

## STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY'S CAPACITY TO TRACK SUSPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMES

### GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

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#### BACKGROUND

Under the principle of universal jurisdiction, States may prosecute perpetrators of serious international crimes found on their territory, regardless of the perpetrator's nationality, where the crimes took place, or the victims' nationality.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Article 89 of the Rome Statute, empowers the International Criminal Court (ICC) to request any State to arrest and surrender a person subject to an ICC arrest warrant who is present on its territory.

Despite these clear obligations, suspects of international crimes are often not apprehended when they enter another State's jurisdiction. Of the 61 individuals subject to ICC arrest warrants, only 22 have been arrested and transferred to the Court, leaving 30 still at large.<sup>2</sup> A major obstacle is the lack of timely, reliable information on suspects' movements, as many fugitives evade detection by changing their identities, and moving frequently across borders.<sup>3</sup>

Civil society organisations (CSOs) can help authorities overcome these challenges by drawing on their local knowledge, networks, and investigative skills. However, their ability to gather actionable, real-time information – and to coordinate effectively with national and international authorities – needs to be strengthened.

This briefing draws on insights from consultations and discussions with key stakeholders, examining the challenges faced by authorities and CSOs in this area, and highlighting practical solutions to improve collective effectiveness in locating and apprehending suspects of international crimes.

It highlights:

- a. **The institutional landscape**, including an overview of the key institutional actors involved in suspect tracking and the legal framework underpinning their obligations.
- b. **The role of CSOs in identifying**, monitoring and tracking suspects of serious international crimes, as well as the common methods used to detect their location.
- c. **Good practices** for CSOs engaged in suspect tracking and the main challenges they encounter.
- d. **Recommendations** for States, institutional actors, CSOs, donors and funders to strengthen CSOs' capacity to engage in suspect tracking, with the overall objective of facilitating arrests when suspects enter another State's jurisdiction.

1 For more detail on which countries have adopted universal jurisdiction provisions, see the Clooney Foundation for Justice's '[Justice Beyond Borders](#)' tool.

2 The International Criminal Court, '[About the Court](#)'.

3 United Nations – International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, '[Searching for Fugitives](#)'.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE - TRACKING SUSPECTS-AT-LARGE

Individuals suspected of international crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, are often highly mobile and difficult to apprehend.<sup>4</sup> They may travel using fraudulent documents and fund their evasion through other criminal activities,<sup>5</sup> presenting significant challenges for authorities seeking to bring them to justice.

The process of identifying a suspect typically begins when there is credible evidence or reasonable grounds to believe that an individual has committed one of these serious offences.<sup>6</sup> Such evidence may include witness testimony, documents, communications or orders (e.g. military directives), forensic or digital evidence, or patterns of behaviour.

Once the evidence is gathered, investigators, such as those at the ICC, international criminal tribunals, or national war crimes units, assess whether the individual's involvement was direct, they held command responsibility, or otherwise assisted in the crime. The identification process is often initiated through multiple channels: State referrals (e.g., when a country reports crimes to the ICC), United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions, independent international investigations, and reports from CSOs or media outlets.<sup>7</sup>

After a suspect has been identified, the next critical challenge is tracking and apprehending them. This requires effective cooperation between international organisations, national authorities, and intelligence or law enforcement networks. CSOs play a key role in this process, acting as intermediaries between affected communities and authorities, and providing crucial information that may otherwise be difficult to obtain.

This section outlines the main institutional actors involved in tracking suspects of international crimes, focusing on their interactions with CSOs, the legal frameworks governing their work and the challenges they face. The remainder of the note further explores the valuable contributions of CSOs to the tracking process, including the methods, best practices and obstacles they encounter, and concludes with recommendations for strengthening these efforts.

### Overview of institutional actors involved in suspect tracking

The ICC is the main permanent institution responsible for investigating and prosecuting individuals accused of international crimes.<sup>8</sup> In accordance with the Court's legal instruments, the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) conducts investigations and applies for arrest warrants. Once the Pre-Trial Chamber issues arrest warrants or summons to appear, the Registry transmits requests for cooperation to the relevant States for the arrest and surrender of suspects and liaises with national authorities to facilitate the execution of the warrants.

Securing the arrest and surrender of suspects at large remains the Court's highest priority. To date, there are 32 publicly known ICC arrest warrants in 11 different situations, in addition to others under seal, which remain unexecuted. The Registry's Judicial Cooperation Support Section (JCSS), through its Suspects at Large Unit, and the OTP's Suspects At Large Tracking Team (SALTT) are responsible for tracking suspects at large and coordinating their efforts within the inter-organ Suspects at Large

4 INTERPOL, '[Fugitive investigative support](#)'.

5 INTERPOL, '[Fugitive investigative support](#)'.

6 The International Criminal Court, '[Arresting ICC suspects at large: Why it matters; What the Court does; What States can do](#)', page 9; see for example Article 58 of the Rome Statute.

7 The International Criminal Court, '[How the Court works](#)'.

8 The International Criminal Court, '[About the Court](#)'.

Working Group (**SALWG**). This structure enables coordinated tracking, the development of joint arrest strategies, and the effective use of the Court's limited tracking capacities. In their engagement with requested States, the Registry and OTP provide detailed information on suspects, including their possible whereabouts, to enhance the prospects of arrest.

