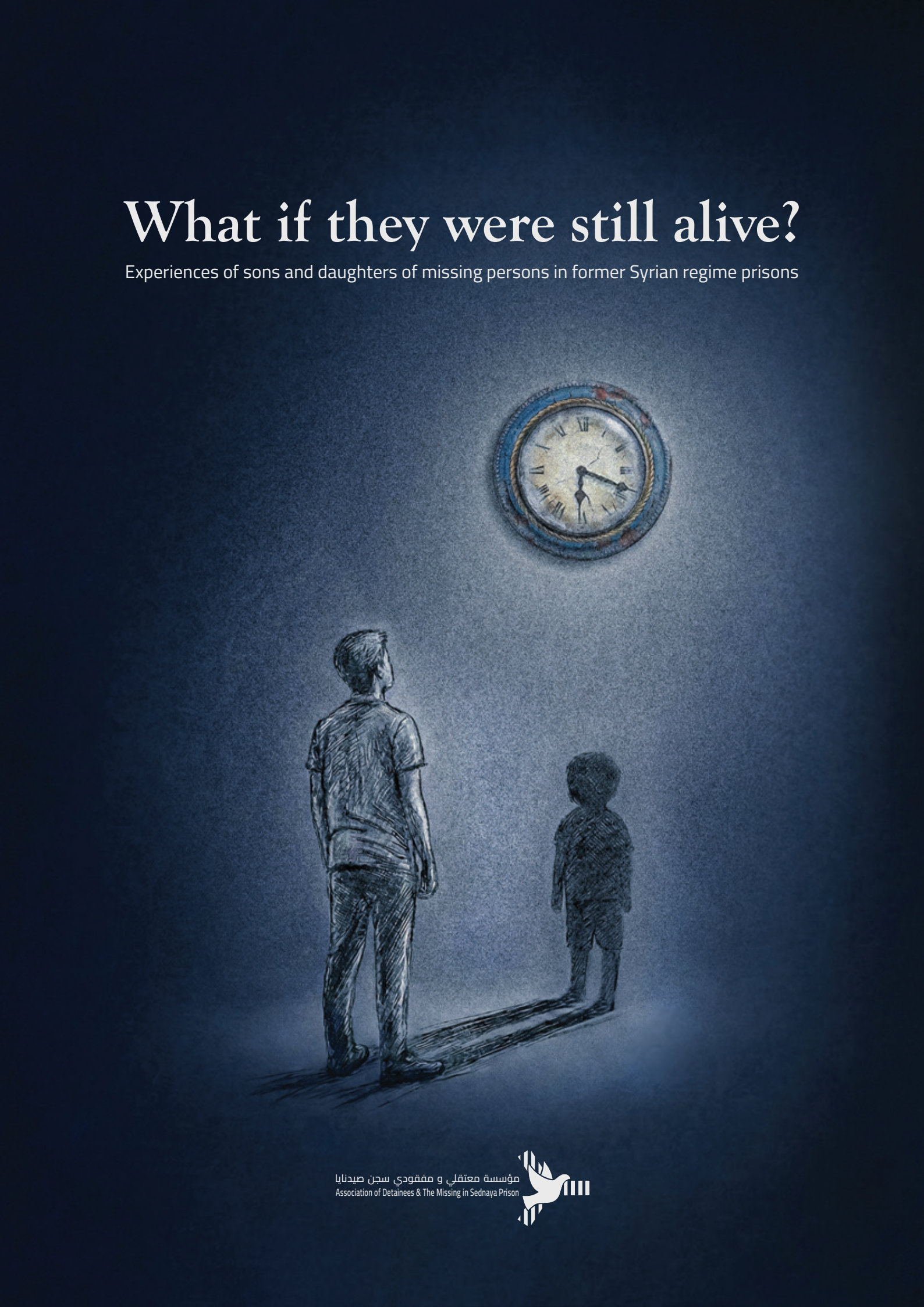
What if they were still alive?

Experiences of sons and daughters of missing persons in former Syrian regime prisons



مؤسسة معتقلي و مفقودي سجن صيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison

What if they were still alive?

Experiences of sons and daughters of missing persons in former Syrian regime prisons

February 2026

مؤسسة معتقلي و مفقودي سجن صيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison

Association of Detainees and Missing of Sednaya Prison (ADMSP) is a coalition of Sednaya survivors, victims, and their families that seeks to uncover the truth and achieve justice for those detained due to their political opinion or activities. ADMSP seeks to unveil the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Sednaya prison. It further offers advice and support to families of detainees and missing persons providing them with information and advice towards ensuring the fate of their loved ones is unveiled. In addition to its documentation and evidence collection work, ADMSP offers, through its family center, rehabilitation services with a focus on mental health of survivors of torture, war, violence or any human rights violation. ADMSP's work promotes recognition of the damage suffered by detainees, truth seeking, accountability, uncovering the fate of forcibly disappeared persons, reparation for victims and survivors of violations of the international human rights law and the international humanitarian law.

Lead Researcher **Basem Mahmud**

Obtained a PhD in Sociology from Free University of Berlin, post-doctorate Maria Skłodowska-Curie fellowship. He worked with University of Granada, Spain between 2019-2022 and a visiting researcher at the Migration Research Center (MiReKoc) at Koç University in Istanbul (2020-2021). His publications include his book "Emotions and Belonging in Forced Migration: Syrian Refugees and Asylum Seekers" (Routledge, 2021). He currently works as an independent researcher on research projects with international institutions.

Research Assistant **Batol Alghabra**

Holds an MA in Sociology from Damascus University (2025). She focuses on gender issues and feminist content in the digital spaces. She is interested in gender justice and transitional justice in the Syrian context. She has participated in research and community initiatives concerned with empowering women and marginalized groups.

Contents

Executive Summary

This report examines the experiences of sons and daughters of missing persons in prisons of the former Syrian regime as a social, temporal, and moral reality that goes beyond individual psychology or conventional human rights frameworks. It is based on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in October-November 2025 with 21 participants who were children or teenagers when a parent disappeared and continue to live with its effects as an ongoing condition rather than a past event.

Key Findings:

1.Enforced disappearance as suspended time not a definite loss

The data show that enforced disappearance is not experienced in Syria today (even after the fall of the former regime) as a past event. Rather, it is experienced as a temporal structure that controls the present and reshapes it. The children live within a fractured time fluctuating between the possibility of life and possibility of death with no resolution or closure. This suspended time rearranges their day-to-day decisions and their choices of residence, migration and work and delays their chances of recovery.

2.Emotional struggle and chronic conscience conflictions

The experience of absence gives rise to a set of contradictory emotions which forcibly coexist: fear, hope, guilt, pride, desire to know the truth and the need to defer it. This manifests itself in daily moral dilemmas including the tension between hope of release from detention and the wish for death as a way for the missing person to survive torture, a wish that generates a deep feeling of guilt and silence.

3.Emotional regulation as a survival mechanism not a path to healing

The children have developed some delicate strategies to manage this contradiction including deliberate silence, deferred anger, forced distraction using study or work, social withdrawal and resorting to spirituality. These practices do not resolve the emotional struggle but makes it manageable and allows them to go on with their lives in the absence of justice and protection.

4.Disrupted childhood and forced adulthood

The report reveals the direct link between emotional regulation and reshaping roles within the family. A child who hides their emotions to protect their mothers or who prematurely shoulders economic and emotional responsibilities forcibly transitions into the position of ‘adult’ and their childhood gradually erodes. This transformation does not generate natural maturity, but long-term forced endurance.

5.Violence as a foundational memory of the experience

Violence is not confined to the moment of arrest. It extends into raids, torture, extortion, stigma, institutional violence, harassment, and threats This memory continues to re-produce fear even after the liberation as the disappointment associated with the missing person not returning or continuing to lack any information about their fate becomes a new form of symbolic violence due to the ambiguity of the transitional justice process.

6.Disintegration of supporting structures and decline of trust in institutions

The testimonies reveal the withdrawal of the extended family and absence of support networks. Society sometimes even turns to stigma and punishment especially in cases where the mother is detained. This is compounded with an accumulated conviction that administrative and even justice institutions were not only absent but contributed to the production of harm causing the erosion of trust in justice and the state.

7.Identity and future pathways: escape vs. rebuilding

Response of children varies from migration, as an escape mechanism, to adamant attempts to rebuild through education and work while honoring the values of the missing person or engaging in public affairs. These pathways do not constitute final solutions but ongoing negotiation with an unstable reality where the future remains conditional and carries unresolved moral questions.

Political and institutional implications

- Justice, as seen by the children, is not only about legal accountability, but the ability to restore a livable time, a dimension often neglected in swift or symbolic policies.
- Local cultural and religious resources may play a positive role in coping with absence. This requires studying and understanding them as recovery strategies which it would be good to take into account when addressing issues of reconciliation and recovery.
- Adopting ready-made models for memory and transitional justice such as converting detention centers into museums may carry some serious risks which may give rise to some serious problems if sensitivity to the Syrian context is not observed. In some cases, this idea has been perceived as symbolically instilling identity (sectarian) connotations which have been reinforced during the authoritarian rule and civil war rather than a form of recognition and remedy. This may contribute to re-producing symbolic violence instead of containing it.

Conclusion

The report concludes that the greatest risk in the Syrian transitional period does not lie only in the absence of justice but in imposing a form of justice that does not resonate with the experience and a memory whose owners may not want to keep. Therefore, any serious pathway to address the issue of missing persons must be sensitive to suspended time, emotional struggle and social vulnerability. It must emanate from listening deeply to the experience as it is lived not as it is assumed because a justice not based on listening may reproduce violence and a memory imposed may become a new form of coercion.

The value of this report does not only come from the findings it offers but its knowledge-producing nature as it rebuilds the experience from the perspective of the sons and daughters of missing persons as producers of meaning not mere recipients of harm. Thus, the report constitutes a knowledge-based document based on perceptions of victims as they form in their daily lives not based on institutional preconceptions of what justice or recovery should look like. It offers a realistic foundation for designing policies and programs that are more sensitive, fair and sustainable without reducing the experience into technical or short-term interventions.

Introduction: How does absence reshape the life of sons and daughters of missing persons?

As the years pass, enforced disappearance in the Syrian context has become an extended social experience which has profoundly reshaped the lives of families not only because one of their members went missing but because of the lifestyle, prolonged waiting, imposed silence and premature responsibilities which this absence has produced. In the absence of any clear pathway for uncovering the fate of missing persons or observing justice, absence is no longer an incident invoked in the memory but a daily presence which infiltrates into the small life details: family decisions, envisioning the future, distribution of roles within the family, and the concurrent management of hope and fear. The experience of sons and daughters of missing persons emerges as one of the most complex absence experiences as they did not experience loss at a mature stage of their lives, rather at foundational moments of their childhood or adolescence where the self was still forming and their perceptions of safety, belonging and meaning were being built. Many of them grew up within the time of absence, neither before nor after, effectively shaping their lives in open-ended waiting, incomplete knowledge and unanswered moral questions. This further makes them face an experience that is structurally different from the experience of fathers and mothers. It is thus necessary to understand absence not as a temporary gap but a continuous social relationship which reproduces its impact across time and generations.

Generally, most studies on Syrian missing persons tend to focus on quantitative data and a documentation perspective. These studies aim at accounting for the number of missing persons, documenting cases of detention and recording violations associated with forced disappearance. This approach offers a comprehensive picture of the quantitative scope of the phenomenon. However, it falls short of understanding the human and social experience of the children and families especially in terms of their perception of time and the meaning of waiting and how they deal with absence. Most of those studies were based on a human rights perspective focused on collecting evidence and documenting violations (including the few qualitative studies that attempted to offer in-depth understanding of the experience of missing persons by paying special attention to the psychological-therapeutic aspects).[1] This human rights focus makes enforced disappearance appear to be a matter of numbers and rights while, for the families in reality, it is an experience which is repeated every day in their memory and relations reshaping the personal and social time...

1. Hadeel Deeb, Rana Sadi and Bushra Sharbah, "Level of psychological resilience of siblings of missing persons in the war on Syria: a field study in Lattakia countryside", Lattakia University Journal- Humanities and Arts Series 44, Edition 1(2022). The Day After, Report: On the brink of despair: Experiences of families of persons forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime (2020). Talal Mustafa, Families of detainees and missing persons: legal and living challenges and psycho-social impact, a field study for a sample of Syrian families, Haramoon Center, (2023).

of the family as time itself becomes a social space where absence is reformulated as a continuous action that is not forgotten but brought back through daily practices and political memory to the present making it a living experience which infiltrates the details of daily life.

Hence, it is important to look at time not merely as a neutral background for events, but a structural element which is reshaped within the experiences of forced absence. Waiting, suspension, repetition and lack of closure all create a new social time shared by the children, the family and the community at large.

