MENA PRISON FORUM
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A Victim-Centered Approach to Syria's Detained, Missing, and Forcibly Disappeared

The Role of Victims' and Family Members' Organizations

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In February 2021, an association of five Syrian victims' and family members' organizations released the Truth and Justice Charter. The survivors, relatives, victims, and witnesses who authored this text describe it as "a common vision on the question of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention in Syria." Rooted in a victim-centered approach, the Truth and Justice Charter presents a multi-stage 'roadmap' delineating a list of consolidated demands with respect to truth, justice, reparations, memorialization, accountability, and non-recurrence. In so doing, the Charter's signatories seek to provide a framework to guide current and prospective efforts "to build a future Syria that upholds the dignity and rights of all its citizens."

One such signatory is the Caesar Families Association (CFA), an organization comprised of individuals who have identified relatives and loved ones in the so-called "Caesar photos" that emerged in January 2014. Last month, the MENA Prison Forum spoke with CFA director Ms. Mariam Alhallak, who found her son, Ayham Ghazoul, among the photographs in 2015. Over the course of the conversation, Ms. Alhallak shared unique insights into the various levels of engagement taking place in regard to those arbitrarily detained and/or forcibly disappeared within the context of the Syrian crisis.*

In order to best represent Ms. Alhallak's comments, the full, unabridged interview is presented below. The conversation was conducted in Arabic. It was then transcribed in Arabic and subsequently translated into English. Prior to our discussion, Ms. Alhallak submitted brief written responses (also in Arabic) to a portion of the questions posed below. These responses are also presented in their entirety, and accompany her spoken remarks under each

corresponding question.

** Ms. Alhallak shares her story in Sara Afshar's 2017 documentary, Syria's Disappeared: The Case Against Assad*

MENA Prison Forum: To begin, could you please provide a brief overview of the Caesar Families Association, and its work and objectives?

Ms. Mariam Alhallak: The Caesar Families Association was founded by seven families. Each of these families had found a missing loved one in the Caesar photos. I found my son Ayham among the photos shortly after they appeared in 2014. I was in Beirut. His photo is clear; I don't know if you have looked at the photographs but his photo is clear. He died under torture just five days after his arrest. After I saw his photo and verified that he had been martyred, I came to Berlin. I had originally filed a legal case in Berlin. It was the first case filed against the Syrian regime. So I came to Berlin to file the case as a plaintiff and a witness. Here, I met with a number of families who had also found the photos of their sons or missing loved ones. So we had the idea to become a distinct group since there is something quite distinguishable here: we have significant proof, the existence of which the whole world has acknowledged. And this proof is the Caesar photos. With this proof, we can hold to account those who killed our sons.

The most important objective of the association the priority that we have set is accountability. Holding to account those who perpetrated or who had a role or a hand in what happened to our loved ones. The second objective is to pressure neutral international organizations such as the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) and the Red Cross to enter Syria and reveal the mass graves, because all of our loved ones are in mass graves. Not a single family has received the body of their son or loved one. This is the work that is fundamental to the association: first, accountability; and second, urging and providing information to international organizations. The third objective is caring for the families of the victims, the families of those who were killed and whose photos are among Caesar's file. Currently, we are able to offer them psychological support through partner organizations. We are also working with legal organizations that manage and facilitate the legal matters and processes of [CFA] members in the countries in which they now reside. Today, the association is comprised of 38 families. Some are in European countries, but the largest number of our members are currently in Turkey.

We are submitting individual complaints to all United Nations-affiliated mechanisms that are concerned with human rights and, more specifically, that work on the issues of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial execution. The loved ones that we have lost were subjected to different types of crimes, the first of which being arbitrary arrest and detention, as well as enforced disappearance, torture, and extrajudicial execution. Each one of them was subjected to all of these crimes. Of course, the fact that we have not received the bodies of our loved ones, nor any information or acknowledgment, is also a crucial point for us. If it were not for the Caesar photos, we would still since 2012 be awaiting and anticipating the return of our loved ones whom had been arrested or disappeared.

