living under conditions of fear that discouraged them from discussing cases publicly or engaging with authorities. At the same time, participants repeatedly described the focus group discussions themselves as uniquely valuable, often the first time they had spoken openly with others facing similar circumstances.

10. Regional Snapshots

Common ground, different realities

While the core demand for the right to know the fate and whereabouts for a loved one is universal, families experience disappearance differently depending on where they live and who is believed responsible.

Homs	A collapse of hope. Families expected detainees to return after December 2024. When they did not, disappointment was profound and widely shared.
Aleppo & Idleb	Fragmentation and fear. Multiple armed actors, contradictory information, and accounts of extortion dominate families’ search experiences.
Latakia	Renewed hope, then frustration over not having news of a missing loved ones was shared by families of both older and recent cases.
Hassakeh & Qamishli	Sustained hope, sustained fear. Many families believe relatives remain alive in detention, but fear approaching the detaining authorities directly.

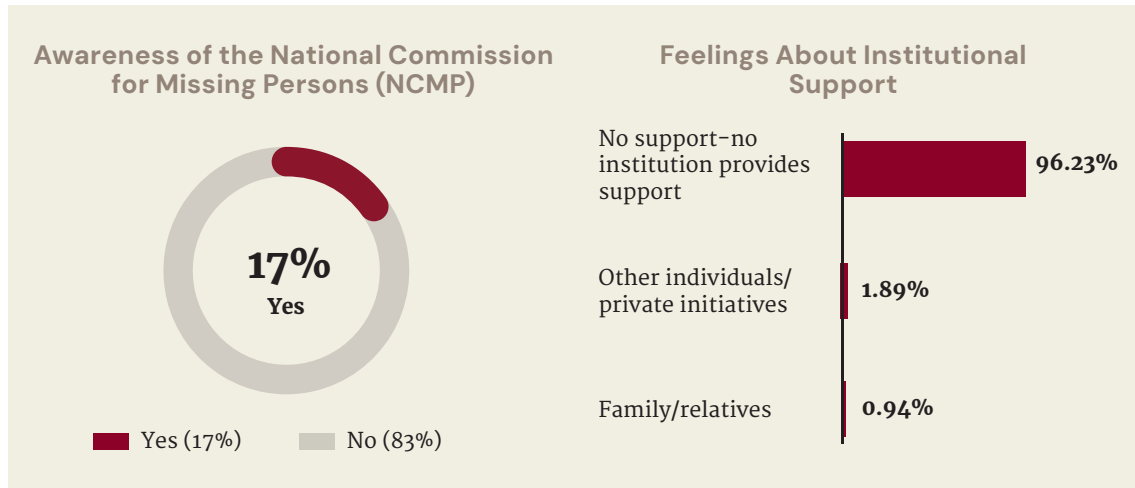
Cross-Location Finding

Despite contextual differences, families across all locations ultimately expressed the same core demand: they seek verified, transparent, and dignified clarification of the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. This shared demand transcends geographical, political, and demographic differences and represents the strongest common finding emerging from the qualitative component of the Family Needs Assessment.



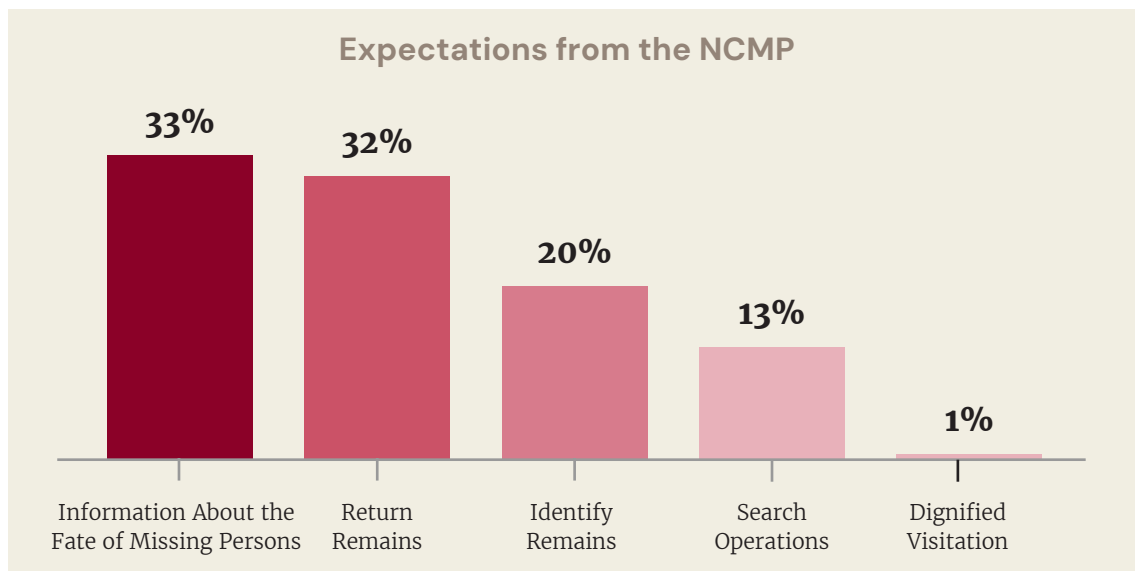
11. Trust and Institutional Expectations

Families overwhelmingly reported that no institution currently supports them — and most were unaware of the specific authorities working on the missing. Where trust exists, it is directed at family and peers.



