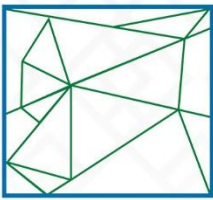


Turkey Continues to Forcibly Return Refugees, Ignoring International Warnings that Syria is Still Unsafe

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The Turkish authorities deported over 155,000 Syrian refugees to Syria between 2019 and 2021, committing refoulement under the veil of “voluntary return”



Executive Summary

“Fourteen days into detention, they started to take groups of five young men out of prison every day. We did not know what happened to them. On my turn, they took me to the interrogation room. The interrogator asked me a few questions and then said: ‘sign this paper. It is for your release.’ I checked the document thoroughly and realized that it was the approval of ‘voluntary return’ to Syria. I refused to sign it and asked for a lawyer. The interrogator refused. I informed them of my situation and that I had a *kimlik* [Temporary Protection Identification Document]. But they refused to listen. I insisted that I would not sign the document. So, they returned me to prison. Two days later, a security force handcuffed me and coerced me to sign the ‘voluntary return’ document. Then, they transferred us to the Jarabulus Border Crossing and handed us to the 9th Division of the Opposition Syrian National Army (SNA). The division, detained, interrogated, beat, and humiliated us. After this, they asked us to pay them money in exchange for our release.”

The Turkish authorities raided the house of the witness and returned him to Syria against his will in May 2021. The witness had established a stable life in Turkey and even started his own business once he entered Turkey in 2016. He was one of the many Syrian refugees, whom the Turkish authorities detained and ultimately forcibly deported back to danger, even though they had a *kimlik*, the chief purpose of which is ensuring the safety of refugees.

Since mid-2018, Turkish authorities have been carrying out a wide range of arbitrary practices against refugees, whose status as refugees is established by the *kimlik* the Turkish government provided them with. Refugees were detained at deportation camps adjacent to the Turkey-Syria border and later were forcibly deported to Syrian territories. In Syria, Turkey-affiliated armed opposition groups beat and maltreated dozens of the refugees and even detained them for varying periods.

In the deportation camps, the Turkish authorities hold refugees in appalling conditions and force them to choose between long-term abject detention in the camp or signing a “voluntary return” document. Syrian media activist Munib al-Ali was [held](#) in a detention camp on the charge of “provoking hatred and animosity and perpetrating discord” under Article 2016 of the Turkish Penal Code. Al-Ali was placed in the Oğuzeli Deportation Center in Gaziantep, with his file coded G87. Al-Ali was coerced to choose between detention for a year or signing the “voluntary return” document. He was ultimately returned to Syria even though he had a *kimlik*.

As documented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) and other local and international rights organizations, in some cases Turkish authorities exploited the language barrier between their employees and Syrian refugees. They took advantage of the detainees’ inadequate command of the Turkish language and asked their affiliated interpreters to trick the refugees into putting their thumbprint on the “voluntary return” document, alleging it is a release paper. One of the deported refugees told STJ that the Turkish authorities played on his lack of proficiency in Turkish and asked him to sign documents, supposedly of his release. Later, he learned that he was deceived and made to sign the “voluntary return” document, which facilitated his deportation to Syria.





For the purposes of the report, STJ reached out to a total of 21 deported refugees. All the witnesses stressed that the deportations had adversely affected their lives. The majority lost their jobs and/or had their bank accounts frozen after the Turkish Government canceled their *kimlik* and gave them five-year-entry bans. The most devastating outcome has been the fragmentation of several families. Husbands and fathers were sent to Syria, while wives and children remained in Turkey. Deprived of their breadwinners, those left behind were forced to fend for themselves.

Out of the 21 interviewed witnesses, STJ recorded that only seven did not have a *kimlik*, which is the main pretext on which the forced returns were carried out.

In Syria, several of the deported refugees were subjected to blackmail and extreme violations, including detention and torture at the hands of the SNA and the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Both the SNA and the HTS operate border crossings with Turkey.

The interviewed witnesses told STJ that the deportations perpetrated by Turkish authorities did not target male refugees only. The witnesses said that the Turkish authorities carried out family-level deportations, detaining mothers and children under grim conditions, and later forcibly returning them to Syria.

In addition to deported refugees, STJ reached out to three employees at the border crossings in the Turkey-supervised Euphrates Shield and the Peace Spring strips. The sources recounted that the Turkish authorities deliberately deported refugees through the HTS-run border crossing of Bab al-Hawa, even though they knew that several of those deported are from Aleppo's northern countryside and are on bad terms with the HTS. Thus, the Turkish authorities risked the lives of these refugees and made them vulnerable to financial extortion and/or arrest by the HTS forces. The sources added that the Turkish authorities deported a small batch of refugees to their birthplaces in Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, in response to the appeals the refugees filed when they were in the detention centers.

The deportations garnered the attention of several Syrian influential figures, who decried the arbitrary practice. Scholar Ali al-Qaradaghi, Secretary-General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, on 21 December 2021 addressed the suffering of Rohingya and Uighur Muslims, stressing that the "forcible deportation of refugees is *haram* (forbidden)" and described the deportations as a "crime and absolutely forbidden". Specific to the deportations of Syrian refugees from Turkey, the *Anadolu Agency* (Arabic) [cited](#) a *fatwa* by al-Qaradaghi. The scholar said that "deporting refugees, especially against their will, is absolutely forbidden and is a crime. He added that "Helping refugees reach safety or keeping them safe" is *farida* (obligation) under the Islamic Sharia. The scholar also emphasized that "advocating the cause of those subjected to injustice is an ethical and humanitarian duty, enforced by Sharia as well. And that enabling the oppressors and helping them inflict injustice amounts to partaking in the crime, which is an act punishable by God."