To strengthen State cooperation, the Registry and the OTP have further deepened their engagement with national and international law enforcement agencies. This has included, together with relevant States Parties, the implementation of recommendations presented by the Court to the Hague Working Group on Cooperation.<sup>9</sup> In parallel, situation-specific efforts are ongoing with several States to promote coordinated approaches among domestic counterparts, enhance inter-agency cooperation, and foster greater shared ownership in executing the Court's arrest mandate.

The Registry also continues to promote institutional learning through the now-established practice of organising, jointly with the OTP, post-operation "lessons learned" debriefings with domestic counterparts. These reviews assess outcomes and identify improvements for future arrest operations. Such operational exchanges are crucial to strengthening operational connections, enhancing coordination and building mutual trust.<sup>10</sup>

CSOs can contribute to the Court's tracking efforts in several ways, including by providing Open-Source Intelligence (**OSINT**) leads or locally gathered information relevant to suspects' locations. They may also pursue strategic litigation or targeted advocacy aimed at encouraging State compliance with ICC arrest warrants and addressing obstacles to their execution. For example, in February 2016, the Peace and Justice Initiative and the Centre for Human Rights, represented by the Legal Resources Centre, intervened in domestic proceedings in South Africa concerning the Government's position that it was not obliged to arrest former President of Sudan, Omar Al Bashir, despite an outstanding ICC arrest warrant.<sup>11</sup> More recently, in October 2025, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights supported survivors of torture who had been unlawfully detained in Libya in filing an application to the European Court of Human Rights against Italy for its failure to cooperate in the ICC's investigation and prosecution of high-ranking Libyan official Osama Elmasry Njeem, wanted for crimes against humanity and war crimes.<sup>12</sup>

CSOs have also publicly called on ICC State Parties, such as Mongolia and Poland, to execute outstanding ICC arrest warrants, including those issued against Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in anticipation of their planned visit to the respective States.<sup>13</sup>

International criminal tribunals and hybrid courts - including the Office of the Prosecutor for the **International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR)**, the **International Criminal Tribunal for the Former**

9 ASP Resolution on cooperation, [ICC-ASP/23/Res.5](#) (2024), para. 40.

10 These efforts culminated in the ICC hosting a closed-door Expert Roundtable on Tracking, Arrest and Surrender of suspects on 21 November 2025, at the seat of the Court in The Hague, The Netherlands. The event brought together operational counterparts from national authorities, international organisations and civil society to exchange on experiences and best practices developed in national systems, international tribunals and by the Court regarding the tracking and arrest of suspects at large (see: The International Criminal Court, '[ICC holds Expert Roundtable on Tracking, Arrest and Surrender](#)', 21 November 2025).

11 Legal Resources Centre, '[Press Release: International NGOs file papers for admission as friends of the court in Al Bashir matter](#)', 8 February 2016.

12 ECCHR, '[Italy to answer to European Court of Human Rights after failure to surrender suspected Libyan torturer to the ICC](#)', 14 October 2025.

13 See for example, Human Rights Watch, '[Mongolia: Arrest Putin – ICC Members Should Not Allow Fugitives on Their Territories](#)', 2 September 2024; Human Rights Watch, '[Poland Sends Wrong Signal on Global Justice – Government Should Commit to Arresting All ICC Suspects Including Nethanyahu](#)', 15 January 2025.

**Yugoslavia (ICTY)**,<sup>14</sup> their successor, the **International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT)**,<sup>15</sup> and the **Kosovo Specialist Chambers** - have also employed small, multidisciplinary, tracking teams to gather intelligence on the whereabouts of fugitives. Like the ICC, these bodies lack their own police force and rely on State cooperation for arrests. Their tracking teams gather intelligence from a wide range of sources, including victim and witness statements, eyewitness reports, OSINT and geolocation data, financial and asset-tracing information, and other classified or publicly available intelligence, integrating online analysis with on-the-ground observations.

