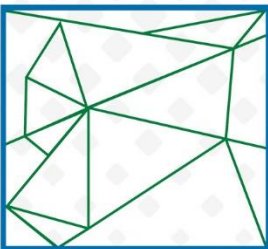


Syria: Cham Wings Airlines is Lifted from the EU Sanctions List



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Several commercial airlines were implicated in flying thousands of migrants and asylum seekers to Belarus, which used them as leverage against the European Union

Executive Summary:

On 19 July 2022, the European Union (EU) announced in its [Official Journal](#) (L190) that [Cham Wings Airlines](#) was lifted from the list of sanctions imposed on 2 December 2021 accusing the Cham Wings of flying migrants and asylum seekers to Belarus so they could then illegally cross the EU's external border.

According to the EU, the decision to remove [Cham Wings](#) from the sanctions list is because it originally aimed to change the behaviour of an individual or entity. Therefore, when this happens, the EU sanctions can be reviewed, as in the case of Cham Wings Airlines.

According to the Official Journal (L190), the company was deleted from the list set out in Section [Legal persons, entities and bodies referred to in Article 4(1)] of Annex I to Decision 2012/642/CFSP, related to restrictive measures regarding Belarus.

The EU Council imposed [restrictive measures](#) on 17 individuals and 11 entities including Cham Wings due to the latter's participation in transporting asylum seekers from the Middle East to Belarus. According to the [Official Journal](#) (L430I) of the EU (2021), Cham Wings increased the number of flights from Damascus to Minsk since the summer of 2021 in order to transport migrants to Belarus, who intended to illegally cross the external border of the EU.

In the 19th round of EU sanctions against the Syrian regime, on 15 October 2012, the EU has [prevented](#) Syrian flights from accessing airports of Member States. Moreover, 28 persons responsible for the "violent repression against the civilian population" [were added](#) to the sanctions list.

EU lifting sanctions on Cham Wings does not allow them to land in European airports (the company has [3 aircrafts](#) only whose flights are limited to the Middle East region). On 20 July 2011, Osama Satea, business development and public relations director at Cham Wings, told "[Reuters](#)" that although lifting sanctions would not immediately lead to flights to Europe, it will allow the company to request permission to operate in some airports.

De-listing Cham Wings comes after approximately a year of its implication, along with other international companies, in the systematic flying of thousands of asylum seekers to Belarus, so they could then cross the EU's border via Poland. The mentioned companies include the Turkish Airlines, Flydubai Airline, Belavia Airline (a Belarusian company), Iraqi Airways and Fly Baghdad Airline. According to the EU's [Official Journal](#) (L430I), in autumn 2021, Cham Wings also opened two new offices in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, in order to be able to organise the flights from Damascus.

Since mid-2021, asylum seekers of various nationalities, including Syrians, began to flow towards Europe through Belarus, especially after a [statement](#) made by the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in May 2021, declaring that he would not stop migrants from flooding into western Europe.

Subsequently, the Belarusian authorities granted visas to citizens of non-EU countries. Accordingly, asylum seekers—including Syrians, Iraqis, and Yemenis— began to flood into

Belarus. The influx of refugees reached its highest peak during the months of September, October, and November 2021. This number dropped dramatically in December, after the European Union threatened to impose sanctions on the commercial companies involved.

On 13 November 2021, Cham Wings [announced](#) the suspension of its flights to Belarus due to what it called a "critical situation on the Belarus-Poland border". Moreover, Turkey was accused of contributing to the migrant flow on the Polish border. Therefore, on 12 November, [Turkish Airlines](#) announced that Turkey will no longer allow citizens from Syria, Yemen, and Iraq to buy tickets or fly on Turkish aircrafts heading to Belarus.

Using Asylum Seekers as a Bargaining Chip to Blackmail the EU:

According to the [Official Journal](#) (L319I) of the EU published on 2 October 2020, the EU has imposed economic sanctions on the Belarusian President for suppressing peaceful protests. As a result, the Belarusian government used refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers as a primary tool to respond, aiming to put pressure on the EU.

Since the summer of 2021, with the support of the Belarusian Army, [thousands of refugees have flocked](#) to Belarus aiming to cross the border of Poland and Lithuania —both members of the EU— heading toward other EU countries to seek asylum.

