



SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTRE

2022 ANNUAL REPORT



Introduction

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) works toward a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law – where all Syrians live in peace. SJAC pursues this goal by focusing on seven areas of work: documentation, investigations and case building, missing persons, trial monitoring, justice policy, technology and human rights, and capacity building.

Mission Statement: The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a Syrian human rights organization working for meaningful justice and accountability for Syria that holds perpetrators accountable and addresses grievances, leading to lasting peace. SJAC collects documentation of violations from all available sources, stores it in a secure database, catalogues it according to human rights standards, and analyzes it using legal expertise and big data methodologies. Originally imagined as a central repository for documentation, SJAC has grown into a dynamic organization that is not only documenting the conflict, but engaging with justice mechanisms and policymakers, developing new technologies for human rights, searching for missing persons, and building the capacity of human rights defenders in Syria and around the globe.



Syria Justice and
Accountability Centre

Documentation

Since 2012, SJAC has collected and preserved nearly two million pieces of documentation, including insider witness testimonies, leaked government documents, ISIS records, satellite imagery, videos shared on social media, and more. Throughout 2022, SJAC's documentation team pursued leads on possible violations including property confiscation, child conscription, violations in SDF-held territory, human rights abuses by Türkiye and Türkiye-backed groups, Russian bombardment, ISIS violations, and more. One new area of focus was the growing

[*captagon trade*](#), which is helping fund the Syrian government's ongoing criminal behavior while also increasing violence in some border communities as smugglers engage with security forces.

SJAC's team continually works to improve its methods, ensuring that it is collecting documentation while prioritizing the health and well-being of survivors. In 2022, SJAC published an [*article*](#) overviewing some of its policies for conducting ethical survivor interviews.



340 interviews collected
from Syrians



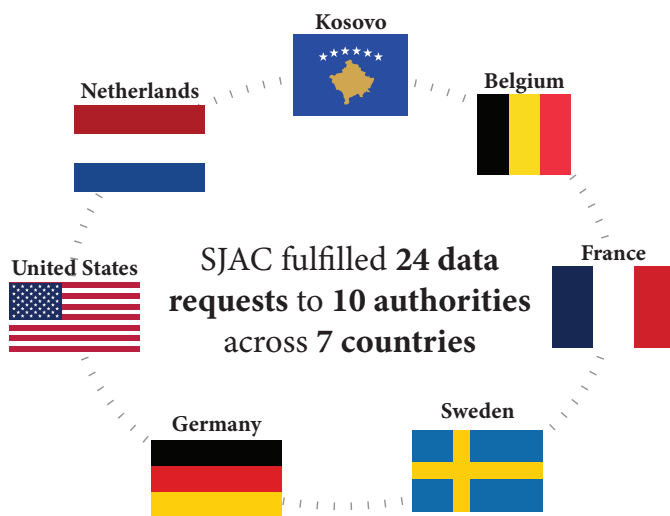
17,000+ pieces of data
processed



Building in Raqqa destroyed during the battle to retake the city from ISIS - Image provided by SJAC's Documentation Team

Investigations and Case Building

SJAC's investigative and legal teams work to ensure that documentation is utilized to its fullest extent, both by sharing evidence directly with justice authorities and publicizing information on the most serious violations being committed in Syria. In 2022, SJAC also worked to connect Syrians directly to justice mechanisms. This included hosting an event in the Netherlands that allowed Syrians to communicate with local authorities on how best to support local trials prosecuting crimes committed in Syria.

