

# The Integration of Mental Health Approaches and Psychosocial Support in Syria

---

Eveline de Bruijn and An Michels



رابطة معتقلي ومفقودي دسجن صيدنايا  
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison



NYU | CENTER ON  
INTERNATIONAL  
CIC | COOPERATION



## About the Authors

**Eveline de Bruijn** has over sixteen years of experience in the areas of justice, security, and peacebuilding, having worked with the United Nations (UN), the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Oxfam. Most recently, Eveline served as senior justice advisor and justice coordinator with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prior to this, Eveline worked for Oxfam and for the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention from where she has supported justice and security operations in various conflict-affected settings.

She started her UN career in support of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Sudan, based in Juba and Bor, and with UNDP in Khartoum. She is currently a non-residential fellow at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, undertaking research on the integration of mental health in transitional justice processes and works as an independent consultant on justice and mental health. In addition, she works as a coach and is in the process of also obtaining a MA in Clinical Psychology. She holds a LLM in Public International Law and MA in Conflict Studies.

**An Michels** is a clinical psychologist and a family therapist. She specialized in the development of support strategies for conflict-affected populations and worked in Rwanda, Burundi, and Indonesia for Médecins Sans Frontières as well as for the Special Court for Sierra Leone. As the Psychologist/Trauma Expert for the Victims and Witnesses Section at the International Criminal Court (ICC) she advises the Court on the development of survivor-centred approaches and issues related to mental health and trauma. Throughout her work she has developed particular expertise in supporting victims of gender-based violence and children affected by armed conflict, in their involvement in transitional justice mechanisms.

Together with her teams she has supported hundreds of victims and witnesses interacting with the Courts. An is a visiting researcher at the Amsterdam Laboratory for Legal Psychology at the VU University Amsterdam. In 2023, she received a grant from the Knowledge Management Fund of the Knowledge Platform for Security & Rule of Law to conduct a good practice analysis on the integration of mental health and psychosocial support approaches in accountability mechanisms for atrocity crimes and launch a community of practice of mental health and justice practitioners. An was selected by the Rockefeller Foundation for a Bellagio Residency for 2024, in recognition of her role as a global leader in her field.

This brief should be cited as: Eveline de Bruijn and An Michels, "The Integration of Mental Health Approaches and Psychosocial Support in Syria," (New York: NYU Center on International Cooperation, November 2023).

## Contributing Partners

**The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison** is an independent and mutual solidarity association seeking to uncover the truth and serve justice for detainees based on their opinion or political activity. Based in Turkey, it works on revealing the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria in general and in Sednaya in particular. The association mainly takes care of detainees' affairs and forcibly disappeared persons in Sednaya, documenting their numbers, places of origin, dates of disappearance, and the party responsible for their arrest. The Association seeks to communicate with the families of missing persons, provide material and immaterial support, and communicate their voices and suffering by all means possible.

**The Center on International Cooperation** is a non-profit research center housed at New York University. For over two decades, CIC has been a leader in applied policy that links politics, security, justice, development, and humanitarian issues. CIC's mission is to strengthen cooperative approaches among national governments, international organizations, and the wider policy community to prevent crises, and advance peace, justice, and inclusion.

**Impunity Watch** is an international non-profit organization working with victims of violence to uproot deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations and promote justice and peace. Working together with victims, survivors and communities affected by human rights violations is at the heart of everything the organization does.

**Women Now For Development (Women Now)** is the largest Syrian feminist organization, focused on deepening the roles of women and girls in shaping a democratic Syria. Through integrated programs in Protection, Empowerment, and Participation/Leadership, Women Now reaches thousands of women and girls annually, both in Syria and abroad. Women Now also conducts impactful Research, Advocacy, and Campaigning at both local and international levels. It focuses on producing feminist knowledge and supports women's advocacy efforts for justice and accountability through various means, including leadership, networking, and specialized psycho-social support.

## Acknowledgments

This paper and the recommendations within are largely based on the findings of the good practice analysis: "Integration of mental health and psychosocial approaches in accountability mechanisms for atrocity crimes," prepared and funded by the Knowledge Platform for Security & Rule of Law.



The authors are grateful to the Syria Truth and Justice Charter groups and the Center for Victims of Torture for their insightful input. The authors would also like to thank Dr. Kholoud Saber Barakat for her review and feedback on this piece.