This pattern of using refugees as a political bargaining chip, goes back to early 2020 when the Turkish government announced its intention of opening its border for refugees to cross towards Greece, then to the rest of EU countries. Turkey aimed to put pressure on Europe to get its support in Idlib where the Turkish army was bombarded by the Syrian and Russian government forces, and dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed (STJ previously published a detailed [report](#) on the incident).

Most of the refugees, who headed to Belarus in the summer and autumn of 2021, were from unstable countries with brutal conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. They departed from countries that receive millions of refugees, like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, some of which stamped the passengers' passports with a re-entry ban, in order to prevent them from returning. Thousands of refugees were able to reach the EU through Belarus before it closed its border and sent military reinforcements to the Polish border.

According to a [report](#) published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), refugees who were able to reach Belarus have faced grave human rights violations committed by the Belarusian army, such as death threats in case they do not cross Poland's border.

HRW stated that **"Belarus' abuse of people at its border amounts at least to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and may in some cases constitute torture, in violation of Belarus' international legal obligations"**.

Moreover, the senior Europe and Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch, Lydia Gall said: **“While Belarus manufactured this situation without regard for the human consequences, Poland shares responsibility for the acute suffering in the border area”**.

For the purposes of this report, STJ conducted 8 focused interviews with sources/witnesses. Some of them managed to cross from Belarus to European countries, while others were family members of young migrants who returned to Syria —after the border was closed— and were arrested by the security services of the Syrian government.

Asylum Journey from Syria and Turkey to Europe via Belarus:

When the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, announced in May 2021 that Belarus will not prevent refugees from entering Europe, thousands of Syrian refugees flew from Damascus, Turkey, and Lebanon towards Belarus. Despite the high cost, this trip was considered as a good opportunity. Therefore, people used their savings, or even mortgaged or sold their houses and properties, in order to reach Europe.

Previously, Syrian citizens travelling to Belarus were able to obtain a Visa on Arrival. However, after the refugee influx, the Belarusian authorities requested obtaining visas from official embassies and consulates, (which [cost](#) €60 for the visa and €120 for travel insurance). Shortly afterwards, travel agencies and brokers in Syria and Turkey took advantage of this “opportunity” and requested \$3500 - \$4000 per traveller.

Starting the Journey: Departing from Damascus:

The Syrian government facilitated travelling procedures for travellers to Belarus by exempting them from obtaining an “Approval of Recruitment Division” or “Postponement of Recruitment”, a document that males between 17 and 42 years should secure before leaving the country, according to the [instructions](#) of the Syrian Ministry of Defence.

At the same time, travel and tourism agencies in Damascus and other cities posted dozens of advertisements on social media platforms, offering trips to Belarus, including visas and hotel reservations.

For example, the "Sultan House Office for Travel and Tourism" in Tartus [announced](#) on 18 September 2021, providing tourist entry visas for those wishing to travel to Belarus.