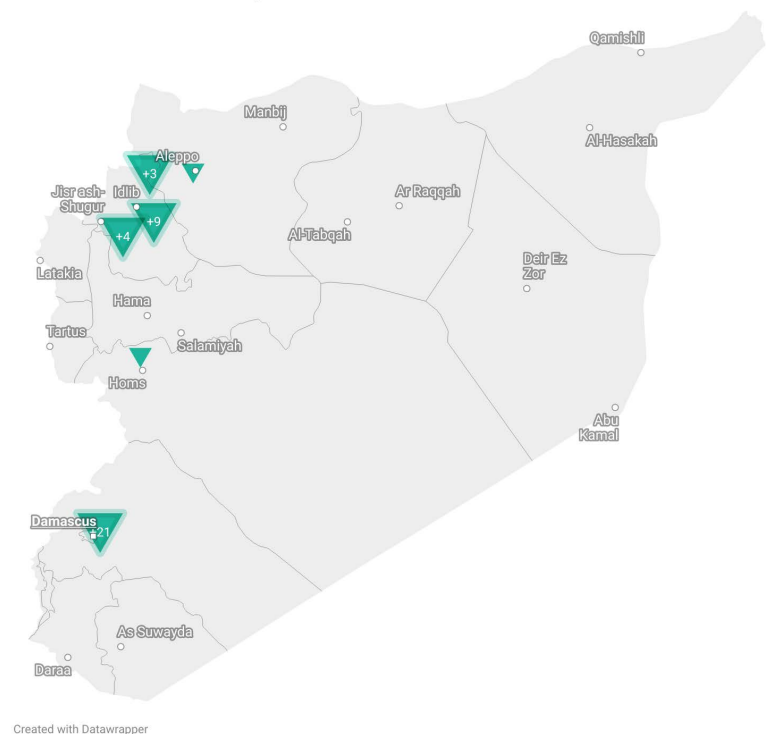


SJAC established its Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) team in 2022 to proactively harness the vast amount of documentation and evidence held by SJAC and use it to investigate human rights violations committed in Syria. SJAC's team of Syrian investigators use SJAC's open-source software, Bayanat, to organize documentation and identify patterns of crimes, while employing a combination of open-source investigative techniques to identify serious violations. This analysis is then used to draft reports for policymakers and public audiences alike.

In 2022, SJAC's investigators published four reports:

When the Planes Return: Double-Tap Strikes on Civilians in Syria explores the targeting of civilians and first responders through "double-tap" airstrikes, designed to terrorize local populations and impede the work of humanitarian actors. A double-tap is the illegal military tactic of striking an initial location, then striking the same location soon after to target civilians and humanitarian actors who arrive at the scene between the strikes. SJAC's investigation documenting nearly 60 double-tap airstrikes on civilian and humanitarian targets in Syria and determined that the Syrian and Russian air forces have utilized this tactic from 2013 to the present as part of a larger strategy to punish and regain control of opposition-held areas.