This policy brief aims to inform the process of elaborating the terms of reference of the new independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. It provides concrete and practical recommendations on how to integrate a mental health approach and provision of psychosocial support into these different elements of the Institution. The recommendations are based on existing frameworks, guidance, and lessons learned from other contexts and include the inputs, reflections, and review from representatives of Syrian community service organizations that have direct experience with the provision of mental health services to victims and survivors of torture and families of missing persons.

## 1. Introduction

On June 29, 2023, a historic United Nations (UN) resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly, which established the independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter the Institution). This is a unique occasion and a direct response to a long-standing demand of associations of families of missing persons and survivors of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance.

This institution will allow for more systematic and coordinated efforts to determine the fate of more than 100,000 missing persons.

Experiences across many countries have demonstrated the profound psychosocial effect of disappearances and not knowing the whereabouts of loved ones on families and communities. **In Syria, such ambiguous losses have a detrimental impact on families and their mental health and psychosocial well-being. In addition, disappearances have an impact on the socio-economic status of families and can destroy the social fabric at community levels.**<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued that justice processes have often been limited in terms of victims' and survivors' inclusion and the provision of comprehensive support addressing the above-mentioned socio-economic and mental health challenges.<sup>2</sup> The UN resolution indicating that the Institution will include both a search function and support to victims, including psychosocial support, is unprecedented. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to establish an

---

<sup>1</sup> Susana Navarro, Pau Pérez Sales, Franc Kernjak, "International Consensus on principles and minimum standards for psychosocial work in search processes and forensic investigations in cases of enforced disappearances, arbitrary or extrajudicial executions," *ICRC Missing Persons Global Response*, 2010, <https://missingpersons.icrc.org/library/international-consensus-principles-and-minimum-standards-psychosocial-work-search-processes>.

<sup>2</sup> Gugu Resha et al, "Literature Review: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Transitional Justice in Africa, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation," *Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, April 2023, <https://www.csvr.org.za/literature-review-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-in-transitional-justice-in-africa>.

institution that *does* contain the components and capacities to address the psychosocial impact of disappearances holistically.

The UN resolution provides for the following relevant elements that offer a basis for the development of the terms of reference of the Institution:

- **Clarify the fate and whereabouts** of all missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic;
- Provide **adequate support to victims**, survivors, and the families of those missing—in close cooperation and complementarity with all relevant actors;
- Ensure the full and meaningful participation and representation of victims, survivors, and the families of missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic through its operationalization and work;
- Engage with women’s organizations and other civil society organizations (CSOs) in a regular and sustained manner;
- Apply a victim- and survivor-centered approach; and
- **Be inclusive** of families and be guided by the principles and fundamental features of gender inclusivity, non-discrimination, “**do no harm,**” **independence, impartiality, transparency, and confidentiality of sources and information,** along with the operational standards of complementarity and non-duplication, presumption of life, sustainability, accessibility, **and multidiscipline,** as outlined in the report of the secretary-general.

The above implies that this Institution will (1) contain a search function and (2) a support function, which requires a cross-cutting and survivor-centered approach.

This submission in support of the process of elaborating the terms of reference of the new institution aims to provide recommendations on how to integrate a mental health approach and provision of psychosocial support into these different elements of the Institution. This can help to fulfill above-mentioned obligations in the following ways:

In terms of its search function by:

- Seeking to integrate the provision of mental health services to victims interacting with the Institution where needed (including a “do no harm” approach considering risks of re-traumatization);
- Improving the quality and efficiency of search endeavors and information gathering—ensuring victims are fully informed and included in search endeavors; and
- Reinforcing the healing potential of search processes.

In terms of its support capacity by:

- Ensuring that appropriate trauma-informed support is provided, which is informed by the socio-political and cultural features of the victims/survivors’ context, including gender norms; and
- Addressing the needs of families and victims and considering the “do no harm” approach, trauma, and the welfare of those involved.

The recommendations provided in this brief are based on existing frameworks, guidance, and lessons learned from other contexts. Furthermore, they include the inputs, reflections, and review from representatives of Syrian CSOs that have direct experience with the provision of mental health services to victims and survivors of torture and families of missing persons.

The purpose of these recommendations is for them to be utilized in the development of the Terms of Reference of the Institution, including functions and required operational capacities to ensure the integration of a mental health and psychosocial support approach across the different components of the Institution’s work.

