



# Syria Justice and Accountability Centre Annual Report 2020



## Vision

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a Syrian-led human rights organization that seeks **meaningful justice and accountability** for Syria that holds perpetrators accountable and addresses grievances, leading to lasting peace.

Through its work for Syria, SJAC seeks to **build a model** for effective human rights documentation and justice efforts which can be transferred to other conflict contexts around the globe.

## Mission

SJAC contributes to meaningful justice and accountability for Syria by **leading the development of efforts to document abuses** perpetrated during the course of the conflict, ensuring that documentation is **reliable and usable** for criminal trials, that collection practices are in line with ‘**do no harm**’ principles, and that collected documentation accurately **reflects the priorities and grievances of victims** as well as captures the geographic scope of the conflict and the diversity of perpetrators and victims.

SJAC **develops new technologies and methodologies** to securely preserve and analyze human rights documentation for use in transitional justice and peace-building and shares relevant data with justice mechanisms.

SJAC **provides analysis**, both privately and via public reports, of human rights violations happening within Syria and how these violations can be appropriately addressed via transitional justice mechanisms.

SJAC **engages with Syrians** to ensure they have the knowledge they need in order to directly and meaningfully participate in justice processes.

Finally, SJAC helps partner organizations adapt its model for effective human rights documentation and justice through providing direct **capacity building** to partner organizations, sharing SJAC materials and technology, and engaging in international discourse on the role of documentation and civil society organizations in transitional justice.



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## Documentation

SJAC works to ensure that human rights violations in Syria are **comprehensively documented** and preserved for use in future transitional justice and peace-building processes. To this end, SJAC's documentation team works within Syria and in neighboring countries to collect a diverse array of documentation, with a focus on interviews with survivors and witnesses of serious violations. The team also collaborates with partners throughout the region, including humanitarian, medical, and human rights organizations, which share their information with SJAC. SJAC's documentation team follows the **'Do No Harm'** principle and, when possible, connects survivors to medical and psychosocial services through its dual referral program.

In addition to work in the field, SJAC's IT team continually identifies new social media channels and websites containing valuable, **open-source videos**, downloading and preserving them before they disappear.

## Field Documentation

In 2020, SJAC's documentation team collected **87 interviews** with survivors and witnesses of serious violations and their families, along with photos, videos, and other types of supporting documentation.

SJAC works to document serious violations of international law committed by all perpetrators, however, it places special focus on violations that may be under-documented. In 2020, SJAC's documentation team focused on:

- **Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV):** SJAC's documenters rely on strong partnerships with humanitarian and medical organizations to receive referrals to both male and female survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. While most of those interviewed in 2020 were survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by the Syrian government in detention centers, SJAC documenters also interviewed Yazidi survivors of ISIS captivity.
- **Missing Persons:** In late 2020 SJAC hired a new team of documenters specialized in collecting interviews with families of those missing due to ISIS crimes in Northeast Syria, as well as survivors of ISIS detention, in order to support investigations into the missing.
- **COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic in Syria has been marked by a lack of transparency, leaving many patients and families in fear. SJAC spoke to families of COVID-19 patients about their lack of access to basic medical information. Some families accused the government of issuing death certificates with incorrect causes of death to hide the extent of the crisis.
- **Insider Witnesses:** Defectors often possess invaluable evidence regarding organizational hierarchy and command structures, which can be crucial linkage evidence when building a criminal case. SJAC interviewed defectors from the Syrian military who had witnessed serious violations.

## Documentation Training

In order to improve the quality of documentation collected by its team and partners, SJAC provides technical training in documentation skills, international human rights, and humanitarian law to documenters in Syria and across the Arab world. In 2020, SJAC launched a new, [Arabic-language training website](#), providing extensive resources for independent study. The trainings include video lectures, written materials, fact sheets, and comprehension quizzes.

Current course offerings include:

- Human Rights Principles, including courses on ‘International Humanitarian Law,’ ‘Transitional Justice,’ ‘Impartiality,’ and ‘Universal Jurisdiction.’
- Documentation Principles, including courses on ‘Ethical Documentation Practices,’ ‘Chain of Custody,’ and ‘Informed Consent.’
- Documenting Violations, including courses on ‘Documenting Sexual Violence,’ ‘Documenting Torture,’ ‘Documenting Detention,’ and ‘Documenting Human Trafficking.’



الاحتلال تجاه السكان المدنيين، وتضم أحكامًا تفصيلية بشأن الإغاثة الإنسانية في الإقليم المحتل.