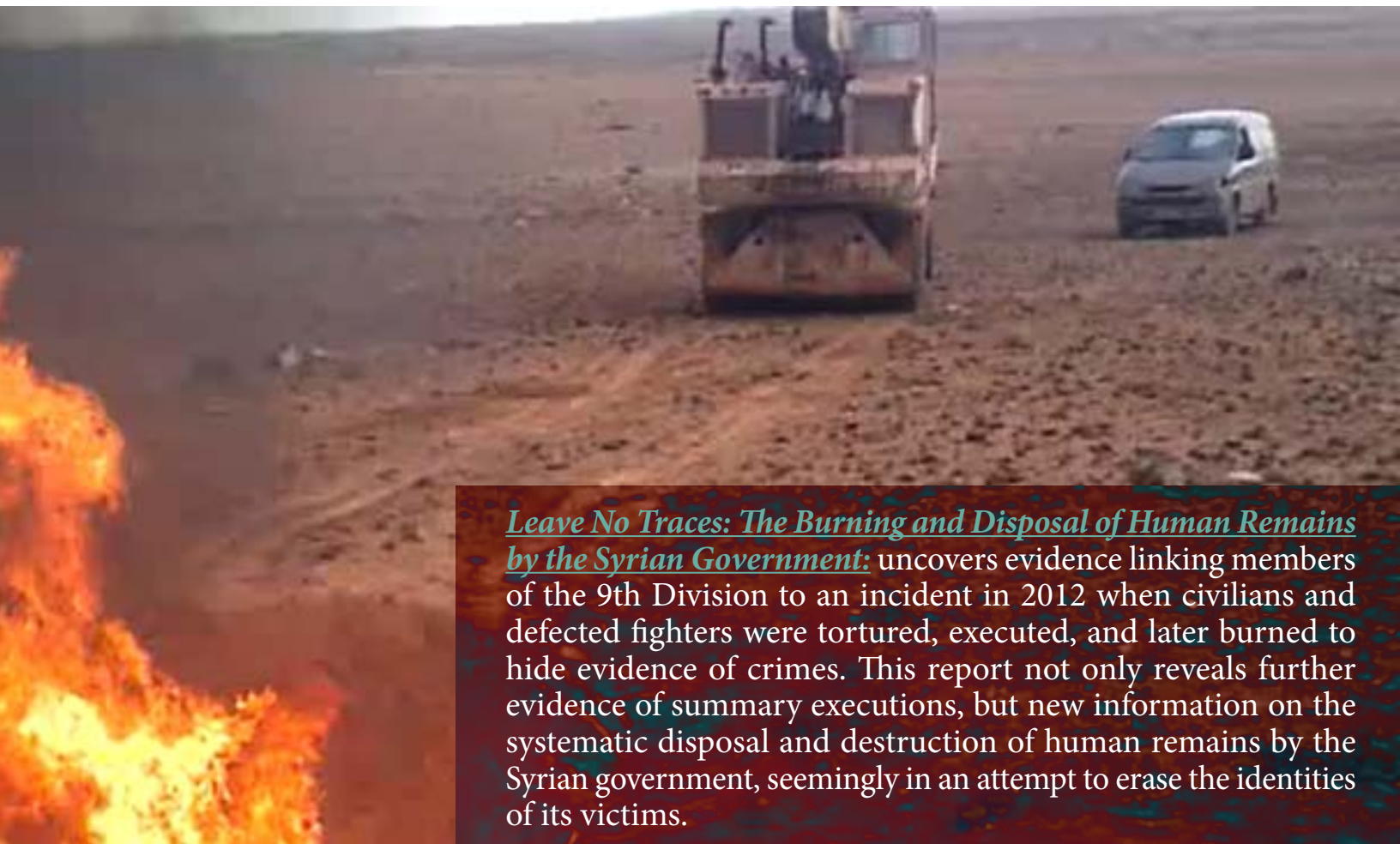
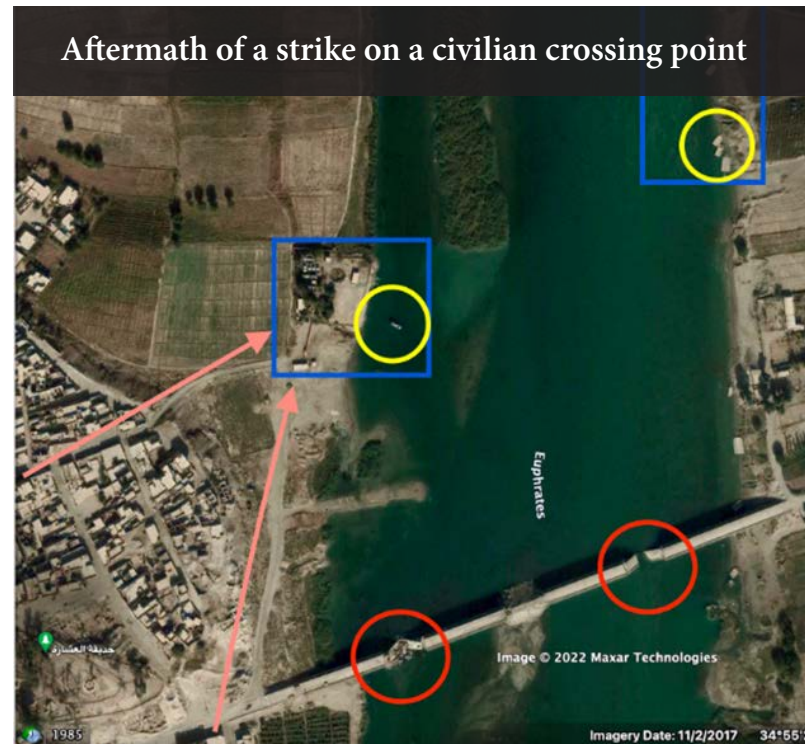
Locations of Double Tap Strikes