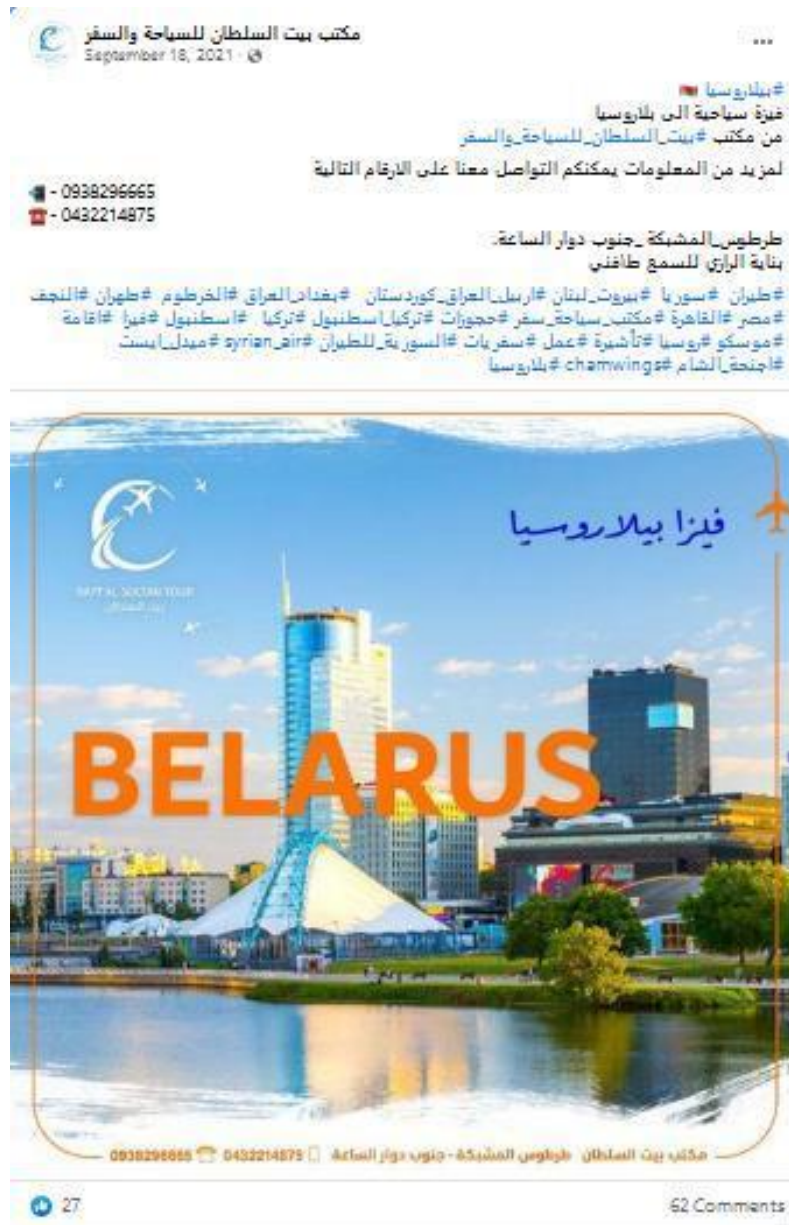


Image (1) - Facebook Post of the "Sultan House" on granting visas to Belarus

"Adam Travel and Tourism" agency in Damascus is another example. On 8 August 2021 it published a Facebook post explaining what documents were required to obtain an entry visa to Belarus.



Image (2) - Facebook Post of the “Adam” agency on travelling information.

STJ interviewed several travellers who went from Damascus to Minsk via the Cham Wings Airlines. Travellers secured their visas through travel agencies located in Damascus. The latter obtained the visas from the Belarusian embassy, through an intermediary from the 4th Division of the Syrian government forces.

A young man, under the pseudonym of Hayan Youssef, obtained a visa through a travel agency in Syria, and narrated his experience to STJ:

“I read on the internet and heard from my relatives about travelling to Europe via Belarus. Therefore, I went to the office of the Cham Wings Airlines and paid around \$4000 for a visa, a hotel reservation, and a flight ticket. While I was asked to submit my passport along with 2 personal photos, no other documents were requested. I received the visa after only two days. In early

October 2021, I left Syria from Damascus International Airport. When I entered the airport, I was very scared that I would be asked to show the 'Postponement of Recruitment' document which had expired. However, no one asked for it, which I thought was quite odd".

STJ interviewed another source, Abu Ahmad, who is the father of a young Syrian. The latter travelled to Russia through an intermediary from the Syrian security services. Abu Ahmad recounted the following:

"My son was a fighter with the armed opposition, but later he went through a reconciliation process with the Syrian government. When he heard about the possibility of travelling through Belarus to Europe, he was excited to go. Thus, I called one of my acquaintances, an officer of the Air Force Intelligence. I asked him whether there is any risk in travelling through Damascus airport since my son was a fighter. The officer told me that there is no risk because this issue is approved by the State. In fact, the officer drove my son to the airport, and the latter left Syria with no questions or investigations".

The information provided by this source, Abu Ahmad, confirms that the Syrian government and airlines companies were complicit with the Belarusian government, which used refugees as leverage against Europe. The role of the Syrian government was to facilitate all procedures for travellers without announcing any official decision about it.

A young Syrian man, under the pseudonym of Sami, was able to go from Belarus to Germany. He told STJ that he left Syria in late September 2021, with his wife and son. In order to secure travel costs, he put his house up for sale. However, when he could not sell it, he mortgaged it. He added in his interview with STJ:

"I went to a travel agent in Damascus and booked three flight tickets on flydubai, each for \$950. The flight was from Beirut airport. I also paid \$2500 for hotel reservations".