## 2. Context

The Syrian conflict that began in 2011 has resulted in at least 112,713 people going missing in Syria, constituting a major humanitarian crisis.<sup>3</sup> Much of this is the result of abductions, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearance primarily at the hands of Syrian government forces or its allies, but other parties to the conflict also share in this responsibility, including Syrian National Army (SNA) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Many of the missing have been extrajudicially executed. Others have died in detention because of torture or because of dire conditions and neglect. The number of those still alive today is unknown.

As a result, family members are forced to search for their loved ones among official, informal, and secret detention centers across the country, going from door-to-door and from one intelligence facility to another. They face violence, extortion, threats, and false promises.

The evidence shows that the Syrian government is aware of and meticulously registers information about those it has detained. However, it continues to withhold information from family members—as do other parties to the conflict—intentionally prolonging the suffering of hundreds of thousands of families.

The term “missing” does not only relate to those held in incommunicado detention. It also relates to those who went missing or are presumed dead

---

<sup>3</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, data from March 2011-June 2023, <https://snhr.org>.

because of the conduct of hostilities. The extent of damage and destruction, together with the massive displacement that has taken place on the ground, greatly complicates the ability of families to locate their missing relatives.

Adding another layer of complexity, over six million Syrians have sought refuge abroad, and this may include individuals documented as missing, or they may have information about the fate of others who are listed as missing. Millions of Syrians are seeking refuge outside the country, with many dying or going missing en route.

Many families have been waiting for more than twelve years for news about missing relatives. This prolonged state of uncertainty is paralyzing. Without knowing the status of their loved ones, who are often the heads of household, most families face enormous social, economic, legal, and administrative difficulties, including when accessing social welfare benefits, inheritance, and property. This often leaves severe consequences for families'—not least women-headed households'—ability to deal with fundamental aspects of their daily lives. **Women face very specific challenges where the consequences of a disappeared family member and the exposure to violence are combined with earlier forms of gender social injustice, a patriarchal legal system, financial and care responsibilities, and financial exploitation.** The impact on mental well-being is immense.<sup>4 5</sup>

Syrian victims and their families have been working tirelessly to seek answers. In 2021, five victim, survivor, and family associations joined forces and put forth a common vision for truth and justice. They have since expanded to ten organizations.

In December 2021, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 76/228, in which it requested the secretary-general to produce a study on how to bolster efforts, including through existing measures and mechanisms, to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing people, identify human remains, and provide support to their families. The General Assembly specifically requested that the study be based on the recommendations of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter the Commission). In this paper, the Commission sets out some of its views on addressing this issue in line with its prior recommendations and the wishes of family members, victims, and survivors of the Syrian conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Following advocacy efforts by the Truth and Justice Charter members, Syrian CSOs, and international bodies, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution

---

<sup>4</sup> Dawlaty and Women Now for Development, "Shadows of the Disappeared," 2018, <https://women-now.org/shadows-of-the-syrian-disappeared>.

<sup>5</sup> "Forcibly Disappeared in Syrian Detention Centers," 2020, <https://www.admsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Forcibly-Disappeared-in-Syrian-EN.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> The Commission of Inquiry elaborated a non-paper regarding this issue in May 2021, on which this policy paper is partly based.

creating a new independent institution to assist the families in the search for the missing on June 29, 2023.

### 3. Lessons on the integration of mental health approaches<sup>7</sup>

It has long been globally recognized that the integration of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) approaches is critical for accountability mechanisms. Much guidance in investigating and documenting victims and survivors of torture and enforced disappearances exists. These provide an overall framework and guidance as to basic principles and lessons to be applied. However, the challenge is not only about knowing what to do but about ensuring adequate policies, plans, capacities, and resources are in place to operationalize recommendations.

#### *Lessons learned from Syria and other contexts*

The below key lessons, drawn from other contexts and learned in Syria through existing efforts, can be drawn upon in developing the Terms of Reference for the Institution. The list is far from exhaustive but is intended to demonstrate that experiences from different contexts coincide with specific experiences in Syria.

These lessons apply to both the **search capacity** and the **support capacity** of the Institution; they are all interrelated parts of a trauma-integrated approach.

#### *Operational set-up of the Institution*

Experiences from the work of the International Criminal Court and the more recently established UN investigative mechanisms show the importance of structurally integrating a mental health approach in the organization's set-up.

To combine a “do no harm” approach in investigative activities with providing the appropriate level of psychosocial support to victims and witnesses, it is essential to prioritize mental health and the prevention of psychological harm in the legal framework and to have psychologists with expertise in trauma on board. They can advise on strategies to put in place psychosocial support and to support investigative activities.