[Read more about SJAC's OSINT team and methodology here](#)

No Escape: Targeting Civilians between Crossing Points: demonstrates that pro-government forces have repeatedly targeted civilians attempting to travel in and out of government-controlled areas in order to seek food, water, fuel, and medical supplies.

Hunting the Wounded: Double-Tap Strikes on Healthcare Facilities: investigates a variant of double-tap strikes, in which Syrian government and allied forces strike an initial location, and then wait for casualties to be transported to nearby medical facilities. Forces then strike the facility where the injured are treated in order to maximize damage to the wounded as well as medical personnel and facilities.



Missing Persons



Collected 179 interviews with families of missing persons



Mapped 29 ISIS detention facilities and training camps

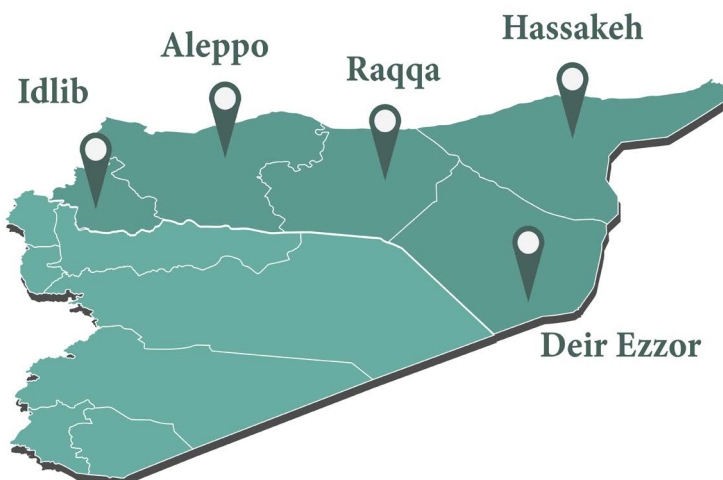
SJAC's missing persons team utilizes forensic methods to investigate missing persons and mass graves in Northeast Syria with the goal of identifying those who were disappeared by ISIS and supporting accountability processes.

In April 2022, SJAC released a report, [*Unearthing Hope*](#), which provides an overview of SJAC's investigative strategy, as well as ISIS's detention system. SJAC's documentation and analysis represents the most comprehensive study of the ISIS detention apparatus available, relying on interviews with former members of the organization, survivors of ISIS detention, and families of the missing, as well as ISIS documents smuggled out of the organization's security offices in Northeast Syria. The report lays out the strategy for the search for the ISIS missing, based on an application of this documentation.

In the second half of 2022, SJAC worked with the Raqqa-based Syrian Missing Persons and Forensic Team (SMFT) to begin contextual investigations of mass graves in Northeast Syria. This work will be instrumental in future efforts to identify missing persons.



The SMFT prepares a search grid prior to cataloging surface evidence at a gravesite



SJAC and the SMFT also [*expanded the geographic scope*](#) of their programs, with SJAC now conducting documentation in Idlib and Aleppo governates, and the SMFT opening a new branch in Deir Ezzor.