«وخلال العقدين اللذين عبقا اعتماد اتفاقيات جنيف شهد العالم زيادة في عدد النزاعات المسلحة غير الدولية وحروب التحرير الوطني. وكرد فعل على ذلك تم اعتماد بروتوكولين إضافيين لاتفاقيات جنيف الأربع لعام ١٩٤٩ في ١٩٧٧... وكان البروتوكول الثاني هو أولى المعاهدات الدولية المكرسة بالكامل لحالات النزاع المسلح غير الدولي .

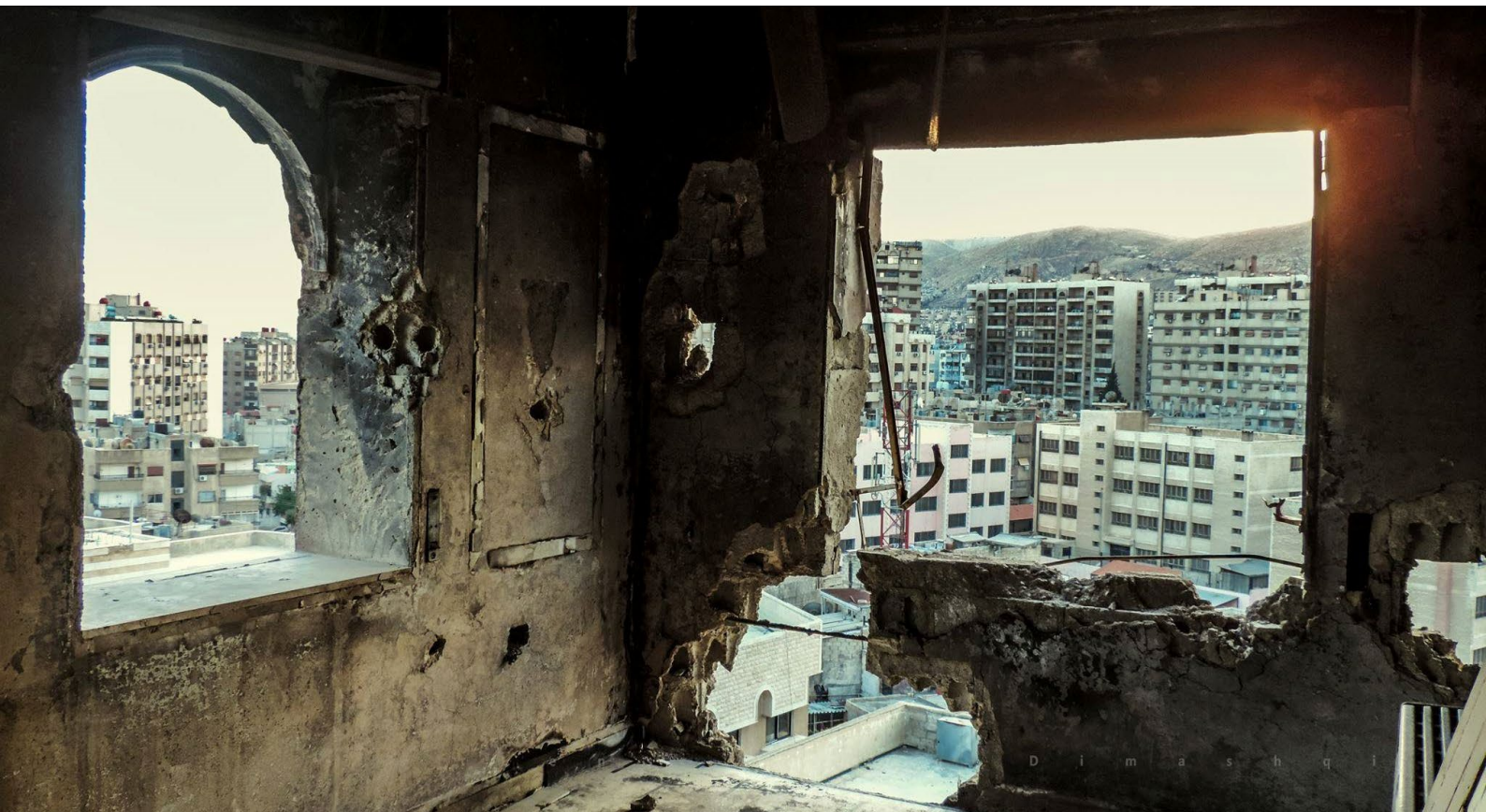
### ما هو القانون الدولي الإنساني؟

«القانون الدولي الإنساني هو مجموعة من القواعد الرامية إلى الحد من آثار النزاعات المسلحة. يفرض قيودًا على أطراف النزاع من حيث أساليب الحرب ووسائلها المستخدمة. يوفر الحماية للأشخاص غير المشاركين في الأعمال العدائية، أو الذين كفوا عن المشاركة فيها. يعرف القانون الدولي الإنساني أيضًا بقانون الحرب أو قانون النزاعات المسلحة.»