Generally speaking, international mechanisms have been responsive. We submitted five individual complaints and these mechanisms responded favorably to three. They sent correspondence to the Syrian regime to inquire about the details of these cases. Of course, we know that Syria will surely not reply to any of these questions. The regime doesn't even admit

that it has detainees, so how is it going to respond or comment on this subject?

MPF: What do appropriate reparations include for your own family, or speaking more broadly for the other families of the CFA or those who have identified loved ones in the Caesar photos? (i.e., monetary compensation, rehabilitation, official apologies, assurances of non-recurrence, memorials, memorial ceremonies, etc.)?

MA: Within [the Caesar Families Association], offering moral support is so important because the entire association is in the same situation in a state of loss, which experts have termed 'ambiguous loss.' In other words because we don't know how they died or what happened to them. We just saw their photos. This is the only reason we learned that they have died. [CFA] doesn't provide financial support because the association is still new and we aren't able to help anyone financially or materially. In terms of what we are working on now, for example, on our website, we are creating a kind of memorial for the martyrs, in which we share the personal stories of each person as well as videos that capture the deceased and the close relationship he shared with his relatives. Right now, in this way, we are just trying to continue their memory.

I think that our objectives are more oriented within Syria. Even anticipating the time when Syria becomes secure, as we say, or when transitional justice is achieved the work needs to be there, in Syria, so that we are able to care for these families, materially or otherwise. In other words, to implement transitional justice provisions, whether this come in the form of reparations, or memorialization, or the burial [of their loved ones] in proper graves, or compensation for their property. Of course, we know that Iran appropriated all of our land, our property so this is also evidence of the martyr's right, or his family's right, to the ownership of this land or houses that were ours. So we hope that in the not-so-distant future God willing we will return to Syria and ascertain large-scale support for families. But right now, we are in a situation in which we are all dispersed and working in different [organizational] systems in a multitude of different countries. There are those who are in Turkey, for example; others of course who are inside Syria in Idlib others in Lebanon and Jordan in European countries, in Canada. So given this difference in organizations and systems, we aren't able to offer much... We can't raise our hopes until we are back in our country. I think that these things will be realized, God willing, when we can return to Syria. The association will remain and will be able to accomplish and attain for these families what they deserve and what the loved ones whom were killed [martyred] deserve.

MPF: When and how did the idea for the Truth and Justice Charter **arise, and how does it aim to contribute to the various ongoing international efforts toward a cessation of hostilities in Syria and negotiations regarding a future political process?**

MA: Members of several family organizations were invited to the 2019 Brussels Conference. I attended, along with a member of the Ta'afi organization and a member of Families for Freedom. Our role there was to tell our personal stories. Those in attendance offered their sympathy for us and sometimes they shed tears, and that was it. We left the conference and that was it that was our role. But we did not feel that this was, nor should be, our role. We are not victims who sit around and seek people's pity. So after the Brussels Conference, the members of family associations met with one another frequently and we found that our work aligned. We then decided to do something that would enable us to have a real role. We recognize and value the work of these other organizations, but they are not the rights holders

who are directly concerned. When it is the person most directly affected who is speaking on his own behalf and demanding his rights on his own behalf it is entirely different than having another individual speak and make these demands for him. So this is how we first gathered.

We originally met as four organizations, all of which were established relatively recently. The oldest [among the *Truth and Justice Charter* signatories] is the Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison which was founded about four years ago then CFA. The Coalition of Families of Persons Kidnapped by ISIS (MASSAR) then joined us, and we became an association of five groups. We decided to do something, so we set down the essential provisions and steps of the *Charter*. It started as a piece of paper, but it gradually began to develop and evolve. We worked on it for approximately a year and a half. Every word in the *Charter* derives from a process of careful deliberation, and draws from legal and linguistic reference and precedent. We laid out our vision as a collective association, as the relatives of victims and as survivors.