A 50-year Kurdish woman, under the pseudonym of Umm Lana, spoke to STJ via the internet. She said that her story started from the Qamishli city (Northeast Syria) when she agreed with a smuggler to secure her arrival into Germany via Belarus in return for €15,000. She reported the following:

"We were a group of 19 travellers, and most of us were Syrian Kurds. The smuggler M. Mala Manjih secured us with entry visas to Belarus. On 11 October 2021, we travelled from Qamishli Airport to Damascus International Airport. The next day, along with dozens of other passengers aiming to cross the EU border, we took off from Damascus to Minsk, the Belarusian capital".

Similar Facilitation in Turkey:

According to STJ's sources, Syrian refugees in Turkey found unofficial travel facilitation offered by the authorities and aviation companies in order to leave Turkey toward Belarus. The Turkish authorities allowed refugees to travel from its airports even though they did not have official residence permits in Turkey. However, their passports were stamped with a re-entry ban preventing them from going back to Turkey for a period of five years.

Similar to Damascus, travel and tourism agencies and smugglers in Turkey became very active during this period, and dozens of advertisements were posted on social media platforms, encouraging refugees to travel to Belarus for the purpose of "tourism". For example, on 1 September, the "al-Homsi Agency for Arab Services" in Turkey [announced](#) on its Facebook page offering entry visas to Belarus¹. Also on 8 October 2021 the "Baron Aus Agency for Travel and Tourism" [announced](#) the same offer on its Facebook page. According to the many published advertisements, the average price of the visa amounted to \$3000.



Image (3) - The post of the "Baron Aus Agency" on granting visas to Belarus.

¹ The account was deleted: <https://www.facebook.com/Alhomsi.Turkey/posts/125784383121622>



Image (4) - The post of the "al-Homsi Agency" on granting visas to Belarus.





Images (5, 6, 7 and 8) - Several advertisements in Turkey on granting visas to Belarus

Another young man (who requested anonymity) from Daraa Governorate told STJ about his experience of leaving Turkey (where he lives) towards Belarus:

"Great travel facilitation was offered in Turkey. I was allowed to depart from the airport without any question, even though I entered Turkey illegally and have no residence permit; I only had my passport with me. This facilitation was in return for signing a document of re-entry ban for five years".

The source added:

"In Turkey, I contacted a travel agency called 'Dream Turk' to obtain a visa to Belarus. The agency requested my passport and two personal photos. It also booked me a hotel in Belarus for 7 nights. This cost me \$3500".

A Syrian young man, under the pseudonym of Ayman, departed from Istanbul Airport to Belarus in late October 2021. There, he got stuck at the Belarusian-Polish border. In his testimony to STJ, he said:

