



General Assembly

Distr.: General
31 October 2024

Original: English

Seventy-ninth session

Agenda item 13

Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields

Implementation of the resolution establishing the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [77/301](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of the resolution, within 100 working days of its adoption, and further to report on the activities of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic on an annual basis.

The present report outlines the steps taken since the development of the terms of reference of the Independent Institution, published in December 2023 ([A/78/627](#), annex I), up to its establishment on 1 April 2024, and further towards its full operationalization.



I. Introduction

1. On 29 June 2023, the General Assembly adopted resolution [77/301](#), in which it decided, in paragraph 2, to establish the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic.
2. In paragraph 10 of the resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of the resolution within 100 working days of its adoption, and further to report on the activities of the Independent Institution on an annual basis.
3. On 1 December 2023, the Secretary-General submitted a report to the General Assembly ([A/78/627](#)), which outlined the steps already taken and those further envisaged towards the speedy establishment and full functioning of the Independent Institution. In the report, he also described the process of development of the terms of reference of the Independent Institution, which were presented in annex I to that report, highlighting, among other issues, the mandate and scope, legal framework, working methods, structure and composition of the Independent Institution, as well as its cooperation with other relevant actors.

II. Steps for the establishment of the Independent Institution and related activities

A. Establishment of the Independent Institution

1. Premises

4. The Independent Institution was established on 1 April 2024. It is based in Geneva, as determined by the Secretary-General in accordance with paragraph 45 of the terms of reference. It operates from premises within the United Nations Office at Geneva, which were secured during the initial set-up phase. The location in Geneva facilitates close cooperation with other relevant United Nations offices and entities hosted there, as well as with additional organizations and entities that are relevant to the mandate of the Independent Institution.

2. Budget and funding

5. The budget for the Independent Institution for 2024, as approved by the General Assembly in its resolution [78/273](#), covers operations from its establishment on 1 April 2024 until 31 December 2024. It reflects a phased strategy to progressively build capacities in line with operational requirements. The budget proposal for 2025, submitted to the General Assembly on 29 April 2024 (see [A/79/6 \(Sect. 24\)](#) and [A/79/6 \(Sect. 24\)/Corr.1](#)), includes provisions to fully implement the mandate of the Independent Institution as set out in General Assembly resolution [77/301](#), to cover the full complement of posts and non-post resources.

3. Recruitment of staff and progress on the appointment of the Head of the Independent Institution

6. Recruitment efforts for the Independent Institution are well under way, with some posts already filled, while the process for the remaining posts is ongoing, in order to fill all posts included in the 2024 budget by the end of the year. The recruitment strategy prioritizes the onboarding of personnel with the broadest skill sets of relevance to the mandate of the Independent Institution, thereby ensuring that the staff is equipped to handle the complex and multidisciplinary nature of the work. The phased recruitment approach is designed to ensure a smooth integration of staff

while maintaining operational efficiency, in line with the exigencies of the mandate and the objectives set for delivery in 2024.

7. Applications for the Head of the Independent Institution, at the level of Assistant Secretary-General, closed on 19 September 2024 and are currently being assessed. The prompt filling of this leadership role is a priority. The Head, once appointed, will oversee the process of selection of the Deputy Head of the Independent Institution.

B. Key activities during the reporting period

1. Outreach and consultation

8. Since its establishment, a consultative, participatory, gender-sensitive and victim- and survivor-centred approach has been taken by the Independent Institution in its work. The Independent Institution has engaged extensively with victims,¹ including families and survivors, and with civil society, including victims' and women's organizations across the Syrian Arab Republic, in neighbouring countries and beyond.

9. In order to integrate the views of victims and civil society into its operations and strengthen programming, the Independent Institution is holding thematic consultations on specific areas of its mandate, including:

- Search methodologies, strategies and priorities, as well as lessons learned from the search for missing persons from other country contexts;
- Implementation of the structural element for participation;
- Guiding principle of gender inclusivity and sensitivity;
- Use of the data on missing persons gathered by civil society organizations;
- Outreach strategies and tools, including a communications campaign;
- Provision of support, including through referrals.