Of course this vision of ours is for a solution to the detainees' file. Speaking as careful observers and followers of this file, we know that it is the last thing that people want to discuss in the context of Syria. Even though it is the most important thing. How can anything happen how can there be transitional justice, for example, when hundreds of thousands of the disappeared are still not here? How can reconstruction take place when we know that the bodies of our children, or even those among them who are still alive, are under the foundations? In Syria, in Damascus, there are detention sites under the streets on which you walk. So on what basis can reconstruction occur?

There is not a single Syrian family who does not have an immediate or a close relative whom has been detained a son, a brother, a cousin. Every Syrian family now has members whom have been arrested or detained. This subject should therefore be a priority and the first step if there is international will to solve the Syrian issue. It is for this reason that we met and created this *Charter*. We are working extremely hard to try to cooperate with the international community, which, from our perspective, has so far let us down. Let us down as Syrians, let us down as a cause The documentation that the international community possesses should not result merely in condemning or denouncing the regime and Bashar al-Assad, no. Every testimony enables [the Assad regime's] referral to the International Criminal Court.

So the *Charter* clearly and firmly lays out victims' demands and priorities in order to press active parties to adopt a victim-centered approach. Moreover, it seeks to confront the narrative that falsely claims that victims do not know what they want, or that the active parties don't know what the victims want. It likewise challenges the narrative that wrongly suggests that victims might be an obstacle or impediment to the peace process. But as I said, the *Charter* conveys the vision of the victims and survivors in relation to solving the detainees' file. It's objective is for us to emphasize that the victim is the foundation of everything, of all action.

MPF: What measures must be taken to ensure that transitional justice mechanisms and accountability processes are victim-centered, and that the voice, agency, aspirations, and needs of victims are not only 'mainstreamed,' but prioritized?

MA: Pressure must continue and intensify. Likewise, we and all active parties on this issue must pursue all alternative solutions [for justice and accountability] that are available at

present. And we must be innovative in this endeavor, by exercising the principle of universal jurisdiction, for example, and resorting to the International Court of Justice.

MPF: CFA's website features victims' and families' organizations from other countries around the world, such as Argentina, Colombia, and Bosnia Herzegovina, in order to learn from their experience and adapt and apply 'best practices' to Syria. Have the Charter **signatories identified any preferred formats/structures that truth-seeking mechanisms and memorialization programs might assume?**

MA: We convened several meetings with [victims' and families' organizations in other regions] and they always ended with me telling them that we are different from all of these other countries in regard to these events and proceedings. We are not in our country. When you are in your own country, you are able to be far more active and effective. I can't do things like Ram, for example, who is from Nepal. Ram was able to do so much and now he is establishing an international organization for victims. But he was able to do these things because he is there and he can communicate with the relatives and do something. We are not. My siblings, for example, are in Syria and they are not able to talk to me. Why? Because they're scared, and rightfully so. Because the regime might take a brother or father or mother in reprisal. So there is a lot of fear among people, and so you can't simply communicate with anyone from Syria and tell them, for example, 'Do 'X,'' or, 'We want to do 'Y'' no, not at all. We always have to be careful and mindful of them and their safety, and put this first above us doing something inside the country.

So their experiences for example, the experiences of Argentina and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) we greatly admire their work. By the way, in Indonesia, for example, on the contrary, they feel that we as Syrians have reached people in decision-making positions to a far greater extent than they have. So it is the reverse they have started to ask us, for example, 'How were you able to reach them?' And now whether they are at the Security Council, or in Geneva, or at the Human Rights Council we truly are benefitting from [these decision-makers]. Ever since a full explanation has shed light on Syrians' situation, they have supported us continuously and our communication with them has given us a lot of momentum in international forums.

But of course, the fact that we have not received the remains [of those killed in detention] is very difficult for us however, it also allows for a kind of hope [that we will eventually receive them]. There is a well-known quote that has been disseminated in which I say, 'I want a grave for my son.' It's extremely difficult when you don't know where he's buried, or the condition of his remains whether or not he has dissolved to bones. But yes, I want a grave for him, in whatever form it may take. And of course everyone shares in this principle.