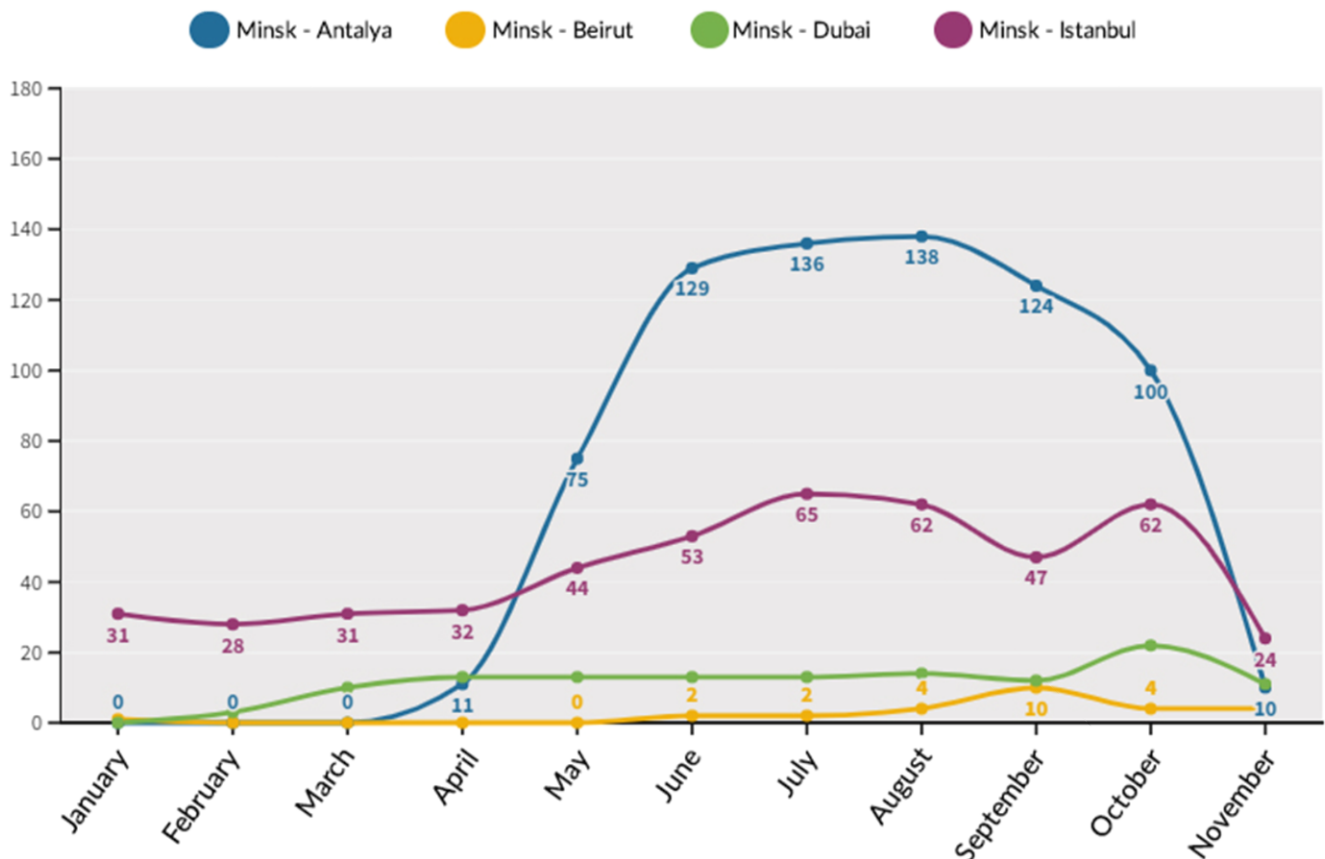
"I heard about travelling to Europe via Belarus while working in a restaurant in Istanbul. My Iraqi coworker and I decided to go. We went to a travel and tourism office run by a smuggler called al-Yabroudi, who smuggled refugees towards Greece. He told us that the way from Belarus to Europe is currently open, so we

booked a trip that cost \$4000 per person. We kept the money in an insurance office in Esenyurt. We travelled to Belarus, then we were stranded there for about ten days waiting for the smuggler to come. However, by that time, Poland had completely closed its border”.

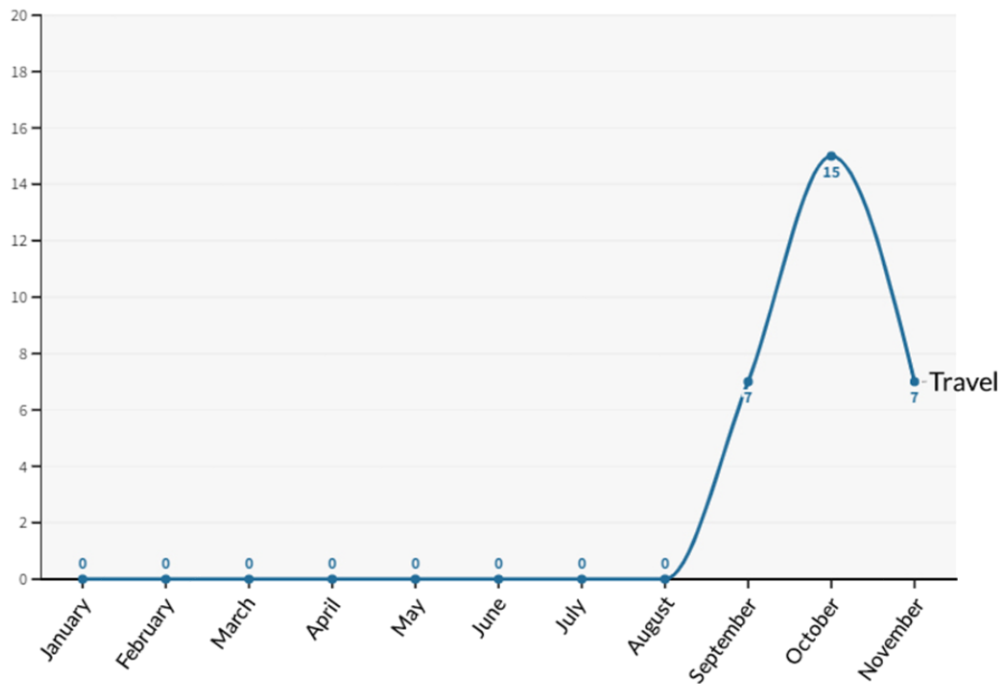
Statistics of Airlines Flight:

