

# Searching for Missing Persons in Northeast Syria

Assessment & Recommendations for the First Responders' Team



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**Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC)**  
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Cover: The First Responders' Team exhume the remains of a body in Raqqa. (C) FRT 2019

# Introduction

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Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), armed groups and civilians have discovered tens of mass graves throughout Northeast Syria. Hundreds of additional bodies have been discovered in the rubble left behind by Coalition airstrikes. These unidentified remains have left thousands of families with no information on the fate of their loved ones. Since the beginning of the conflict, discovering the fates of the thousands of missing persons has been one of the primary demands of Syrians; however, little progress has been made. The territorial defeat of ISIS and relative stability in Northeast Syria provides a unique opportunity to discover the fates of missing persons while also collecting valuable evidence of ISIS crimes. The potential for grave sites and bodies to be damaged, both by intentional tampering and natural degradation, makes the situation particularly urgent.

Local councils in Northeast Syria have recognized this urgency and created a First Responders' Team (FRT) to undertake exhumations. While this team has been doing extraordinary work under extremely difficult circumstances, they have little technical knowledge on how to protect the bodies they handle from damage and how to appropriately document what they find in order to ensure that it is preserved for future accountability efforts and identification. Additionally, because of the security situation on the ground and the widespread displacement of civilians from Northeast Syria, families of the missing have had limited opportunities to learn about the FRT's work or register their missing loved ones. The FRT is in need of specialized training in grave exhumation, forensic investigations, documentation, and psychosocial resiliency, and their work needs to be integrated into a comprehensive program that also includes documentation of the missing and direct engagement with families.

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In the fall of 2019, SJAC received a small award from Creative Associates' Facilitating Urban Recovery and Transition (FURAT) project to implement a training program and assessment for the First Responders' Team. SJAC provided remote forensic trainings and psychosocial support in collaboration with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), a forensics organization with over thirty years of experience in mass grave exhumations. The First Responders' Team was enthusiastic about the first round of trainings, but also identified significant, specific needs for further support, including more extensive technical training, preferably in-person, as well as psychosocial support. In addition to these self-identified needs, SJAC has further recommendations on how to restructure the FRT in order to better take advantage of future technical trainings and build out a more intensive psychosocial support program. In the aftermath of the initial assessment with FURAT, SJAC has received longer term resources in order to continue to collaborate with the FRT and EAAF in launching a more comprehensive missing persons program. This project will implement the above recommendations, as well as undertake antemortem documentation and provide capacity building and psychosocial support to families of the missing. Both SJAC and the First Responders' Team will need diverse political and financial support in order to build the comprehensive program necessary to begin identifying victims.

# Current Exhumation Processes

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In early 2018, the local council in Raqqa created the First Responders' Team in order to recover bodies left among the rubble in the aftermath of the Global Coalition's airstrikes. Shortly thereafter, their work expanded to include exhumation of graves, both those which families created while under air bombardment as well as those resulting from crimes. To date, twenty-two mass graves have been exhumed in Northeast Syria, containing a total of 3,700 bodies, with between 13 to 793 bodies found in each grave. An additional 1,900 bodies have been recovered from the rubble, streets, or ad hoc graves created by families under bombardment. Five hundred sixty-one bodies have been identified, but the vast majority of these were found in the rubble or in graves created by family members. The majority of remains removed from mass graves remain unidentified.

While the First Responder' Team is run through the Raqqa Civil Council for administrative purposes, it is now an impartial organization operating independently of the local governance structure. As of January 2020, the FRT has 56 workers in Raqqa and Deir Ezzour, including a team lead and a medical doctor. Families, witnesses, and other community members report knowledge of mass graves or other human remains to the team, which has created a system for exhumation and reburial. The FRT assigns each recovered body an ID number and records basic information, including sex, estimated age, apparent cause of death, date of recovery, location of recovery, and a list of any belongings found with the body. Since the doctor joined the team in April 2019, a hair follicle, tooth, and piece of thigh bone have been taken from each body.

In some cases, bodies are readily identifiable. In one case, the team recovered a body with an ID,<sup>1</sup>

and in others, family members have asked the team to recover already identified remains from the rubble or ad hoc burials that were created during the Coalition airstrikes, when access to traditional cemeteries was not possible. In these cases, the team returns the body to the family or, if the family prefers, reburies the body and informs the family of the precise location. Some families choose the latter because of the high cost of burial.

*"To date, 22 mass graves have been exhumed in Northeast Syria, containing a total of 3,700 bodies"*

The team has created two gravesites outside of the city for the purpose of reburial. Bodies are buried in parallel, along two trenches. The location of each body is recorded using its unique ID number, allowing the burial site to be linked with information recorded during exhumations, recovered personal objects, and samples collected at the grave site. The team maintains an excel spreadsheet to store all relevant documentation.