So we are benefitting from the experiences [of other victims' and family members' associations in other countries] and learning what steps to take. The women of *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* had a large political role even within some Security Council resolutions, which were set forth as a result of their interaction and their presence. They changed a system. So we are benefitting greatly from them and these experiences, and we are constantly communicating with them.

MPF: The Charter **states unequivocally that criminal accountability is imperative to long-term justice. On the matter of locating the remains of those whom have been killed in**

detention, some advocate for a 'humanitarian approach,' whereby experts collect only the information that would assist in the identification of human remains, rather than information that is of critical importance to a criminal prosecution process. What is your response to such a proposal?

MA: We are working on proposing an international mechanism to reveal the fate of the disappeared, and as of right now the work of the mechanism will not identify the perpetrating party because we know that the regime is not the only actor responsible. Of course, 90 percent of the disappeared are in regime custody, but also those who have taken up arms, let's say, as well as those such as Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, and Da'esh also have detainees and have forcibly disappeared people. They are creating the same situation. But accountability will come later.

MPF: Your colleague, Mr. Ahmad Helmi, who directs the Ta'afi Initiative (also a Charter **signatory), made note of this proposed mechanism in an interview with Amnesty International in March. He mentioned that your next step as a collective association is to publish a report "suggesting an international mechanism to reveal the fate of the disappeared." Is this the same mechanism that the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (IICI) recommended in its latest report on arbitrary imprisonment and detention (A/HRC/46/55, para. 113(b))? Or is the mechanism to which Mr. Helmi referred the mechanism that the** Charter **signatories have conceptualized different in scope and mandate?**

MA: It is similar in terms of principle, but our [forthcoming] report indeed goes into great detail regarding the competence of the mechanism and the tools at its disposal. Now that we have published the *Charter*, we are working on proposing an international mechanism to reveal the fate of the disappeared without identifying the perpetrating party. We know that the Syrian regime is granting access to neither ICMP nor the Red Cross the Red Cross has an extremely narrow role in Syria. After several attempts, they were able to enter civil prisons, for example. We are not interested in civil prisons those in civil prisons are alive. Notwithstanding the poor conditions of these prisons, those inside are at least alive, whereas the detention facilities that are underground the locations of which are unknown we don't know if those inside are alive or dead. This is what we want to examine and bring to light.

The regime is categorically denying the existence of detainees in its custody. Thus, in 2018 it issued approximately 1,700 death certificates. Of course this measure has no credibility. In a number of cases, relatives received death certificates, then after a period of time their loved one [whom was pronounced dead] was released. So there is no credibility and, in any case, we refuse to accept these death certificates, which [frequently] list the cause of death as cardiac arrest. My son's death certificate, for example, cites cardiac arrest and respiratory failure. And this is supposedly what happened to all of the detainees all of them supposedly died of cardiac arrest. So there is no acknowledgment or admission despite the exceptional clarity of the situation. There is no frank discourse conceding or acknowledging that it was the regime that murdered them. So the matter of the death certificates, in its entirety, is rejected. And therefore, we want the detainees returned to us. We want them, regardless of whether they are living or deceased. We want to see what happened to them.

So this mechanism which seeks to reveal their fate without identifying the perpetrators is merely so that we can at least arrive to a stage in which their fate is disclosed. Of course

accountability is an imperative, but this will be the second step. Right now, all we want is to know the fate of those detained. In regard to those whom were killed, we want to know where they are buried, and we want to receive their remains and bury them in a proper manner. And if there are detainees who are still alive, they should be released; or, at the very least, organizations should be granted access to enter and see them so that their parents can be reassured, and also to see whether there is at least medicine, clothing, and these things. Because those who have gotten out of detention sites and have spoken about it it's extremely horrifying. Deaths occur due to disease, due to overcrowding, due to starvation. The Caesar photos fully verify this situation [detainees whose bodies are] skeletons, some whose eyes have been gouged out, burned and amputated limbs So our work now is in relation to a mechanism that will aim to reveal the fate of those detained. We are exerting a lot of pressure in order to urge the Security Council to adopt [this proposal] that is, of course, if Russia and China don't exercise their veto power. This is our current work.