The focus of the support is two-fold. On the one hand, it supports interventions aimed at facilitating the involvement of victims and their families in the mechanism. On the other hand, it supports strategies focused on the prevention of psychological harm as a result of the involvement with the mechanism.

Specific mental health strategies include using **vulnerability assessments** prior to interviewing and providing support during interviews; the possibility to offer not only **psychosocial support** but also **medical and/or socio-**

---

<sup>7</sup> The writing of this policy brief was informed by an initiative funded by the Knowledge Platform on Rule of Law and Security, led by An Michels (in her personal capacity) to develop guidance and standards on the integration of mental health approaches in accountability processes for atrocity crimes.



**economic support** to facilitate victims' collaboration with the Institution. For example, this looks like being able to facilitate travel and participation in interviews alongside psychological support and/or close collaboration with local organizations and services that can offer long-term psychotherapy or community-based support. In most accountability mechanisms, MHPSS for witnesses and victims is developed within the limitations of a clear legal, operational, and ethical framework, which determines the boundaries of the support and assistance provided.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, the focus on staff well-being and the prevention of vicarious trauma are critical elements of this MHPSS approach. The employment of staff counselors, who are not involved in psychosocial support for victims, and regular training for all staff are tested tools that the Institution should employ.

Experience demonstrates that, while much progress has been made, the further implementation of good practices in these institutions is often hampered by organizational limitations, such as the limited number of psychologists or other experts, the lack of psychological expertise at the senior management level, or the difficulties the organizations face to operationalize support—due to financial and administrative rules. **The establishment of a new institution offers a possibility to avoid these problems and be innovative in the structural design of the organization.**

#### ***Search capacity: Victim involvement and interviews***

Lessons from a variety of experiences emphasize the importance of the involvement of victims in the search process.<sup>9</sup> In Colombia, for example, the Search for Missing Persons Unit allows for victims to be involved in the identification and search process while providing counseling and other support at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, useful guidance exists on how to conduct investigations in a trauma-informed way. This includes a focus on the interaction with victims and on the importance of awareness of different manifestations of mental health problems that could occur during interview processes. The use of a psychological risk assessment is important—for example the trauma-informed investigations field guide which was used for investigating crimes committed by

---

<sup>8</sup> An Michels, “The Psychologist-Client Relationship at the ICC: A Road Map for the Development of the Counsel-Victim Relationship,” in *Advancing the Impact of Victim Participation at the International Criminal Court: Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice*, ed. Rudina Jasini and Gregory Townsend (Oxford: Oxford Law In-house publication, November 2020), [https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/iccba\\_-\\_oxford\\_publication\\_30\\_november\\_2020\\_.pdf](https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/iccba_-_oxford_publication_30_november_2020_.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> The importance of victim participation is also stressed in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2019 and the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Best Practice on the Documentation of Sexual Violence as a Crime or Violation of International Law, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, “From Justice for the Past to Peace and Inclusion for the Future,” *UNDP*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/publications/justice-past-peace-and-inclusion-future-development-approach-transitional-justice>.

Da'esh in Iraq.<sup>11,12</sup> This need was confirmed by Syrian CSOs, stating the high risk of re-traumatizing victims during documentation and research processes, as has occurred in some past investigations.<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, efforts have been made to develop training manuals providing methodologies and techniques for how to provide psychosocial support to victims, integrating specific gender perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, experience demonstrates that while training and awareness raising of all staff is crucial, it is not sufficient on its own and cannot replace the involvement of psychologists.

From established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC), such as those in Africa and Latin America, it is evidenced that civil society involvement in the investigative process is essential for operational and social support purposes.<sup>15</sup> Employing mental health professionals to guide the truth commissioning process and to handle the aftercare of the witnesses is a critical component in the design of a TRC. Additionally, the provision in some of the reparation grants for identified victims ought to be considered.<sup>16</sup>

### **Provision psychosocial support**

It is important to conduct an extensive consultation process to identify **psychosocial support needs** to inform policy development within the institutions. Here, there is a need to consider the multi-faceted nature of mental health challenges amongst Syrians affected by the disappearance of a loved one—mental health provision for victims and families of missing persons cannot be provided in isolation of addressing other needs. It is crucial to be aware that victims have diverse needs and are not a homogenous group.<sup>17</sup>

For example, Syrian victims currently reside in very different contexts within and outside Syria, while all victims find themselves facing different challenges, including day-to-day challenges in terms of discrimination, human rights abuses, socio-economic challenges, and generally life as a refugee. Suffering from trauma and the needs for psychosocial assistance should be considered in this broader context.