Trial Monitoring



30 trial reports published



3 trials monitored

SJAC's trial monitoring program started in April 2020 with the trial of Anwar R. and Eyad Al-Gharib in Koblenz, Germany. In the absence of official documentation or public information from the Higher Regional Court, SJAC was the only organization to provide daily trial monitoring reports and additional background on the Koblenz Trial. These reports, which are available in English and Arabic, present a unique historical record. After the conclusion of the trial, SJAC published:

- A detailed report on [*the verdict of the Anwar Raslan trial*](#).
- A report, [*"Between Hope and Despair"*](#) that assesses trends and challenges of survivors' participation in the trial. The report is based on a review of SJAC's 1,500+ pages of trial notes and provides recommendations for effective participation of survivors in universal jurisdiction proceedings.

In 2022, SJAC's trial monitoring program expanded to follow the trial of an alleged former government affiliate and doctor at military hospitals, Alaa M. In 2022 alone, SJAC produced 25 [*hearing summaries*](#) covering the case which is expected to take several years to conclude.

SJAC's trial monitors also followed the cases against El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey (the so-called "ISIS Beatles") at the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in Alexandria, USA. By monitoring the trial, conducting interviews with surviving hostages and, with the assistance of authorities, Kotey himself, SJAC gained extensive information on ISIS detention centers vital for missing persons investigations. The results of this effort were published in a report, [*Missed Opportunities: Searching for the Missing While Prosecuting ISIS*](#).



Alaa M. at court in Frankfurt, Germany

Justice Policy

SJAC uses comprehensive documentation and analysis to drive justice and accountability processes that are designed specifically for the Syrian context. To do so, SJAC provides resources to justice and accountability actors, including government officials, policymakers, lawyers, police investigating alleged perpetrators, and Syrians participating in or seeking to understand these processes.

This year, SJAC published several articles on justice policy challenges including how to:

- [Hold minors accountable for crimes committed in Syria](#)
- Managing [ISIS Prisons](#) in the wake of the attack at Ghweiran Prison
- The need to expand sanctions against Türkiye-backed armed groups, including [calling on the U.S. Office of Foreign Asset Control to sanction Abu Amsha](#).

In 2022, SJAC published its two annual reports:

- The [Priorities for the 2022 United Nations General Assembly](#) brief, outlining SJAC's policy recommendations and advocacy priorities.
- The [State of Justice in Syria 2022](#), detailing human rights violations against Syrians in 2021, as well as avenues for justice and accountability.

Additionally, SJAC published 9 reports and 31 articles, covering topics such as universal jurisdiction, accountability for children suspected of perpetrating crimes, sanctions, refugee policy, and detention.

Syrian Organizations Ask for a More Ambitious Missing Persons Mechanism

The proposed Mechanism needs to make meaningful changes for victims of disappearance and their families