*A resource from SJAC's course on international humanitarian law.*

SJAC also offers live, customized training sessions to SJAC's team and partners, supplementing what they learn online. In 2020, SJAC trained **64 human rights defenders**, including 37 individuals inside Syria, on topics including how to conduct interviews with insider witnesses and basic documentation methodology.





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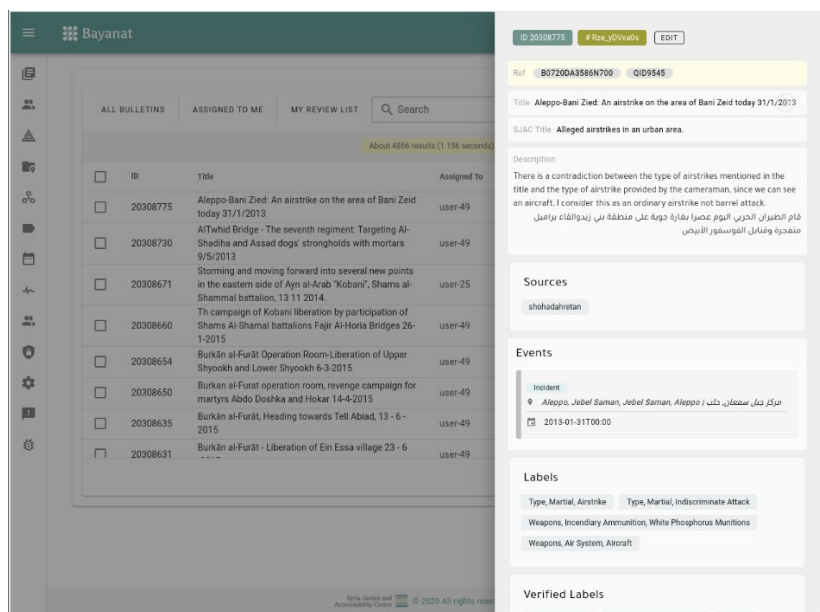
## Data Analysis

SJAC has collected and archived over **eight terabytes of documentation**. In order to preserve this massive amount of data and make it useful to justice practitioners, SJAC preserves, catalogues, and analyzes the videos, pictures, documents, and interviews in its collections – along with relevant metadata. SJAC employs a team of Syrian data analysts who work in SJAC's database to label data according to international legal standards and link related data to create a more thorough understanding of each violation of international human rights and criminal law. In 2020, SJAC's data analysts **processed 113,448 videos** of the conflict.

## SJAC's Database

In December 2020, SJAC released its new database, [Bayanat](#), following the culmination of many months of work by SJAC's IT and data analysis team, as well as beta testing partners. The new database improves on SJAC's existing relational database software, leading to faster loading times and a simpler code that is much easier, and hence cost-effective, to maintain, and will be more accessible for human rights organizations with limited tech capacity.

The code is now publicly hosted on GitHub – the largest public repository for open-source code. Any human rights organization can download *Bayanat* and apply a classification schema that enables tagging based on time period, actors, and types of violations in accordance with their own organizational goals and unique geographic context.



Analyzing a video using SJAC's Bayanat software

SJAC also released a demo of the software available in both English and Arabic for individuals and organizations to test before employing the software for their own use.

## Collaborating with justice mechanisms

SJAC works closely with justice mechanisms around the world, including the UN's International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), Europol, and war crimes units across Europe. In 2020, SJAC responded to over **19 requests for evidence to support criminal investigations** into crimes committed in Syria. SJAC also proactively provided evidence to relevant authorities when its team identified possible perpetrators living in jurisdictions where prosecution may be possible. In addition to collaborating with accountability mechanisms, SJAC staff continued to offer their expertise to a variety of investigative mechanisms, including the Commission of Inquiry and multiple UN Working Groups, as well as policymakers working on Syria.





United Nations General Assembly © Wikimedia

## Transitional Justice Discourse

SJAC seeks to **promote a dialogue** around transitional justice both among Syrians and within the international community. SJAC publishes articles and reports, in both English and Arabic, based on SJAC documentation and expertise to shed light on violations within the country and provide recommendations on how traditional justice mechanisms could be utilized to address grievances and build long-lasting peace. Additionally, SJAC **provides expertise** to the UN, foreign governments, and non-governmental organizations. Finally, SJAC **provides technical support** to survivor and victim-led Syrian organizations to ensure that they are able to continue their work and engage in justice discourse in a meaningful way.