Through [Flightradar24](https://flightradar24.com), STJ was able to compare flights heading to the Belarusian capital, Minsk, during the refugee crisis on Poland's border (autumn 2021), and in previous months (summer 2021). STJ reached the following conclusions:

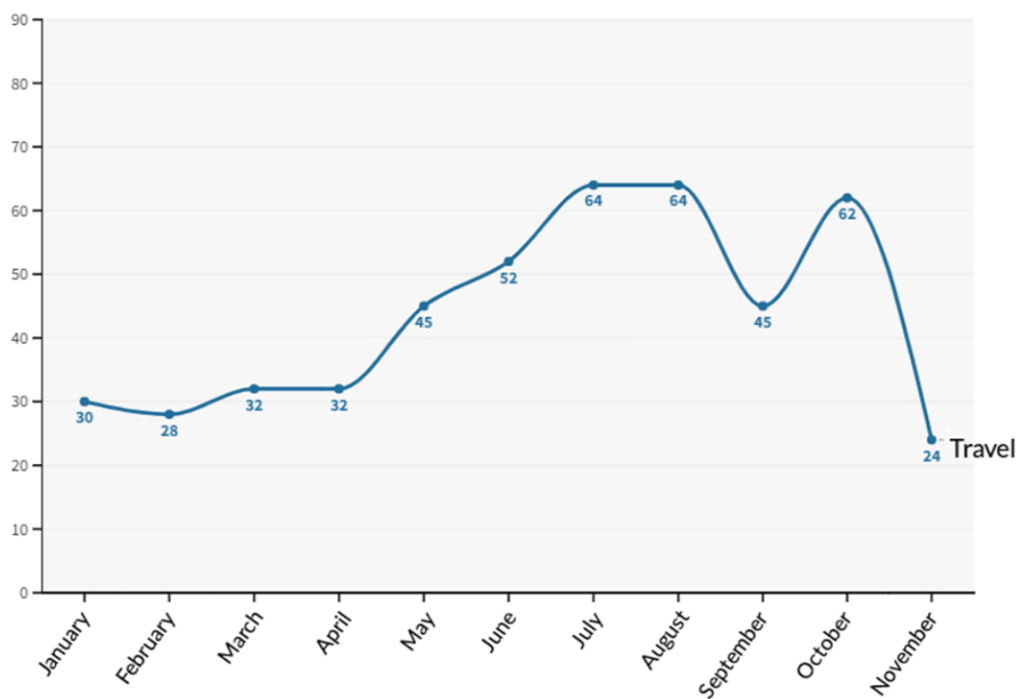
2021 Flights by Belavia Belarusian Airlines, which flew asylum seekers to Belarus from airports in Dubai, Beirut, Iraq and Istanbul



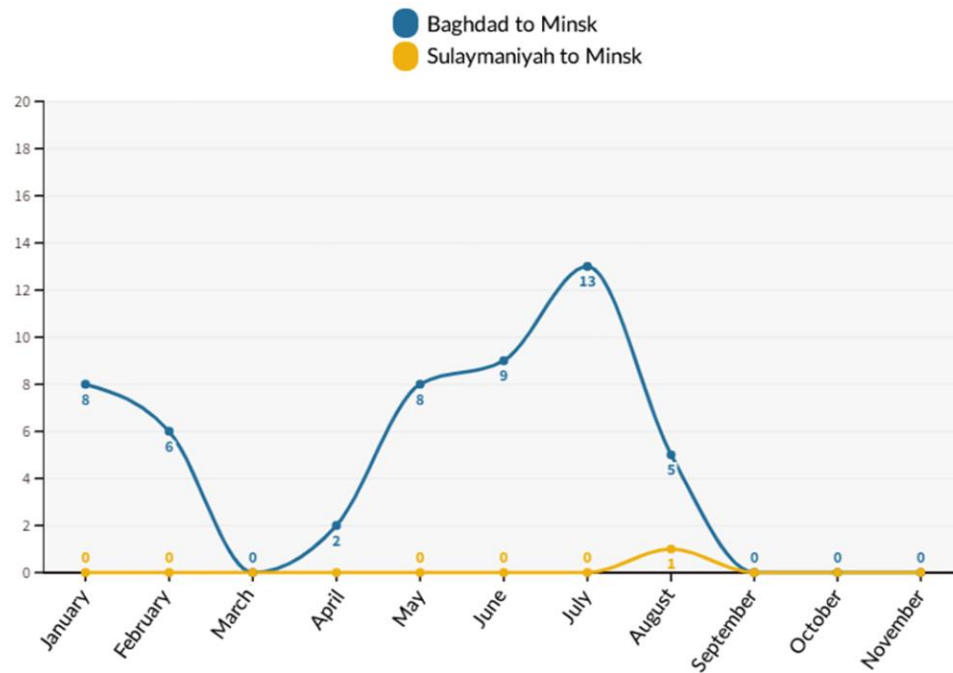
2021 Cham Wings Airlines Flights from Damascus to Minsk