---

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) and the Human Rights in Trauma Mental Health Program at Stanford University, "Trauma-Informed Investigations Field Guide," *UNITAD*, 2021, <https://www.unitad.un.org/content/trauma-informed-investigations-field-guide>.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of taking into account psychological consequences in terms of interviewing and dealing with victims is also highlighted in the Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2022 edition), *UN OHCHR*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/policy-and-methodological-publications/istanbul-protocol-manual-effective-o>.

<sup>13</sup> From consultations with Syrian CSOs, August 3, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Based on consultation on August 3, 2023 with Women Now for Development, Syria, <https://women-now.org/> and the Association of Detainees and Missing in Sednaya, Syria, <https://www.admsp.org/en/>.

<sup>15</sup> Verlyn Francis, "Designing emotional and psychological support into Truth and Reconciliation Commissions," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 12 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2663172>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Ott and Natacha Hertig, "Family Associations of Disappeared and Missing Persons: Lessons from Latin America and beyond," *Swisspeace*, February 2020, <https://www.swisspeace.ch/articles/family-associations-of-disappeared-and-missing-persons-lessons-from-latin-america-and-beyond>.

In addition, within the Syrian context, it is crucial to pay specific attention and provide appropriate support to **women, persons with disabilities, and children**.<sup>18</sup> It is essential to undertake a thorough analysis of the needs of specific groups and develop targeted strategies addressing these groups, such as the gender strategy developed by the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) in Syria.<sup>19</sup> For example, often, women searching for missing loved ones face gender-based violence and will have specific gendered consequences.<sup>20</sup>

Experience also demonstrates the importance of specific attention to transgenerational trauma and the mental health needs of children during the search process for missing persons.<sup>21,22</sup> For example, in Cyprus, grandchildren of missing persons indicated that in addition to their own needs, they found it important to learn to be equipped to support their grandparents.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the consequences of intergenerational trauma need to also be taken into consideration, as it forms a potential root cause for future suffering.<sup>24</sup> Psychoeducation of victims and their communities can play a role in addressing this issue.

It is important to consider good practices on what can be done **without a collaborative government**. In the first place, lessons can already be drawn from Syrian experiences. Both in Syria itself and neighboring countries that host Syrian refugees, various projects and initiatives have been established to address the severe mental health issues faced by refugees, victims of torture and families of missing persons in particular. Examples of such initiatives include direct services for torture survivors and families of missing persons through individual and group therapy. Community-based and group therapy and facilitating the sharing of grief amongst victims have been shown to be effective in addressing trauma.<sup>25</sup> In Syria, an initiative and methodology were developed to provide specialized trauma rehabilitation care in family centers. The focus here is both on providing therapy to individuals and to families, after which families and survivors work jointly in documenting their stories.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, “Lessons Learned: Missing Persons in Lebanon,” March 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lessons-learned-missing-persons-lebanon-critical-reflection-approach-missing-persons-lebanon-provided-support-international-missing-persons-mechanism-syria-march-2023-enar>.

<sup>19</sup> “IIIM Gender Strategy and Implementation Plan (Abridged Version),” *UN IIIM*, September 30, 2022 <https://iiim.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Gender-Strategy-Implementation-Abridged.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> <sup>20</sup> From consultation session with Syrian CSOs on August 3, 2023, and online review process in August 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Waters, “Listening to Young Voices: A Guide to Interviewing Children and Young People in Truth Seeking and Documentation Efforts,” *ICTJ*, January 2018, [https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/Child\\_statement\\_EN\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/Child_statement_EN_Final.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> From consultation session with Syrian CSOs on 3 August 2023, and online review process August 2023.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.cmp-cyprus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Cyprus-FNA-Public-Report-April-2019-EN-1.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> L.H. Berckmoes, “In the Aftermath of Atrocities: Research on the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atrocity Crimes*, ed. B. Holá et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 555-578, <https://www.ascleiden.nl/publications/aftermath-atrocities-research-intergenerational-transmission-trauma-and-violence>.

<sup>25</sup> From consultation session with Syrian CSOs on August 3, 2023, and online review process in August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross and the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, “Needs of Families of Missing Persons in Cyprus,” April 2019, <https://www.admsp.org/storiesor>.