The deportations reverberated locally, stirring 16 Turkish organizations to respond in an official form. On 1 November 2021, the organizations issued a [joint statement](#), calling the Turkish authorities to stop the deportation proceedings against Syrian refugees, on the charge of "posting provocative videos" in the context of the [banana crisis](#), whereby the banana became the newest symbol for the growing tensions between some





Turkish people and Syrian refugees. The organizations highlighted the legal implications of the deportations, as Turkish authorities continue to violate Article 33 of the Refugee Convention of 1951, which states that “No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

Turkey is also bound by the international customary law of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of anyone to a territory where they would be at the real risk of persecution, torture or other ill-treatment, or a threat to life. Turkey also may not use violence or the threat of violence or detention to coerce people to return to places where they face harm. This includes Syrian asylum seekers, who are entitled to automatic protection under Turkish law, including any who have been [blocked](#) from registration for temporary protection since late 2017.

Addressing the claims of safety in Syria, which the Turkish authorities are using as a pretext for the deportations, on 21 October 2021, Chair of the UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, Paulo Pinheiro, delivered a [speech](#) before the Third Committee of the General Assembly, warning that “This is not a time for anyone to be thinking that Syria is safe, for its refugees to return home. Instead, we are seeing an upsurge in fighting and violence.”

Despite this, January 2022 was marked by [group deportations](#) of tens of Syrians, most of whom had not committed any crimes. Instead, many carried *kimliks*, work permits, and student paperwork. STJ continues to investigate these cases and will soon publish our findings in another report.

The cost of these deportations, both from Turkey and Europe, have often been deadly. Most recently, Turkish media, associated with the government, reported that 19 bodies had been found of refugees who died from the cold after Greek police arrested, stripped, and returned them to Turkey.

Border Crossing Statistics on Deportations

The media outlets affiliated with the Turkey-Syria border crossings are primary sources for leads on deportations, particularly statistics they publish on the numbers of refugees forcibly deported to Syria. The numbers are obtained from crossing employees, who receive the refugees from Turkish authorities and register their names, before granting them access to Syrian territories, which are under the military control of HTS and other armed opposition groups.

The published statistics exclude refugees who enter Syria either on holidays, to spend the Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr with their families, or for medical reasons. The second group includes individuals and/or their companions who seek healthcare in Turkish hospitals.





Additionally, the statistics do not cover Syrian individuals arrested and returned to Syria while attempting to enter Turkey illegally. On 15 February 2021, STJ published a report that documents dozens of cases of captured Syrians, who have been beaten, tortured, and maltreated in the custody of the factions in control of areas adjacent to the border strip.

STJ tracked the statistics published by the official media outlets of three major border crossings, Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salameh, and Tal Abyad.

On its [official website](#), the [Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing](#), connecting Turkey to the HTS-held areas in Idlib province, recorded that the Turkish authorities forcibly returned 100872 Syrian refugees, among them women and children, between 2019 and 2021.

[Media outlets](#) run by the [Bab al-Salamah Border Crossing](#), which connects Turkey to the Euphrates Shield strip, encompassing Jarabulus, Azaz, and al-Bab, published similar statistics. However, the outlets provide the numbers under the label “people who voluntarily returned” and distinguish this group from the group who returned “after trying to enter Turkey illegally.” The outlets are likely working under the directives of the border officials, who must be avoiding mentioning the issue of deportations openly, concerned over the growing Turkish military influence in the area. The crossing’s administration documented the forcible return of 47310 persons to Syria between 2019 and 2021.

One of the sources STJ interviewed in November 2021 estimated the number of people forcibly returned through the border every month. The source said:

“Every month, approximately 400 people are deported from Turkey to Syria through the Bab al-Salameh border crossing. The majority are forcibly returned. Over the course of my work, I noticed that barely 25% of the deported people returned voluntarily and because it was what they wanted. Regardless, most people were forced to return.”

The [Tal Abyad Border Crossing](#), which links Turkey to the Peace Spring strip, started publishing data nearly a year after Turkey occupied areas across Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Like the administration of Bab al-Salameh, the administration of the border labels the deportations using the term “voluntary returns”, fearing to use open and clear-cut tags to describe the situation, given the Turkish presence in the area. The border [documented](#) the deportation of 9344 refugees to Syria between mid-2020 and 2021.

For further details, STJ reached out to one of the border’s officials. He narrated:

“The border did not receive many deported/forcibly returned refugees because the deported were chiefly people that Turkish authorities consider problematic, for security or criminal reasons. During our work, we noticed that Turkey did not deport people to the Peace Spring Strip because they consider it a safe zone and would not want anything to cause problems there.”





He added:

“Deportations and the border crossings through which the deported would be sent are decided by the Department of Immigration in Ankara. The department often chooses Bab al-Hawa because it is a humanitarian crossing and it leads to Idlib, which is not under Turkey’s control.”

The [Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê](#) Crossing did not [publish](#) any numbers or reports on refugees deported or returned by Turkey to Syria.

The detailed yearly statistics from the three border crossings are aggregated into the table below.