10. The Independent Institution is also engaging with humanitarian actors to identify areas of cooperation in both the search and support components of its mandate.

11. The Independent Institution regularly delivers briefings to victims, including families and survivors, to civil society organizations and other relevant partners, such as humanitarian actors, United Nations entities and Member States, on numerous issues relating to the implementation of its mandate and the progress of its work. By applying a victim- and survivor-centred approach, and guided by the principles of gender inclusivity, non-discrimination, "do no harm", independence, impartiality, transparency and confidentiality of sources and information, these briefings aim to strengthen understanding of the mandate of the Independent Institution, share substantive and administrative updates, and establish and maintain transparency and accessibility in relation to the Institution and its activities. Briefings have taken place virtually or during missions to countries with a significant presence of Syrians.

12. Between January and September 2024, the start-up team and, since 1 April 2024, the Independent Institution itself, have delivered 29 group briefings to nearly 500 victims, in collaboration with civil society partners, 21 of which were virtual and 8 in-person. Of these briefings, 17 were dedicated to engaging with women who are relatives of the missing and women survivors. In addition, there has been bilateral engagement with around 70 civil society organizations working on issues of relevance to the mandate, including victims' associations and women's organizations. There has also been engagement with a wider range of civil society organizations through

¹ See the terms of reference of the Independent Institution ([A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 9).

periodic public online briefings, through which initial contact has been established with over 200 civil society organizations.

13. On 30 August 2024, the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the Independent Institution launched its website, a key tool for furthering its engagement with all stakeholders.² The Institution is working on a preliminary outreach policy, including by identifying platforms and tools that would be effective in the Syrian context. Furthermore, the Institution is developing recommendations to address barriers to information and participation, including those based on age, gender or economic background. Those outreach efforts also serve to help victims to protect themselves from potential extortion attempts during the search for missing loved ones, from actors claiming to represent the Independent Institution or work on its behalf.

2. Mapping

14. The Independent Institution is conducting a mapping of existing actors that hold relevant information on missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and of those that are carrying out relevant activities. A number of international organizations, international and Syrian non-governmental organizations as well as associations of families and survivors have collected a significant amount of data and information that are relevant to the mandate of the Independent Institution. Many also provide relevant support to survivors or families of missing persons.

15. The Independent Institution continues to map the needs of victims, recognizing their multifaceted, gendered and, at times, age-specific nature. Thirteen years of conflict, human rights violations and abuses, displacement and humanitarian and political crises have resulted in cumulative and compounded needs for people in the Syrian Arab Republic, in neighbouring countries and beyond. Determining the fate and whereabouts of missing persons remains a primary need expressed by families, coupled with addressing a range of psychosocial, legal and economic needs arising from the disappearance of their loved ones. During the consultations, many families emphasized the importance of awareness of their rights and of legal recourse available to them, including of how to engage in the search for missing family members without falling victim to extortion or misinformation. Families and survivors also highlighted the need for protection, livelihood and reintegration in their host communities, inside and outside of the Syrian Arab Republic.

16. That mapping, which includes the collection and assessment of information, has allowed the identification of elements of potential cooperation agreements with relevant actors, in relation to both search and support work. The Independent Institution has conducted several meetings to discuss modalities of cooperation and pave the way for the conclusion of such agreements in the near future, notably to facilitate the collection and sharing of relevant available information and data, as well as the provision of support services by referral.

17. While the mapping processes are inherently a work in progress, they are an essential part of the work of the Independent Institution as they are strictly linked to the principles and operational standards underpinning the implementation of the mandate, such as “do no harm”, complementarity and non-duplication.