Examples of successful tracking operations include the ICTR's discovery in 2022 of the body of Protais Mpiranya, former commander of the Rwandan presidential guard indicted for genocide, after finding a hand-drawn design of his tombstone on a confiscated computer.<sup>16</sup> Mpiranya was the last major fugitive among the ICTR's 93 indictees.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, by 2011, the ICTY had brought to justice, or otherwise accounted for, all 161 individuals indicted for crimes committed during the Balkan wars.<sup>18</sup> A key factor in these successes was reportedly the tribunal's reliance on a small number of highly reliable informants.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, many countries have **specialised war crimes or international crimes units** within their police or prosecution services. These units investigate suspects found on their territory, share information with the ICC or other UN bodies, and can make arrests pursuant to international arrest warrants or domestic arrest warrants issued as part of investigations based on extraterritorial jurisdictional bases. Several States have also created teams dedicated specifically to locate individuals subject to arrest warrants. For example, **France's Central Office to Fight Crimes against Humanity, Genocide and War Crimes (OCLCH)**, established in 2013, identifies and tracks suspects of international crimes both in France and abroad.<sup>20</sup> It serves as the main point of contact for international police cooperation and coordinates with foreign and international judicial authorities. The OCLCH actively solicits information from victims, witnesses and CSOs, encouraging the submission of relevant material, including online content. The Office employs investigators specialised in IT, social media analysis and financial tracking, who are trained to assess and safely follow up on leads.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, **INTERPOL (International Criminal Police Organisation)** and **EUROPOL (the EU's Law Enforcement Agency for Intelligence and Police Coordination)** facilitate cross-border police cooperation and support member countries and international entities to locate and arrest fugitives across international boundaries.<sup>22</sup> A key tool is INTERPOL's Red Notice, which alerts all member countries to locate and provisionally arrest an individual pending extradition. Under **Project Basic (Broadening Analysis on Serious International Crimes)**, INTERPOL arrest fugitives wanted for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>23</sup> In this framework, INTERPOL cooperates with national authorities and international institutions to locate, arrest and develop information concerning individuals suspected of these crimes.<sup>24</sup> Since 2023, EUROPOL has led an **OSINT taskforce** in collaboration with national police forces to identify suspects involved in the war in Ukraine using publicly available information and satellite imagery.<sup>25</sup>

14 United Nations – International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, '[The Fugitives](#)'.  
 15 United Nations – International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, '[Searching for Fugitives](#)'.  
 16 The Guardian, '[Twenty-year search for Rwanda genocide suspect ends in Zimbabwe grave](#)', 12 May 2022.  
 17 The Guardian, '[The Hunters: the small UN unit that tracked down Rwanda's worst killers](#)', 12 May 2022.  
 18 The Guardian, '[The Hunters: the small UN unit that tracked down Rwanda's worst killers](#)', 12 May 2022.  
 19 The Guardian, '[The Hunters: the small UN unit that tracked down Rwanda's worst killers](#)', 12 May 2022.  
 20 JUSTICEINFO, '[International Crimes: Spotlight on France's War Crimes Unit](#)', 17 December 2017.  
 21 JUSTICEINFO, '[International Crimes: Spotlight on France's War Crimes Unit](#)', 17 December 2017.  
 22 INTERPOL, '[Fugitive investigative support](#)'.  
 23 INTERPOL, '[Fugitive investigative support](#)'.  
 24 INTERPOL, '[Fugitive investigative support](#)'.  
 25 EUROPOL, '[Europol sets up OSINT taskforce to support investigations into war crimes committed in Ukraine](#)', 21 November 2024.

## Legal frameworks and obligations

The effectiveness of these international, hybrid and national mechanisms in locating and apprehending suspects of international crimes depends fundamentally on the willingness of States to cooperate in accordance with their obligations under international law to prosecute or extradite individuals suspected of such crimes. This duty has been interpreted to include an obligation to investigate,<sup>26</sup> which necessarily entails making reasonable efforts to ascertain the suspects' location. Key international legal instruments establishing these duties include:

The **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court**, which obliges States Parties to “cooperate fully with the Court in its investigation and prosecution of crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court”<sup>27</sup>, including by executing arrest warrants, facilitating surrender of suspects, providing relevant information, and enabling operational cooperation.<sup>28</sup>

- e. The **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)** which requires States Parties to prevent and punish genocide, ensure effective penalties are provided for persons found guilty and grant extradition when genocide charges are involved.<sup>29</sup>
- f. The **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984)** which obliges States Parties to investigate allegations of torture and to prosecute or extradite any individual suspected of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment where the suspect is present in any territory under their jurisdiction.<sup>30</sup>
- g. The **Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional Protocols**, which require States Parties to search for persons alleged to have committed, or ordered grave breaches and to bring them before their courts or to extradite them.<sup>31</sup>
- h. The **Ljubljana-The Hague Convention on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes and Other International Crimes**, which establishes comprehensive obligations for States Parties to investigate, extradite or prosecute suspects of core international crimes and to cooperate in information-sharing and mutual legal assistance.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, efforts to investigate international crimes and locate suspects must be balanced against the fundamental rights of the accused, including privacy, due process and the presumption of innocence, as protected by instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights,<sup>33</sup> and data protection regimes, including the General Data Protection Regulation.<sup>34</sup> However, these rights are not absolute and may be restricted for overriding legitimate grounds, including the prevention, investigation, or prosecution of serious crimes and the protection of others. Thus, when necessary and proportionate, measures such as suspect tracking and other investigative activities can be conducted without unlawfully interfering with suspects' rights.

26 [Questions relating to the Obligations to Prosecute or Extradite \(Belgium v. Senegal\)](#) Judgment, I.C.J Reports 2012, para. 86.

27 [Rome Statute](#), Article 86.

28 [Rome Statute](#), Articles 89 and 93.

29 [Genocide Convention](#), Article I, V and VII.

30 [United Nations Convention Against Torture](#), Articles 6 to 9.

31 The [Geneva Conventions](#) of 12 August 1949, First Geneva Convention, Article 49; Second Geneva Convention, Article 50; Third Geneva Convention, Article 129; Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 146.