Month	Bab al-Hawa			Bab al-Salameh			Tal Abyad		
	2021	2020	2019	2021	2020	2019	2021	2020	2019
January	2290	6814	4466	422	3369	2241	544	-	-
February	1549	4409	3307	359	4872	1824	-	-	-
March	1938	873	3046	0	3472	1947	-	-	-
April	1777	41	2823	570	360	1279	535	-	-
May	697	61	3316	323	90	1163	250	-	-
June	0	742	4370	468	560	1322	-	-	-
July	1168	1409	6160	386	1006	2964	-	-	-
August	1045	1930	8901	351	788	4261	-	1732	-
September	1142	1561	8653	461	704	2657	578	0	-
October	777	1448	7542	324	478	2393	-	5705	-
November	964	1337	5816	299	549	1822	-	-	-
December	1420	1632	5448	615	535	2076	-	-	-
Total	14767	22257	63848	4578	16783	25949	1907	7437	-
Total Deportation Per Crossing	100872			47310			9344		
Total Deportations	157526								



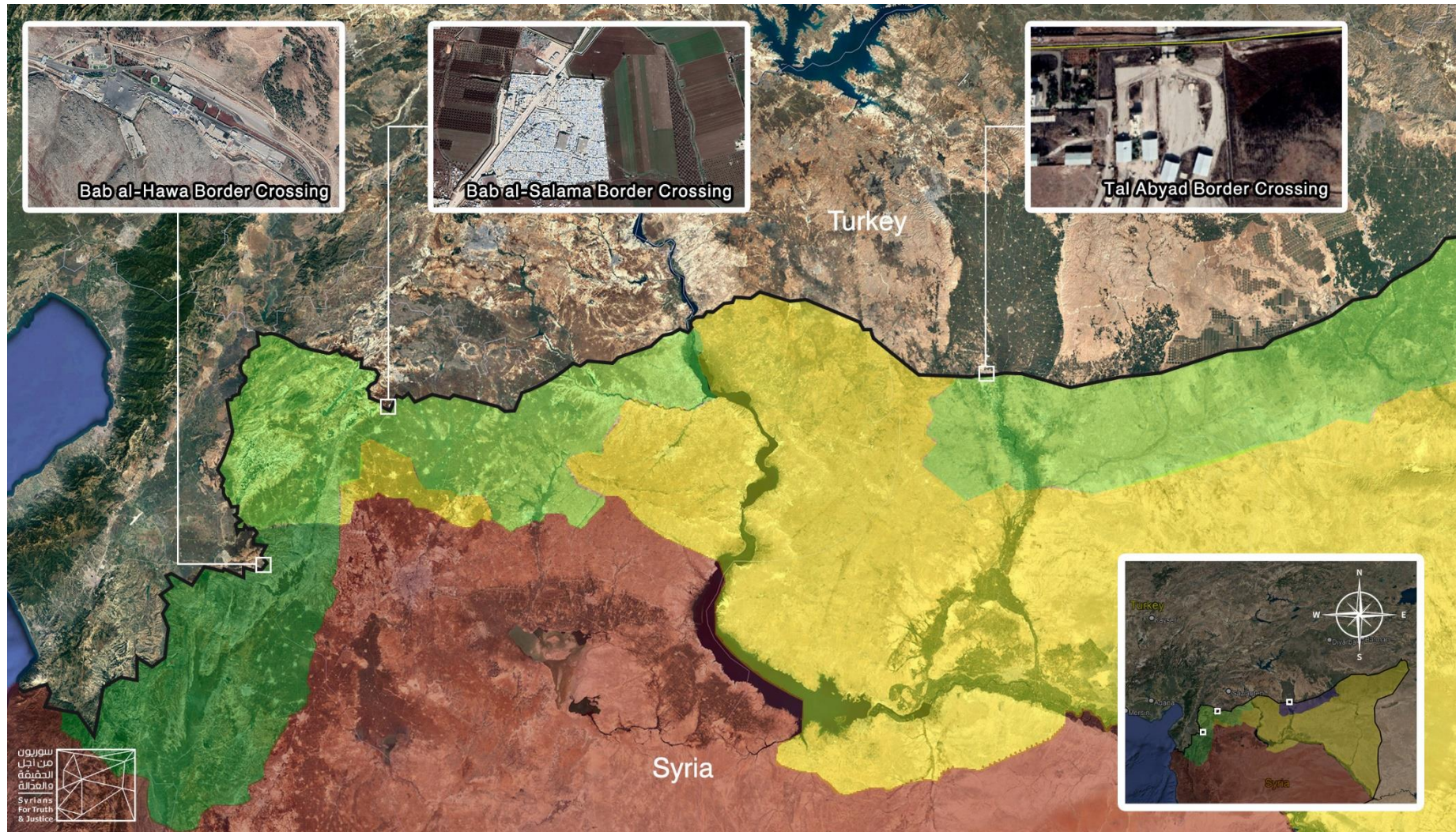


Image (1)- Map locating the border crossings through which Turkish authorities are forcibly returning refugees/asylum seekers to Syria. Besides the three major border crossings, several informal crossings are witnessing similar deportations.





Real Number of Syrian Refugees in Turkey?

Turkish authorities, including the Ministry of Interior and other government departments, continue to manipulate data on the Syrian refugees present in Turkey. The concerned departments publish supposed updates on the number of registered Syrians, kimlik holders, but these updates are not excluding the people deported under the guise of “voluntary return.” The numbers should be decreasing, while published statistics show a constant decrease.