3. Design of an appropriate information management system

18. A significant part of the work of the Independent Institution will consist of establishing appropriate procedures to incorporate the relevant available information and data, bearing in mind the need to adhere to the principles of informed consent

² See <https://iimp.un.org/>.

while also mitigating the risk of revictimization, as well as the need to set parameters for the verification of such information.

19. The Independent Institution is establishing data processes and infrastructure as the foundation for its operations. That work includes aligning all aspects of programmatic outputs of the Institution with an integrated information architecture to streamline the collection, processing and analysis of information, along with the processing of individual and family support cases, through a single point of data entry. Major milestones that are on course to be achieved by the end of 2024 include the implementation of the following aspects: a data centre that complies with standard ISO 27000 of the International Organization for Standardization; the setting up of core databases; a framework for managing information security risk; the case registration system; and the intake of information for the purposes of the search.

20. The Independent Institution is focused on the need to complement the work of and avoid duplication with other existing actors in the field and is seeking to build, as far as possible, on the work of such actors, including in the area of information management. The Institution aims to adhere to standards and commit to proven technologies within the United Nations system, while making strategic investments to significantly increase capacity so as to meet the particular demands inherent to its mandate. As such, it is using tools of artificial intelligence and data augmentation, as appropriate, notably in terms of translation technology and in identifying relevant information and patterns across disparate structured data sets.

4. Design of an initial search plan and other activities related to the search

21. For the purpose of the mandate of the Independent Institution, clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing persons shall be taken to mean determining whether they are alive or dead, their whereabouts, and the circumstances in which they went missing, including for those who may have died.³ The concept of search is inextricably linked to upholding the right of victims, notably the family members of missing persons, to know the truth.

22. The search for missing persons is a process involving a series of steps aimed at tracking and reconstructing, in retrospect, the circumstances that led to them being missing in order to determine, with a degree of confidence, their fate and whereabouts. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to finding those who have gone missing, and the strategy employed in a specific search operation will depend on the scenario considered. The procedures and activities involved in the search will need to be adapted to the context, type of case, magnitude, complexity and the time of intervention, as well as to context-specific patterns or trends. In every search process, however, it is important to follow a series of steps with a view to alleviating the suffering of the families, while providing meaningful answers. The search methodology must be based on key principles, guidelines and standards drawn from best practices in the area, including the presumption of life and the continuing nature of the search until the fate and whereabouts of missing persons have been clarified.

23. At the time of writing of the present report, the Independent Institution is developing its search infrastructure and designing an initial search plan, with a view to developing and adopting a comprehensive search strategy at a later stage, once the Head of the Institution has been appointed and the Institution is fully staffed and operational.

³ [A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 21. In the same paragraph, the terms of reference clarify that this shall also include consequential responsibilities that may derive from such findings, such as seeking the reunification of the person with the family if the person is alive and so chooses, seeking the release of the person if the person is found to be arbitrarily detained, or facilitating the return of the remains to the family if the person is found to be dead.

24. As indicated above, by the end of 2024 the Independent Institution intends to have its own information management system developed and be able to securely collect, store and disaggregate relevant data from other entities. Once this system is in place, it will also be able to collect new information and register cases of missing persons in its own database. A registration form is being produced to facilitate the submission of search requests from families.

25. As information is collected, the Independent Institution will start to analyse it. The analysis of the information, including structural and contextual analysis of events and patterns, is an important element in the search process and is essential in informing the search plan and investigation strategies of the Institution. Given the vast number of persons who have gone missing in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Institution will establish initial priority lines of investigation while ensuring a balanced approach to cover all categories of missing persons under its mandate.⁴

26. The Independent Institution will make use of available technologies for search activities⁵ and develop partnerships for specific search processes in which other entities have demonstrated resource capacities and expertise. Searches for missing individuals will benefit from strategic cooperation, the coordinated gathering of data and collaborative analysis work.