This "fractured time" is not a mere detail. Rather, it is a structural factor that reformulates identity, relations, responsibilities and future outlook. Without understanding this time, the experience remains lacking and disrupted. This pattern of dealing with absence shows that time in the context of forced absence does not operate as a pathway for progress, but as a mechanism to reproduce social vulnerability. The families live in fractured time where the future retracts under the weight of a lingering past. This in turn reflects on the prospects of social recovery and building trust in the present. In the literature, this absence does not only reflect a knowledge gap, but reveals a structural gap in legal and political fields unless mechanisms are put in place to understand the impact of absence on the social time and shaping roles within the family and the emotional shifts between the past and the present. Some studies have adopted feminist approaches and focused on women's experiences including the impact of losing a family member on their daily life, their social roles, the psychological and emotional dimensions of enforced disappearance in detention centers.[2] This is a form of absence that cannot be separated from the structure of political violence which has made detention become a means to control the present and the future alike. Important as they were, those studies have neglected an essential part of the experience which is the children's. Thus, not only are the voices of children absent, but so is a broader understanding of the way in which the impact of political violence reshapes the next generations through memory, waiting and the symbolic legacy of loss. This human rights, quantitative, feminist or psycho-therapy focus in the absence of a sociological and anthropological approach has meant that we still do not know much about the experiences of missing persons' children especially those who have found themselves in the midst of this experience in their childhood or adolescence. Apart from the media reports which were issued recently about the missing persons' children who have been transferred to orphanages, one could not find any study or report that tackles this age group who experiences the enforced disappearance of one of their parents in Syria.[3]

2. Caesar Families Association, 'Not our choice but we are bound with hope: burdens of the legal and social system on women affected by enforced disappearance in Syria' (2024). Dawlati and Women Now for Development, "Shadows of Syrian Disappeared". (2018). Group of Syrian organizations, 'A Guide through the Untold Darkness: Reality of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria and their families." (2021)
3. See for example: Rida al-Mawi, "Syria's missing children: between hope of return and incomplete grief". BBC News Arabic. 7 January 2025, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cnv34909gyqo

Therefore, the experiences of children who have grown up within this persistent absence continue to be outside the scope of research although their lives constitute an extended form of loss which they experience through waiting, memory and search for meaning for what is incomprehensible. This gap does not only obscure the human dimension of the experience of loss, but also hinders understanding in depth the time in which the children live and the moral and emotional questions which become part of their existence. In the absence of any clear pathway for justice or unveiling the fate of the missing, time itself becomes an extension of violence: a space in which past and present intersect keeping the sadness alive and indefinitely deferring recovery. Looking at the theoretical concepts adopted in approaching this issue, one can immediately recognize that Pauline Boss's concept of ambiguous loss can be said to be the main theoretical concept utilized in past studies on enforced disappearance in Syria.[4]

This concept is useful for cases where loss and presence are hard to differentiate as individuals experience a sense of permanent clinging to the absent person. However, despite its importance from a psychological perspective, it remains limited when we apply it to cases of enforced disappearance by agencies notorious for their practice of all forms of torture as in Syria. For the ambiguity here is not merely a form of uncertainty, but part of a deliberate authoritarian practice that not only conceals the truth but also puts the children in a dual moral predicament, one of the experience's most complicated and least visible aspects. The experience is not merely about waiting for an absent person. Rather, it is a constant internal struggle between the desire of life and the desire to end the torture: what if they were alive! The children experience this struggle on a daily basis: a deep wish that the missing person would come back alive, but on the other hand, the children's consciousness may harbor another harder wish that the missing person had died not because they want to survive the experience themselves, but because they wish the absentee would survive the daily torture and humiliation which the children's minds never cease to imagine. This wish, however, does not feel as a rational act. Rather, it feels like an emotional betrayal that cannot be shared and is coupled with a heavy feeling of guilt as though thinking of death is a betrayal to the memory of the missing person, diminished loyalty to family love and sense of duty.

4. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression "Conclusion of the training program for preparing trainers on enforced disappearance in the Syrian context" 27October 2023 https://scm.bz/conclusion-of-the-training-program-for-preparing-trainers-on-enforced-disappearance-in-the-syrian-context-ar/
Salah Eddin Hashim Lakeh, Jalal Noufal, Wael Yaski, Juman Qenan, Mervat Wahiba, Munir Sheikh Hamoud, Amjad Abo Leil and Muta' Barakat, "Studying Ambiguous Loss in the Syrian Context". Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 2025, available at: https://scm.bz/ambiguous-loss-in-the-syrian-context-ar/ accessed on: 19 November 2025. Haj Saleh, Khalil. "Necessary Steps from Syrian 'ambiguous loss community' perspective", Al-Jumjuriya, 20 December 2024. https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2024/12/20/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B6%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/
Hochberg, L. 2021. Recovering the Truth for Syria's Missing and Forcibly Disappeared: Assessing Opportunity Structures and Guiding Principles for International Stakeholders. Master's thesis, Utrecht University; Bernath, J. 2025. "Mobilizing for Syria's Disappeared: Survivor-Led Movements, Emotions, and Transitional Justice." Journal of Human Rights Practice 17 (2).

This silent guilt, in turn, becomes another form of helplessness. Neither can it be expressed nor does it vanish. Thus, children remain locked in an unbreakable emotional deadlock between hope and fear, dream and guilt. It is precisely here that the limitations of the concept of ambiguous loss become apparent as it does not capture the political dimension of absence nor does it address the deliberate violence which makes "uncertainty" itself a tool of control. For the ambiguity in enforced disappearance is not a coincidence, but an emotional system to generate dominance. This contrast creates a state of emotional struggle. However, it is not a mere psychological disorder but a reflection of a distorted relation between the living and the missing produced by an authoritarian structure that is built on ambiguity, torture and control. In the absence of justice, children are left to live in this painful dichotomy with no prospect of resolution: neither can they grieve because loss is not certain, nor can they wait indefinitely. Here exactly one of the most important gaps in the concept of ambiguous loss becomes visible: the experience of forced absence in detention centers is based on a deliberate absenting that is reproduced every day through torture, denial of truth, and leaving people's fates hanging in limbo as a deliberate act by the state, its official institutions and clientelist networks. In this sense, the conventional psychological concept cannot interpret absence as a political practice that reshapes emotions, time and identity altogether. This is not to say that there is no value in the concept of ambiguous loss as it offers an important point of entry to understand emotional confusion and inability to grieve. However, the present research uses this concept as a starting point rather than an adequate framework as it seeks to expand it from the field of psychology to a more structural space where absence is a political practice that produces power relations and fractured time that shifts rapidly between the news of life or death and an emotional struggle that cannot be reduced to 'ambiguity' alone.

Time in this context extends beyond the chronological framework to become a space in which helplessness and suffering are reproduced on a daily basis with the torn conscience and the constant moral dilemma. Helplessness extends to encompass all aspects of daily life: making small decisions, social interactions, planning for the future, dealing with the persistent absence of the missing person. In this sense, the children live in a duality: an internal predicament of a torn conscience coupled with social and emotional helplessness which is reproduced everyday during the suspended time and under policies of silence and absence. Every responsibility becomes a heavy burden and every decision related to the missing person keeps hanging between desire for relief and fear of the continuation of agony. Helplessness becomes part of the composition of the children's social identity through their daily life, choices, relations with the family and society and their future ambitions.

This composition is not restricted to their individual experience. Rather, it extends to formulate relations, manifestations of power and limits of social action within the broader Syrian society. For absence generates a collective emotional structure that hangs between fear and uncertainty which makes addressing this experience a social imperative rather than a topic merely related to afflicted families. This experience does not evolve within the family alone, but within a broader social and political structure that continues to reproduce silence and denial. Therefore, understanding the children's lived experience is not merely a knowledge exercise, but an essential step to dismantle the patterns of power that reinforced this absence and to envision a future more capable of protecting memory and justice. Understanding how children deal with these daily challenges (the constant moral struggle, suspended time and social helplessness) is not only important to support them individually, but extends to society as a whole. The persistence of the impact of enforced disappearance on the new generations would reflect and deepen the patterns of helplessness, waiting and silence. It would also affect the networks of social relations, trust in institutions and society's ability to reproduce justice and accountability. Integrating these experiences in public policies and transitional justice enables the society to confront the legacy of violence and allow some space to rebuild social bonds and develop forms of dealing with absence in a way that would reduce the persistence of socio-political injustice and promote the ability of all Syrians to actively engage in public life and common future. As the impact of enforced disappearance extends to the next generations, understanding the experience of the children becomes a prerequisite for understanding how a society regenerates itself in the aftermath of violence. The children constitute a delicate link that connects the memory of the past to the vision of the future. In their narratives it can be seen how meaning is reconstructed; trust is reformulated and how absence becomes part of the collective Syrian identity. Therefore, the importance of this research is not merely to bridge a knowledge gap but to reframe absence as a socio-political relation that produces a new self, a new time, and a different worldview. Understanding the experience of the children is a prerequisite to understand the society that emerged within that absence. These elements show that the experience of children of missing persons is not merely an extension of the trauma, nor is it an individual psychological phenomenon, but a complex social structure formed by politics, violence, memory and waiting. Tracing this complexity at its daily life level required a flexible methodological approach that allows for meaning to emerge from within the experience rather than outside of it. This is why the constructivist grounded theory was chosen as a methodology for this research.[5]

5. For more details on this methodology, see: Basem Mahmud, "Towards Social Sciences in the Arab Context: On the need for grounded theory", Omran, 2018 https://omran.dohainstitute.org/ar/Issue026/Pages/art4.aspx

1. Methodological approach: Cautiously approaching absence

Dealing with a complicated experience as that of the children of missing persons necessitates adopting a methodological approach that is both ethically sensitive and analytically rigorous. Participants do not provide "information" as much as they share stories where personal memory intersects with pain, absence with daily life, individual consciousness with the political structure of violence. Therefore, it was not possible to use conventional tools or direct questions. Rather, it was essential to build a safe space for narration that allowed for the emergence of meaning from within the experience itself rather than from assumptions. This "cautious approach" does not only aim to avoid pain but also to respect the vulnerability inherent in the experience and ensuring participants are not transformed into 'subjects' or 'data' in which their lives are reduced into a ready-made theoretical framework. This was the point of departure for the design of the methodology as it was important to adopt a framework which would allow the participants to determine the rhythm of the narrative, weave events and identify the points of silence and the points of disclosure. Caution here is not merely an ethical position, rather an epistemological prerequisite to ensure that later analysis is an extension of the meaning as it emerges in the children's experiences not as predicted by the researcher or previous literature.

1.1. Theoretical Sampling: Guided by data not presumptions

The sample was not predefined precisely, but it evolved gradually according to analysis requirements. Every time a new dimension appears in the interviews (e.g. torn conscience, suspended time, variation in experience by age or gender, impact of absence on children's roles) the sample expanded to include more participants who would shed a clearer light on the respective dimension. The research was based on ADMSP's database which provides the basic information necessary to select participants based on theoretical sampling: the aim was not to represent social 'categories' but to delve into the concepts to understand how they form and shift. As the analysis progressed, the question was no longer who the participants were but what the emerging concepts needed to emerge. This methodology led to interviews which helped explain the central tensions in the experience such as the refusal to believe the death of the missing person, constant search for truth, change of roles within the family, anger for lack of accountability, isolation or wishing to migrate or the impact of lack of understanding in the community. Thus, the theoretical sample became a dynamic map expanded with questions and shrank when the analysis started to reveal the main theoretical implications.

1.2. Research Design: From experience to concept

This research is based on a methodological commitment based on constructivist grounded theory which regards meaning as something that emerges in the relation between the researcher and participants rather than a ready-made truth or a complete structure. Therefore, the research has not adopted any predefined conceptual framework. Rather, it allowed the living experiences of sons and daughters of missing persons to lead the analysis phases through initial coding, focused coding all the way to developing the theoretical concepts through continuously comparing data, questions and analytical memos.

The questions were not built on hypotheses, but on an open invitation to narrate because the essence of grounded theory is to track meaning as it formulates in the narrative of the participant rather than how the researcher expects. This approach required high sensitivity to the nature of the topic as speaking about loss, detention and enforced disappearance cannot be inferred through direct questions but by creating the safe space that would allow the participants to determine what they want to say and how they want to say it in line with the essence of the constructivist approach which respects meaning as it emerges within, as opposed to outside, the experience. After each interview, the data were coded and analytical memos capturing the ideas, emotions, ambiguities, and initial theoretical possibilities were written. The intersection of personal proximity and methodological distance was reflected directly in the coding method. Every piece of the narrative was examined on two stages: first as provided by the participant and second as re-read with ongoing comparison. This dual exercise prevented the analysis from slipping into presumed empathy or interpretation and allowed for the construction of concepts which belong to participants narratives but extend beyond the individual experience into a broader social structure. In this manner, analysis was not a deferred process but part of the continuous interaction between data collection and formulating the following questions which is the main feature of a theoretical sample. To ensure the methodology is rigorous, the analytical memos were reviewed regularly to reexamine inherent assumptions and neutralize the impact of prior expectations. This enabled the researchers to keep the principle of 'concept emerges from the data' which is one of the pillars of constructivist grounded theory.