## Trial Monitoring

In April 2020, the first trial of two former Syrian government officials for acts of torture commenced in Koblenz, Germany. SJAC recognized that this trial, conducted in German with no public transcripts, needed to be accessible to Syrians grappling with the legacy of torture in their country.

As a result, SJAC launched its **first trial monitoring project**. Two SJAC team members, a Syrian data analyst and a German lawyer, were trained by the University of Marburg's International Research and Documentation Center for War Crimes Trials and have attended every trial day to date. This effort resulted in **twelve trial reports** in 2020, along with a variety of articles providing legal analysis. The reports have filled an important void, and have been well-received by Syrian and international audiences alike.



*Defendants and their Counsels at the beginning of a trial day, February 2020 © Ruptly/Pool Provider*

## Reports and Analysis

In 2020, SJAC published **5 reports**:

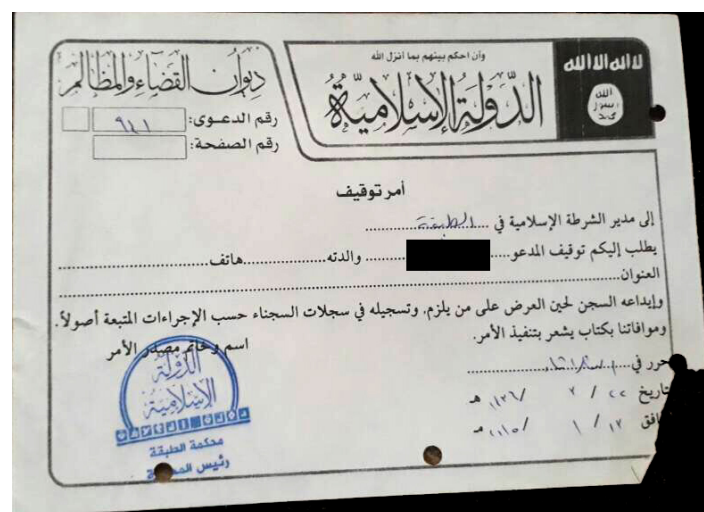
*[Sanctions, the Caesar Act, and COVID-19](#)* rigorously assesses the urgent humanitarian needs in Syria based on interviews with experts, analysts, and organizations working in the humanitarian and medical sectors in Syria. The report also examines the relationship between these needs and the imposition of economic sanctions, identifying areas where sanction procedures, licenses, and humanitarian exemptions can be improved.

*[The State of Justice in Syria, 2020](#)* is SJAC's first annual review of justice efforts in the Syrian conflict. The report aims to keep the Syrian and international communities informed and engaged in justice efforts by mapping recent developments in European courts, the United Nations, international sanctions, documentation efforts, and other avenues for justice and accountability.

*[Searching for Missing Persons in Northeast Syria](#)* provides an overview of SJAC's and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)'s initial efforts to provide technical trainings in mass grave exhumation and documentation to the First Responders' Team (FRT) working to open mass graves in Northeast Syria. These trainings are part of SJAC's larger efforts to address the thousands of missing persons in the aftermath of ISIS's territorial defeat.

*[Judge, Jury and Executioner](#)* analyzes nearly 300 ISIS documents—from judgments and sentencing documents to arrest warrants and interrogation reports. The report looks at the ultimate jurisdiction, power, and control of this Bureau, previously portrayed by ISIS as merely a branch of the judiciary designated to hear complaints against ISIS public officials and fighters.