Only 17% of families can identify the NCMP as an authority working on the missing— in Qamishli, the awareness of any authorities working on the missing was reported as effectively absent.

96% of families say no institution provides them with support.



Where families are aware of the NCMP, information about the fate of missing persons (33%) and the return of remains (32%) are their leading expectations.

Low awareness is not low demand. Families are eager to engage with any credible institution that can provide verified information, communicate transparently and regularly, and involve them as participants in the process.

12. Recommendations

The FNA's findings help to better understand the priorities, needs and expectations of the families of the missing and should therefore be widely shared amongst all concerned stakeholders. Given the scale of the needs of families of missing in Syria after years of conflict, it is important that all relevant actors mobilize themselves and work in coordination with the NCMP to help contribute to clarifying the fate of the missing and support the families whilst they wait for news.

Based on the FNA's finding and in order to further enhance the collective response to the needs of Syrian families of missing persons, the following recommendations should be considered:

To the National Authorities

- Many families demonstrated a keen interest in knowing more about the NCMP and its work. Prioritizing outreach to families can help them understand the Commission's mandate and activities. Particular attention may be needed for remote areas where there was a lower awareness of authorities working on the missing.
- Families reported having any credible information about their loved ones is important to them, even though there may not be a complete answer for their missing relative's fate and whereabouts.
- Families wished to be seen as active participants in the search effort and look for opportunities for embedded family participation and consultation into the Commission's working methods.
- A Missing Law will be instrumental to help alleviate some of the administrative and legal hurdles faced by families since the disappearance of their loved ones and clarify the roles and responsibilities of different authorities who will be responding to the needs of the families of the missing as well as ensuring that the needs of families are met by the available services.

To humanitarian and civil society actors working with families of the missing

- Recognize families of the missing as a distinct vulnerability category in national programming.
- Strengthen referral and support pathways between humanitarian actors, civil society and national authorities to help respond to the identified needs of the families.
- Support and complement the national authorities' efforts to clarify the fate of the missing through technical assistance and material support.

To the international community

- Provide sustained financial, technical and political support to the Syrian national authorities to fulfil their efforts to clarify the fate of the missing and address the needs of their families.

Encourage other States dealing with the aftermath of missing and its humanitarian impact to share their lessons learned and best practices or organize forums – such as the Global Alliance for the Missing.

13. Conclusion

Disappearance is not a single event. It is a humanitarian condition that families live with for years, often decades — one that reshapes economic stability, mental health, legal status, and trust in institutions long after the moment a loved one went missing.

Families are not asking for empathy alone. They are asking for the right to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved one, told transparently and with dignity; for recognition as people living in with ambiguous loss; and for a seat at the table in decisions that affect their lives. Every actor working on the missing can have a role to play in meeting the requests of the families demands.

“

Families need answers, support, and someone to listen.

– Participant, comparative focus group discussion

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The ICRC would like to extend its thanks to all the families who participated in the Family Needs Assessment, as well as to the national authorities, international organization and civil society actors working with families of missing for their continued support and collaboration.





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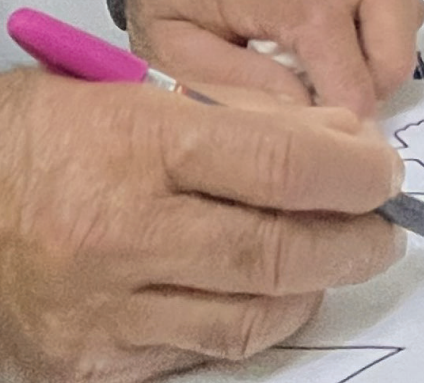
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International Committee of the Red Cross

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About the ICRC in Syria

Since 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has worked to preserve human dignity and relieve suffering caused by war and armed violence.

In collaboration with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners around the world, we do everything we can to deliver life saving aid, reconnect families and locate missing people – helping those who need it most, regardless of who they are and what side of the front line they are on.

We engage with authorities and armed forces on all sides, often confidentially, pressing for access to detainees to improve their living conditions and urging compliance with international humanitarian law to protect non-combatants, including from digital threats.

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