The interviews were conducted between October and November 2025 and involved 21 participants (9 male and 12 female) all of whom have at least one parent who went missing after 2011 (14 missing father, 3 missing mother, one person with both parents missing, two members of the same family have a missing father and brother, one person was arrested with his mother but was in a different cell)

Three interviews were conducted in person while the rest were conducted over the phone. They lasted between 30-45 minutes each. Using both in-person and phone interviews allowed access to participants from various backgrounds and contexts which is consistent with the rationale of theoretical sample. The participants' ages ranged between 7 and 18 years when one of the parents went missing (except for one female participant who was 21 years old). This age category was selected because the disappearance of a parent during childhood or adolescence is not a casual incident, rather a constructivist experience which affects the formulation of one's identity, their perception of time, social and emotional relations. Children and teenagers experience absence at a stage where the initial features of the self are just evolving and their conception of safety, responsibility, belonging and limitations of social action are just being formulated. Therefore, the disappearance of a parent during this stage produces long-term impacts that are radically different from those experienced by adults. Furthermore, this age group is the most absent from Syrian literature on forced missing which focused mostly on numbers and documentation, women's experiences or general human rights or psychological aspects.

Thus, this research aims to bridge a clear knowledge gap by tracing the lived experience of children who grew up within the absence time itself rather than outside it. As for the female participant who was 21 years old when a parent went missing, she was included following the logic of theoretical sample used in the grounded theory as her experience offered some important elements to explain how absence affects transitioning to adulthood and the responsibility roles that emerge in the family following the disappearance of a parent. Her age was not included because it represents the target group but because of its ability to enrich the concepts which started to emerge during the analysis. Therefore, the choice of age group was not based on quantitative representation but on its relevance for the experience of emotional and social reformulation which children go through at a critical moment in life where absence becomes interwoven into the very building of the self.

In observance of the do-no-harm principle, verbal informed consent was collected from all participants after explaining the nature and goals of the research as well as the potential risks associated with discussing the enforced disappearance experience. It was clearly asserted that participants may refrain from answering any question or terminate the interview at any point or completely withdraw with no consequences. In cases where signs of disturbance or stress were observed during the interview, the session was immediately suspended and resumed only if the participant explicitly expressed their desire to continue. The interviews was recorded and saved in a encrypted format. Only the research team was given access to those recordings.

After they were transcribed and checked, the original recordings were deleted permanently to ensure the highest levels of protection and confidentiality. Any details which may identify the participants were omitted or modified.

1.3. Researchers and findings mutual impact

In research settings where the personal experience intersects with the subject matter of the study, methodical awareness becomes a prerequisite for authentic listening. The main researcher, himself son of a missing father who was killed in the prisons of the Syrian regime, and the assistant researcher, who has experienced the return of her father after a prolonged disappearance, do not enter this field as neutral observers, but as holders of a legacy of questions, memory and major losses. This proximity, delicate as it may be, did not become a guiding framework for the research. Rather, it was dealt with as a cognitive tool that necessitates constant discipline. In some interviews, the participants assumed there was an existing understanding by the researchers as though the intensity of the experience can be grasped without being said. In order to avoid reducing the meaning or interpreting the gaps, we deliberately went slowly and repeated the questions asking the participants for details about the moments which seemed to be clear because the seeming clarity concealed much complexity.

To prevent slipping into 'normalization' of the experience or fleshing out the meaning by projecting our own experiences, we adopted what could be called a methodical slowness protocol: rephrasing, double-checking, eliciting examples, and examining the emotions experienced during the interview before coming up with an interpretation. The aim was not to share the personal experience but to protect narratives from sliding into oversimplifications or uncontrolled empathy. This critical consciousness transformed proximity into a methodological strength: a strength in listening, capturing delicate meaning, making questions that respect the fragility of the experience and its social and ethical structure. On the other hand, the research impacted the researchers both psychologically and cognitively. Nonetheless, the subjective lens did not become a preconceived interpretation lens. Our methodological commitment was to transform emotions into 'data' to be examined rather than presumed 'axioms'. Every personal impact was dealt with as an element that must be critically examined using analytical memos and joint reviews to ensure the analysis remained based on the narrative of participants not the subjective experience of the researchers. Reopening memory layers was not easy in some interviews, but it helped the researchers think of their own experience in a less subjective and more complex manner.

To do so, the main researcher conducted the interviews while the assistant researcher transcribed them without any modification and in the local dialect. The main researcher then read and analyzed them. To ensure consistency of analysis, MAXQDA software was used to code the data and monitor the evolution of concepts throughout the different stages. During that process, each researchers used to keep a journal (of all that comes to mind be it descriptive notes, analysis, methodological thoughts..etc) in writing or using voice messages between them. This practice was observed throughout the duration of the research until it was issued in its final form. The memos, constant comparisons and dialogue helped them ensure that there is no one-way impact: the data impacted the researchers and the researchers impacted how the questions were formulated without guiding the findings, rather enhancing their ability to understand, listen and be disciplined. In this sense, this reciprocity was not a burden for the research, but part of its theoretical design: a bridge between personal experience and methodology that keeps analysis open away from ethical or emotional closure.[6] Thus, rather than just being a form of self-awareness, reciprocity became a cognitive tool that enabled the research to delve into layers that would not have been revealed without this tension between proximity and distance. For proximity helped open some sensitive narrative spaces while the methodological distance ensured these narratives were translated into knowledge that can be analyzed rather than mere human empathy. Hence, knowledge here was not something to be discovered but something that evolved within the interaction of the voices of participants, the researchers' sensitivity and the open-ended analytical process.

Reciprocity was, therefore, part of the epistemological structure of the research which made the personal experience become a tool for understanding the meaning instead of being a source of potential bias. This was ensured by the continuous check and review. Reciprocity here, in its deeper sense, was an ethical and cognitive tool that protected the participants' voices from dissolving into the researcher's voice ensuring at the same time that knowledge remained open, incomplete and reviewable. In the following sections, we present the findings we arrived at.

6. Reciprocity in qualitative research refers to the researcher's awareness of their positionality and experience and the impact thereof on the production of knowledge and dealing with this impact as part of the analysis rather than a latent source of bias.

2. Suspended time and waiting as a living construct

Testimonies reveal that enforced disappearance for the participants is not lived as an event that occurred in the past, but as a temporal structure that controls and reshapes the present. Waiting here is not just an emotional state, but a framework within which daily decisions, emotions and relationships are reformulated. Although all participants experience a state of fluctuation between the possibility of life and the possibility of death, this fluctuation takes on a variety of living forms, related to the nature of the relationship with the missing person, age, the ability to endure ambiguity, and to the social pressure that pushes for resolution while the experience remains so elusive.

Rana's testimony illustrates how absence can produce a symbolic presence. The father, although physically absent, continues to be active in her life as his advice continues to serve as an imaginary reference with which she regulates her behavior and from which she seeks guidance when in doubt. This evocation is a way of rearranging internal time so that absence does not become a complete interruption. As for the absence of a brother, it cannot be filled symbolically; it stops emotional growth at the moment of loss, as is evident in her words:[7]

> I always thought that if I were in any trouble, how would we have acted if my father had been present? How would he advise me to act? ... I was only fifteen years old. In every session where I sat with him alone, he would tell me: Do this... Do that. So I always wondered: If he were here now, what would he have done? How would he have guided me to the right path? He was not really absent; he was always with us, at least with me. As for my brother, it's very different; his absence has affected me a lot, and it made me feel like I'm still that little girl, a fifteen-year-old girl.

Another testimony shows that the suspension of time is not limited to the inner world and emotions, but extends to the sphere of living itself. Jana's testimony provides an example of how waiting becomes a logic that regulates the fateful decisions of everyday life, not merely an inner feeling. The possibility of the father's return remained the basis for the decision to stay inside Syria and not leave, despite the lack of any confirmed information. Here, waiting turns into a living structure that determines the place, accommodation, and mobility. Time does not advance in a natural sequence, but is reshaped around a single possibility that has enough power to reshape life. Jana says:[8]

7. Rana, female, was 15 years old at time of arrest, father and brother still missing to the date of the interview
8. Jana, female, was 8 years old at time of missing, missing father was identified in Caesar photos

> It depends on our age and the time we learned anything about my father's fate. Before 2020, we didn't know if he was alive or dead; his fate and whereabouts were completely unknown. We were always trying to convince ourselves that he might be alive, so we didn't leave Syria; we stayed there because we thought he could come back at any moment and knock on the door; who would he be with if we traveled? That's why we didn't leave and stayed in Syria.

However, suspended waiting does not only form within the family, but is also exposed to external interventions that push for a resolution that the family does not have means for. Hassan's testimony reveals this social dimension of suspended time, as society imposes a ready-made narrative that seeks to turn probability into certainty: "They may have died." Hassan feels the weight of this discourse, but he resists it because decisiveness here does not mean reaching the truth, but rather severing a relationship that he does not have the right to terminate. Thus, waiting intertwines with internal fragmentation, he says:[9]

> It is difficult for me to feel, for example, that they are dead. When I miss them, I don't know where to go with this feeling, and I don't know how to express it. The only things left of them now are the images, so the experience remains very difficult, not as easy as others would imagine. We were often confronted with the idea that if the prisons were empty, they might have died. For us, it's not that simple: we can't let go of the idea that there is still a possibility just because it seems comfortable to others. As I told you, when I miss them, I start talking to them, and the scene I told you about comes back to my mind. I have not lost hope, but when a person is placed in de-facto situation, he does not know how to act. After all this time, I feel they are with me all the time with everything I do; it is not a real presence in life, and we do not know their whereabouts, neither with the state nor with any other entity.

Issam's case presents a third dimension, represented in the moment of reunion after a long absence. It is a moment that reveals that the suspension of time not only changes the present, but also reshapes the relationship itself, so that it becomes almost impossible to recover. Here, waiting does not preserve the bonds, but exposes them to disruption, because the time that is supposed to be spent together has been disrupted and cannot be restored. Issam says:[10]

9. Hassan, male, was 10 years at time of arrest, father and brother still missing to the date of the interview
10. Issam, was 10 years old at time of arrest, missing mother was released from detention

> I swear, I wasn’t so happy when I saw her. Not because of her, but because it was hard for me to see her after all this time. She left me when I was a child, and when she saw me I was about nineteen, she felt embarrassed and walked away, as though I were a stranger. I also felt she was a stranger. That's what hurt me inside. She was happy to see me, but I was hurt; after all this time, is this the reunion that awaits us? I didn't feel like she was my mother, because I lived through all the times when she was supposed to be there, and she wasn't.

Thus, these testimonies reveal a complex temporal structure that governs the experience of waiting: an internal time that reshapes memory and emotion, a living time that rearranges decisions, position, and movement, and a social time that imposes narratives that do not correspond to lived experience. Waiting may provide a symbolic presence that mitigates the impact of absence, freezes a part of the self at the moment of loss, disrupts daily decisions, imposes a constant fluctuation between two possibilities, or exposes the fragility of bonds when the disrupted is reconnected. In all these cases, waiting is not just a circumstance resulting from absence, but the very logic of life is shaped by a loss that cannot be confirmed or overcome. This is where the deeper effect begins: the suspension of time does not only reflect on everyday life, but also infiltrates the structure of the self, creating a constant state of emotional struggle between hope and fear, between clinging to the missing person and conforming to reality, and between resisting and submitting to social pressures. From this exhausting fluctuation between multiple levels of time, the conflicts of conscience that control the children's daily experience arise.

3. Emotional struggle and confliction of conscience

Testimonies reveal that enforced disappearance does not produce a single grief or emotional trajectory that can be defined or contained. Rather, it opens a highly complex inner space, in which contradictory emotions juxtapose without canceling one another. Children do not experience absence as a complete loss, nor as mere waiting, but as a suspended experience, open to opposing possibilities producing a chronic emotional struggle between fear, hope, guilt, pride, the desire to know, and the desire to stop knowing at the same time. This forced coexistence between irreconcilable emotions does not remain at the level of feeling, but is embodied as a daily conflict of conscience, which confronts children with fateful moral questions that they neither have the means to resolve nor are they at leisure to defer.

Fear comes to the forefront of this scene, but it does not appear as a single or direct fear, but as a dynamic system of fear whose subject is constantly changing. One of the participants described how the fear was linked to the very attempt to ask, when one of her relatives tried to inquire about his brother inside the Palestine branch, and the answer was decisive and final precluding any possibility of action: "He said to him, I am sorry, your brother is in the red section, this means that no inquiries can be made about him, and if we ask, we may put him in danger, they could kill him. They can do anything... but let's stay hopeful..."[11] In this context, the question is no longer a means of knowledge, but a potential source of harm. Fear for the missing becomes a fear that the quest to learn their fate will expose them to further violence. Here, fear not only produces psychological paralysis, but also imposes a logic of forced silence, in which refraining from inquiring becomes a moral act to protect the missing person, even if the price is perpetuating the ambiguity.

Fear takes a more extreme form when the search itself turns into an experience of direct violence for the family, as in the testimony of the participant who recounted her family's attempt to go to Qaboun: "My aunt was shot in the head by a thermal sniper and she fell ... A cat passed by, was shot and died... Anything passing by was killed."[12] At this moment, violence is no longer just part of the experience, but becomes part of its foundational structure. The attempt to approach the truth becomes an existential threat, and the meaning of the search itself is redefined, so that survival becomes a priority that takes precedence over knowing the fate of loved ones. Thus, fear not only produces individual withdrawal, but also redraws the boundaries of the possible and the impossible in the whole experience.