Other contexts also demonstrate the power and effectiveness of horizontal efforts within communities. Peer support and community-level work are vital parts of healing.<sup>27</sup> For example, in Latin America, the sharing of stories and experiences across families through Family Associations has proven to be supportive in dealing with the trauma of missing family members.<sup>28</sup> Globally, much experience exists in providing psychosocial support at community level as a form of community healing and empowerment that can be drawn upon.<sup>29</sup>

For psychosocial support to have a sustainable impact, it is crucial to not only provide psychosocial assistance but also to mainstream a trauma-informed approach through other interventions and offer a broad spectrum of psychological, social, legal, economic, and medical support (where needed).<sup>30</sup>

Experience in Lebanon has demonstrated the importance of ensuring that psychosocial support is always accompanied by addressing other legal and administrative barriers families of the missing are facing (bank accounts, inheritance, proprietary rights, etc.).<sup>31</sup> Also, it was found in Uganda that psychosocial support interventions are not sustainable if only specifically targeted at individuals and not addressing the broader daily needs of communities through collaboration with other peacebuilding/development initiatives.<sup>32</sup>

## **Recommendations: How to integrate a mental health approach and the provision of psychosocial support**

The new Institution has the potential to play a groundbreaking role in the integration of mental health and psychosocial support in the core structure of its work, in the development of strategies for psychosocial support for victims and families of the missing, as well as in providing mental health support to staff. Integrating lessons learned and the policies and procedures it develops can serve other international and national mechanisms.

The recommendations below are intended to be as operational as possible and include suggestions for preparatory actions to ensure capacities and structures are put in place to ensure a truly trauma-informed approach to implementing its mandate.

---

<sup>27</sup> SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," July 2014, [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ott and Hertig, "Family Associations of Disappeared and Missing Persons."

<sup>29</sup> UNDP Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Guidance Note, <https://www.undp.org/publications/integrating-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-peacebuilding>.

<sup>30</sup> "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma."

<sup>31</sup> "Lessons Learned: Missing Persons in Lebanon – A critical reflection on the approach to missing persons in Lebanon provided in support of an international persons mechanism in Syria," *Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre*, April 2023, <https://apidiakoniase.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/Missing-Persons-Report.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Gugu Resha et al., "Literature Review: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Transitional Justice in Africa," *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.csvr.org.za/literature-review-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-in-transitional-justice-in-africa>, referring to 2017 study by Amrriyam Rokhideh.

### **General recommendations**

- Develop a mental health and psychosocial support policy and strategy, which is gender-sensitive and includes relevant protocols at the onset of the establishment of the Institution.
- Ensure the integration of a MHPSS approach goes beyond mainstreaming or recruiting a psychologist only—and ensure a systematic mental health approach to the different functions of the institution.
- Prioritize the principle of “do-no-harm” in all areas of work of the Institution.
- Conduct an annual review of this pioneering aspect of the work of the institution to better understand new or unforeseen challenges and be ready to adapt to address them more effectively.

### **1. Structure of the Institution: Integration of a mental health approach through staffing, budget, and structure**

- The position of a leading psychologist should be created as a senior management position to ensure an interdisciplinary senior leadership team; to ensure the mainstreaming of a survivor-centered and trauma-informed approach throughout all procedures, policies, and operational activities and to ensure that it is taken into account in strategic decision making; and to help coordinate outside support activities in the area of MHPSS;
- In conjunction, a psychosocial support team should be created to support search activities; operationally coordinate MHPSS activities and tie them to other forms of support provided by the Institution and engage with support networks of local psychosocial services, women’s organizations, and civil society. This team can also provide psychosocial support to staff, witnesses, and other CSO representatives who may not be victims;
- This team should include more than one psychosocial expert/psychologist so that continuity is ensured and should include a mix of experts with international and local expertise; it is a necessity to have several Arabic-speaking psychologists on board who have a high level of awareness of the victims’ and survivors’ context;
- Because of the particular mandate of the Institution and the gravity of the violations under its mandate, special attention should be given to staff care and prevention of secondary trauma through training, access to specialized services, and supervision, but also by ensuring sufficient staffing levels to assure rotation. Staff of organizations collaborating with the Institution should also have access to staff support and training;

- Establish a plan for regular monitoring and evaluation of the mental health and psychosocial support approach of the Institution and ensure capacity is in place for this; and
- The budget should foresee sufficient funds to not only support organizations who offer MHPSS services for the institution but also allow for the payment of individual specialized support services where needed—based on clear rules on who would be entitled to this support. The financial rules of the organization should allow for easy and direct payment of services and the establishment of partnerships with local CSOs (without tender or a vendor system).

