

Syrian Archive<https://syrianarchive.org>

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In 2011, a group of Syrian citizens took to the streets calling on the Syrian government for democratic reforms. This was the beginning of a civil war that has lasted for almost ten years. Originally a regional war, today it is an international war.¹ The war has taken the lives of more than half a million Syrians; an additional 5.6 million are refugees and 6.2 million are displaced.² Many towns and cultural institutions, including archives and museums, have been destroyed. Given the horrifying situation, many groups began to document the destruction and the war's atrocities. One effort to document the impact of the war is the *Syrian Archive*, an online resource which relies on mainstream news media to expose human rights violations. The site is open to anyone with Internet access who can read Arabic or English. The *Syrian Archive* aims to "preserve, enhance and memorialise documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed by all parties to conflict in Syria for use in advocacy, justice and accountability."³ The archive includes visual materials that document the violence of war against Syrian citizens, which can help to hold the Syrian government and other political groups accountable for human rights violations. The site advances justice for vulnerable groups, enabling the voices of civic witnesses, journalists, and ordinary people to be documented through aggregated data (such as video clips) and through collaborations. The initiative includes partners with international institutions and organizations such as Amnesty International and the University of California, Berkeley.

The *Syrian Archive* collects visual documentation created by journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists. The videos mainly document the Russian airstrikes, clustered incidents, and chemical weapons. The site has preserved approximately 3,578,591, verified 8,249 videos, and investigated 2,069 incidents.⁴ A main goal of the project is to preserve related media found online and secure the availability of these materials for present and future needs. The project publishes a regular report that provides information about how many of their videos have been removed from the Internet, which shows the importance of the *Syrian Archive* project. The media is

¹ "Global Conflict Tracker," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-syria>.

² Council, "Global Conflict Tracker."

³ Homepage, *Syrian Archive*, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://syrianarchive.org>.

⁴ "How we do it," *Syrian Archive*, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://syrianarchive.org>.

cataloged in Arabic and English. The *Syrian Archive's* metadata schema is based on consultation with different international organizations such as the United Nations Office for High Commissioner for Human Rights, and other archival institutions and human rights organizations.⁵

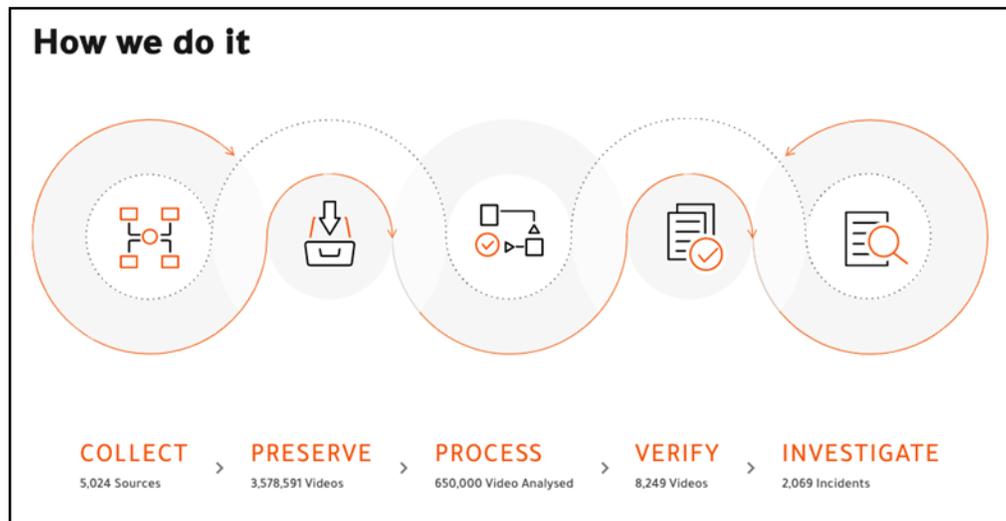


Illustration of the *Syrian Archive's* workflow, <https://syrianarchive.org>.

According to the *Syrian Archive* website, curators verify and collect videos focused on the use of chemical weapons attacking Syrian town and cities.⁶ They have collected materials from social media, journalists, and individual citizens since 2011. The site also receives materials from local and international news agencies, human rights organizations, and local hospitals. After the data has been collected, it is analyzed and verified; then it is cross-referenced with other reports that document the same events. Curators also validate the location from which the media were captured using Google Earth and open street-maps or another geolocation software.

The website collects data from various resources online, but it is challenging to verify the credibility and the provenance of the source because most media clips come from unknown sources. Online media and social networks create both opportunities and challenges. Individuals and groups can work together to provide information about injustice; however, others use the same tools to disrupt justice. For example, the *Syrian Archive* collects media clips from a media network called Durar al-Shamiyyah. I searched the network and read some of the news they publish and was disappointed because it is mostly gossip and action news. Such network sources require more careful analysis and confirmation.

⁵ "Establish Standardized Metadata Scheme," *Syrian Archive*, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/about/methods-tools>.

⁶ "Incident Collections," *Syrian Archive*, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200514023656/https://syrianarchive.org/en/collections>.

Searching the content presents some challenges because the archive does not use standardized metadata found in other archives or libraries. Additionally, searching in English for a town called “Daraa” results in 72 records, whereas if I search in Arabic for the same town, it yields zero results. Searching the data using the titles created by the project staff, such as “Attacks on Hospitals,” results in 227 records. The videos can be downloaded.

In general, the site is a useful resource, despite some challenges navigating the content. The *Syrian Archive* is one of a few sites that document the war in Syria.⁷ The site could be made more user-friendly if curators use a more controlled vocabulary which enables users to search and retrieve the information quickly. Other ways to enhance search results include associating the location or description from each record to metadata in similar documents. For example, by linking location names, one can find all video clips that cover the same location. Search by location can be challenging because the keywords are not organized alphabetically, and the list appears endless and repetitive. The *Syrian Archive* has done better job more recently in creating relevant metadata that can be filtered by date, location, and type of violation, which is something that was not possible a year ago.

The *Syrian Archive* is an impressive project that raises awareness of the effects of war on Syrian civilians and the country. After monitoring the site for a year, it seems that the site has preserved a greater number of videos. The *Syrian Archive* describes the workflow and the methodology used since the project started in 2014, and from my observation the archive had been developing its methodology over time, as needed. The site includes important resources, since it aims to create, organize, and secure content that documents human rights abuses in Syria; the videos are evidence which can be used by human rights groups to bring justice to the victims of wars.

⁷ Syria Justice and Accountability Center, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://syriaaccountability.org>; and Syria Countries page in Human Rights Watch, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/syria>.