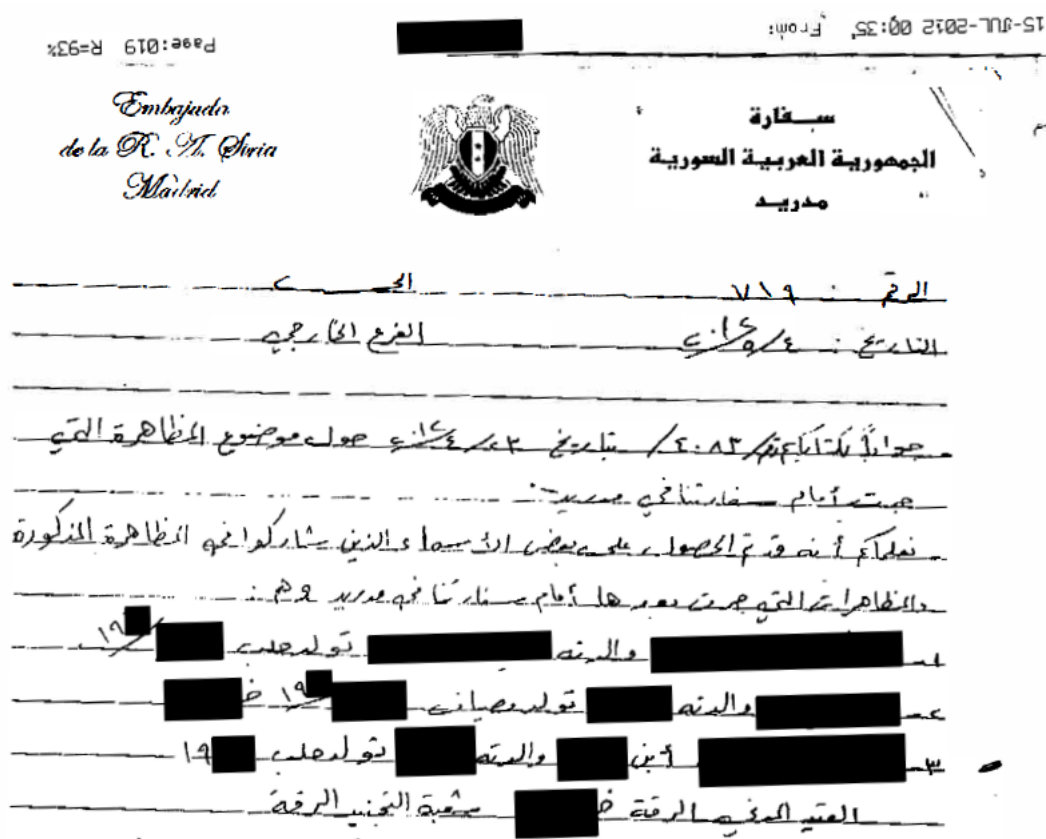
*[Priorities for the 2020 UN General Assembly](#)* includes recommendations for three key issues: addressing the spread of COVID-19 in Syria, aid access & humanitarian exemptions, and detained ISIS fighters in Northeast Syria.



An arrest order issued by the Bureau of Justice and Grievances, featured in SJAC's *Judge, Jury and Executioner* report

Additionally, SJAC published **47 articles** on its website, covering a wide variety of human rights and justice policy topics, including analysis of:

- Syrian government documents, including [The Shadows of Surveillance: Government Documents Confirm Syrian Embassies Monitored Syrians Abroad](#)
- Mercenary recruitment practices, including [Driven by Poverty, Syrians are Paying the Ultimate Price in Libya](#) and [The SNA in Nagorno-Karabakh: Turkey is Subsidizing its Interventions with Syrian Lives.](#)
- Justice processes, including [UN Fails to Acknowledge Own Failures in Hospital Attacks Inquiry](#) and [Turkey has Opened the Door to the European Court of Human Rights for Syrian Victims.](#)
- Missing persons, including [The Women Left Behind](#) and an [Letter to the Committee on Detainees and Kidnapped Persons in Syria.](#)
- Refugee protection, including [Syrians in Denmark Fear Losing Refugee Protections](#) and [Syrians in Lebanon Face Discriminatory Measures Amid Coronavirus Lockdown.](#)



*A Syrian government document published by SJAC in 'Shadows of Surveillance' sheds light on how the Syrian Embassy in Spain monitors Syrians abroad.*



## Missing Persons

In February 2020, SJAC publicly launched its new missing persons program, focused on the **search for those missing due to ISIS crimes** in Northeast Syria. Although COVID-19 travel restrictions delayed efforts to support exhumations on the ground, SJAC worked closely with families of those missing by ISIS throughout 2020 to bring their concerns to the international stage. SJAC collaborated with its partner, The Syria Campaign, on the creation of a website, [Truth After ISIS](#), which tells the stories of family members searching for their loved ones. SJAC also hosted an event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly engaging the EAAF, UNITAD, IIIM and US State Department in a discussion of how accountability mechanisms can better support efforts to discover the fates of missing persons. The IIIM later announced a new plan to begin tagging data relevant to missing persons to share with organizations mandated to look for the missing. Additionally, SJAC engaged with Syrian audiences through a series of Facebook Live events, including a conversation with the President of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) on how forensic anthropology could assist search processes in Syria and a panel discussion with families of the missing who have successfully organized in the search for their loved ones.



*Families for Freedom and the Caesar Families Association protest outside the court in Koblenz in July 2020*  
© FFF/Guevara Namer





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To learn more about SJAC's work visit our website at [www.syriaaccountability.org](http://www.syriaaccountability.org) or follow us on Twitter ([@SJAC\\_info](https://twitter.com/SJAC_info)) or [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SJACinfo).

Syria Justice and  
Accountability Centre