In addition to exhumations, the First Responders Team has also taken on a role in antemortem documentation collection. As of December, approximately 1,700 families have visited the FRT Center in Raqqa to seek information on their missing loved ones. FRT employees at the center record information provided by families, and also provide photos of recovered personal belongings (which are catalogued and stored rather than reburied) in order to facilitate identification.

# Training Program with Creative Associates

In the fall of 2019, SJAC received a small award from FURAT to conduct an initial round of forensic training and psychosocial support with the FRT, as well as assess the need for further support. SJAC originally planned to provide in-person, on the ground trainings in Raqqa; however, the trip was cancelled after the partial withdrawal of US troops in October 2019 changed the security situation and complicated attempts to secure access. Instead, SJAC provided remote support via both live and pre-recorded video trainings. In collaboration with EAAF, SJAC conducted a short assessment interview with the FRT team lead, in order to understand the types of graves and conditions encountered by the team. Based on this information, eight custom-made videos, totalling 45 minutes, were provided by EAAF, covering introductory information on forensic anthropology. Topics included the necessary tools for documentation and recovery, how to utilize maps and satellite navigation systems, how to survey and map grave sites, how to set an excavation grid and basic excavation techniques, how to photograph remains, and how to create and manage a documentation database. SJAC also worked with the team to assess their equipment needs, and FURAT provided the necessary funds to supply additional equipment based on EAAF's advice, including cameras for photographing grave sites, handheld GPS devices, and additional body bags.

The president of EAAF, Luis Fondebrider, also conducted a remote discussion with the FRT via Skype. The call began with an introduction by EAAF, during which the president explained how the field of forensic anthropology developed, the history of Argentina's own missing person's program, and some basic rules of forensic anthropology that should guide the FRT's work. This was followed by an unscripted discussion between FRT and EAAF, during which FRT asked follow-up questions about the training videos, and EAAF was able to receive a clearer picture of the FRT's methodologies and practices.

SJAC also hired a clinical psychologist with extensive



EAAF films a training video for the FRT

experience in providing staff care for humanitarian and human rights workers. She conducted a staff care survey as well as four unstructured, individual interviews to learn about the challenges facing staff, and then designed a customized training. The psychologist split the 56 trainees into four groups, and each group received a 2.5-hour training, which covered the symptoms of secondary trauma and how to utilize appropriate coping mechanisms. A basic pre- and post-training survey measured a 157% increase in knowledge of secondary trauma after the training. Surveyed staff members stated that they planned to utilize coping skills taught during the training session and that the training was uplifting for their morale and provided them "confidence and peace."

While these interventions were only a first step in meeting the FRT's needs, they succeeded in providing SJAC, EAAF, and FURAT with a clearer picture of the FRT's structure and needs, which will lead to more targeted interventions in the program's next phase. Additionally, the project began to build a working relationship between the FRT and the EAAF, and socialized the concept of psychosocial support among the team, providing a baseline of knowledge on secondary trauma and appropriate coping skills.

# Assessment & Future Plans

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**T**he president of EAAF was impressed with the FRT's efforts to date, particularly the documentation efforts that have been implemented within the last year, after a medical doctor joined the team. Fondebrider noted that even in comparison to other mass grave exhumations, the team is operating under particularly difficult conditions. However, the team's processes need to be improved and further systemized with targeted trainings.

The most important step is to ensure that the FRT is not conducting exhumations in an ad hoc way, but rather, has a plan to guide its exhumation work. Fondebrider points to current exhumation work in Iraq as a warning as to what can happen when there is a rush to open graves without any coordinating mechanism. While such a strategy may lead to graves being opened quickly, the lack of preparation slows down identification processes, and families are often left angry and disillusioned about a process in which they were never engaged. These types of quick exhumations also rely on outside expertise, instead of taking the opportunity to train locals, who will be able to lead such processes, and communicate about them with local communities, after the departure of international experts.

EAAF will help the FRT create a plan for exhumations, which will allow the team to assess its current abilities and decide which graves it should prioritize and which are best left unopened for the time being. EAAF then hopes to offer targeted trainings to help the FRT build its technical capacity. The following list is not exhaustive, but rather, examples of a number of areas where EAAF hopes to work with the FRT to systematize and improve their processes.

## Antemortem Data Collection

Effective identification will rely not only on documentation taken from graves, but also documentation on the missing collected from families and witnesses (known as antemortem documentation). The FRT is currently collecting such documentation from families who approach their center in Raqqa, but the team has stated that they need more training on this topic. EAAF can work with the team to adopt standardized documentation forms and train them on how to help families understand the identification process and manage expectations appropriately.