STJ checked the Turkish government’s posted numbers on both categories, the registered Syrians yet in Turkey and those deported. STJ matched the figures and discovered a huge gap of more than 1.5 million refugees. This comparison shows that the actual number of Syrian refugees currently in Turkey is nearly two million while government departments are reporting an almost fixed number, saying there are at least three million Syrians.

The table below provides a detailed comparison between the number of officially registered refugees and those who have been deported. The numbers are all obtained from official Turkish sources.

2021 Figures							
Reported Number of Syrian Refugees	Report Date	Source	Notes	Number of “voluntary returns”	Report Date	Source	Notes
3.700.000+	19.12.2021	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	İsmail Çataklı cited these numbers during the monthly Turkish media press conference. The conference is held to provide the media with statistical updates on various issues of concern in Turkey.	1.000.000+	30.11.2021	Ministry of Defense	Major Pinar Kara made a statement on behalf of the Media and Public Relations Consultancy, within the Turkish Ministry of Defense, saying that 450,000 Syrians returned to Idlib province alone. Kara added that other batches returned to the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Spring Shield strips, where Turkey had previously launched military operations.
3.738.032	25.11.2021	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	The association obtains numbers from the immigration department and ministry of interior	469.170	25.11.2021	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	On 3 November 2021, the association quoted İsmail Çataklı, deputy of the interior minister, as saying that 469,170 refugees returned to Syria.





3.726.206	03.11.2021	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	İsmail Çataklı cited these numbers during the monthly Turkish media press conference. The conference is held to provide the media with statistical updates on various issues of concern in Turkey.	469.170	03.11.2021	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği) cited these numbers in their reports.
3.715.913	16.09.2021	Immigration Administration	The administration reported that up to 16 September 2021, there were 59,877 Syrians in housing centers, and an additional 3,559,041 Syrians outside housing centers, all registered under the temporary protection provision.	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	450.000	19.08.2021	The Turkish President	"They returned to the places we made safe." (video)
3.684.412	23.06.2021	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	The association obtains numbers from the immigration department and ministry of interior	419,040	23.06.2021	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	The total of refugees who returned starting from 6 December 2020.
3.645.557	13.01.2021	The Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği-IHD)	The association obtained the numbers from the Turkish interior ministry, applicable up to 13 December 2021.	-	-	-	-

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2020 Figures							
Reported Number of Syrian Refugees	Report Date	Source	Notes	Number of "voluntary returns"	Report Date	Source	Notes
3.641.370	31.12.2020	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	The association obtains numbers from the immigration administration and interior ministry, issuing bi-annual years.	419.040	31.12.2020	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	The association attributed the 419.040 reported number to the interior ministry, adding it is applicable only up to 6 December 2020.
-	-	-	-	+1.000.000	12.11.2020	Minister of Defense	Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar reported this number, while discussing the Finance Minister's proposed 2021 budget. This number matches the ministry's figures reported on 30 November 2021. Out of the reported number, 450,000 returned to Idlib province, in Syria.
3.624.941	02.10.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	İsmail Çatakılı made an official statement, saying that 413,196 refugees returned to Syria	413.196	02.10.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	İsmail Çatakılı made an official statement, saying that 413,196 refugees returned to Syria
3.585.198	11.06.2020	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	Based on statements by the interior ministry.	402.011	11.06.2020	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	A statement by the interior ministry on 5 May 2020.
3.580.263	05.05.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	Video	402.011	05.05.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	The video, updates numbers reported earlier
3.587.266	06.03.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	Video	399.087	06.03.2020	Deputy of the Minister of Interior	Video





4.000.000	02.01.2020	Turkish President	In a statement made during the “City and Security” Seminar, held in The Presidential Complex in Ankara.	-	-	-	-
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2019 Figures							
Reported Number of Syrian Refugees	Report Date	Source	Notes	Number of “voluntary returns”	Report Date	Source	Notes
3.571.030	25.12.2019	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	Cited from interior ministry reports	369.690	25.12.2019	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	Based on numbers issued by the interior ministry and a statement on 4 December 2019.
3.691.333	05.12.2019	Interior ministry	Monthly statement by deputy of interior minister, İsmail Çataklı.	369.690	05.12.2019	Interior ministry	Monthly statement by deputy of interior minister, İsmail Çataklı.
3.649.750	31.06.2019	BBC citing the interior ministry	Based on a statement by the interior ministry on 25 July 2019	337.729	31.06.2019	BBC citing the interior ministry	Based on a statement by the interior ministry on 25 July 2019
3.613.644	13.06.2019	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	Cited from interior ministry reports	329	13.06.2019	Association for Refugees (Mülteciler Derneği)	Based on interior ministry numbers, reported in May 2019.

In addition to contested numbers, STJ detected other potential statistical manipulations, including misreporting on the number of Syrian refugees who relocated to Europe and Syrian fighters who were recruited as mercenaries in various non-national military activities. Both the traveling refugees and mercenaries remain registered as asylum seekers in Turkey.

STJ confirmed two such cases among Syrian recruits. STJ obtained verified information demonstrating that a fighter within the ranks of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) was deployed to fight in Libya in early 2020. The fighter was based in Turkey and had obtained





a *kimlik* from the province where he lived. The Turkish authorities did not update the fighter's status after he was sent to Libya, keeping him registered as a Syrian refugee under the temporary protection system.