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19/October/2022

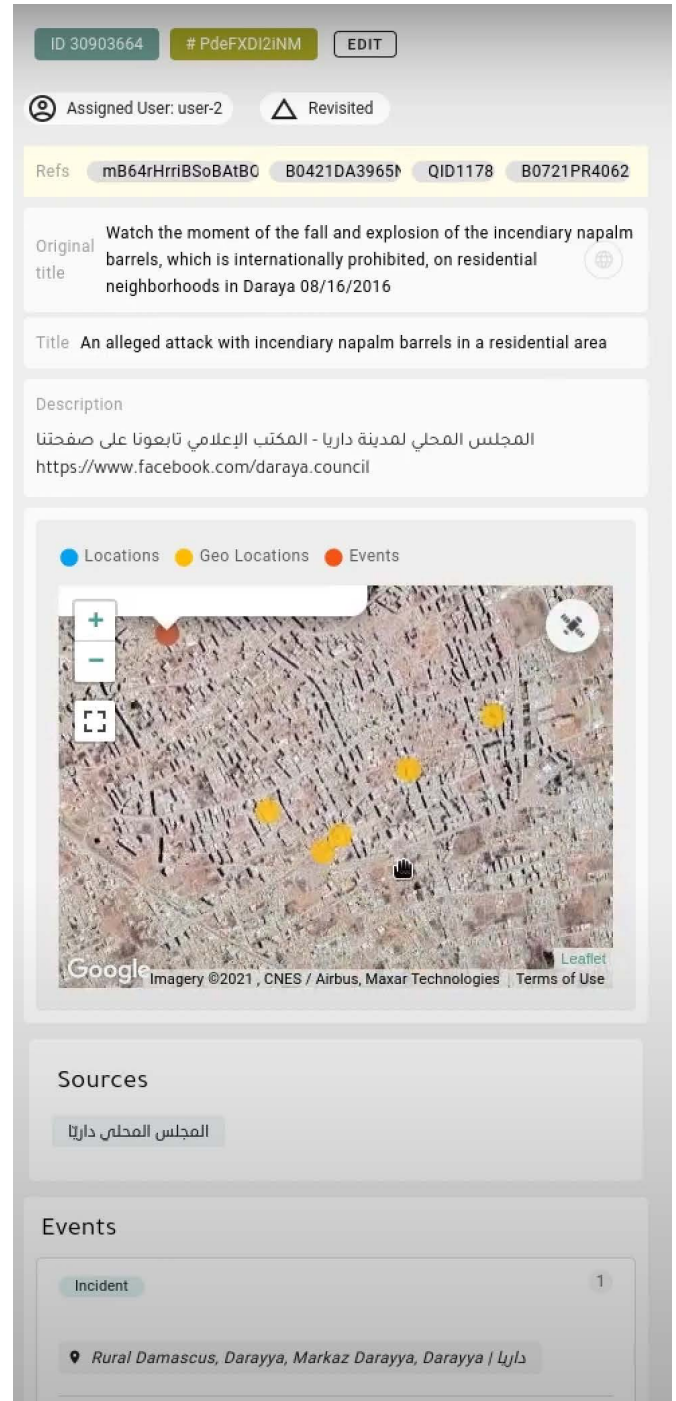
SJAC also continued to be a leading voice in the ongoing discussion of a proposed international mechanism to search for missing persons in Syria, joining with partners to [publish a letter](#) demanding a more ambitious missing person mechanism.

Tech and Human Rights

[*Bayanat*](#) is an open-source data management tool that SJAC developed to allow human rights documenters to store and analyze large amounts of data, for advocacy, prosecutorial, and journalistic purposes.

SJAC made numerous improvements to Bayanat in 2022. SJAC's IT staff developed a tool for [*uploading data from CSV/Excel files*](#). This process was originally done by hand but the new update allows interviews and other data collected in the field to be uploaded to Bayanat in large batches which auto-populate data fields. Since the data is immediately searchable, the tool substantially reduces the need for manual human analysis. Other developments included the integration of an optical character recognition tool that allows for both Arabic and English PDFs, Word documents, and images to be rendered searchable. Lastly SJAC created two visualization features: one to show relationships between different pieces of evidence (node visualization) and another to create [*map visions*](#) that can show spatial linkages between incidents.

SJAC also published its open-source [*analysis methodology*](#), which explains SJAC's process for analyzing documentation within Bayanat in accordance with international humanitarian law.



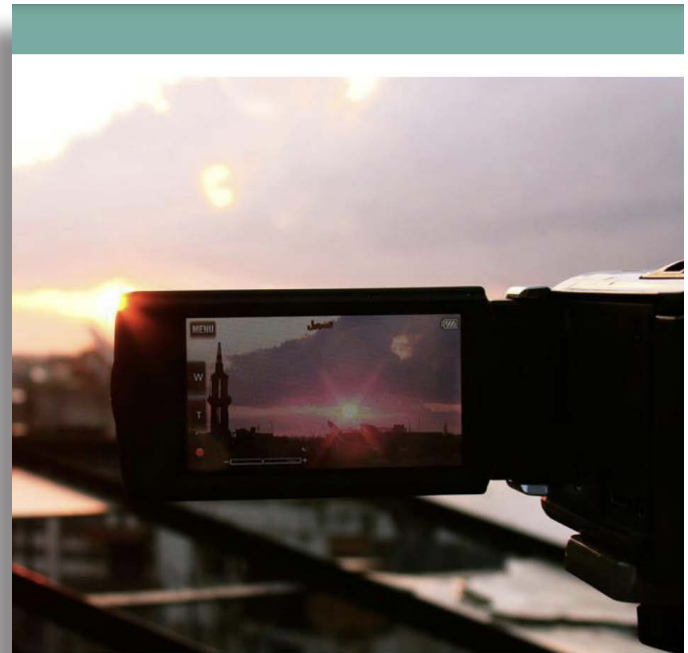
In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, SJAC translated Bayanat to Ukrainian, making it accessible to Ukrainian human rights organizations documenting violations. In 2023, SJAC plans to translate and adapt Bayanat to all UN official languages.