Many families from Northeast Syria have been displaced, and those who are proactively approaching the FRT Center in Raqqa represent only a small percentage of the population. SJAC plans to collaborate with the FRT and Jawab (discussed below) in order to connect families abroad to the work being done on the ground and allow them to report their missing loved ones. SJAC has also received funds to directly collect documentation outside of Syria, which will then be combined with data collected by the FRT.

## Database Management

The FRT is currently using an excel spreadsheet to store both its antemortem and graves documentation. While this system is sufficient for basic preservation and storage, a relational database, allowing for complex searches of recovered bodies as well as missing persons data, will be necessary for effective identification processes. With assistance from EAAF, SJAC is updating its database to allow for the storage of missing persons data, and will provide access to the FRT and documentation staff at the Center, so that both documentation from graves and antemortem data can be directly uploaded, securely preserved, and analyzed together.



Members of the First Responders' Team record information from an exhumed grave in Raqqa Governorate, Syria.

## Grave Mapping

The FRT is currently tracking the graves it has opened and which bodies originated at which sites, but EAAF would like to see the collection of more precise mapping data, including GPS coordinates. SJAC will be providing the team with GPS technology under the FURAT project. Two of the training videos provided by EAAF focused on this topic, and EAAF plans to provide further training in the next phase of the program.

## Documentation of Exhumations

While team members are currently collecting basic documentation on recovered remains, they are not documenting the exhumation process itself. Photos of grave excavations have only been taken for media purposes, and bodies have not been photographed. EAAF would like to work with the team so that they take photos and/or videos of the exhumation process, recording the exact location of remains and associated personal belongings in each grave. Such photographs can capture important information about possible causes of death and ensure that analysis of the gravesite can continue after a body has been removed and reburied.

## Restructuring the Team

While EAAF is able and ready to provide trainings to address the above concerns, it is difficult to do so in the current context. The First Responders' Team is currently made up of 56 members between two cities, most of whom have the same job description, namely opening graves and moving bodies. The team members have widely different backgrounds and levels of education; some team members are illiterate and needed extensive support to understand EAAF's training materials. Understandably, these team members reported that some of EAAF's training videos were technical and difficult to understand. Additionally, the large team size makes it difficult for all trainees to directly participate in trainings with EAAF.

SJAC believes that these concerns could be addressed through a restructuring of the FRT. The FRT's work and future trainings would be more efficient if the team was broken into specialized sub-teams, each with a team lead. These sub-teams can include teams to interview families and collect antemortem data, create and administer a centralized database, survey potential grave sites or other areas where bodies are present,

document findings via photo and video, and recover and document (via standardized collection forms) the remains and associated evidence.

After restructuring, EAAF can continue to offer training to the full team, to ensure that everyone understands the importance of their work and how it may affect future identification and criminal processes. However, more technical trainings can be targeted directly at the team leads, who will have more opportunities to ask questions and receive in-depth guidance from EAAF. These team leads would then be responsible for ensuring that what they have learned is implemented and taught in turn to relevant sub-team members. By targeting these technical trainings at a small group of trainees, SJAC could also potentially host in-person trainings in Erbil, providing team members the opportunity to work with equipment not available inside Syria and avoiding current security and funding restrictions.

## Working with Families

One of the most common failings in past exhumation and missing persons programs has been a disconnect between exhumation work and families searching for their loved ones. When families are not well-informed regarding missing persons work and its challenges, they can have unrealistic expectations regarding identifications, which quickly leads to frustration and disillusionment. On a more practical level, without access to families and their knowledge of the missing, identification is not possible.

While the FRT has been making efforts to connect with families on the ground, they need a systematized approach allowing for all families, both inside and outside Syria, to be connected to the project. A number of families have started to create advocacy groups focused on the search for their loved ones, and are interested in engaging the FRT. Instead of aligning this project with a specific group of families, SJAC has facilitated the creation a platform, Jawab, which provides capacity building in advocacy to family members regardless of their specific affiliations. Jawab will provide a public platform for those searching for

missing loved ones to advocate on their behalf, but it will also act as a network to disseminate information about ongoing exhumations, ensuring that families understand the process and that their priorities are being reflected in the work on the ground. SJAC also plans to utilize Jawab's network to help families report their missing directly to the FRT.

*“Jawab will provide a public platform for those searching for missing loved ones to advocate on their behalf”*

## Psychosocial Support

Even in comparison to others in the humanitarian and human rights field, the work of the FRT is extremely challenging and has been compounded by the trauma experienced by team members during the conflict. Through a pre-training survey as well as four randomly selected interviews, SJAC's psychologist determined that the majority of FRT members are showing symptoms of stress and burnout, and that increased years of service with the FRT is correlated to an increase in these symptoms.