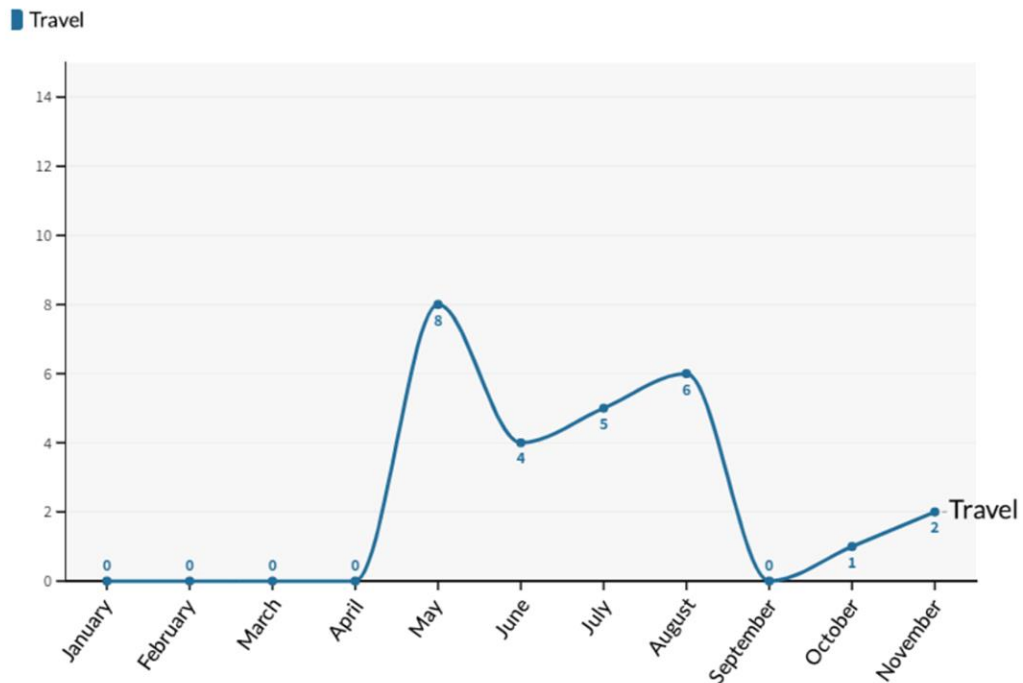
2021 Turkish Airlines Flights from Istanbul to Minsk