32 [The Ljubljana-The Hague Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance](#), Article 14, Part III (Mutual Legal Assistance) and Part IV (Extradition).

33 [ECHR](#), Articles 6 and 8.

34 [GDPR](#), Articles 13 to 20, granting data subjects rights to information and access to personal data and rectification and erasure.

## Gaps and limitations in the official approach

Despite States' clear obligations to prosecute or extradite suspects of international crimes, efforts by international institutions and domestic law enforcement to locate and apprehend them face significant structural, political, and operational obstacles – allowing suspects to evade justice. These challenges include:

- a. **Limited legal frameworks or capacity:** States may lack adequate laws or institutions to support investigations and arrests. Gaps include incomplete incorporation of international crimes, weak mutual legal assistance procedures, and under-resourced law enforcement and judiciary which hinder efforts to verify identities, detain suspects, and facilitate international cooperation. Tracking suspects is highly resource intensive: open-source tools often require specialised expertise and human resources, and accessible online platforms can be costly. Additionally, information overload from numerous, uncoordinated, sources can misdirect efforts and waste resources.
- b. **Timely intelligence:** Timely intelligence is critical for tracking suspects across borders or in unstable environments. Even short delays can allow suspects to escape, undermining apprehension. However, authorities often face constraints, including limited access in uncooperative jurisdictions, risks of leaks, and threats to informants, all of which restrict reliable information flow. The ICTR's tracking efforts, for example, were reportedly impacted by fugitives frequently changing identities and moving constantly across East, Central and Southern Africa, including inaccessible areas of the DRC.<sup>35</sup> Using outdated or incomplete information can further leave investigative traces that may compromise future operations. Intelligence must therefore be accurate and actionable at the moment of use, to avoid exposing sources or alerting suspects.
- c. **Shielding of suspects:** Some States may protect suspects or deprioritise cooperation with international justice mechanisms due to political interests or fear of exposing their own officials. This resistance can impede the execution of arrest warrants or extradition requests, leaving suspects beyond reach despite credible evidence of their location. As a result, tracking efforts are often more successful against "low-hanging fruits" where arrests pose less diplomatic risk. High-stakes cases, by contrast, require combining investigative skill with diplomatic efforts to persuade or pressure States into cooperation.<sup>36</sup>

## CIVIL SOCIETY IN ACTION: BEST PRACTICES, TOOLS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In light of the challenges confronting States and international institutions, CSOs are essential partners in tracking suspects of international crimes. Their proximity to affected communities, contextual knowledge, documentation work and ability to build trust with national authorities often yield information that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

In several cases intelligence provided by CSOs or survivors directly enabled authorities to locate and arrest suspects. For example, in December 2023, the Dutch police arrested a 55-year-old Syrian man on suspicion of crimes against humanity. He was alleged to have led an interrogation unit of the National Defence Force (**NDF**) in Salamiyah, Syria in 2013-2014.<sup>37</sup> His arrest followed a tip-off indicating

35 United Nations – International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, '[Searching for Fugitives](#)'.

36 The Guardian, '[The Hunters: the small UN unit that tracked down Rwanda's worst killers](#)', 12 May 2022.

37 DutchNews, '[Syrian living in NL to be prosecuted for crimes against humanity](#)', 8 December 2023.

that a man with a similar name had served as the NDF’s principal interrogator in Salamiyah and was now living in the Netherlands.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in July 2024, a former Syrian military official who oversaw Syria’s infamous Adra prison under President Bashar al-Assad was arrested at Los Angeles international airport following a tip off by a refugee that there was “potentially a war criminal” in the US.<sup>39</sup>

The following qualities of CSOs are particularly noteworthy:

- a. **Bridging the accountability gap in politically constrained contexts:** CSOs can operate where State institutions face political barriers or lack community trust. Through their relationships with local partners who may have direct access to information about a suspect’s presence or activities, CSOs can help broker credible intelligence to advance investigations and prosecutions, acting as trusted intermediaries between survivors, communities and law enforcement.
- b. **Early documentation and preservation of evidence:** CSOs often engage long before formal investigations begin. Through early evidence gathering and long-term monitoring of situations involving serious human rights violations – and of potential perpetrators – they can provide critical leads, help set investigative priorities, preserve key information, and keep attention on situations that might otherwise be overlooked. In addition, CSO research can be especially valuable in mapping the command structures of units under investigation. Their detailed, on-the-ground, inquiries often uncover names, roles and hierarchies that would otherwise remain outside the authorities’ purview.
- c. **Advocating for politically neglected situations:** Building on their early investigative role, CSOs can also advocate for politically neglected situations. They help maintain visibility and pressure on cases or contexts that may be politically inconvenient or less appealing to authorities. Through this advocacy, CSOs can push against double standards and ensure that all situations – regardless of geopolitical interest – receive attention.
- d. **Supporting victims and affected communities:** CSOs play a crucial role in ensuring that survivors and affected communities remain central to justice processes and maintain ownership and agency over their engagement. By facilitating safe participation – such as providing support for travel or secure interactions with law enforcement – CSOs empower survivors to actively contribute to investigations and proceedings. This not only strengthens cases but also reinforces the legitimacy and inclusivity of accountability efforts.