11. Amal, female, was 10 years old at time of arrest, the missing person was identified in Caesar photos
12. The above participant, Amal

In addition to fear, the torn conscience stands out as one of the most painful and complex dimensions of the experience. The testimonies reveal an intense internal struggle between holding on to hope and wanting to end the state of waiting, even if by accepting the idea of death. One participant says: "I was so torn... I expected the worst... I often thought that their death might be easier for them than the continuation of torture."[13] This thinking does not reflect cruelty or abandonment of the missing; it is rather an attempt to morally reframe the pain, so that wishing for death becomes a preventive act, aimed at protecting the missing person from an ongoing torture scenario. This was also echoed in Jamal's testimony after visiting his father before the information was completely cut off: "After the visit, I used to tell myself without telling anyone else that his death was a salvation and a relief from torture."[14]

This shift in thinking, however, generates a deep sense of guilt, because wishing for death is at odds with the image of the living father and with the unspoken moral duty to wait for his return. Thus, conscience becomes an arena of conflict between imagined mercy and a loyalty one cannot give up. This conflict is further complicated when partial knowledge intertwines with deliberate concealment within the family. One participant describes the moment her father's picture was seen in Caesar's photos, and the collective decision not to tell the mother: "They all knew, but they didn't tell my mother... They said they didn't want to put her in a bad mental state."[15] At these moments, children become moral mediators, carrying the burden of knowledge and the burden of withholding it at the same time. They are required to protect the mother from the truth, and at the same time they are required to live with this truth within themselves. There is no entirely right choice here, but rather a series of grey decisions that deepen the emotional struggle and prolong the internal conflict. This image is further illustrated in Ola's testimony:[16]

> "Not so much out of a sense of responsibility as from an emotional perspective, you don't want to talk much about it, especially because you have younger siblings, and you don't want them to feel the profound loss (her voice trembled) and you try to stay by your mother's side, because she is doing everything she can to not feel this loss."

13. The above participant, Hassan
14. Jamal, was 13 years old at time of arrest, missing person died in detention
15. Participant above, Jana
16. Ola, female, was 7 years old at time of arrest, the missing person was released

This struggle peaks when enforced disappearance is accompanied by social stigma, especially in cases of mother's detention. One participant recounted how he was physically punished just because he tried to ask about his mother: "Whenever I tried to ask about her, or said I wanted to see my mother, they punished me. On one occasion, I was tied to a chair from morning until evening, because I asked about her. For them, being detained means being defiled [referring to the presumption of sexual abuse]."[17]

Violence in this case is not limited to the absence of the mother, but extends to delegitimizing the relationship with her, and to the imposition of a forced break between the child and their mother. The child finds himself caught between an unyielding emotional loyalty and the requirements of survival within the extended family, which turns conscience into an arena of constant punishment. In another testimony, Saeed explains how they were hiding the news of his mother's arrest for the sake of the family's "reputation":[18]

> We've been discreet about it lately, that is, we have not been showing it. This continued until I was injured and we lost contact with some of our relatives. Then it became clear to them that I had been injured, and they began to ask: Where is your mother? And why doesn't she come? So our relatives became aware of it.

In contrast to this burden, pride emerges as a parallel emotion that does not eliminate pain, but regulates it. A number of participants speak of being proud of their fathers despite the fear and absence: "The fact that my father was arrested because he refused to kill people was a source of pride... At the same time, there were feelings of fear, anxiety and terror."[19] Another participant says, "Whenever our neighbor sees me, she tells me that my father had once saved her life."[20]

This pride gives absence a moral meaning, but at the same time it doubles the emotional burden. The image of the noble father makes the idea of his vulnerability or torture harsher which deepens the rift of conscience as it is torn between holding on to this image and the reality of prisons. Thus, pride does not serve as compensation for pain, but as an additional element in the web of contradictory emotions that govern the experience.

17. Participant above, Issam
18. Saeed, male, was 15 years old at time of arrest, missing mother was released
19. Ayman, male, was 7 years old at time of arrest, missing father was released
20. Adel, male, was 12 years old at time of arrest, information indicate the death of the missing person

Testimonies do not show that emotional struggle and conscience conflictions are merely a passing internal state. Rather, they reveal a constant tension between contradictory emotions that individuals are forced to hold at the same time: fear and pride, hope and despair, clinging to life and the desire for a closure that would end the waiting. However, this contradiction does not remain only at the level of feeling, but also imposes itself as a daily burden that requires continuous management, especially in light of the absence of social protection and the continued security threat and social stigma. This context prompts the sons and daughters of detainees and missing persons to develop various strategies to control their emotions, not in order to overcome the pain, but in order to go on with their lives, and to protect themselves and others from collapsing or being targeted.

4. Emotional regulation strategies: Managing rather than solving the contradiction

The testimonies show that the sons and daughters of the forcibly disappeared do not seek to overcome or resolve the emotional struggle, but rather to manage it in delicate, often unspoken, ways every day to prevent collapse, protect oneself, and protect others at the same time. "Regulating emotions" here does not mean inner calm in the psychological sense, but a complex social and moral practice, formed under the pressure of fear, guilt, family responsibility, and social stigma. One of the most prominent patterns of emotional regulation is deliberate silence, not as a failure of expression, but as a conscious choice to protect the family. One of the participants clearly says: "I am the kind of person who is discreet and does not reveal anything. I have little siblings... We don't want to reveal this to my mom. We don't want to hurt her."[21]

Suppression of emotions, in this case, becomes a form of care, where the pain is redirected inward so it does not become an additional burden on the mother, who has "been through so much and has been exhausted bringing us up."[22] This silence is not individual, but part of an unspoken distribution of emotional roles within the family, in which the eldest son or daughter bears the burden of adjustment for the benefit of others.

A second pattern emerges: the division and deferral -but not denial- of emotions. One participant describes it very clearly: "I'm mad at you, but you won't see any reaction from me now, I'll act later."[23] There is anger here, but it is deferred and monitored, because its immediate expression may lead to security or social risks. In this sense, controlling emotions becomes a survival strategy, not a psychological choice.

21. Sana, female, was 11 years old at time of arrest, missing although a message was received confirming death
22. Above participant, Sana
23. Above participant, Jana

Another frequently cited method to temporarily avoid compulsive thoughts about the unknown is to redirect emotional energy to study, work, or constant activity. This distraction does not reflect forgetfulness, but a conscious attempt to control thinking and prevent the mind from slipping into helplessness and despair. In other cases, social withdrawal and introversion appear as a regulation mechanism. One participant said: "I wouldn't go anywhere; I felt it was more important to do well in school..."[24] Some daily and small practices appear to offer some alternative emotional venting outlets such as listening to the radio, reading or keeping pets. Attention in this case is focused on one area or areas that can be controlled as the social sphere becomes a source of threat, pity, or harm. Spirituality plays a central role as a safe space that does not require an explanation or a decisive stance on the question of life and death. Many participants turn to prayer and supplication as a framework that allows painful moral questions to be suspended, and to attribute the unbearable to a higher meaning.

These practices do not resolve the emotional struggle, but they do give the body and mind temporary moments of stability, allowing them to continue their daily life. Most importantly, emotional regulation is exercised not only at the level of oneself, but also in relationships with others, especially with mothers, younger siblings, or those living abroad. The son becomes the guardian of the family's emotions, and prevents himself from collapsing so that others do not collapse, as Raneem explains in the way her siblings deal with their brother living abroad:[25]

> "No, we didn't tell anyone. But one of my brothers, our youngest, who was fifteen years old at the time, came down here during the Eid period. He was the youngest of us, and he came down happy that he was going to spend Eid with us, but he didn't know that my mother wasn't at home with us. He used to ask us: Where is my mother? We told him that she had gone for treatment. He would ask: Why doesn't she talk to us? Afterwards we told him that she was detained. It was a big shock for him. From that moment on, he wouldn't accept to travel until my mother returned. He was supposed to go back to work, but he didn't. He said he traveled for her, so why go back and travel again before my mother came back? When my mother got out, he couldn't take it. He developed a strong hatred for Syria, and this feeling still accompanies him today."

24. Bisan, female, was 13 years old at time of arrest, missing father was released, she is now 26
25. Raneem, was 14 years old at time of arrest, missing mother was released

Taken together, these patterns show that emotional regulation strategies are not pathways to healing, but mechanisms of forced adjustment to an unresolved situation. They do not eliminate or resolve the emotional struggle, but keep it manageable, and allow children to continue to perform their daily roles, despite the uncertainty, absence of justice, and absence of closure. These strategies are therefore understood not only as individual psychological responses, but as everyday practices that have gradually reshaped children's positions within the family. When a child learns to hide his fear so as not to multiply the mother's anxiety, or to suppress his anger so as not to attract social or security attention, or to defer his grief so that "the house will remain standing", emotional regulation turns from an internal protection mechanism into a logic of behavior that regulates the relationship with oneself and with others. In this context, calm becomes a responsibility, discreetness a duty, and endurance a moral value that is implicitly rewarded, leading the child to adopt the role of the "rational", "strong" or "unbreakable" even at the expense of his needs as a child.

In this sense, emotional regulation does not stop at containing the pain, but opens the way for a deeper shift in the structure of roles within the family. A child who controls his emotions is the one who is asked to be too understanding, to endure more than he can bear, and to fill a void that he was not designed to fill. Strategies for managing fear and grief intersect with the emergence of a pattern of "premature responsibility," in which childhood is interrupted not by a conscious decision, but by the daily accumulation of calculated silence, repeated emotional concessions, and forced awareness of limitations that a child is not supposed to know. This paves the way for the next section, which discusses how roles within the family are reshaped, and how children become key actors in managing absence, in an experience that can be described as a disrupted childhood and forced adulthood.

5. Reshaping roles: Disrupted childhood and forced adulthood

The findings indicate that enforced disappearance not only suspends time, but redistributes roles within the family and generates an early transition to adulthood, a transition that does not emanate from natural maturity but from the void left by the father's absence. Childhood does not end all at once, but it gradually erodes as safe spaces shrink, responsibilities intensify, and fear becomes an inherent component of daily life. In many cases, the impact of absence cannot be separated from the impact of displacement: both push for a reduction in privacy and intensification of interdependence within the family, so that each individual is required to take roles beyond their age and abilities. One of the most obvious shifts is the transition from a traditional paternal relationship to a power vacuum that the mother or children themselves are forced to fill. In the testimony of one participant, there is a recurrent feeling that the father's absence left the family "without a pillar," and that this absence was not only an emotional incident but also reshaped its entire social structure. Privacy at home is diminished, a factor often associated with displacement, but it interacts with the father's absence in a way that makes loss of personal space another form of childhood disruption. Displacement not only shrinks geography, but also strains relationships and disrupts the familiar rhythms of home life. Although this situation is not a direct result of enforced disappearance, the father's absence prevents the emergence of alternatives or the restoration of stability, so temporary residence becomes a permanent structure, and children find themselves growing up in narrow spaces that do not allow for a safe distance to form an identity or to feel safe and protected by the family. All of this is embodied in Khawla's words:[26]

> "We never knew where they were, and we didn't have any information about them. I was the oldest person at home. We lived with my uncles: three families living in the same house. When they came and took my parents, they took my father, my mother, my uncles, their wives, and there was no adult left at all; I was the oldest in the family. There were little children, my cousins and siblings, they were all very young, some as young as two years old. Some very heavy responsibilities fell on me, such as child care, looking after the house, and continuing my studies, all under severe psychological pressure. Sometimes our neighbors or acquaintances would come and give us a lot of information that had a great impact on us, such as someone coming in to say that your family had been exiled, or that no one knew where they were, or that they had been killed, or that they had been transferred to Damascus prisons, or to Sednaya. No one knew for sure, but everyone who visited said things that only accentuated our fear and anxiety."

26. Khawla, female, was 17 years old at time of arrest, missing persons released

This description represents a radical shift in the position of the child: instead of receiving protection, he himself is required to protect his identity, to hide what might put him in danger, and to participate in the management of daily life under stifling social and political conditions. Enforced disappearance becomes a foundational event that reshapes the individual's relationship with society before the family. Forced adulthood is also manifested in the fact that children are forced to play emotional roles that are not appropriate for their age, especially in the relationship with the mother. The missing person is not only absent as an individual, but also leaves behind a wife who is chronically anxious, and often the son or daughter have a share in carrying or containing this anxiety. One participant described how she was withholding information, or taking secret steps to search for the father so as not to increase the mother's anxiety, saying, "I was doing something without my mother knowing... I could never talk to her about it."[27] Here the right of children to depend on adults disappears, and the son becomes a mediator between truth and fear, and a guardian of adult feelings. This role produces a coercive maturity that is not based on experience but on the need to protect those who are supposed to protect them.

The child in this case is forced to adopt a narrative that is not appropriate for his age: the narrative of heroism, martyrdom, or betrayal, all of which are political and social classifications that go beyond the child's ability to act or understand, but become part of his identity against his will. Thus, enforced disappearance becomes a force that shapes the self-image as seen socially, not as it is formed internally. The harshest dimension of role reshaping is that children are forced to perform emotionally as society expects them to be. In some cases, the child is seen as an extension of the absent father, a witness to the family's suffering, or a symbol of state injustice. These expectations, even when they are empathetic, put the child in a position that is beyond their capacity, and transform their life into a space where absence is reproduced rather than overcome.