But as I said, this mechanism will not identify perpetrators, and this point distinguishes our mechanism from the other proposals or instruments that are being suggested... there is ICMP, for example. But there is a difference: in the mechanism that we have presented, we propose to search for those who are still alive as well as those in mass graves. The ICMP, on the other hand, searches only for the dead only for mass graves and collects DNA from them for analysis. So this is what we are working on. Maybe the mechanism that we've proposed will be formed through an international resolution or decision; or we can try to combine or bring together the efforts of the Red Cross and those of ICMP and other organizations that work on this matter and issue a unified decision that will organize each entity's particular function. And we are working on this possible option, as well. In other words, focusing on what everyone is able to do in order to advance the subject of the mechanism.

We are now oriented toward, or focusing on, pressuring several organizations and states on the Security Council to adopt the proposed mechanism through an international resolution. Such a resolution would facilitate the mission of the United Nations Security Council, as it is this body that will implement and operationalize the mechanism. Of course, we don't have too much hope that it will be implemented, but just simply presenting it to the Security Council from victims' families is, in our opinion, a positive step. It might be presented to the General Assembly, but we know that this approach will take two or three years and I think that ten years is long enough for the missing for those who are waiting for their children and relatives. Really, they have arrived to a point where, enough we can't wait anymore. We want to know whether they are alive or dead. We cannot wait another ten years, this is too much.

But, as I said, the obvious course forward is to find congruence or compatibility among the organizations that work on this issue the Red Cross, ICMP and unify, in the sense that we take from each organization that which is useful and beneficial, and we formulate the mechanism in this manner. As such, the mechanism will be constituted from the aggregation of the different organizations' efforts. In other words, we draw upon what each organization can offer or what it is able to contribute. As I said, ICMP has not been able to enter any Syrian prison or access the north in order to uncover the mass graves that Da'esh left behind because the Syrian regime is not granting them entrance.

So, we presented a proposal that does not involve identifying the perpetrators so that they might authorize it because the state has to approve unless, of course, the decision comes from the Security Council. So, within our proposed mechanism, experts will enter only to reveal

the fate of the disappeared. And accountability, of course, will occur through other means. But we will in no way capitulate or back down from the topic of accountability from the highest in the chain of command to the lowest-ranking who carried out torture.

MPF: As you know, much of the critical work that CFA and other victims' and family members' organizations are doing is the legal obligation of the Syrian State. Do you believe that international entities or other state actors can successfully pressure the Syrian State to fulfill the demands that are presented in the Charter**? And if not, what do the** Charter **signatories identify as the preferred alternative channels or processes for achieving these demands?**

MA: Of course it is possible for the states with influence in Syria to pressure the Syrian regime and the rest of the parties to the conflict to comply with the requests stated in the *Charter*. But this requires greater pressure and the appropriate political mood, which is not presently available. The current situation in Syria clearly indicates the absence of the [Syrian] state's sovereignty and the level of impact that other countries have on all of the state's decisions.

MPF: With this in mind, the Charter **explicitly states that a victim-centered approach must challenge 'elitist and external pressures and agendas' that might contradict or conflict with victims' aspirations vis-à-vis issues of justice and accountability on the one hand, and political negotiations on the other. In view of the prominent geopolitical dimension of the ongoing violence in Syria, what efforts must be undertaken to ensure that the strategic interests of external powers do not overshadow the vision put forth by the signatories of the** Charter**? How best can diplomats, policymakers, and peace negotiators ensure that the vision presented in the** Charter **is integrated and incorporated into political talks?**

MA: Victims must be integrated and incorporated as active parties in the formulation of transitional justice mechanisms, as well as in the work toward peace. They should not be considered only as bearers of testimony. It is important to remember that a large number of victims were subjected to [human rights] abuses because of their activism, as they have been activists since the beginning.

