

Center for the Victims of Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/empowering-survivors-through-right-truth>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Um Ahmads" teenage son barely communicates with anyone, suffers from several physical ailments, and refuses to leave the house. Almost three years ago, he was swept up in a wave of indiscriminate arrests in Damascus and disappeared in a Syrian prison for a year. While his father waited in Damascus for any sign of his son, Um Ahmad fled with her other children to the relative safety of Jordan. Although her son is now with her, he arrived in Jordan in shock, having suffered unspeakable torture, which he will not discuss.

Um Ahmad is one of CVTs many Syrian clients who express the desire to know the truth about what happened to their family members and to seek justice against the Syrian regime for torturing and killing them. She has been in Jordan for nearly four years, and, while the seeming hopelessness of the situation has led many to seek resettlement, she still wants to return and rebuild her life in Syria.

Under international law, survivors of war violence and other mass atrocities have the inherent right to discover the truth about their own suffering and that of their loved ones and neighbors. In 2010, the UN General Assembly proclaimed March 24 the [International Day for the Right to Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations](#). But as the world grapples with whether and how to seek justice for the victims of the worlds worst humanitarian crisis since World War II, the question remains: how can the revelation of truth also empower the survivors to rebuild their lives?

The right to truth has long been recognized as an important element of post-conflict justice and reconciliation. It was famously the impetus behind the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which carried the mantra [revealing is healing](#). Under certain circumstances, for some survivors, the truth can have healing or cathartic elements. Studies show that despite some negative experiences providing testimony, effective psychosocial and emotional support before and after the process can remedy these harmful effects and lead to a positive experience.

CVT works with survivors of torture and war violence from all over the world to heal the wounds of traumatic experiences. While simply telling their stories in the context of accountability can have therapeutic effects for some, our experience has shown us that for many, their needs are much deeper. A community of support, a feeling of safety, and a trusting relationship in which they can explore their past can provide the means to living a more fruitful life despite their past. The truth must not only allow survivors to tell their stories, it must empower them to face their past and take control of their future.

This month, Syrian activists, frustrated with delays in the international community at its slow move towards justice, began [posting a trove of photos online](#) that were smuggled out of Syria. The photos show the tortured and emaciated corpses of hundreds or thousands of victims of Bashar al-Assads regime. The hope is that family and friends of the thousands of disappeared are able to identify their loved ones and the photos will provide the truth to the survivors of the war, which entered its fifth year in March.

The international community continues to engage in seeking justice for Syrian survivors. Senators Marco Rubio, Ben Cardin, and Bob Menendez recently [introduced a bill](#) in the U.S. Congress that would require the State Department to report on efforts to bring perpetrators to justice, including the establishment of an ad hoc international tribunal. The [UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria](#) is in its fourth year of investigating alleged violations of human rights and has [announced its intention](#) to provide information about perpetrators to ongoing foreign judicial inquiries into atrocities in Syria.

Ultimately, however, the mechanisms of justice must lie in the hands of Syrians themselves. Whether Syrians choose to create a truth commission, support an internationalized tribunal, seek a referral to the International Criminal Court, or carry out domestic criminal prosecutions, those decisions must be Syrian ones. [Successful transitional justice](#) mechanisms must be based on the needs of the affected community itself and include national ownership of the process.

Many, like Um Ahmads son, may not be ready to tell their story in front of a truth commission or international tribunalsome may never be ready. They may not even be ready to tell their story confidentially to a clinician to begin the process of healing. But if and when they are ready, the choice should be their own. Similarly, a credible accountability forum will have national ownership. The international community, governments and non-governmental organizations alike, should be there to offer support and expertise. The truth that must emerge must be the survivors own.

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