In a second case, STJ obtained verified information that the Turkish authorities provided a fighter of the Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam and his family members with a *kimlik*, on the condition that he relocates to Libya as a mercenary. The fighter was deployed to Libya as a member of the al-Hamaz/al-Hamzat Division, commanded by Abu Seif Baker, which he joined in February 2020. When he returned from Libya to Syria, the fighter was transferred to Turkey and given the *Kimlik*.

Recommendations

The EU and other Donor Countries should:

- Carry out a fair and transparent investigation into the actual number of Syrian refugees in Turkey. To this end, concerned entities should establish an independent and objective committee to recount the refugees and match the reported numbers of *kimilk* holders with the refugees present in Turkey.
- Carry out a separate investigation into the issue of *kimlik* holders that have been recruited to fight in Libya as mercenaries.
- Press the Turkish government to stop forcibly returning Syrian refugees to Syrian territories, which are still struggling in the woes of armed conflict.





Background

During the Migration Council meeting, held in mid-September 2021 in the capital Ankara, the Turkish Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, [stated](#) that since 2016 approximately 500,000 Syrian refugees have voluntarily returned to the “Euphrates Shield” and “Olive Branch” strips, north of Aleppo, which are controlled by the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).

For her part, Major Pinar Kara, representative of the Media and Public Relations Consultancy within the defense ministry, [said](#) that “a million Syrians had voluntarily returned to northern Syria’s areas”, a number that some Syrian organizations considered an exaggeration.

Major Kara attributed the returns to Turkey’s military campaigns in the area, which “provided the population with security and prosperity.”

Pinar added that continued Turkish humanitarian aid and infrastructure support led to the “safe and dignified voluntary return of over a million Syrians to their homes, among them nearly 470,000 who headed back to Idlib province.”

Notably, the Syrian presence in Turkey is governed by the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal signed in 2016. Under the deal, the EU pledged to allocate Turkey financial assistance worth billions of Euros.

As for the refugee movement, the deal provided that “all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey.” In return for curbing illegal crossings, the EU agreed to resettle one Syrian refugee for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands.

Turkish authorities have been perpetrating massive forcible returns, claiming that the Syrian areas where Turkish forces are stationed are safe. However, these claims have been refuted by several international organizations and UN officials. On 25 October 2021, the Chair of the UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, Paulo Pinheiro, [addressed](#) the Third Committee of the General Assembly, warning the international community that “while some might be thinking the conflict is ending, the facts on the ground paint another picture.”

“This is not a time for anyone to be thinking that Syria is safe, for its refugees to return home. Instead, we are seeing an upsurge in fighting and violence,” Mr. Pinheiro added.

For their part, Amnesty International dedicated a September 2021 [report](#) to the restrictions several countries are imposing on the lives of Syrian refugees, recommending Turkey to “End unfair and restrictive policies coercing refugees to return to Syria, which amount to constructive refoulement.”

Amnesty cautioned that while several European countries, including Turkey, Sweden and Denmark, are imposing administrative restrictive measures against Syrian refugees and are pressing them to return, the horrifying testimonies they collected confirm that “no part of Syria is





safe for returnees to go back to, including Damascus or the Damascus area, and people who have left Syria since the beginning of the conflict are at real risk of suffering persecution upon return, with women being as much at risk as men.”

Additionally, Human Rights Watch [revealed](#) that the Turkish government has been adopting an obvious policy, which aims to impose restrictions on Syrian refugees to drive them into returning to Syria. Under this policy, the Turkish government suspended the registration of refugees in several provinces, denying new asylum seekers the *kimlik*, thus, protection. The tightened measures also included major navigation restrictions; the authorities prevented Syrians from moving between Turkish provinces without obtaining a travel permit.

Notably, the suspension of registration and hampered navigation were accompanied by a large-scale campaign against unregistered refugees, forcibly sending numerous Syrians, including *kimlik* holders, to Northern Syria.

The tightened restrictions have accompanied an upsurge in violence against Syrian refugees. Dozens of discriminatory and retaliatory assaults were documented in the past few months alone. In September 2021, the Turkish *Sozcu* media outlet reported that approximately 150 Turkish citizens marched towards Torbalı district, in İzmir province, attacked Syrians, stoned their houses, and set fire to their cars. The assault was in retaliation to the [death](#) of a young Turkish man in İzmir.

A second horrifying incident took place in İzmir. In December 2021, a Turkish man set fire to the residence of three Syrian young men, killing them all. A human rights activist following the investigation claimed that the murders were committed for a “purely racist reason.” This [reason](#) was confirmed by the perpetrator himself in the testimonies he provided to Turkish authorities after his arrest.

Methodology

For the purposes of this report, STJ interviewed 25 refugees affected by forced deportations and three employees working at Turkish-Syrian border crossings. Additionally, STJ obtained information from various official sources that addressed the report’s subject matter, including statistics on registered and returned refugees.





Refugee Detention/Deportation Centers

As part of the pre-deportation measures, Turkish authorities have been holding Syrian registered refugees and asylum seekers, both holders and non-holders of the *kimlik*, in three types of detention facilities.

Military barracks on the Turkish-Greek Borders:

These barracks are operated by the Turkish Jandarma (Border Guards). These barracks are allocated to asylum seekers who try to illegally reach Europe by land. The centers function as interim holding places before the refugees are handed over to police patrols, in the presence of employees from the immigration administration. These employees oversee the return proceedings.