Active parties and decision makers must know that any transitional justice process or peace process that does not address the priorities and needs of the victims will not be an effective process and will not lead to stability. As we have witnessed in the context of other conflicts, if the roots of the conflict are not addressed, violence and instability will resume after a brief period.

MPF: The Government of the United States has taken a strong interest in the military defector codenamed 'Caesar,' inviting him on multiple occasions to testify before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and naming a piece of American legislation after him, which introduced economic sanctions against the Assad government. What is your opinion of the sanctions imposed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act or the so-called 'Caesar Act'

MA: There is surely a political backstory to the sanctions. Trump wasn't some great fan of the Syrian people if that had been the case, he wouldn't have prohibited asylum. But now we're talking about interests. If you look at it, the Caesar Act was in support of the Syrian people who are still inside the country with respect to the delivery of food and assistance. But the Syrian

regime took advantage of the sanctions in the ugliest way by starving the Syrian people who are still there. Nothing is available, why? 'Because we are under sanctions.' [This is the official line recited by the regime.] And subsequently, we know how much the Syrian pound has fallen against the dollar. We don't have any of the basic living necessities there's no gasoline for vehicles, there's nothing even food would be unavailable if it weren't for the fact that there is agriculture in the country. Syria perhaps used to be economically self-sufficient due to the different types of terrain within its territory it's a rich country, but exploitation and also the implementation of the Caesar Act contributed to the current situation.

The Caesar Act, as we say, was fully adopted because several organizations were working with Caesar and contributed to the topic of sanctions. There is another young man, Omar Alshogre. He was arrested and imprisoned when he was fifteen years old, and when he got out, his father and his brother had been killed in a massacre. Now he is studying in university. But [while he was in prison], his task [which was coercively assigned by his jailers] had been to tape numbers on the foreheads of those whom had been killed. In other words, he was a witness like Caesar. Caesar was photographing, but Omar was placing [numbered] adhesives So I think this also was a kind of impetus that prompted [the Trump administration] to name the sanctions after Caesar. In other words, the sanctions were going to be imposed [regardless of the Caesar photos], but they assumed the title 'Caesar' because of the presence [and profile] of Caesar and also of this young man Omar, as well as for the organizations [that worked with and supported these two individuals] The sanctions took the name 'Caesar,' but I don't think they had anything to do with the topic of Caesar's photos nor with the martyrs whom these images depict.

MPF: It is an unfortunate and deeply disappointing fact that neither the United States, nor the United Kingdom or France chose to participate in the UN General Assembly debate that ultimately resulted in Resolution 71/248, which established the IIIM in December 2016. What is your response to this inaction, adopted by three permanent members of the UN Security Council?

MA: Of course this is considered a let down and a failure on their part, particularly because these are the states that are calling for human rights. So it is odd that they are calling for human rights and they have evidence that proves that the regime has perpetrated crimes against humanity, and yet in spite of this, they still until now adopt such a posture. Their position has not been affirmative or favorable throughout any talks or even in regard to accountability mechanisms. As you know, the states that have exercised universal jurisdiction include Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium certainly not France, for example, although there are two essential cases that France accepted and participated in. Certainly nothing like this from Britain. So, indeed, this is considered a let down.

I think that their foreign policy is utterly clear in the United Nations and they are, in fact, condemning but 'on the ground' in practical terms as regards humanitarian commitment, they are not doing the right thing. I think that there is certainly a contradiction, and this contradiction is negatively affecting us. As I say, the way they address issues depends on their interests, and their interests are still aligned with the continued presence or existence of the Syrian regime. Russia is benefitting completely, irrespective of Iran. Syria has become a battleground. It's only 185 square kilometers in size, but several international powers are present therein.