Capacity Building

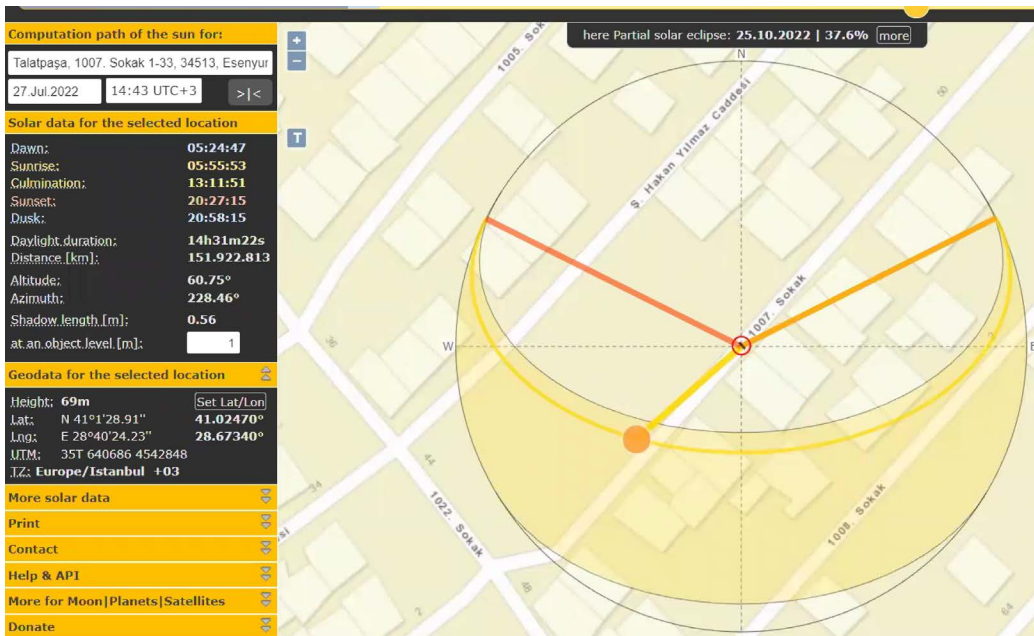
Over the past decade, SJAC's team has built expertise not only in human rights documentation and analysis, but also in utilizing that information to advocate for justice. Recognizing the value of these skills for human rights defenders, SJAC's team proactively works to share its practices and technologies with partner organizations in Syria and across the region.

SJAC's online documentation trainings continue to serve Syrians and global human rights defenders and remain freely available. These efforts were expanded in 2023 following the public release of [English-language versions](#) of SJAC's existing [Arabic-language documentation trainings](#).

In 2022, SJAC also conducted live training opportunities for human rights defenders from Syria and around the globe. SJAC co-hosted a workshop for Syrian family and survivor organizations to build effective advocacy skills to work with international justice mechanisms. SJAC also conducted a three-day training course for Syrian documenters and activists on open-source investigations, which covered open-source tools including geolocation, weather reports, and authenticating evidence.



Documentation Training Guide



Frame from SJAC's OSINT training on how to use the length of shadows to determine time of day.

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