According to the obtained testimonies, STJ concluded that these barracks are not prepared as proper detention facilities and fail to accommodate the refugees. Border guards leave the refugees in open areas, where they suffer from harsh weather conditions in winter and summer, especially children. In addition to poor detention environments, children suffer from malnourishment and milk shortages.

The detention duration varies between one to 15 days, after which the refugees are discharged from the center in one batch.

One of the interviewed witnesses, who was held in a barrack detention center, said that he was held for 15 days and was then deported with 300 other persons.

Detention Centers Run by the Immigration Administration

The immigration administration dedicates these centers to asylum seekers who attempt to reach Europe illegally by sea, through the Turkish coast. The people are often relocated from administration-affiliated centers to those centers/camps on Syria-Turkey borders before they are ultimately deported. These transit centers mostly consist of camps, established only to detain refugees. According to the interviewed witnesses, the food shares were better in these centers, but they were plagued with skin diseases.

Designated Camps

These camps are established to accommodate thousands of people. They are assembly centers where to-be-deported asylum seekers are gathered and given *kimlik*-related documents before they are transferred to other locations, where *kimlik* are canceled and people are forced to sign the voluntary return documents.

Comparing several accounts from the interviewed witnesses, STJ concluded that this has been a pattern that Turkish authorities have been adopting since 2018. In June 2018, the Turkish authorities applied this method the first time, sending Syrian refugees from the Suruç Camp,





south of Turkey, to the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing. At the crossing, the deported refugees were asked to walk towards the areas held by the HTS. The Turkish authorities did not give the refugees a chance to choose a preferable crossing.

Later, Turkish authorities started deporting refugees through other official and unofficial crossings and began considering people's preferences regarding the crossings they were to return through to Syria.



Image (2) – Map locating some of the centers where refugees and asylum seekers are held before they are deported to Syria.





Syrian Refugees Deported

Families Torn Apart

The deportations had adverse social and financial effects on the families of the deported persons. The deportations robbed many families of their breadwinners, leaving them to struggle with the woes of poor living standards.

Muhammad Abdulqader (pseudonym) used to live with his wife and two children in the Turkish province of Şanlıurfa. Turkish authorities deported him on 12 April 2021, even though he had a *kimlik*. Abdulqader narrated:

“I am married and have two kids. I had been living in Turkey for seven years . . . One day, I went to downtown Şanlıurfa to buy clothes. Then, a fight broke out between Turkish and Syrian young men, after Turkish youngsters harassed a Syrian girl. I was close to the site of the fight but did not intervene. I stayed in the cloth shop and continued shopping. The police and the intelligence services came and interfered to solve the problem. They started to stop and inspect young men. They asked owners to close their shops. Meanwhile, a member of the intelligence services stopped me and asked me to wait. Later, they detained me with other 25 young men, even though I had nothing to do with the fight. They took us to a police station and we were distributed to two cells. They took the seven men from the fight to a cell while they transferred us to the immigration administration, where we were held for two days. Then, they asked us, through which border crossing we preferred to be returned to Syria. They forced us to sign and put our thumbprints on the ‘voluntary return’ documents, even though we tried hard to explain to them that we were not part of the fight. They said, ‘we know that, but these are the orders.’”

The witness added:

“I chose to be deported through the Tal Abyad crossing because I intended to reenter Turkey, since my wife, children, and relatives are based in Urfa province. When they handed us to the Syrian side at the Tal Abyad crossing, which is run by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, we were subjected to interrogation. They asked us to pay them money in exchange for our release. We paid them the money.”

Seven *Kimlik* Holders Deported

Ahmad al-Abdullah (pseudonym) is a Syrian refugee. He had a *kimlik* and used to work at a marble stone factory, owned by a Turkish man. Ahmad recounted the details of his deportation:

“I am 22 years old. I supported my family in Turkey through this job. On 7 April 2021, the Turkish authorities forcibly returned me to Syria. We were seven young men; we worked at a marble stone factory in Hilvan district, in Şanlıurfa province. We worked for 12 hours





a day and slept within the factory. We were paid a salary of 2300 Turkish Liras (TL). The money I made only covered the rent and the bills. In early April, the Turkish police raided the factory and asked us to stand next to the wall. They had a discussion with the factory's owner, a Turkish man. Then a Turkish officer approached me and asked me to show him my *kimlik*. We all had *kimliks*. Then, he asked us to show him our work permits. None of us has a permit. This was not our fault; it was the factory owner's mistake. It was his responsibility to register us for work permits."

The witness added:

"Along with the factory owner, they transferred us to the Hilvan Police Station. They put us, the Syrians, in a detention center, where we slept for the night. The next day, they took us to the Immigration Administration and then to the Harran Detention Center, where we stayed for four days. Then the police members held our hands and forced us to sign and put our thumbprints on documents, the contents of which we did not know. By bus, they then transported us to the Tal Abyad Border Crossing in Raqqa. We were all taken aback, they deported us for no obvious reason . . . My family consists of nine persons and my siblings are too young. Today, my sisters sell tissues on the streets because my father is too sick to work. I tried to enter Turkey illegally through Tal Abyad several times but failed, the border guards are keeping a close watch. During one my attempts, the guards captured me, beat me with the butt of a rifle and shattered my phone . . . I will keep trying. I will return to my family, find a job, and help them have a decent life."