MPF: The Charter **suggests that peace process negotiations must take place 'under the sole auspices of the United Nations.' Does this mean that CFA and the other** Charter **signatories reject the Astana Talks and any other negotiations that might take place under a different mechanism or platform?**

MA: As we discussed, the Security Council has been a let down in regard to the Syrian situation by way of Russia and China's veto power, but it is the only body that we can trust it's a collection of states and an international, UN body. Our wish that talks take place within the framework of the United Nations is for the sake of granting international legitimacy to these talks and guaranteeing best practices under the framework of international law.

The Astana framework is rejected categorically because it considers detainees to be prisoners of war. We are not at war. This is demeaning and impractical, given that the largest portion of detainees and the disappeared are in the custody of the Syrian regime. Furthermore, the circumstances of prisoners of war do not apply to our loved ones whom have been detained and disappeared. They are not combatants and do not have connections or ties to the militant factions that conduct and participate in prisoner exchanges. Consequently, they will be excluded from the equation.

So the topic of prisoner exchanges was rejected completely. And the United Nations is aware of this topic because there are existing [UN] members what were they doing? I attended a session of the Astana Group in Geneva honestly, they are adjudicating amongst themselves. They say: 'Such-and-such people were released.' Those whom had been detained or something along these lines from the same region. They brought around ten or fifteen people and put them in prison for a month or so, and then exchanged them for prisoners. So it's absolutely a game that has been exposed to the world, to the states of the world, and to the United Nations. What they are doing has been totally revealed, but this is the will of Russia, Turkey, and Iran the states that are working on the Astana track.

So last year, prior to issuing the *Charter*, our demands included referring or sending the *Charter* to Geneva. Of course, nothing happened aside from the formation of a constitutional committee that resulted from Astana, which until now has not done anything and which is considered almost dead. As of today, nothing has come out of it, nothing has been implemented, nor has it navigated or steered any issues regarding Syria or addressed Syrian demands demands of the Syrian people. We aren't speaking as organizations, we aren't talking about states' politics; we are speaking as Syrian people and stating our demands. And up until this point, neither Astana nor the Constitutional Committee has been able to do anything. We are still relying on [UN Security Council resolution] 2254, despite the fact that there was no agreement on it in the beginning. But now it is the best way to bring about justice in Syria.

MPF: The Truth and Justice Charter **was discussed extensively during the 8 March, 2021 webinar, titled "Truth and Justice First for Syria's Arbitrary Detention, Enforced Disappearance, and Torture Victims and their Families," which was organized in parallel to the 46th regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.**

Since this event, to what extent have state representatives and policymakers expressed an interest and willingness to engage with the Charter **signatories particularly diplomats and political figures from countries that exercise the greatest influence on the various**

parties to Syria's conflict? What about on the part of representatives negotiating on behalf of the Syrian opposition within the political process and Constitutional Committee?

MA: A large number of state representatives and international institutions expressed their support and adoption of the *Charter* at different times and on different occasions, and we appreciate this very much. Direct interaction was very substantive from all of the organizations in countries where it was the first time they were hearing victims' voices. It was the first time that something tangible, something written, had reached them and made extremely clear what the demands are and the path to realizing them. I think the conference that took place in Geneva [the side event of the UN Human Rights Council session] was an outcome or a result of the *Charter*. This conference was an acknowledgment of the pivotal role played by relatives of the victims, and this is a historic precedent. There had been absolutely nothing before. Of course, we tried very hard to pressure states to actualize this role-- not merely to recognize it as pivotal, but rather to recognize us as partners in any discussions held on the topic of detainees in Syria or, indeed, any talks convened on the Syrian issue.

So on one hand, this acknowledgment is a very positive step, but on the other hand, there is disappointment. Why don't [victims' families and survivors] have a role? These are the people at the core of the issue; they are the ones who have been harmed more than anyone, they are the ones who lost For example, I no longer have a home in Syria, I no longer have a salary, I don't have anything so how am I supposed to return? I don't have anything. My living necessities are non-existent no family, no house, no salary. So how am I supposed to live? We must have a large role in the decision-making process, and so we are now striving to hopefully achieve this. Applying continuous pressure on all stakeholders is essential, and we will not stop in our efforts to do so.