Thus, it is clear that the reshaping of roles within families affected by enforced disappearance is inseparable from the broader contexts that have surrounded the experience since its initial moment. Absence was not just the loss of a parent, but a direct result of a violent act that removed the mother or father from their natural place within the family structure, leaving a void that did not stop producing emotional and social consequences over the years.

27. Participant above, Jana

Therefore, it is impossible to understand a disrupted childhood or forced adulthood without returning to that foundational moment in which the wound was formed: the moment of arrest with its fear, threats, and humiliation, and the accumulated images, narratives, and unanswered questions that followed.

This memory is not a narrative background, but a structural element that reshapes children's perception of the world and their place in it, and frames their relationship to themselves and their future. In the next section, we will move on to analyze this formative dimension of violence, and how its effects, whether visible or silent, remain present in children's conscience, becoming part of the identity of the experience itself.

6. Violence as a foundational memory for the experience

Violence does not appear in testimonies of children of missing persons as a passing incident that occurred at the moment of disappearance only, but as an extended structure that permeates all stages of life and continues to shape individual and collective memory even after years of the disappearance. Violence here is not just an act by members of security agencies. Rather, it is a complete system that reshapes the family's relation with the state, society and itself transforming the experience from personal loss to a reconfiguration of their social being. Children do not inherit absence alone, but also the impact of violence as a memory that gives meaning to that absence and regenerates fear through everyday details that indicate insecurity and persistent threat.

Some testimonies reveal direct confrontations with violence from the first moment of arrest, which leave a lingering mark on the sensory and visual memory. One participant recounted how security officers stormed their home suddenly, and how he himself was subjected to physical violence as a 12-year-old child: "They stripped me down to the underwear, made me stand on the snow, and started beating us."[28] Another participant recalls the day his father was arrested when he was 10 years old: "They started interrogating me and said: You have weapons, and they slapped me..."[29] These moments are not just sporadic memories; they are foundational scenes that are engraved in consciousness, reshaping the child's perception of the world as an insecure place, where the body stands helpless in the face of absolute authority. Direct violence goes beyond the body to be directed at family bonds per se, threatening the family's ability to provide physical and symbolic protection to its children.

28. Participant above, Adel
29. Waleed, male, was 10 years old at time of arrest, for him his father is still missing although they received a message confirming his death

One testimony describes how the family was forced to hear the father's voice while he was being tortured over the phone: "They would open the line so we would hear his voice and how they tortured him... They tell us, 'Soon you will find him in such and such place..."[30] This cruelty does not target the father alone, but affects the whole family, as the children become forced witnesses to the pain making the moment of loss a moment of symbolic collapse of the pillar on which the family was founded.

Violence also manifests itself in the form of deliberate concealment of information. Many participants speak of years of ambiguity, where the father's whereabouts or whether he was alive or dead were unknown, and children were forced to live with a vast expanse of forced ignorance. Violence in this case is not just detention, but the production of a knowledge gap that prevents the family from constructing a fixed narrative and turns time into a suspended space.

Violence extends to economic and social life through vast networks of financial extortion, which is repeated in almost all testimonies as a constant feature of the experience. All those we interviewed without exception said that their family had been subjected to continuous fraud and deceit, taking advantage of the family's need for any information. One participant described how an officer called her mother saying he could get her husband out for three million Liras: "He told her, 'Prepare the meal he likes, and give me the money..."[31] before it turned out to be all in vain. Another participant talks about years of uninterrupted payments: "Every year we would pay large sums so that they wouldn't take anyone from the family... And yet they took someone every year."[32] Extortion here is not just an economic act, but a form of emotional control over the family by raising hope and then crushing it, which makes the violence go beyond prison to become part of everyday life.

Violence takes on a structural dimension when the bureaucracy of institutions intertwines with the security service, causing long-term suffering that is difficult to account for. One participant describes how finishing the certification of death paperwork took months of reviews and investigations after the state had officially confirmed his father's death: "I kept moving between branches... They would ask me, "How many people are in your house?" Do you have weapons?... In the end, they said, 'We will issue a notification that he is dead."[33]

30. Participant above, Amal
31. Participant above, Rana
32. Participant above, Khawla
33. Adnan, male, was 15 years old at time of arrest, missing father died in detention

This bureaucracy is not just administrative redtape, but an extension of violence, because it keeps the family in the suspect's position making the children prisoners of a system that sees them as an extension of the missing person.

The effects of violence are also evident in the social environment of the family, where children are exposed to exclusion and stigmatization, whether at school, in the neighborhood or in public institutions. "In the bread queue, they told me, 'Your father is a terrorist,"[34] says one participant, while another participant talks about feeling trapped in a pro-regime environment: "The social environment in which I live is not an understanding one... If I say my father is a detainee, he is a terrorist to them."[35] These practices are no less impactful than direct violence, as they transfer the power of punishment from the state to society, and turn children into legitimate targets of discrimination.

In some cases, violence takes a more serious form through the harassment some female participants were exposed to by people who knew they had a detained relative. One participant recounts how she was threatened by a university professor after she refused to join the Baath Party: "He told me, one word and you would disappear behind the sun.'" He then used his knowledge of her father's and brother's arrest to blackmail her: "He told me, 'I know where he is..."[36] This type of violence reflects how the vulnerability of the family is used as a tool to subjugate children in contexts that are not directly linked with prison, but where the impact of prison is present as a primary threat.

The impact of violence does not end at the moment of liberation or the fall of security control; rather, the memory of violence persists and reproduces itself in the form of collective disappointment. Many spoke of the moment of liberation as a moment of hope, soon followed by a sense of devastation when it became clear that the detainees had not emerged. "Three days passed and I couldn't go to work... You wait for someone for fourteen years, and in the end you find out that he is dead."[37] In general, many participants refer to disappointment after liberation. With the entry of the Deterrence of Aggression troops, many of them forgot the death notifications and the news of the death or even the Caesar photos and lived moments of hope that the missing person would be released from prison, and some of them went to Sednaya Prison to participate in the search operations, but in the end, the missing person did not emerge.

34. Participant above, Adel
35. Sama, was 9 years old at time of arrest, missing father died in detention
36. Participant above, Rana
37. Participant above, Adel

They recount conflicting emotions between the extreme sadness for not being able to find their loved ones and the intense joy of getting rid of those who were responsible for their suffering though the suffering did not end! Thus, for them, liberation, which is supposed to be an endpoint, will remain another extension of violence as it does not offer truth or justice.

In the midst of all this, a final form of violence is born, namely enforced silence. It is not silence for lack of a desire to speak, but a silence imposed by fear of society and the state, and is reproduced within the family as a protection mechanism. One participant says that she always answered: "Baba is traveling... here's not here... and I change the subject."[38] In another case, silence also becomes a legal imperative: "If I say he's dead, my mother intervenes in legal accountability... because it means we recognize the Caesar photos."[39] This silence is the culmination of symbolic violence, forcing children to deny or ambiguate the truth to protect themselves and their families.

What these testimonies reveal is that violence is not an additional layer on top of the experience of loss; rather, it is the framework in which the whole experience takes shape. It defines how the first day of detention is remembered, reshapes the meaning of absence, extends to family decisions, the family's position in society, and the path to justice. It continues even after liberation in the form of broken promises that only produce a deeper sense of breaking. Violence here is not an event; it is a memory without which the experience cannot be understood, and the burden that children carry in their daily lives and in their view of themselves and the world cannot be understood.

In light of these testimonies, it becomes clear that violence was not a past event that could be contained or overcome, but became a structural part of the framework within which experience evolves and the meaning of loss, self, and the world are reshaped. As this heavy memory accumulates, daily life turns into a series of attempts to regulate and endure, but without any real support to mitigate the effects of what happened or provide a protective structure that helps families repair what has been broken. Another level of experience opens up, no less severe than the violence itself: a deep social vulnerability manifested in isolation, forced reliance on limited resources, absence of support networks, and the transformation of community relationships into an additional source of pressure rather than a space for recovery. Shifting attention from the impact of violence to that of the absence of support, new layers of suffering unfold, showing how loss intertwines with the social structure to reproduce itself in every detail of daily life.

38. Participant abover, Samar
39. Participant above, Jana

7. Absence of support structure and deepened social vulnerability

The data reveal that enforced disappearance's impact is not limited to the loss of a parent, but also extends to undermining the social structure around the family, placing it in a position of compounded vulnerability where stigma intertwines with isolation, lack of protection, and the withdrawal of formal and informal support networks. In many cases, detention does not become a moment of family or community solidarity, but a direct cause of disavowal, exclusion and reclassification of the family as a burden or a source of danger. One participant describes how her older brother was forced to flee the country after the family was officially labeled, saying that her brother, after repeated attempts to postpone military service, applied to join the police, and was told, "Your father is a terrorist, don't apply to the police again,"[40] which eventually led him to flee to Europe. In this case, the status of a "detained father" becomes a structural barrier that closes the paths of education and employment, and prompts children to consider immigration as the only option to avoid repression or persistent stigma.

Stigma is not confined to the institutional sphere, but is rooted in everyday life and social relationships as hiding one's origin, hometown, or parent's fate becomes a survival strategy. One participant recounted: "We didn't dare to say we were from Idlib... If they asked me where your father was, I would say dead, I didn't dare say in prison, we didn't talk about it."[41] This enforced silence reflects how stigmatization is imposed as an implicit system that defines what can be said and what must be hidden, and reshapes the social identity of children and adolescents at an early age.

Stigma culminates in cases of detention of the mother as social gender norms intersect with political fear, producing harsh forms of ostracism and violence. In a shocking testimony, Issam recounts how his father's family handled his mother's detention, saying that they "tarnished her status asserting that they disowned her and had nothing to do with her." Explaining the logic imposed on him, he adds: "Just as they disowned her, I had to disown her and believe I had no mother because she had been detained..." This testimony reveals how stigma here becomes a tool for symbolically erasing the mother, forcing the child to participate in this obliteration through physical and psychological coercion, making the family itself a source of violence rather than a protective refuge.

40. Participant above, Amal

41. Jamal, was 13 years old at time of arrest, missing person died in detention

Along with stigma, the absence of social support appears almost as a constant feature of recounted experiences. Many participants point to the withdrawal of relatives, the fading of support networks leaving the families to face their fate alone. Raneem says:[42]

> No, no. In our village we have a large number of relatives, such as uncles and grandparents, but not all of them have been supportive. No one came, no one stood by us. There was only my father; he played the role of mother and father together. Even my father himself, what did he tell us? After about two or three months he was thinking about doing something, but when he saw that no one was by our side, it made him back off. He used to say to us: If your mother does not return, I will go and surrender myself to them, either they let him look for her, or he goes himself, because it was easier for him than this life without her.

This social withdrawal deepens their sense of not belonging not only to the place but also to the community. One participant describes her relation with the areas she lived in saying her sense of belonging was 'shallow' and that returning to the neighborhood where she grew up was painful because the area was 'destroyed. The homes were demolished. You feel like you are in a movie where everything is in ruin, devastated. And when I went to my parents' home, which used to be the safe haven and family home, the place that is full of memories… they had left nothing, nothing at all. You feel like monsters had been staying in these homes."[43] In other testimonies, lack of belonging is associated with the community's perception of the family as 'displaced' or 'suspicious'.

This social vulnerability intertwines with unfulfilled psychological, financial and educational needs. A number of participants asserted that absence of specialized psychological support made dealing with the experience of detention and disappearance almost impossible. At the same time, poverty, accumulated debt, school dropout and inability to access treatment were frequently cited as a direct result of the absence of the breadwinner and lack of any compensation or protection mechanisms.

Taken together, these testimonies show that the absence of a support structure is not limited to lack of services or assistance, but reflects a deeper disintegration of the social protection system that is supposed to surround individuals in moments of extreme loss.

42. Participant above
43. Participant above, Raneem

Stigma isolates families socially, family relationships either withdraw or become a source of additional pressure, and official institutions are absent or appear distant, disinterested, or unable to intervene. As a result, the sons and daughters of detainees and missing persons are left with an open confrontation with the consequences of enforced disappearance, without clear frameworks for redress, compensation, or even acknowledgment of their suffering. In this context, a sense of vulnerability arises not only from the loss itself, but also from a growing realization that there is no one to rely on, and no reliable path to justice or the restoration of rights.

This accumulated sense of institutional impotence and lack of accountability is an essential entry point to understand the subsequent transformation of individuals' relationship with the state and the idea of justice itself, which leads to the next section on the collapse of trust in justice and institutions as one of the long-term structural effects of enforced disappearance.

8. Collapse of trust in justice and institutions

In this section, testimonies related to collapse of trust in justice and institutions reveal an accumulative trajectory of frustration starting with the moment of arrest or disappearance and that only gets deeper with time. So much so that many participants have developed a deep conviction that institutions have not only been absent but, very often, they have been part of the harmful experience itself. This collapse of trust does not appear as a purely political position, but as a direct consequence of the daily recurrent experiences in which the expectations of families and children have run into barriers of silence, fraud or institutional impotence.

