

ORION FORUM

Syria's Lost Children: The Assad Regime's Legacy of Disappearances

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With the protracted Syrian Civil War and the recent collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria remains one of the [largest humanitarian crises](#) globally. After nearly 14 years of war, approximately [16.7 million Syrians](#) are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The prolonged violence has taken a devastating toll on civilians, with more than half of Syria's prewar population [displaced](#) from their homes, and millions lacking access to basic infrastructure. Furthermore, civilians became targets of war tactics like [chemical attacks](#), indiscriminate aerial bombardments, and sieges that destroyed [life-sustaining services](#) like water, sanitation, health systems, and electricity. Among the lives that have been shattered by the Syrian crisis are children, who have arguably paid the heaviest price of the conflict. In the aftermath of the hostilities, investigations are now underway into the thousands of children who [disappeared](#) in detention, conscription, or abductions linked to the Assad regime.

Numbers, Methods, and Human Cost

As the investigation into Syria's missing children deepens, the lives lost to violence, imprisonment, and enforced disappearances come to the fore. For more than a decade, the Assad regime's security forces [abducted](#) thousands of children, separating them from their families and hiding them in networks of orphanages. This was done to coerce the families of the abducted children into cooperating with the regime. While the true number of missing children is likely much higher, families are still searching for [at least 3,700](#) abducted under the Assad regime and remain unaware of their fate.

While living in orphanages, the children were under the strict control of security forces. Their methods of repression were bureaucratically [organized](#); abducted children were registered in orphanages under different names, moved from prison to prison, or transferred to military

training camps, making it impossible to trace them. Some children of foreign fighters were [deported](#) to Iraq or Russia. Families seeking answers face an opaque system designed to erase evidence and sow fear.

According to a [report](#) by the BBC, Lighthouse Reports, The Observer, and other organizations, the majority of abducted children were sent to orphanages run by SOS Children's Villages International, an Austria-based aid organization operating in more than 130 countries and raising approximately €1.6 billion annually, including donations from the UN, European governments, and individuals. However, the organization's senior leadership [remained silent](#) about the abductions and transfer to orphanages for years until the regime's fall, seven years after whistleblowers first alerted international staff to SOS's involvement in the issue. The human cost of this mechanism extends beyond the losses: families plunged into despair, siblings forced into premature adulthood, and communities destabilized by the loss of a generation. These losses are not only a humanitarian tragedy but also a deliberate war strategy that transformed children into victims and symbols of a stolen future of Syria.

Similar dynamics exist in other conflict zones. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, children have long been abducted and forcibly recruited by armed groups. The most widespread human rights violation is recruitment, with more than 4,000 children forcibly recruited into armed groups, mostly through [abduction](#). While some children have been reunited with their families, the majority continue to [suffer](#) further abuse at the hands of these armed groups. Similar situations emerged during The Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in Uganda, where approximately 35,000 abducted children were [placed](#) in camps. While many have [escaped or returned](#), they face long-term hardship, including psychological trauma. In a broader context, the tragedy in Syria is part of a global pattern that requires consistent accountability mechanisms to ensure that child abductions do not go unpunished.

The Path Ahead

With the collapse of the Syrian dictatorship, the transitional government still lacks the capacity to respond effectively to its entire population's humanitarian needs. In order to find and reunite the missing children with their families, the international community must act with urgency and step in to hold the fallen Assad regime accountable for its atrocities against

children. While Syria's Social Affairs Ministry announced an [investigation](#) in May 2025, it has yet to yield meaningful findings on the children's situation because of its monumental staffing and resourcing challenges. Since Syria is currently unequipped to respond to the crisis and track the children on its own, bodies like the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and independent tribunals should open an investigation into the Assad regime's human rights violations. These bodies can strengthen their cases against those responsible for the disappearing children and more adequately and efficiently bring these families to justice.

Another method to hold the Assad regime accountable for its crimes is through punitive actions like international sanctions. By financially penalizing regime officials, intelligence workers, and other networks involved in disappearances, countries around the world will send a message to the Assad regime that its strategy of hiding children and forcing their families to cooperate with the regime is unacceptable under international law.

In addition to legal and economic mechanisms, the international community must raise public awareness about Syria's lost children and the urgency of returning them to their families. Since the issue is largely underreported, the media, nongovernmental organizations, and activists must work to frame the issue as both a humanitarian crisis and a war crime to garner the international support demanded to meaningfully reconcile this issue.

The Trump administration, in a sharp policy pivot after the fall of the Assad regime, pledged a [policy](#) of engagement and conditional support toward the new Syrian government under President Ahmed Al-Sharaa. While the White House has publicly [vowed](#) to give Syria a chance to hold accountability for past atrocities, the Trump administration has yet to take action to address the Assad regime's enforced disappearance of children. Further, Syria lost a critical lifeline for its humanitarian assistance programs with the United States' cuts to global aid as Syria's [largest donor](#). These funding cuts are hindering the new government's ability to investigate and address war crimes, including those committed against Syria's youngest generation. The US must decisively change its message of inaction. Even symbolic statements and messages from the US in policy circles can increase visibility and awareness of the cases of missing children. Such measures, which bring the issue to the global agenda, can offer avenues that al-Sharaa and other advocates can use to seek justice for Syria's missing

children. While the numbers can make the crisis feel abstract and distant, public messaging based on storytelling through personal testimonies, videos, and interviews can humanize the statistics and build public empathy, giving voice to those who cannot speak for themselves.

Despite years of [documentation](#) by various international and non-governmental organizations, thousands of missing children in Syria remain unaccounted for. Families are deprived of justice, and perpetrators largely escape consequences. The new regime's promise to investigate the case remains unfulfilled, fueling distrust among the victims' families and human rights defenders. The impact of this inaction extends far beyond Syria's borders. If such systematic abductions and disappearances remain unanswered, they risk setting a dangerous global precedent. Authoritarian regimes may view this as evidence of impunity, demonstrating that they too can target vulnerable groups without consequence. Addressing these crimes will require a sustained international commitment to accountability; otherwise, the world risks normalizing practices that undermine human rights globally.

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