27. In order to inform its initial search plan, the Independent Institution is carrying out a series of activities, including consultations with families, civil society organizations and experts on the topic. In August 2024, the Institution held a virtual round table with practitioners and experts working on search mechanisms at the national level. It will also conduct at least two country visits before the end of the year, notably to Colombia and Cyprus, so as to learn from the work of bodies with a similar mandate.

28. The Independent Institution is also working to ensure that search strategies and priorities are developed in coordination with relevant actors, in particular families, as well as civil society organizations, in accordance with the terms of reference.⁶ At the time of writing, the Institution is planning a consultation with victims' associations and another with civil society organizations in order to inform the design of an initial search plan.

5. Support activities

29. For the purpose of the mandate of the Independent Institution, providing adequate support means, either directly or through referrals to existing actors, that families of missing persons receive support adapted to their rights and needs, be it

⁴ The expression "all missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic" encompasses all persons, irrespective of nationality, who went missing before or after the creation of the Independent Institution, whenever their situation or circumstances are related to the Syrian Arab Republic. For the purpose of the mandate of the Independent Institution, different categories of individuals and circumstances under which they go missing are covered under the expression "missing persons", including those individuals who went missing as a result of abductions or enforced disappearances or following any form of arbitrary deprivation of liberty. It also covers people who go missing in other contexts such as displacement or as a result of military operations, whether or not directly connected to specific human rights violations or abuses or, in situation of armed conflict, to specific violations of international humanitarian law. Furthermore, it includes persons who are currently believed to be missing in the country, regardless of where they may have gone missing initially, as well as those who initially went missing in the country, irrespective of where they may be believed to be currently missing. See the terms of reference of the Independent Institution ([A/78/627](#), annex I, paras. 7 and 11).

⁵ [A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 22 (f).

⁶ *Ibid.*

individual or collective, taking into account that needs may change over time, and with due consideration for the gendered impact of missing persons.⁷

30. Given its link to the search aspect, support should encompass ensuring the participation and engagement of victims in the search for their loved ones. As with other areas of its programming, and pursuant to paragraph 3 of General Assembly resolution [77/301](#), the Independent Institution is developing guidelines for the participation of victims in the search process so as to ensure that they have easy access to information about the process and updates on investigations, and can meaningfully contribute to the search in an active way. The participation of victims in the search shall be balanced with the upholding of the principles of confidentiality, protection, privacy, and the safety and security of information and data.⁸ Additional forms of support are being considered and include, notably, psychosocial support, with a view to ensuring that the victim- and survivor-centred approach and the principle of “do no harm” are upheld.

31. During the reporting period, the Independent Institution conducted a number of activities to ensure the implementation of the support part of the mandate. As mentioned above, the ongoing mapping of the needs of families and of existing actors that provide relevant services is informing the work of the Institution to design an accessible, transparent, gender-sensitive and victim- and survivor-centred system of referrals for support. Cooperation agreements negotiated with relevant actors will be informed by this mapping and designed to include the possibility to refer cases for the forms of support that the Institution may not itself be able to best provide.

32. The Independent Institution is also working to establish clear protocols on eligibility of persons to receive different forms of support, notably psychosocial and legal support, and to determine means of appropriate support to families. Furthermore, it is identifying ways, such as through consultations and cooperation with relevant actors, to support families requiring necessary documentation, including regarding the status of the missing person, to help families to better enjoy relevant rights, such as the rights to education, housing, land and other property, and to access support services.

6. Design of a system for the meaningful and full participation of victims in the work of the Independent Institution

33. In line with resolution [77/301](#),⁹ since its establishment the Independent Institution has emphasized consultation with victims, including families and survivors, and civil society organizations, on the structural element for their full and meaningful participation and representation in the work of the Institution, as well as on how this can best be put into practice in its working methods, taking into account the guiding principles of non-discrimination, gender inclusivity and “do no harm”, among others.