This early break with the idea of justice is evident in the testimonies that speak of the first attempts to communicate with the security services in prisons to deliver material and moral support to the missing. One participant recounted how the family was told that they could bring items to the detainees, so they put messages inside the clothes "so that they might be delivered", before later discovering that nothing was. This experience left them with a feeling that even simple human actions can become meaningless within a closed system that cannot be trusted: "We used to send them some things to prison, put messages inside their clothes, and say to ourselves: they may get them and maybe not... But it turned out that nothing had reached them."[44] Other testimonies show how the collapse of trust began at a very young age, through the first contact with the military institution. One participant, a first- or second-grader at the time, described how he was shocked when he was searched and beaten after hearing the word "terrorists," and says he used to have a very different image of the army as an institution that protects children and the country, not harming them. This shift in perception was not a passing moment, but formed an early basis for an awareness that sees institutions as a threat rather than protection and law as an instrument of power rather than justice.[45]

With the passage of time, this feeling does not become a sense of indifference, but an exhausting state of waiting where desire for accountability is mixed with much doubt in its feasibility. In more than one testimony, participants demand a clear role for the state in the issue of missing persons and martyrs, not only in terms of accountability, but also in terms of regulation and recognition. One participant demanded that some offices be explicitly designated to receive mothers of martyrs and missing persons instead of letting them be lost between ministries.

44. Participant above, Khawla
45. Nezar, was 7 years old at time of arrest, missing father released

He confirms that the absence of this structure makes justice 'difficult for families' turning it into an additional burden instead of being a pathway for redress. In this case, it is not the principle of justice that is rejected, but the format in which its responsibility falls on the victims themselves.[46]

On the other hand, some testimonies reveal a painful paradox: even when limited attempts at accountability begin, they remain lacking and incomplete. One participant recounts that after liberation he was able to return to his hometown and that he knew the person who caused his father's arrest and later death in prison, and that he tried to start prosecution proceedings for him but this seemed impossible due to the ambiguity of the supposed transitional justice procedures in Syria today and returned disappointed because apparently "informants live among us without prospects of accountability."[47] This ambiguity deepens the feeling that justice is selective and truth continues to be out of reach.

The collapse of trust in justice is inseparable from its direct impact on life paths, especially education. Several testimonies indicate that education has been suspended or postponed due to arrest or disappearance, and that the state has not offered real alternatives to make up for them. They demanded that education be seen as a form of reparation, not a favor or circumstantial assistance. In this context, absence of make-up educational policies becomes further evidence of a structural flaw in the understanding of social justice, Rana says:[48]

> "Today, there are already many people who have dropped out of school. I had better luck, because my mother always pushed me to pursue my studies and insisted on it. But many children have had to drop out of school to take on the responsibility of providing for their families. Therefore, they can be compensated by giving them the opportunity to complete their education, or by providing them with jobs that they deserve. We are not saying that people are waiting for pity or salaries from the state, not at all, but we are demanding compensation for what we have gone through. Those who are unable to complete their studies must be compensated by being able to complete them, this is their right."

46. Participant above, Saeed
47. Participant above, Jamal
48. Participant above,

What these testimonies show is that the loss of trust did not arise from a single situation or experience, but from a long accumulation of experiences of neglect, waiting, and unfulfilled promises. Justice, as these accounts show, is not only absent, but constantly deferred, leading many to live in a grey area between cautious hope and realistic despair. This collapse in trust does not mean the end of the demand for rights, but it does explain why justice, in the consciousness of the sons and daughters of the missing and detained, has become a demand that requires deep reform of the institutions themselves before being about legal proceedings or legal files.

These testimonies show that the collapse of trust in justice and institutions does not only translate into demanding rights or waiting for accountability, but extends to individuals' perception of themselves, their position in society, and future prospects. When justice is absent or seems to be deferred with no clear horizon, the question is no longer limited to who is responsible, but a deeper question about the point of survival, the meaning of belonging, and the possibility of building a viable life in a context that does not guarantee protection or recognition. Within this void, new paths begin to form, as children swing between the desire to escape by way of individual salvation and faltering attempts to rebuild and cling to life in a reality that is overburdened with loss. This shift in the existential compass paves the way for the transition to the next section, which deals with the paths of identity and the future as they are formed between the choice to leave and the will to rebuild oneself and meaning.

9. Paths of identity and future: Between escape and rebuilding

This section shows that the experience of loss and detention does not stop at pain or deprivation. Rather, it extends to reshape the paths of individual identity and future outlook of the sons and daughters of missing persons. With the collapse of protection systems and the absence of justice, individuals find themselves facing a central existential question: how to go on? What future to expect after this enforced disruption of one's life path? Testimonies show that answers reflected two interwoven tendencies: escape in search of survival and rebuilding as an adamant attempt to restore meaning and dignity. In many testimonies, escape, especially travelling or migrating, seems to be more an existential choice than an economic decision. Some participants cited a prior wish to leave the country to evade mandatory conscription or because they could not keep silent as their father or sibling had been arrested or because of a stifling financial reality that leaves no room to imagine a stable future.

One participant said that he used to consider leaving the country before the fall of the regime because "I had to join the army and keep silent about the detention of my father and brother." Travelling now, however, could offer him better future prospects so he could support his family financially.[49] In this testimony, escaping is not disavowal of belonging, but a survival strategy and an attempt to shoulder the role of support in the absence of the father. Even with the new political shifts, travelling continued to be on the table but for different reasons reflecting a transformation in their relation with the place but no solution to the predicament of the future.

Other testimonies, on the other hand, reveal a different path involving rebuilding from within the experience itself, by linking the future to the realization of what the missing person could not complete. In this context, what can be described as "pathway loyalty" is repeated, in which studying, working, or choosing a university major becomes a symbolic act of the continued presence of the father or mother.

One participant recounts that she got married at a young age, but made completing her studies a condition to her marriage "because her father's dream was that his children would study". She added that she did not give up despite the harsh circumstances, saying: "I will not give up. I want to finish my studies and to work for my father to always be proud of us. My mother even says to my brothers, 'Whoever fails will retake the baccalaureate exam, I want you all to be educated, because that was your father's dream."[50]

Here, academic or professional success becomes a sign of resilience. This path is not limited to individual achievement, but extends to reshaping values and moral identity. Amal continues to emphasize how her father's values, such as giving and helping the poor, have become an essential part of her personality, stressing that she focuses especially on supporting orphans "because there is no harder feeling than being an orphan." Here, the father appears not only as a memory, but as a moral reference that guides the present and gives continuity a meaning that goes beyond loss.

Furthermore, the question of memory constitutes a central piece of future identity pathways. Some participants see commemoration, through photographs, museums or public spaces, as a way to ensure recognition and not to turn victims into numbers.

49. Participant above, Hassan
50. Participant above, Amal

Based on her personal experience, Souad suggests designating a public place with pictures of the missing because this means that people will read Fatiha (first Quran chapter) and pray for them:[51]

> Participant: They made that proposal to put the photos up so that people who see them would read Fatiha and pray for them. I mean using the photos in that beautiful sense.
> Researcher: Was this proposal implemented in Idleb for example or in your village?
> Participant: Yes, they implemented it in Idleb. They put my father's photo and that of my brother-in-law… I can't remember where exactly but they sent me a picture.
> Researcher: How did you feel when you saw it?
> Participant: I felt proud.

At the same time, participants unanimously agree that detention centers must be closed or even eliminated in what seems to be a rejection to constantly recall the painful memories to protect mothers and families from reopening old wounds. This discrepancy does not reflect a contradiction as much as it reveals their fragile relation with memory and different levels of resilience. Issam says:

> Researcher: What do you think of the idea of converting Sednaya Prison into a museum?
> Participant: It is like burning someone with a heated rod and then making them watch it every day!

Alongside this consensus, an additional -rarely stated- dimension emerged in some interviews that may contribute to understanding the severity of this refusal which is how the conversion of these sites into museums is being received in the broader Syrian context. In light of the legacy of the former regime and the civil war and the accompanying escalation of identity conflicts, this kind of commemoration may be understood as symbolically proving the dominance of one group over another with sectarian interpretations of what happened during the rule of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, rather than documenting violence or acknowledging the victims. This interpretation is not presented as a description of what happened, nor as a collective position agreed by the participants, but as a social representation formed by some of those affected in a long context characterized by the politicization of affiliations and exacerbated during the years of violence and division. In this context, places like Sednaya prison are prone to holding symbolic connotations that go beyond the purposes of documentation or accountability, being restored as a renewed compulsive presence, rather than as a containable space of memory.

51. Souad, female, was 10 years old at time of detention, missing person died in detention and identified in Caesar photos

Accordingly, this disparity does not reflect a contradiction in attitudes as much as it reveals the fragility of the relationship with memory after violence, and the disparity in social and emotional resilience, especially when memory is presented in a transitional context in which the political and symbolic structures that produced violence have not yet been dismantled.

New paths of agency also emerge here, as some of the sons and daughters of the missing make the shift from the position of victim associated with helplessness to the position of the social or political actor. Participants talk about engaging in documentation, in community-based organizations in support of the families of martyrs, or in initiatives to advocate for justice and accountability. In one testimony, a participant describes how after liberation he contributed to the establishment of an association for the families of martyrs, considering this work as a form of collective rebuilding, and an attempt to fill the void left by the state.[52] In other testimonies, the transition to political activism is seen as a way of giving "something" to the missing person or to regain control over one's life after years of helplessness.

Notwithstanding these multiple paths, frustration is never absent from the scene. Many participants expressed skepticism in the feasibility of genuine justice and concern that selective justice would only reproduce injustice. This frustration does not preclude pursuit but makes it a cautious and tense one as the future remains an incomplete project swinging between hope and disappointment. Nonetheless, at certain moments some clear indications of self-restoration emerge as in some participants' description of their feeling after the liberation that "the air has changed" and that people have started to regain their energy and capacity to be proactive and work.

All in all, these testimonies show that pathways of identity and future of sons and daughters of missing persons do not follow a straight trajectory nor end with a single choice. They are intertwining pathways where escape and rebuilding, memory and forgetfulness, hope and doubt mutually interact. At the heart of these pathways, the loss continues to be present as a silent point of reference that does not necessarily paralyze their movement, but necessitates that every attempt to move forward be conditional, cautious and charged with a moral meaning that transcends the individual self.

52. Participant above, Saeed

Discussion: From absence as a lived experience to justice as an ethical pathway

The findings of this research indicate that enforced disappearance in the Syrian context cannot be understood as a psychological trauma that can be treated individually, but as an extended social relationship that reproduces violence over time and whose impact takes shape in the daily lives of children, structures of the family, patterns of belonging and perceptions of justice and future. Absence, as experienced by sons and daughters of missing persons, has not been a temporary gap waiting to be filled with truth. Rather, it has been a structural status that gave rise to suspended time, fractured conscience, premature responsibilities and compounded social vulnerability.

The testimonies show that time in the enforced disappearance experience does not follow a linear trajectory leading to recovery, but it operates as a social space within which absence is invoked every day. Waiting is not a passing emotional state, but a way of life that governs critical decisions: staying or migrating, keeping silent or inquiring, studying or dropping out, holding on to hope or looking for a painful closure. This fractured time, in turn, generates deep emotional struggle as children experience a persistent moral conflict between wishing the missing person were alive and hoping they were dead to escape the torture. This conflict cannot be disclosed without some guilt. In this case, conscience is not a private internal space, but a space where political violence intersects with emotions and where control is reproduced through uncertainty. The results also show that the children's strategies were not directed at "resolving" the struggle, but managing it. Silence, emotional regulation, deferral of anger, and shifting attention to study, work, or spiritual practices are not so much indicators of recovery as they are mechanisms for surviving in a context where there is little protection. These practices, while allowing for the continuation of daily life, have contributed to the reshaping of roles within the family, as children have become protectors of mothers' feelings, mediators of knowledge, and bearers of the burden of absence, leading to a disrupted childhood and forced adulthood based not on maturity but on necessity.

Testimonies show that the violence did not stop at the moment of arrest, but continued as a foundational memory of the experience. Raids, torture, extortion, stigma, school violence, harassment, repressive bureaucracy, and enforced silence have all formed a living environment that has made disappearance a comprehensive experience that redefines the relationship between children and the state and society. Instead of becoming sources of protection, kinship networks and institutions have often withdrawn or become additional sources of pressure, deepening social vulnerability and entrenching feelings of isolation and lack of support.

In this context, the collapse of trust in justice and institutions does not appear as an ideological consequence, but as the result of accumulated experiences of waiting, false promises, selective justice, and lack of recognition. Justice, as it appears in the children's narratives, is not only a matter of legal accountability, but also the ability to reclaim the meaning of life after absence, and to imagine a future in which disappearance is not reproduced as a potential prospect. Therefore, the absence of compensatory education policies, long-term support pathways, or genuine recognition mechanisms transforms justice into an abstract concept divorced from the reality of life.

The paths of identity and the future reveal that children were not just passive victims, but actors who negotiated absence in multiple ways: migration as survival and responsibility, or rebuilding through study, work, and honoring the values of the missing person, or engaging in public affairs and documentation. But these paths have remained conditional, tense, and open to frustration, because the loss has not been resolved, because justice has not been served, and because memory itself has become an arena of conflict between the need for recognition and the need for closure.