## Suspect-tracking methods used by CSOs and survivor groups

This section outlines first methods commonly used by CSOs and survivor groups to track suspects of international crimes, before setting out good practices that enhance the effectiveness, reliability and safety of their tracking activities.

The methods CSOs use to track and locate suspects of serious international crimes are highly context-specific and their effectiveness may vary across situations depending on factors such as the availability of open-source information, national data protection standards and societal norms and habits around the use of social media. The following is a summary of the key intelligence sources that may be accessible to CSOs.

<sup>38</sup> DutchNews, ‘[Syrian living in NL to be prosecuted for crimes against humanity](#)’, 8 December 2023.

<sup>39</sup> The Guardian, ‘[Syrian official who ran prison where detainees alleged torture arrested in US](#)’, 17 July 2024.

## Human intelligence (HUMINT)

HUMINT, including witness and victim testimonies, information from defectors and accounts from community members, remains one of the most reliable sources of information on suspects' whereabouts, especially when suspects are difficult to reach or authorities lack access. A notable example is the arrest of Syrian doctor Alaa Mousa, who was identified in Germany by a former colleague and survivor; he was arrested in 2020, and in June 2025, sentenced to life imprisonment for torturing and murdering opponents of the Assad regime.<sup>40</sup>

Methods supporting the collection of HUMINT include:

- a. **Building relationships of trust with local communities, survivors, and diaspora networks:** Through these relationships, individuals may feel more comfortable sharing critical information or leads that can be passed on to law enforcement.
- b. **Engaging informants and defectors:** Efforts to engage and support networks within affected communities could potentially yield information from individuals who may have knowledge of a suspect's whereabouts or activities. However, such actions carry significant moral, legal and security implications. Any engagement should be approached with extreme caution and professional advice must be sought to ensure that these efforts do not compromise the safety, security of, or ongoing investigations involving, any individuals or a suspect's right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence.

## Open-source intelligence (OSINT)

OSINT involves the collection and analysis of publicly available data. It can be a powerful and cost-effective method for tracking suspects, as long as it is used responsibly and with attention to the relevant context. Methods to use include:<sup>41</sup>

- a. **Social media and online presence:** Monitoring the social media accounts of the suspect (and where relevant their family members and close associates) can reveal insights into suspects' movements, contacts, interests, and associations. Social media can provide essential details about their likes or dislikes, their friends and associates, the images and videos posted by them, and the metadata associated with them.<sup>42</sup> For example, Syrian Brigadier General Khaled al-Halabi was apprehended by Austrian authorities after independent investigators located him in Europe based on a photograph he posted of himself on social media on a bridge in Budapest.<sup>43</sup>
- b. **Geolocation and reverse image search:** Analysing geotagged posts, images, or videos may help identify locations tied to suspects or places of interest. If geotagging is unavailable, reverse image search can help identify landmarks or objects in the background of photos, providing leads as to the suspect's whereabouts or travel patterns. Reverse image search is a straightforward tool for digital investigations, typically accessible with just a few clicks (e.g. by choosing "Search Google for image" in many web browsers). The most used platforms include the Russian site [Yandex](#), as well as Microsoft's [Bing](#) and [Google](#).

40 The Guardian, '[German court sentences Syrian doctor to life in jail for crimes against humanity](#)', 16 June 2025.

41 For a more comprehensive list of OSINT methods available please refer to [Bellingcat's Online Investigation Toolkit](#)

42 A demonstration of how this might work can be found [here](#).

43 The New York Times, 'War Crimes Indictment Reveals a Hard Road to Justice for Syria', 12 November 2025.

- c. **Public records and digital trace analysis:** Open databases, including corporate registries or court records can help trace suspects' assets and affiliations to identify their connections or predict their future movements. Tools such as [Have I Been Pwned \(HIBP\)](#) may also help identify on what websites a person of interest had an account and use those for further research.<sup>44</sup>
- d. **Media monitoring:** By tracking local and international news, blogs, and social media channels, CSOs may identify any sightings or updates related to the suspects. Yet, any report should always be cross-referenced to verify accuracy and avoid spreading unverified leads. Media monitoring has historically played a decisive role in fugitive tracking – for example, Augusto Pinochet's 1998 arrest in London was triggered by a tip following a small article in the Chilean press noting his visit to the UK for medical treatment.<sup>45</sup>

## Technical investigative tools

When combined with other methods, technical investigative tools can provide deeper insights and help track suspects through more discreet and sophisticated means.