Deported Due to a Neighbor's Complaints

Nawras Luay is a second Syrian refugees. He is married and has three children. Luay used to live in Mersin city and had a *kimlik*. On 17 March 2021, the Turkish authorities deported him due to a complaint from his neighbors. He narrated:

"I had been based in Turkey since 2016. I used to work in a restaurant for 12 hours a day. My children are nine, six, and two years old. I had recently rented a house and moved to the new building. A while later, the police came to my house at 11 P. M., and told us the neighbors had filed a disturbance complaint against me. When the police went inside to inspect the house, they found a hookah on the balcony. Upon seeing the hookah, the officer became furious and started to say racist things. Then the police asked me to accompany them to the station, to complete the interrogation. I thought that this was only a routine measure. The next day, my wife tried to visit me and hire me a lawyer, but the police told here that this was unnecessary because these were simple proceedings and that I will soon be out. Then, they tested me for COVID, took me for interrogation, and asked me to sign and put my thumbprint on the 'release documents.' This was literally the translation of the interpreter at the station. I signed and added my thumbprint. Then, they put me on board a bus with other five people and transported us to the immigration administration in Antakya. There, they told us that they have deactivated our *kimliks* and gave us a five-year no-entry document. Then, they took us all to the Jarabulus border crossing. The SNA, which operates the crossing, detained us for five days and then released us."





“Back to Zero”

Most of the witnesses STJ interviewed had been living in Turkey for years, during which they had either started their own businesses or worked different jobs to achieve financial and family stability, particularly so they would not burden anyone. However, the forcible returns brought many back to point zero, because most of them partially or completely lost the life they had been building for years.

Hasan Omran is a Syrian refugee. He did digital marketing and had a *kimlik*. He used to live in Bursa and was deported on 26 May 2021 for no obvious reason. Omran narrated:

“I entered Turkey in 2016. I held a Bursa-issued *kimlik*. I also had a work permit. I worked for a digital marketing company. My job had to do with shipping, so I received the shipped goods’ prices to my bank account. During the COVID crisis, my work peaked. There was high demand from people for online shopping. I used to live in an all-male dormitory. In May, at 2 A. M, the electricity went off in the whole building. A few seconds later, our door was smashed down. The Turkish security forces raided the place, inspected the house, handcuffed us, led us down to the street and then took us by buses to the Police Station ... There were about 120 persons. We learned that they raided all the apartments in the building. The next day, they tested us for COVID. We spent 14 days in prison without knowing the reason. Most of us had scabies due to the poor conditions in the prison. After these 14 days, they started taking out batches of five men every day. We had no idea what happened to them. When it was my turn, they took me to the interrogation room, where the interrogator asked me a few questions and then told me to sign a document, saying ‘it is for your release.’ I checked the document thoroughly and realized that it was the approval of ‘voluntary return’ to Syria. I refused to sign it and asked for a lawyer. The interrogator refused. I explained my situation and the nature of my work. I told them that if they deactivated my *kimlik*, I would lose over 100,000 TL deposited in my bank account. The interrogator did not budge. When I remained determined not to sign, they returned me to prison. Two days later, a security force came, they handcuffed us, and forced us to sign the voluntary return document. Then, they relocated us to the Jarabulus border crossing. They handed us over to the 9th Division within the opposition SNA. The division detained, interrogated, beat and insulted us. Later, they asked us for money in exchange for release.”

He added:

“I decided to return Turkey, for my job and the money I had in the account. I managed to cross to Turkey after 16 attempts. I returned to the apartment, but the owner had thrown away all our belongings and offered the apartment for rent. I submitted over 20 petitions to the Turkish government, but all this was to no avail.”

In a similar case, Syrian refugee Mahmoud Jamoh was deported on 2 June 2021 even though he had a Mersin-issued *kimlik*. Jamo is married and has a little girl. He recounted:





“I had been working in the restaurant business in Turkey for four years. One day, I was sitting in a café with my friends. Suddenly, a police patrol came in. They closed the café’s door, let out all the Turkish people and kept only the Syrians. They took us to the Mersin Police Station. There, they decided to transport us to the Syria-Turkey borders. I tried to speak to the officer several times. He ultimately agreed to talk to me. I told him that I had a job, a family, and a *kimlik*, and that I did not commit any crime. This did not affect him in the least, and he did not allow me to call a lawyer. Then, they moved us to Antakya province and forced us to sign and put our thumbprints on the ‘voluntary return’ document. After this, they took us to the Bab al-Salameh Border Crossing. There, the SNA factions detained and interrogated us. They asked us to pay them money in return for our release.”

A third Syrian refugee, Yousef Ramadan told STJ that he was deported on 23 June 2021 to Aleppo’s northern countryside through the Kilis crossing. He said that on board the deportation bus there were more than 12 families, among them women and children. He narrated:

“I entered Turkey illegally, helped by smugglers who worked within the security office of the Sultan Murad Division of the SNA. A person called Abu Furkan, from the division’s security office took 2200 USD in return for helping me enter Turkey. The smuggler then brought us to Kilis. I started working in a cow farm there . . . One day, I was in the city center. A patrol stopped me and asked for the *kimlik*. I did not have a *kimlik*. They took me to the Kilis Police Station and detained me with about 40 young men, all caught in the same way. Then, they relocated us to a detention center, called the Kilis Camp. There were approximately 200 people there, including women and children, and over 12 families. Then, they took us to a room. Inside, there were Turkish employees. They took our photos and personal information. They issued us *kimliks* and then deactivated them, to put five-year no-entry orders on our names. We remained in the detention center for six days, held in poor conditions. The center was short on drinking water and toilets. On day six, buses took us to the Kilis crossing and delivered us to the Syrian side.”