In light of the above, it is clear that unless any approach to transitional justice, memory, or reparation is based on understanding this temporal and emotional complexity, it threatens to reproduce rather than dismantle violence. The imposition of memory may turn into a new form of coercion, the acceleration of revelation of truth may become symbolic violence, and the unification of narratives may exclude those who cannot or do not want to subscribe to them. The experience that this research explores shows that absence is not an issue that needs to be "closed" quickly, but a social relationship that needs sensitive management, long-term pathways, and a recognition of the multiplicity of rhythms and needs.

Thus, recommendations herein are not mere technical suggestions or standard requirements, but an ethical and knowledge response to the inputs of the experience itself. The recommendations seek to protect children from a justice with little affinity to their lived experience, a memory they have little control on and from policies that reproduce suspended time without resolution. The sensitivity of the experience, as revealed by this research, is not a mere human detail, but a structural prerequisite for any pathway that truly seeks to repair restore what has been broken and to prevent violence being handed down generations under new labels.

Recommendations: Towards an experience-sensitive justice model

These recommendations emanate from the analytical findings presented in this report which clearly show that the experience of sons and daughters of missing persons in Syria cannot be reduced to a single pathway nor can it be accommodated within ready-made standard models of transitional justice, memory or reparations. The testimonies reveal a deep division within the experience itself: between those who need memory as a prerequisite for justice and those who need closure as a prerequisite for going on with life; between those who believe remembering is a form of recognition and those who see it as forced re-exposure to violence, and between institutional perceptions that tend to favor general symbolism and lived experiences that find this symbolism threatening to a fragile psycho-social stability. All this, however, is accompanied by a near-consensus on the necessity of accountability. Therefore, no transitional pathway may be effective or ethical unless it emanates from a deep understanding of the experience as lived by the afflicted themselves not as framed in the literature or political rhetoric.

To the Syrian transitional authorities

The data of this research indicate that one of the most critical challenges for the transitional period lies in the tendency to adopt ready-made models of memory and transitional justice especially those which favor swift symbolic measures such as converting detention centers into memorial sites or national museums by way of declaring break with the past. Interviews with sons and daughters of missing persons show that this tendency may have some serious social and emotional risks. In addition to the almost unanimous rejection of converting Sednaya prison and other detention centers into public memory sites, some testimonies reveal some interpretations that make such initiatives prone to being seen -with the legacy of the former regime, civil war and fierce identity struggles- as symbolic reinforcement of oppressive or domination relations on sectarian grounds not just for purposes of documentation or recognition. This rejection stems from concern of reproducing violence through imposing memory whether as a coercive invocation of a pain that many of those afflicted are seeking to remove from their daily lives or as a way of framing that regenerates social rifts whose roots have not yet been treated. Therefore, the study recommends that transitional authorities refrain from taking major symbolic decisions in the field of memory without in-depth and long-term consultations with the afflicted themselves in addition to quality context-sensitive studies. It is also recommended that they recognize that memory is not necessarily an act of liberation. If imposed without regard to the rhythm of social and emotional experience, it could rather constitute a further hurdle to recovery and justice instead of supporting them.

The findings also show that transitional justice cannot be reduced to a moment of political overthrow or swift legal measures because violence, as experienced by the children, has not ended with the removal of the perpetrator, but continued in the form of suspended time, prolonged waiting, premature responsibilities and social disintegration. Therefore, the study recommends that transitional policies be based on understanding this fractured time and that programs be designed as long-term pathways to remedy the impact of absence on daily life rather than being a circumstantial response to internal or international political pressure.

To the National Commission for Missing Persons in the Syria

The testimonies have shown that the main challenge that families face is not limited to lack of information, but lies in how ambiguity itself is dealt with. For many children, ambiguity is not merely a knowledge gap, but an existential condition that regulates their relation with time, hope, guilt and their ability to persist. Accordingly, the study recommends that the National Commission for Missing Persons adopt an experience-sensitive approach not a merely technical one.

This approach must balance between the right to know and the right to refrain from forced resolution. Uncovering the truth must be treated as a right not a moral obligation on families nor an administrative pathway that would be completed without regard to the readiness of the afflicted.

The data also reveal that many children have become, by experience, moral intermediaries within their families, carrying both the burden of knowledge and the burden of withholding it. Therefore, the study recommends that the Commission develop communication protocols that take into account this coercive role, avoid categorical or rushed communication, and involve children not only as sources of information, but also as partners in thinking about memory policies, the fate of places, symbols, and narratives associated with missing persons.

To the National Commission for Transitional Justice

Testimonies show that the concept of justice, as circulated in public discourse, seems for many children to be an abstract concept that does not touch their daily lives. For them, justice is not just about accountability (which they almost all agree to), but about the ability to regain a livable life course after years of disruption. Therefore, the study recommends moving from a model justice based on copying other experiences, to a contextual justice that is based on the questions asked by the children themselves: How do we live after absence? How do we rebuild trust? How do we plan for a future where people don't disappear without a trace?

The study further recommends extending the concept of reparations to include long-term social impacts of enforced disappearance instead of being limited to psychological or financial support. The data show that disrupted childhood, forced adulthood, social isolation and collapse of trust in institutions are all forms of damage that cannot be remedied through conventional approaches. Reparations in this context must include education, long-term support, regaining the ability to envision the future and being able to talk about what happened not as privileges but rights emanating from a structural harm.

To the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP)

The findings of this report show that the 'do-no-harm' principle, an essential part of the mandate of the IIMP, assumes a deeper and more complex meaning in the Syrian context. The data show that the manner in which information is managed and the timing and form of information sharing may itself be a source of regenerating symbolic violence unless it takes into consideration the emotional struggle and time suspension that children and families experience. In this light, the study recommends that:

- The IIMP must observe this principle as an experience-sensitive communication practice not just a general ethical obligation. This can be achieved through developing communication protocols based on cultural and emotional sensitivity that are considerate of the essential difference between the temporal and emotional spaces of the children and the technical logic of information.

- IIMP's communication and outcomes must avoid any direct or indirect pressure towards forced "resolution" or suggesting that knowledge is the end of a long pathway of waiting. Rather, it must deal with truth as a process that takes time and give the families the right to control the timing of receiving and using the information.

- IIMP must support tools and practices to maintain constant communication with Syrian civil society to ensure that sharing data and messages is not divorced from the lived experience of the children and that the used strategies do not deepen feelings of trauma or helplessness but may help the process of gradual building of meaning.

- IIMP must work with CSOs and victim associations to create joint channels to draft messages so that the information presented to the victims or to the broader public is consistent with how victims themselves express their experiences not just what the international technical standards require.

These recommendations do not go beyond its legal mandate but they deepen the understanding of how to fulfil that mandate in the context of people's lives. This would bring IIMP's work closer to the lived experience of children and families and transform its information from cold technical knowledge to a calculated human tool.

To victim associations

Victim associations play a key role in breaking the general silence around enforced disappearance and transforming the individual experience into a collective cause. Nonetheless, the testimonies reveal a tension that exists between the logic of collective representation and the logic of individual experience especially for sons and daughters of missing persons. More often than not, children find themselves automatically enlisted in a uniform representational discourse in which they are expected to continue to play the role of the 'steadfast son/daughter' or 'champion of the cause' even when their needs change or are in contrast with this role.

Therefore, the study recommends that victim associations develop some internal mechanisms to allow for distinction within the group itself and to recognize that children are not a single bloc nor do they experience absence in the same way or time. The strength of associations should not be promoted by forcibly standardizing narratives, but through allowing safe spaces for difference that allow some members to continue their public action while allowing others to temporarily or permanently withdraw from the public sphere without being viewed as having betrayed or weakened the cause.

To civil society organizations

The testimonies reveal that CSOs often deal with sons and daughters of missing persons as beneficiaries of ready-made programs (psychological support, grounding sessions, empowerment activities) without adequate understanding of the complex social and temporal character of their experience. The data show that the suffering is not only manifested in psychological pain but in isolation, shift of roles, stigma and disintegration of relations which are issues that could not be remedied using individual or short-term tools. The study, therefore, recommends that CSOs shift from an intervention logic to long-term mentoring so as to develop programs that deal with the children as social actors living within complex familial and societal networks rather than as separate psychological cases. It further recommends that these CSOs review the impact of their activities regularly inquiring not only about what it offers but also about the symbolic or emotional pressure it may be reproducing by intensifying memories or projecting ready-made expectations about recovery, resilience or engagement.

To media professionalst

The findings of this report show that media does not stand outside the experience of forced absence but is directly intertwined with it and may at certain points be part of the suffering of sons and daughters of missing persons and their families. For media coverage, when insensitive to the nature of this experience, is capable of reproducing harm even when offered under the banner of 'unveiling' or 'scoop'. We have recently witnessed some media practices -including circulation of unconfirmed accounts of secret detention centers, to the use of sensational language in introducing 'coming soon' information about the fate of missing persons- which have had a painful and confusing impact on the families because it reopened venues for waiting and created fragile hopes only to let them fall apart without accountability.

It must be stressed that raising false hope is not a simple professional mistake, but a form of violence.

Hope, as this report shows, is not always a costless resource or a positive feeling as it could be a heavy burden that sons and daughters of missing persons experience within a suspended time. When this hope is produced by the media based on unconfirmed information or sensationalized stories that are not based on rigorous investigation and is then withdrawn, harm is multiplied because it wouldn't be only about unfulfilled expectations but it would undermine individuals' ability to continue to manage their daily waiting.

The testimonies also show that dealing with the missing persons file with the logic of media suspense (through headlines such as "Tomorrow we will reveal information") turns a highly sensitive humanitarian issue into a consumable material. This logic does not take into account that families do not live these issues as spectators, but as direct stakeholders, and that any "advertisement" of this kind could mean a sleepless night, a forced return to the first moments of fear, or a new collapse of hope. The cases of missing persons are not a mystery that is solved in stages, nor is it a story that is built upwards, but rather an open wound that requires precise language, thoughtful timing, and responsibility that goes beyond the logic of scoop and views.

The testimonies also show the need to distinguish between the right to know and the imposition of knowledge. Knowing the fate of the missing does not always mark the end of suffering, and in many cases it may be the beginning of a new form of suffering. Therefore, the publication of sensitive information, even when it is true, without regard to the context, timing, or the families' readiness for it, can become additional harm. Not everything that is known should be published immediately, and not every disclosure is a public service. Responsible media is the one that balances the value of information with its impact, and asks itself the question of potential harm before the question of journalistic significance.

Some media coverage assumes, intentionally or unintentionally, that all families of the missing want the truth in the same way and at the same time. However, this report clearly shows that experiences vary: between those who received a body, those whose missing person has returned, those who are still waiting, and those who cannot afford more news or "revelations". Treating these categories as a single bloc eliminates this diversity and imposes normative reactions that do not correspond to the lived experience. It is the media that is sensitive to experience that acknowledges this plurality, and does not impose a single narrative or response as "normal" or "correct."

In this context, the report calls on media professionals to reconsider how to involve the sons and daughters of missing persons and their families in media coverage. They are not news material, nor are they voices invoked only in moments of shock or emotion. Rather, they are a moral reference that should be listened to respectfully and in the long term. Silence, as the report showed, is not always voicelessness, but may be a conscious choice of protection. Respecting this silence is just as important as allowing space for speech.

Finally, the report emphasizes that the adoption of "do-no-harm" principle in the coverage of missing persons cases should not remain a general slogan, but must translate into concrete daily practice. Practice that begins with simple but crucial questions before publication: Is this information confirmed? Is it necessary to publish it at this timing? Who could be harmed by it? Do those afflicted have any control over the way the information is circulated? When the media deals with the issues of missing persons, it does not report a past event; it intervenes in a continuous, fragile life spent waiting. Media sense of responsibility is not measured by the speed of publication or the scale of interaction, but by its ability not to add a new layer of harm to an already violent and ambiguous experience.