- a. **Geospatial intelligence:** Platforms such as [Google Earth](#) enable CSOs to monitor areas of interest remotely, such as conflict zones or locations tied to suspects. Satellite images can then be matched with witness testimonies or other data to pinpoint exact locations, or correlated with known landmarks or sites of interest to validate locations and provide additional context to intelligence gathered.
- b. **Vessel tracking:** Ships equipped with Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) broadcast their locations and can be tracked using platforms like [Marine-Traffic](#), [VesselFinder](#) and [Immarsat Ships Directory](#) by searching the ship's name or, if unknown, zooming in on specific locations or ports on the map to identify nearby vessels. For example, Bellingcat used AIS data to map the journey of Russian-flagged bulk carrier, Irtysh, operating in defiance of Western sanctions by exporting grain from occupied Crimea to Houthi-controlled Yemen.<sup>46</sup>
- c. **Flight tracking:** Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) technology broadcasts an aircraft's position via satellite navigation or sensors, enabling real-time tracking. Platforms like [ADS-B Exchange](#), [FlightAware](#) and [Flightradar24](#) are commonly used for this purpose. To track relevant planes, CSOs need to first gather key details, such as aircraft call signs (letters and numbers which identify an aircraft), registration numbers (seen on the tail)<sup>47</sup> and ICAO airport codes to follow flight paths. For example, identifying the aircraft involved in the CIA's rendition, detention and interrogation programme, and tracking their movement through the collection of flight data, proved crucial to establishing the connections between secret prison sites and mapping the evolution of the programme over time.<sup>48</sup>

44 For further information, please refer to [Bellingcat's Online Investigation Toolkit, 'Have I Been Pwned'](#).

45 Philippe Sands, *38 Londres Street: On Impunity, Pinochet in England and a Nazi in Patagonia*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson: April 2025.

46 Bellingcat, ['Russia's Grain Smuggling Fleet Continues Undeterred'](#), 23 October 2025.

47 Two popular aviation image sites to search for visuals are [planespotters.net](#) and [jetphotos.com](#).

48 The Guardian, ['New light shed on US government's extraordinary rendition programme'](#), 22 May 2013; Sam Raphael, Crofton Black, Ruth Blakeley & Steve Kostas, ['Tracking rendition aircraft as a way to understand CIA secret detention and torture in Europe'](#), *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Volume 20, 2016 Issue 1.

- d. **Corporate registries:** Using databases like [OpenCorporates](#) (or the UK's [Companies House](#)) can help identify company ownership, directorship and registered addresses linked to a suspect. These registries can also reveal nationality, business locations, and potential family connections if co-directors are involved. Active business operations in a relevant jurisdiction may also suggest travel patterns.
- e. **Offshore leak databases:** Databases like the [Offshore Leaks Database](#) can provide insights into financial entities and assets hidden in offshore jurisdictions.
- f. **Cryptocurrency tracking:** By monitoring blockchain transactions through platforms such as In [Ether-scan](#) and [Block Explorer](#), CSOs might be able to trace the flow of digital assets linked to suspects.
- g. **Land registries:** Public land registries may be used to identify whether a suspect has assets in a foreign jurisdiction, which could be indicative of future travel patterns.
- h. **Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools:** To date, AI tools are mostly used in the context of suspect tracking as a tool that can support OSINT-based analysis and processing. For example, CSOs have used AI for deciphering poor quality handwriting or text from scanned documents. However, it is recommended to always validate the results manually to avoid errors.

## Best practices for CSO engagement in suspect tracking

As outlined above, CSOs have various methods for tracking suspects of international crimes. However, success depends on local context, available technology, and careful verification of information. The following best practices, identified through confidential consultations with CSOs and law enforcement, can enhance tracking efforts and address challenges. These include the need for a clear methodology, strong partnerships, multidisciplinary approaches and robust safeguards to ensure legality, security and the protection of victims, witnesses and staff.

### Establish a clear and legally grounded methodology

- a. **Define the methodology before starting activities:** It is recommended that CSOs articulate a clear and coherent methodology *before* beginning tracking activities. This includes mapping all relevant legal frameworks – especially in contexts like Syria or Ukraine, where multiple jurisdictions may have ongoing investigations. Early mapping can help ensure that information collected is admissible and meets the standards required for use in investigations and prosecutions, laying a solid foundation for subsequent tracking efforts.
- b. **Ensure early coordination and file readiness:** Maintaining up-to-date files on suspects can facilitate prompt sharing with prosecutors, especially when suspects are mobile. Early alerts can enable national authorities to react more effectively. CSOs can also contribute to the early mapping of command chains, providing background on broader unit structures and identifying individuals within those hierarchies, including names that may move across borders.
- c. **Prioritise accuracy, reliability and admissibility:** Providing clear identifying details – such as full names, middle names, dates of birth, or signatures – and clarifying in advance what types of data or sources are admissible in specific jurisdictions can strengthen the usefulness of collected in-

formation. Additionally, caution is advised when using OSINT as online queries may inadvertently alert suspects or influence their movements.

- d. **Use international guidance proactively:** When developing methodologies, CSOs may benefit from consulting resources such as the [Eurojust Guidelines](#) for Civil Society Documentation of International Crimes, the [Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations](#), the [International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), the [Murad Code](#) for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the [Istanbul Protocol](#) on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. These resources can inform internal protocols on evidence handling, privacy, data security and cooperation.
- e. **Engage proactively with law enforcement:** CSOs should prioritise fostering relationships with prosecutors and investigators experienced in international crime early on, clarifying the types of information that are most useful and ensuring tracking efforts focus on the relevant individuals. They may also benefit from identifying the appropriate police or prosecutorial units and establishing a focal point to facilitate rapid communication.