## 2. *Search activities*

- Search activities set up to clarify the whereabouts and fate of the missing, such as interviews, forensic activities, and other search actions, should be based on a trauma-informed, survivor-centered and ethical methodology. It is recommended that the institution conduct a short study in collaboration with Syrian CSOs through interviews on past experiences by Syrian victims during investigative processes and how interviews could be improved.

The new Institution should also:

- a. Ensure training is provided to all staff on how trauma manifests itself and how to interact with victims in a trauma-sensitive manner;
- b. Where forensics endeavors are outsourced, ensure other institutions also have trauma-informed methodologies in place;
- c. Develop procedures at the onset of the work in line with applicable international standards, such as the Istanbul Protocol;
- d. Conduct interviews in close cooperation with the psychosocial support Team (see above on staffing), who should conduct vulnerability assessments prior to interviews to minimize re-traumatization risk and prevent revictimization, and assure referral to appropriate support;
- e. Apply rigorous standards in relation to consent from families of missing persons to be interviewed or share personal data;
- f. Maintain strict confidentiality of medical and other personal records;
- g. Ensure collaboration and play an oversight/coordination role with other investigative initiatives; use a central case-management system with restricted access to medical records to ensure the protection of dignity and privacy of victims and their families and to avoid unnecessary duplication of interviews;
- h. Adhere strictly to standards and good practices around the protection of victims who interact with the Institution, including safe interview locations, confidentiality, and vetting of interpreters;

- i. Include trauma-informed victim participation, where the institution must deal with mental health and psychosocial issues that may obstruct or compromise such participation. It must also prevent re-traumatization of victims as a result of their participation in the institution's activities. For that purpose, the institution must include access to psychosocial support in all its outreach and consultation efforts and for all victim representatives engaging with IIMP as part of their efforts to inform or monitor its work.

### **3. Psychosocial support**

Psychosocial support provided by the Institution should be limited to those directly interacting with the Institution as part of its support function. At the start, it should:

- Identify relevant development/humanitarian actors with whom partnerships can be established and ensure an integral approach;
- Undertake (or outsource) an extensive psychosocial needs assessment;
- Conduct a mapping by a Syrian expert of all existing initiatives and psychosocial support services to provide support to Syrian victims that exist within and outside Syria; and
- Undertake a capacity needs assessment of existing initiatives focused on providing psychosocial support to identify possible capacity-building needs and opportunities for up-scaling.

The new Institution should also:

- a. Develop clear criteria as to whom can benefit from psychosocial support, including families of victims and survivors who were found during the search and whom will be referred to existing initiatives if possible.
- b. Clearly communicate the limitations of the support that can be provided;
- c. Work closely with networks of local psychologists and mental health and psychosocial support initiatives and establish a referral system;
- d. Include access to specialized mental health services, as well as community-based individual, group, and family support (for those who can benefit). A holistic definition of support should be applied, based on identified needs, so that also medical, social, legal, livelihood, and other support can be provided;
- e. Adopt a one-stop-shop approach: victims and their family members can benefit from psychological, medical, social, and legal advice and support in a centralized way, with one entry point to the organization. This lowers the threshold for engagement with the Institution and avoids unnecessary duplication of information gathering and service

overlaps, which may be potentially re-traumatizing (see: case management system);

- f. Support to be based on individual needs and vulnerability assessment and should prioritize the most vulnerable groups such as (unaccompanied) children, single mothers, persons with disabilities, etc.;
- g. Support services directly offered by the Institution should not replace existing services; focus to be on referrals, upscaling existing initiatives, and coordination;
- h. In addition to the one-stop-shop approach, a case-management approach should be used to guide victims and their families through the services;
- i. Following a psychosocial community-based approach, creating sustainable paths of support among the victims, survivors, and families of missing persons;
- j. All internal and external psychosocial support services offered should adhere to minimum standards of confidentiality, consent, ethical and professional implementation of services, non-discrimination, gender sensitivity and offered by professionals;
- k. Engage in persuasion efforts towards countries hosting Syrian refugees, highlighting the importance of attention to the mental health needs of victims and provide recommendations to take this into account in the provision of local services.