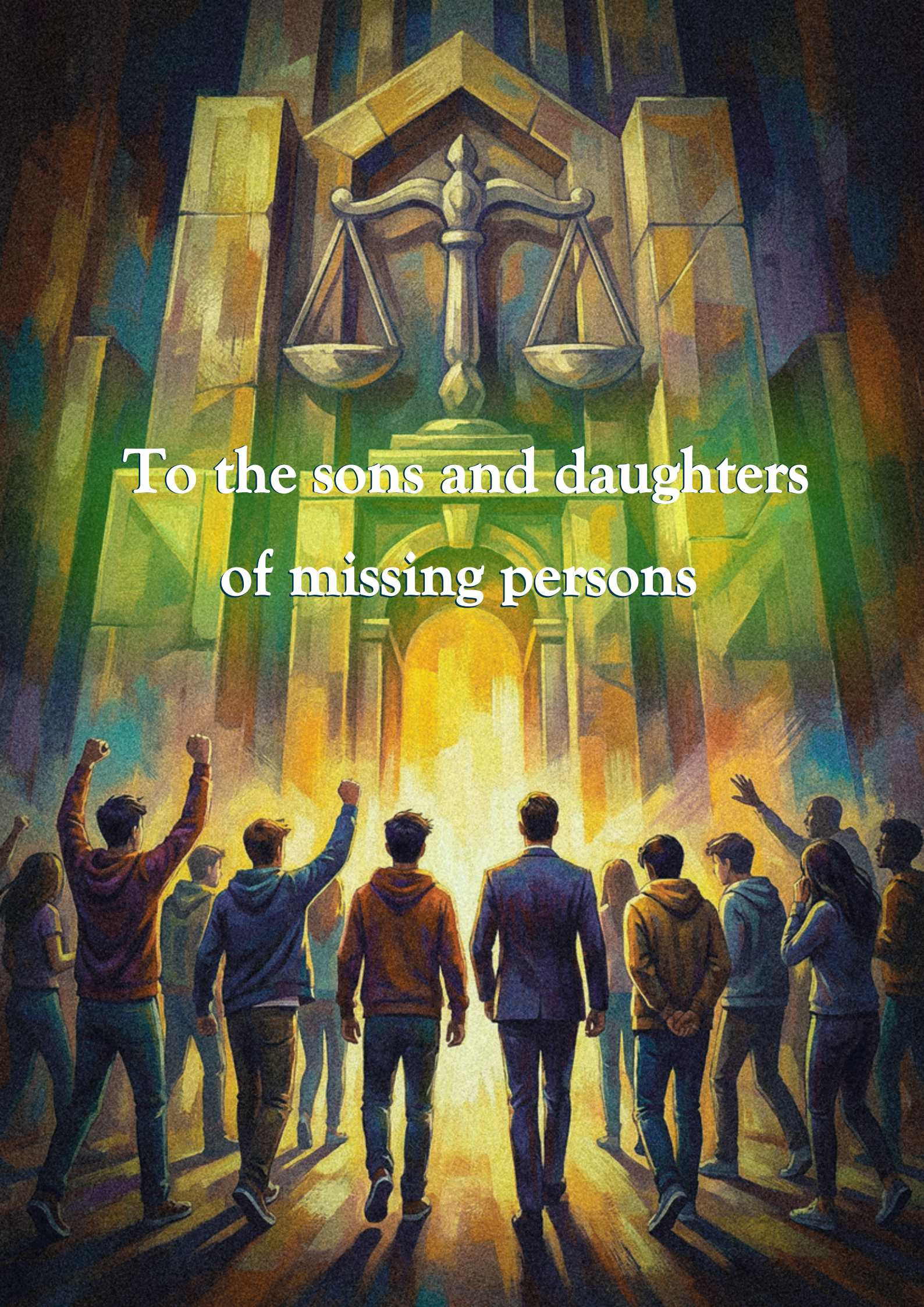
To researchers

In this context, where data show that simple religious practices such as praying for the missing or deceased give some children a sense of reassurance and contentment, and help them endure and live with the absence, it is clear that recovery strategies in Syrian society are not limited to formal psychological or material support, but are also rooted in local cultural and religious resources that have a deep meaning for those who went through these experiences.

However, these resources are not understood or valued through technical or human rights approaches alone, because they do not appear as measurable needs, but rather as meanings that are formed within everyday narratives and in ways of living with absence. With this in mind, the study recommends that international and national actors invest in supporting in-depth qualitative research (sociological and anthropological) not only as a complement to quantitative documentation, but as the primary tool for exploring local recovery strategies as they are actually experienced by children, including the religious and symbolic dimensions that give meaning and mitigate the experience. Understanding how to manage time, negotiate with hope, live with conflicts of conscience, and turn to familiar cultural resources is a prerequisite for developing policies that are experience-sensitive, capable of supporting recovery without imposing external models that are incompatible with the experienced reality.

The results of this research are not intended to offer a statistical generalization, nor are they claimed to introduce new concepts in isolation from the existing literature on enforced disappearance, memory, time, and political violence. However, the research contributes to reformulating and refining these concepts from within the lived experience of the sons and daughters of missing persons in the Syrian context, and to highlight how they intertwine daily in the lives of individuals as interwoven social, temporal, and moral structures. In this context, concepts such as suspended time, emotional struggle, emotion regulation as a survival mechanism, and disrupted childhood are presented not as standalone theoretical innovations, but as analytical lenses redefined based on qualitative data, allowing for a deeper understanding of how enforced disappearance is experienced over time. The transferability of the results of this research lies precisely at this analytical level: these revised conceptual lenses can be used to compare similar experiences in other contexts of political violence and enforced disappearances, provided that they are treated as flexible interpretive tools, rather than ready-made models, and that the historical, cultural, and contextual differences of each case are respected. Transferability here is not a generalization of results, but rather a possibility of responsible comparative thinking.

In conclusion, these recommendations reveal that the greatest risk in the Syrian transition lies not only in the absence of justice, but in the imposition of justice that does not correspond to the experience, and a memory whose owners do not want. Justice that does not listen can reproduce violence, and memory that is imposed can turn into a new form of coercion. Being sensitive to the experience is not a theoretical luxury; it is rather a moral and political prerequisite for any path that really seeks to repair what is broken, not to cover it up with ready-made symbols. At the conclusion of this report, we add the following word not as a research finding, but as an ethical extension of the listening on which the research is based.


To the sons and daughters
of missing persons

A message to the sons and daughters of missing persons

We have experienced absence in different ways and dissimilar ends and with questions not answered in the same way. We write this message because we are one of you, not because our experiences are one and the same but because we know as insiders that absence does not end in the same manner nor does it leave behind the same impact or give us all the same time or tools to deal with it.

Some of us have received a body after waiting for so long and had to learn how to live with a cruel reality that does not end the absence but transforms it from waiting for their returning into facing their loss which is no less complicated. Among us are those who received nothing; no body, no information, and continue to live within an open question which they do not know how to close nor how it would take them to tomorrow. There are those whose absentee has returned after years of going missing only to find out that return does not mean restoring that which has been disrupted and that the time that was missed cannot be made up for. Among us, too, are those who continue to live on partial or contradictory information that keeps them hanging between hope and resolution without being able to cling to either.

We know these variations are not passing details. Rather, they give rise to diverse experiences, incomparable pains and different life paths. We know that those who have received a dead body do not experience absence as do those who continue to wait and that those whose father or mother has returned live an experience different from what they did before their return. We know that persistent ambiguity is not necessarily a temporary stage but could become a long-standing way of life.

We write this because we recognize that these nuances are often neglected, taken lightly or dealt with as levels of the same experience while in reality each has their own internal logic, their own questions, limitations and are equally entitled to be recognized without comparison, sequence or preference.

We write because we know that absence, no matter the path it takes, leaves a deep impact in the time we live in. Whether it ends with the return of a body or does not end, it reshapes our relation with the present and future, with ourselves and others. It rearranges our life expectations and fears and what we dare let go of and what we hold on to.

We write here, too, because we know that absence does not leave only sadness behind, but a muted, deferred, intermittent anger or anger that is reluctant to show. This anger does not always find a safe room to be vented so it becomes a source of internal burden or constant stress. We write this message to say that this anger is not a moral defect, nor is it a betrayal of loyalty or a threat to justice. Rather, it is part of the experience and a response to violence which was out of our hands. None of us should have to justify or control their anger to be accepted by others.

We write this message because we recognize that differences are not only in terms of the fate of the missing but also extends to memory itself. The first thing we would like to tell ourselves and the sons and daughters of missing persons who read these lines is that these differences are not defects nor is disparity in memory a sign of failure. We don't all have the same memories about the missing person nor are we all able to talk about it in the same manner or timing. Those who had grown up and were at an age that allowed them to keep images, stories and details hold a different form of memory than those who were younger or just children and can barely remember the face of the missing person but experience a different form of loss. Absence of memories is not a gap, but yet another form of loss. The silence which may ensue is not weakness, betrayal or moral failure but, more often than not, it is a form of protecting oneself from an unfair comparison. We are not required to have a complete story for our grief to be legitimate nor must we speak to prove our loyalty or belonging. Each one of us has a unique relation with the missing persons that was formed based on the age, the moment, the fear, the circumstances and what has or has not remained in the memory.

We write this message because we know that comparison may produce a hidden feeling of guilt especially when we see others speaking confidently or recounting details we do not have. Those who speak more are not stronger and those who keep silent are not weaker. Some of us project absence in words, others carry it in their body, or anxiety, or daily choices, or being overprotective towards those who survived. All these are equally legitimate forms of expression. None of them is purer or more sincere than the other.

We also write because we know that hope itself is not experienced the same way. There are those among us who cling to it as a prerequisite to continue with life and those who have been exhausted by it, or fear it or can no longer hold on to it without incurring harm. Doubting one's hope is not betrayal, being exhausted by it is not failure, leaving it aside temporarily is not surrender. Hope, just like absence, is an evolving relation. Sometimes, it may be more of a moral burden than a form of support. Each one of us has the right to negotiate hope in their own way or put it aside when it is just too heavy a burden.

We remind ourselves, too, that ability to speak is not a duty, but a choice. The right to be silent is just as valid as the right to tell. We are not responsible for the age we were at when they went missing nor for what memories we managed to have or not. What was taken from us as children cannot be forcibly restored nor should it become yet another burden added to the loss itself.
We write because we know our relation with the missing person is not static nor does it follow a linear trajectory. It may intensify at points and fade at others. It may change as we change or as life changes or as we get tired of the constant pressure and heavy burden. The shift in this relation is not betrayal, not forgetting, not lack of loyalty. Rather, it is part of the evolution of life itself within that absence. No one should be expected to stand still in the same position forever.
We also know that being tired of the issue itself is not betrayal. Wishing to withdraw or step back is sometimes another form of self-protection. It is not a denial of the absence nor it is quitting.
This report has not been written to give one experience precedence over another nor to say that there is a 'right' way to live with absence. We have rather written it because we know that contradictions, reluctance, variance in rhythm, fluctuation of position or emotion are all normal aspects of this experience no matter the form of closure or non-closure.

These words may not resonate with some of you, or you may not feel they fully encompass your experience. This, too, is understandable. As there is not one absence, there is not one language that is capable of encompassing it.

We write these words because we know that much of the discourse, even those that are considerate, tend to deal with sons and daughters of missing persons as one bloc or assume that knowing the 'truth' would necessarily put an end to their suffering. From our position, however, we know that truth may as well be the beginning of a new episode of suffering or a shift to a new form of suffering or another burden that needs more time to deal with.

We write this because we believe that each one of us has the right to live their experience as is not as it is expected to be. We have the right to change our position over time, redefine our relation with absence. We must not be required to hold on, keep composed, or be always clear.
We write this message not to standardize the experience but to protect its very diversity.

Not to shut questions, but to say their presence is understandable.

Not to offer conclusions but leave an area for disagreement, ambiguity and time.

We write because we are part of you.

Because recognition of the multiplicity of absence is, of and by itself, a form of justice.

Bibliography

Haj Saleh, Khaleel. (2024, 20 December). "Necessary steps from the Syrian 'ambiguous loss community' perspective". AlJumhuriya. https://bit.ly/3OOp5Qo

Deeb, Hadeel; Sadi, Rana; Sharbah, Bushra. (2022). "Level of psychological resilience of siblings of missing persons during the war on Syria: a field study in Lattakia countryside." Lattakia University Journal- Humanities and Arts Series. 44(1).

Caesar Families Association. (2024). "Not Our Choice, But We Are Bound by Hope: burdens of the legal and social system on women affected by enforced disappearance in Syria"

AlMawi, Rida. (2025, 7 January). "Syria's missing children: between hope of return and incomplete grief" BBC News Arabic https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cnv34909gyqo

Group of Syrian organizations. (2021). "A Guide through the Untold Darkness: Reality of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria and their families."

Mahmud, Basem. (2018) "Towards Social Sciences in the Arab Context: On the need for grounded theory", Omran. https://omran.dohainstitute.org/ar/Issue026/Pages/art4.aspx

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. (2023, 27 October). "Closing of TOT program on ambiguous loss in the Syrian context. https://bit.ly/4qFH7Sg

Mustafa, Talal. "Families of detainees and missing persons: legal and living challenges and psycho-social impact, a field study for a sample of Syrian families", Haramoon Center, (2023)

The Day After. (2020) On the brink of despair: Experiences of families of persons forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime

Dawlati and Women Now for Development, (2018). "Shadows of Syrian Disappeared".

Hashim Lakeh, Salah Eddin; Noufal, Jalal; Yaski, Wael; Qenan, Juman; Wahiba, Mervat; Sheikh Hamoud, Munir; Abo Leil, Amjad; and Barakat, Muta'. (2025) "Studying Ambiguous Loss in the Syrian Context". Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
https://scm.bz/ambiguous-loss-in-the-syrian-context-ar/

Bernath, J. (2025).

Mobilizing for Syria's disappeared: Survivor-led movements, emotions, and transitional justice. Journal of Human Rights Practice, 17(2).

Hochberg, L. (2021).

Recovering the Truth for Syria's Missing and Forcibly Disappeared: Assessing Opportunity Structures and Guiding Principles for International Stakeholders. Master's thesis, Utrecht University.

مؤسسة معتقلي و مفقودي سجن صيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison

February 2026

info@admsp.org
www.admsp.org