He added:

“On the Syrian side, the Civil Police took us. They detained the young men and released the families. They held us for eight days and treated us badly. They subsequently released us.”

The Syrian refugee Ghayith Salah was deported from Turkey on 25 July 2021 because he stayed in Istanbul province even though he had a *Kimlik* issued from Denizli province. He said:

“I used to work in a sewing workshop in Istanbul. I was doing very well, but I did not have a *kimlik*. I was arrested in Başakşehir sub-district in July 2019. They transported me to Denizli province and issued me a *kimlik*. However, that province had no Syrian or Arab communities. And staying there was almost impossible due to the limited job opportunities. I decided to return to Istanbul, to the workshop I worked for. I continued working there until 20 July 2021. I was doing very well. However, that day, a police patrol stopped me and asked for my *kimlik*. When they found out it was issued from a different province, they arrested me and took me to the police





station, where I stayed for two days. Then, they transported me to Kilis province and asked me to sign documents, supposedly of release. On 25 July, they put us in a bus and transported us to the Syrian Bab al-Salameh Border Crossing. They also gave me a two-year no-entry order.”

Students Facing the Unknown

Ahmad R. is a student of economics in the Sivas University in Istanbul. He was deported from Turkey on 21 April 2021 even though he had a *kimlik*. He narrated:

“I went out. Two policemen stopped me and asked for my *kimlik*. I had forgotten my *kimlik* at home. I told them I was a student and that I memorized the *kimlik* number. I gave them the number, but they did not even check it. They made me wait for half an hour on the street, during which they stopped four other young men. They took us in a car to the Beyazıt Police Station. At sunset, they told us we will take you to Hatay province to issue you *kimliks*. I told him I already had one at home and gave him the number, but he refused to listen. Then, a police bus took us, we were 12. They passed by the Aksaray Police Station and took other young men. When we arrived in Hatay province, they asked us to sign documents. They covered the documents’ contents with a piece of paper, to hide the text. When I asked to read the document, they firmly did not allow me to, saying it was a ‘release document.’ They brought us before another employee, he laser-scanned our fingerprints and gave us one-year no-entry orders. The next day, they transported us to a border crossing with Syria, called the al-Asdikaa (Friends) crossing, which is not used for civilian or trade activities. The crossing is controlled by the Syrian armed opposition groups.”

He added:

“Later, I tried to enter Turkey illegally several times, but I failed. On 22 July 2021, I decided to go to the Bab al-Salameh border crossing and talk to the Turkish officer there. I did meet the officer and explained my situation. He immediately believed my story after he checked my *kimlik*. He then called the police at the crossing and asked them to transport me to the immigration administration in Şanlıurfa. They delivered me to the administration, where they tested me for COVID and gave me the first vaccine dose. They asked me to refer to the Istanbul Security Directorate. [However, by the time I returned], My university registration had been canceled after they deactivated my *kimlik* and deported me.”

He added:

“I believe the Police in Turkey had orders to deport the largest number possible of young men, regardless of their legal status.”





A second refugee, Yousef Abdulmoueen was deported on 1 August 2021. A police patrol stopped him with his friends while walking on a beach in Istanbul. The police had deactivated his Kimlik without even informing him. He narrated:

“On 24 July 2021, I was strolling on the Yeşilköy beach in Istanbul province. Suddenly, a police patrol stopped us. There were four police buses. The police started inspecting the young men and arresting those who did not have *kimliks* or had *kimliks* issued from provinces other than Istanbul. The police stopped dozens of young men, mostly Syrians and Afghanis. They took us to the foreigners’ deportation center in Tuzla. They brought a new batch every three hours. We spent about three days there before they transferred us to the Malatya detention center. There, they enforced several measures. Those who had *kimliks* from provinces other than Istanbul were given travel permits, sent to their *kimlik* provinces, and granted 20 days to rent a house, register their new residence, activate their *kimliks*, and never leave the province unless they had a travel permit. As for those, who did not have a *kimlik*, these were relocated to provinces that still issued *kimliks*. They returned those who had deactivated *kimliks* or criminal records to Syria. I was surprised, I did not know that my *kimlik* was deactivated. They deported me to Syria through Bab al-Salameh Border Crossing. Now, I am trying to enter Turkey illegally.”





Image (3) and Image (4): A group of asylum seekers held by the Turkish authorities in one of the refugee camps that was turned into a deportation center (Suruç Camp) near the Syria-Turkey border. According to the witness that provided STJ with the exclusive photo, the total number of persons brought to the center one month before they were deported, amounted to 3000 persons, many of whom used the Turkish territories as a transit area on their way to Europe.





Image (5)- A group of asylum seekers held by the Turkish authorities in one of the refugee camps that was turned into a deportation center (Suruç Camp) near the Syria-Turkey border. According to the witness that provided STJ with the exclusive photo, the total number of persons brought to the center one month before they were deported, amounted to 3000 persons, many of whom used the Turkish territories as a transit area on their way to Europe.





Image (6)- Satellite image identifying locations apparent in photos for open source analysis.





Image (7)- Satellite image matching locations apparent in Image (6).





Image (8)- Satellite image identifying locations apparent in photos for open source analysis.





Image (9)- Satellite image matching locations apparent in Image (8).



About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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