#### Build strong relationships with local partners and networks

- a. **Mutual capacity-building:** International CSOs can contribute comparative legal expertise and knowledge of criminal procedure, while situation-specific and in-country CSOs provide deep contextual understanding and access to affected communities. Both perspectives are important for effective collaboration.
- b. **Sustained community engagement:** Maintaining long-term, consistent communication – whether with communities inside the country or in exile – can help build trust and enhance the quality of the information provided.
- c. **Manage expectations:** Since not all information collected will directly result in investigations or prosecutions, CSOs are encouraged to remain transparent with partners and internally about these limitations.
- d. **Role of survivor networks:** Survivor groups can serve as important bridges between communities and accountability mechanisms; their involvement strengthens both trust and information flow.

#### Safeguard the security and best interests of victims and witnesses

- a. **Apply a survivor-centered and safety-focused approach:** Protecting the safety, dignity and well-being of victims and witnesses is key to responsible suspect tracking. CSOs are encouraged to conduct interviews and interactions with sensitivity, ensuring all sources and survivors feel respected and supported. It is further important to obtain informed consent at every stage, clearly explaining who is collecting the information, the organisation represented, the purpose of data collection, and how the information will be used. Implementing robust security measures to mitigate both digital and physical risks can further enhance protection.

- b. Prioritize staff security and data confidentiality:** In high-risk or repressive environments, attention to staff safety and secure handling of information is essential. Organisations should consider adopting clear confidentiality procedures and strong digital security measures, including encryption, secure communication, and metadata management.

#### Establish multidisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration

- a. Leverage external expertise:** Where internal capacity is limited, CSOs may consider collaborating with external specialists, such as forensic specialists, legal advisors or intelligence consultants to strengthen tracking efforts.
- b. Build diverse, multi-sector networks:** Engaging individuals with expertise in journalism, law, intelligence and law enforcement - following the model of international institutions and domestic war crimes units that already use such multidisciplinary structures – can enhance tracking efforts. Combining these perspectives can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the suspect, including their family and associates. Achieving this requires creative thinkers who can identify and leverage unconventional sources.

#### Ensure secure and ethical data management

- a. Purpose-driven data collection:** At every stage of data collection, it is advisable to conduct privacy assessments to ensure that the information gathered is directly relevant and necessary to the investigation's objectives.
- b. Secure storage and archiving:** Data should be stored securely, with encrypted backups and VPN protection, ensuring careful handling of metadata to protect safety. When collecting online information, retaining materials in their original form and documenting essential details – such as URLs, screenshots, and timestamps – can help maintain authenticity.
- c. Develop internal privacy guidelines:** Establishing clear policies for handling sensitive data, including specific protocols for minors and other vulnerable individuals, is recommended. Regular assessment of legal and security risks associated with digital operations can further ensure compliance with relevant legal data protection obligations and the safety of those involved in evidence collection.

## KEY CHALLENGES FOR CSOS IN TRACKING SUSPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMES

Although the best practices outlined above can greatly improve CSOs' ability to track suspects of international crimes, operational, legal and resource constraints can hinder their capacity to gather evidence, protect informants and collaborate effectively with authorities. The following is a summary of some of the main obstacles CSOs face:

#### Resource and operational constraints

- a. Funding and capacity limitations:** Many CSOs operate with limited resources, which can constrain their ability to track suspects effectively, especially in remote or high-risk areas. Real-time moni-

toring or verification often requires specialised technology, secure communication channels and trained personnel. For example, insufficient funding may prevent CSOs from accessing satellite imagery, secure databases or adequately compensate local partners, reducing the reliability and timeliness of intelligence.

- b. Difficulty in verifying information:** Relying on publicly available information from sources such as social media or news outlets to track suspects can be fraught with challenges. The sheer volume of information, combined with deliberate misinformation, makes it difficult to confirm the accuracy of suspect whereabouts. Limited resources can exacerbate these challenges, potentially delaying investigation or leading authorities to act on incomplete or unverified intelligence.
- c. Confidentiality and funding challenges:** The sensitive nature of suspect tracking requires a high level of confidentiality, making it difficult for CSOs to publicise their work, and consequently, attract donors or secure long-term funding.

### Security risks

- a. State and non-State threats:** CSOs, victims and witnesses, frequently face security threats from both State and non-State actors, especially in conflict or politically unstable areas, including harassment, surveillance, intimidation or even physical harm. Even when a regime changes, the safety of those involved in gathering information remains uncertain. It is therefore essential that CSOs communicate clearly with local communities and informants about potential dangers and implement measures to protect their safety and security.
- b. Techniques for securing information:** In regions like Syria, CSOs have adopted precautions such as using encrypted communications channels or non-US WhatsApp numbers to protect both the sources and the information being gathered. These measures help mitigate some of the dangers but do not eliminate them.

### Challenges with evidence verification and OSINT

- a. Verifying evidence authenticity:** Ensuring the reliability of evidence, including OSINT materials such as social media posts or videos, is an ongoing challenge. Maintaining proper documentation, preservation of the metadata, and having a clear chain of custody and digital records, are essential, as failure to do so can render evidence inadmissible in domestic or international courts, limiting CSOs' contributions to justice processes. In certain situations, this challenge is compounded by suspects frequently using false identities or aliases when travelling, making it difficult to confirm their whereabouts or track their movements effectively.