34. The Independent Institution has also consulted victims and civil society organizations, including victims’ associations and women’s organizations, on the various forms of participation highlighted in its terms of reference.¹⁰ These include a formal collective platform for two-way exchange on the work of the Institution (which will meet twice every year, in person and online) as well as membership in the advisory board, which shall meet on a regular basis to provide confidential views to the Head of the Independent Institution on its programmes and operations. The

⁷ [A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 33.

⁹ See, in particular, the preamble and paragraphs 3 and 5 of resolution [77/301](#).

¹⁰ [A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 39.

Institution is currently developing guidelines and criteria to implement the participation framework set out in its terms of reference.

7. Development of internal procedures and working methods

35. In line with its terms of reference, following a victim- and survivor-centric and rights-based approach, the Independent Institution is designing internal procedures and working methods for the consideration and adoption, as appropriate, by the Head of the Institution, once appointed. Such procedures, policies and protocols would cover areas such as those set out below:

- Registration of cases and considerations regarding their prioritization
- Parameters for processes of informed consent and verification of information and data
- Means of engagement and participation of victims as well as their protection
- Infrastructure for the identification and mitigation of risk across physical and information security domains
- Technology development frameworks that take into account the principles of “do no harm”, gender analysis, data protection and operational redundancies
- Specific safeguards for children entering in contact with the Independent Institution
- Comprehensive integration of protective approaches to mental health and psychosocial support into its work, including for its staff

36. The working methods of the Independent Institution will be flexible and can be adapted over time, including in the light of the feedback, views and experiences of those affected by its work.¹¹

III. Support and cooperation

37. The General Assembly, in its resolution [77/301](#), provides that the mandate of the Independent Institution shall be carried out in close cooperation and complementarity with all relevant actors. For the Institution to move forward and meet the legitimate demands and expectations of families, cooperation with and support from several actors is key. Such actors include relevant States, notably those having obligations towards missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic,¹² parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Nations system, other international institutions, and civil society organizations at all levels, in particular Syrian civil society organizations.

38. Such cooperation encompasses the sharing of information and data, as appropriate, access to the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic and of other relevant States, the conduct of search operations and the provision of assistance and support to victims – wherever they may be located – which includes the issuance by relevant States of the documents necessary for families of missing persons to procure greater legal certainty as to their situation and its legal consequences.¹³

39. The Independent Institution acknowledges with appreciation the fruitful discussions held to date with several key United Nations entities and other

¹¹ Ibid., para. 29.

¹² See [A/78/627](#), para. 5.

¹³ See paragraphs 7 to 9 of resolution [77/301](#) and the terms of reference of the Independent Institution ([A/78/627](#), annex I, para. 43).

international actors to explore cooperation on relevant issues, within respective mandates, and the possible modalities for such cooperation. These actors include, in particular, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, which also has its mandate from the General Assembly,¹⁴ the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which has its mandate from the Human Rights Council,¹⁵ the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Commission on Missing Persons.

40. The Independent Institution is grateful for the cooperation from and support of other entities of the United Nations system, notably the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), which organized a series of consultations on gender inclusivity and sensitivity and seconded a gender expert to promote the mainstreaming of gender in the design and establishment phases of the Institution.

41. The Independent Institution recognizes with appreciation that a number of Member States, both bilaterally and in other forums, have expressed their continuing support and willingness to cooperate with the Institution. In line with the provisions of resolution [77/301](#),¹⁶ the Independent Institution has also held meetings with other actors that are relevant to its mandate.

42. The Independent Institution is particularly grateful to the associations of families and civil society organizations with whom meetings were held during the reporting period for their trust and for the cooperation and support they offered. The Independent Institution looks forward to deepening its cooperation and collaboration with them, towards the most effective discharge of its mandate.

¹⁴ See resolution [71/248](#).

¹⁵ See Human Rights Council resolution [S-17/1](#).

¹⁶ See, in particular, paragraph 7 of resolution [77/301](#).