SJAC recommends continuing with regular, small-group sessions to build the teams' coping mechanisms, allow staff to vent their emotions, and learn to discuss their stressors with one another. The psychologist specifically recommended sessions covering emotional regulation, meditation, and art therapy. Individual therapy sessions should also be made available to help staff process difficult memories and traumas and discuss issues they may feel embarrassed to mention in a group setting. Because of the potential stigma of receiving individual therapy, all staff members should be required to participate in one individual therapy session, with follow-up sessions scheduled based on individual preference.

٦. يحتوي هذا المقياس على ١٠ عبارات حول كيف كان حالك على مدار الأسبوع الماضي. يُرجى قراءة كل عبارة والتفكير في عدد مرات شعورك بتلك الطريقة خلال الأسبوع الماضي. ثم ضع علامة صح في الخانة الأقرب إلى هذا.

على مدار الأسبوع الماضي...	إطلاقاً	بين الحين والآخر	أحياناً	غالباً	معظم/طوال الوقت
١. شعرت بالتوتر أو القلق أو العصبية			✓		
٢. شعرت أن لدي شخصاً ألجأ إليه للحصول على الدعم	✗				
٣. شعرت بأنني أتمتع بالقدرة على التكيف عندما تسوء الأمور			✓		
٤. كان التحدث مع الناس صعباً أو شكلاً عيباً بالنسبة لي			✓		
٥. شعرت بالهلع أو الرعب	✓				
٦. وضعت خططا لإنهاء حياتي	✓				
٧. واجهت صعوبة في النوم أو في البقاء نائماً		✓			
٨. شعرت باليأس أو بانعدام الأمل	✓				
٩. شعرت بعدم السعادة	✓				
١٠. الصور أو الذكريات غير المرغوب فيها كانت تقلقني وتؤرقني			✓		

A pre-training survey completed by a FRT member.

SJAC's psychologist determined that the majority of FRT members are showing symptoms of stress and burnout.

Additionally, SJAC recommends psychological first aid training for all staff, so that they are able to deal with unexpected emergencies in the field. For example, during a session with the psychologist, staff discussed an incident when one team member was injured by a mine during the team's work. Psychological first aid would allow the team to learn how to support each other through such unexpected crises and could also be used to assist with distressed family members who may come to grave sites where the FRT is working.

FRT members themselves identified a number of specific interventions on their post-training surveys. Specifically, team members are interested in participating in recreational, team building activities together outside of work. They also expressed an interest in participating in more physical exercise. SJAC recommends that the team be encouraged to participate in a weekly physical, recreation-

al activity together, such as a soccer game, to help them de-stress and build social ties that will allow them to better support each other during their work.

FRT members also listed uncertainty about their employment and financial concerns as among their greatest psychological stressors. Long-term funding commitments made to the FRT would allow for team members to have long-term contracts.

Finally, while SJAC can implement most of these interventions remotely, a local psychologist should be hired to lead these efforts if possible. In-person therapy will be more effective, and a local psychologist will be best situated to understand the teams' challenges. Such a psychologist should be integrated into the FRT, so that they understand the nature of the teams' work and can make effective suggestions for further interventions.

# Conclusion

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*“Resolving the issue of missing persons and achieving a level of justice in these cases will be a cornerstone in helping communities that suffered under ISIS to rebuild and reconcile.”*

To date, the First Responders Team has been working effectively to collect and reburial human remains, diligently documenting their work. However, in order to allow for future identifications, the team will need to restructure and develop their technical forensic capacity. From a technical perspective, such changes are achievable through collaboration with EAAF, however serious challenges remain, including continued uncertainty regarding funding. In fact, the First Responders’ Team report that their inconsistent, short-term contracts are one of their primary sources of psychological stress. If financial support for the FRT ends, the work will halt and the possibility for future identification will be threatened.

Missing persons projects cannot be accomplished on a short-term basis. For this project to reach its long-term goal of identifying human remains and pursuing justice for the crimes committed against the missing and their families in Northeast Syria, it will require continuous political and financial support from the international community over the long-term. Despite the costs, resolving the issue of missing persons and achieving a level of justice in these cases will be a cornerstone in helping communities that suffered under ISIS to rebuild and reconcile. Additionally, this program will build invaluable forensic capacity within a country that will be grappling with the legacy of mass killings and forced disappearance well beyond ISIS’s crimes, for decades to come.



## The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC)

SJAC is a Syrian-led, multilaterally supported non-profit that envisions a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law — where citizens from all components of Syrian society live in peace. SJAC promotes transitional justice and accountability processes in Syria by collecting and preserving documentation, analyzing and cataloging data, and promoting public discourse on transitional justice — within Syria and beyond. Learn more at [www.syriaaccountability.org](http://www.syriaaccountability.org).