### Tension between advocacy and confidential information

- a. Publicising suspects' Information:** CSOs face a tension between advocating for justice and maintaining confidentiality. Publicly naming or showing images of suspects can alert them to ongoing investigations, potentially allowing them to flee, and may influence or intimidate witnesses, complicating evidence collection. While holding perpetrators accountable is a core objective, the risks of compromising investigations or the credibility and safety of witnesses are significant. As such, it is often recommended that CSOs collaborate with national authorities before publicly releasing such information to ensure proper handling.

- b. Defamation and political risks:** Going public with findings can expose CSOs to defamation claims and political attacks, particularly in contexts where international crimes are highly politicised. In extreme cases, this can threaten the organisation's financial stability or even lead to the criminalisation of its activities.

### Legal and institutional challenges

- a. Weak collaboration:** CSOs may encounter mistrust or reluctance from national authorities, which complicates efforts to share information or coordinate actions. This issue is compounded by the fragmented nature of international justice efforts, with CSOs often working in silos without clear coordination. Overlapping objectives among different organisations can lead to duplication of efforts and inefficiency: there is often no centralised approach to monitoring, sharing, and handing over information, which weakens the overall impact of their work.
- b. Accountability gaps:** In certain situations, CSOs may face obstacles in connecting victims and survivors with justice mechanisms, particularly in contexts where opportunities for legal accountability are limited. International courts, such as the ICC, have made little progress in addressing crimes in certain conflict areas, and resource constraints in domestic war crimes result in prioritisation of cases. Additional logistical barriers, such as difficulties in arranging visas or language barriers with investigators, further hinder victims' ability to engage with justice processes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the critical role that CSOs play in tracking suspects of international crimes, it is essential to address the numerous challenges they face to enhance the impact of their work. The obstacles outlined – ranging from resource constraints and security risks to difficulties in evidence verification and strained collaboration with authorities – require coordinated efforts across multiple levels. To strengthen the capacity of CSOs, foster better collaboration and support justice efforts, the following recommendations are made for CSOs themselves, States and international institutions as well as funders and donors.

### To CSOs

Invest in long-term capacity building: Where possible, prioritise training in key areas such as OSINT, digital security and evidence and information management to enhance operational effectiveness and protect sensitive data, focusing on approaches that are practical and sustainable for each organisation.

- c. Strengthen collaboration and coordination:** Foster greater cooperation between CSOs, including by establishing situation- or country-specific working groups, with formalised agreements or protocols to guide information sharing and coordinated action. A more coordinated approach will prevent duplication and ensure more strategic use of resources.
- d. Build stronger networks with diaspora and survivor communities:** Work closely with local organisations, community leaders, and survivor groups to ensure that justice efforts are survivor-driven and aligned with the needs and perspectives of those most affected by international crimes.
- e. Adopt rigorous documentation and data protection standards:** Ensure that evidence collection and

data management follow the highest standards of integrity and security, as outlined in frameworks like the Eurojust Guidelines, the Berkeley Protocol, the Murad Code and the Istanbul Protocol, to maintain credibility and admissibility in court.

#### To States and international institutions

- a. **Create formal channels for CSO input and evidence sharing:** Establish clear, secure pathways for CSOs to communicate information on the location or travel patterns of suspects, specifying to whom the information should be directed, the appropriate channels (e.g. different email addresses for urgent cases), and the level of evidence required.
- b. **Protect civil society space and support witness protection:** Strengthen legal protections for CSOs and their staff, ensuring they can operate safely without fear of harassment, criminalisation or retaliation. Implement and support whistleblower and witness protection programs to safeguard those who share critical information.
- c. **Ensure follow-up on CSO-submitted cases:** Authorities should maintain open lines of communication with CSOs after case files have been submitted and provide regular updates on case progression. This feedback loop will help manage expectations, avoid survivor fatigue, and allow for more effective adjustments to strategies based on the limitations and challenges identified in the case.

#### To funders and donors

- a. **Provide flexible, long-term support:** Funders should offer sustainable, adaptable financial support to enable CSOs to build robust cases under universal jurisdiction and engage in suspect tracking. As highlighted in this note, suspect tracking is resource-intensive and often spans several years, requiring long-term investment in investigations, evidence collection, and collaboration with communities often without reportable impact for long periods of times. Sustained and flexible funding allows CSOs to respond to evolving challenges and prioritise long-term impact over short-term outputs.
- b. **Support digital security, legal risk coverage and technical upgrades:** Provide funding specifically for cybersecurity, legal risk management and the technical tools needed to ensure CSOs can track suspects of international crimes and manage sensitive information securely.
- c. **Facilitate collaboration platforms and knowledge exchange:** Invest in platforms and initiatives that foster collaboration, knowledge sharing and mutual learning among CSOs, donors, international institutions, law enforcement and other stakeholders involved in the fight against impunity for international crimes.