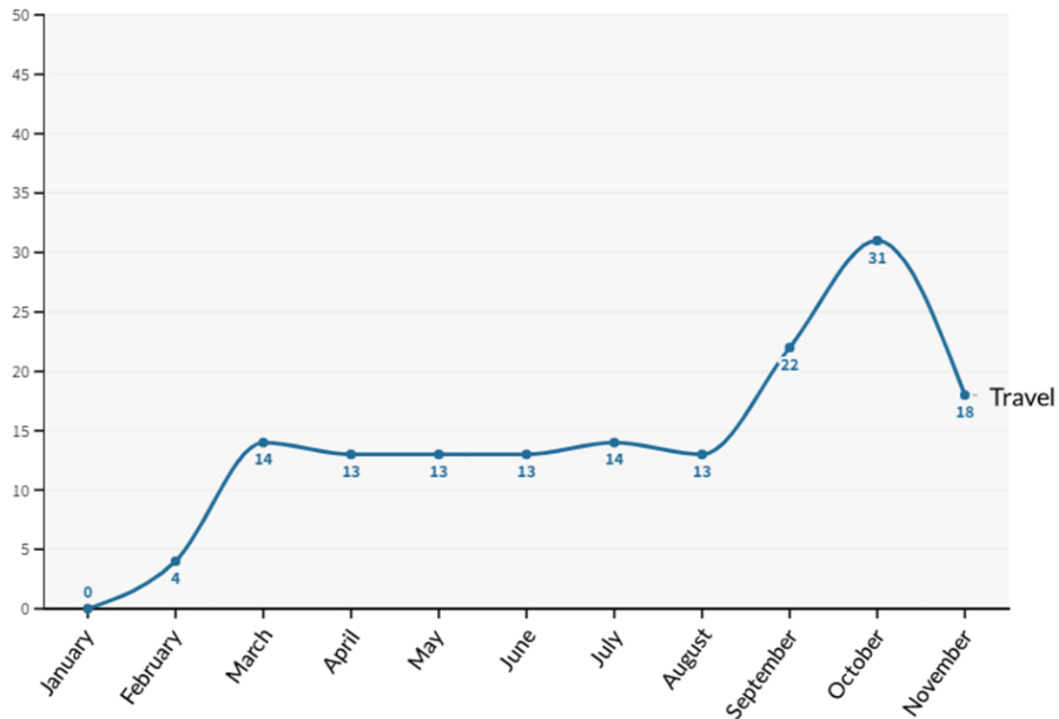
2021 Iraqi Airways Flights from Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah to Minsk



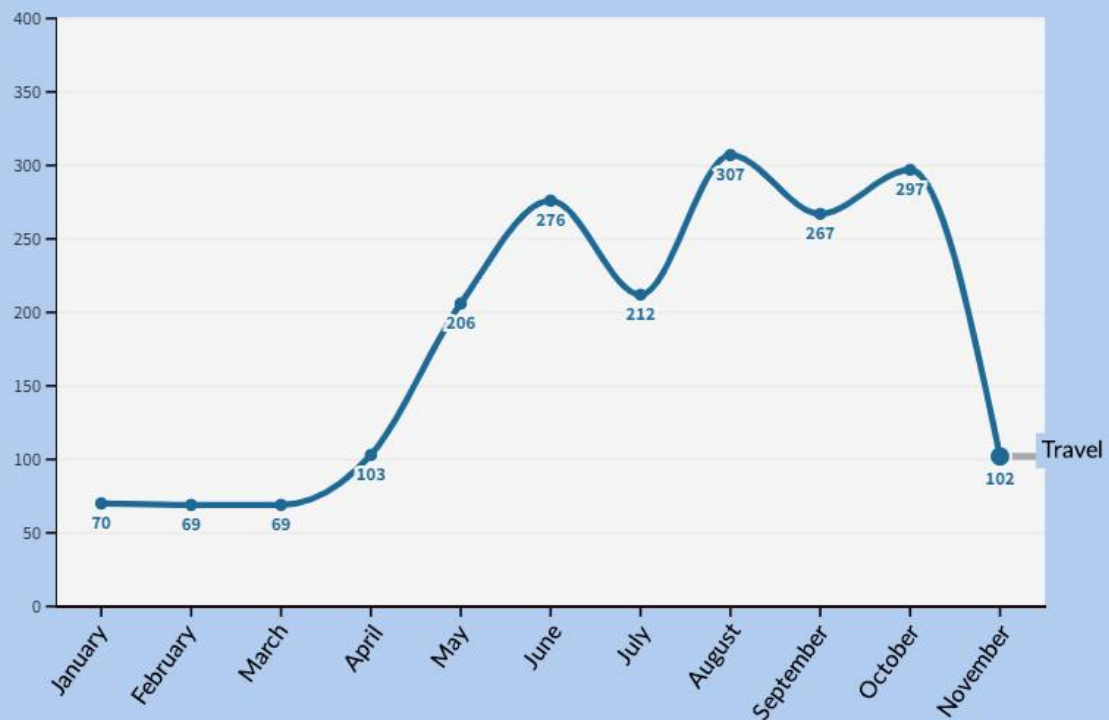
2021 Fly Baghdad Flights from Baghdad to Minsk



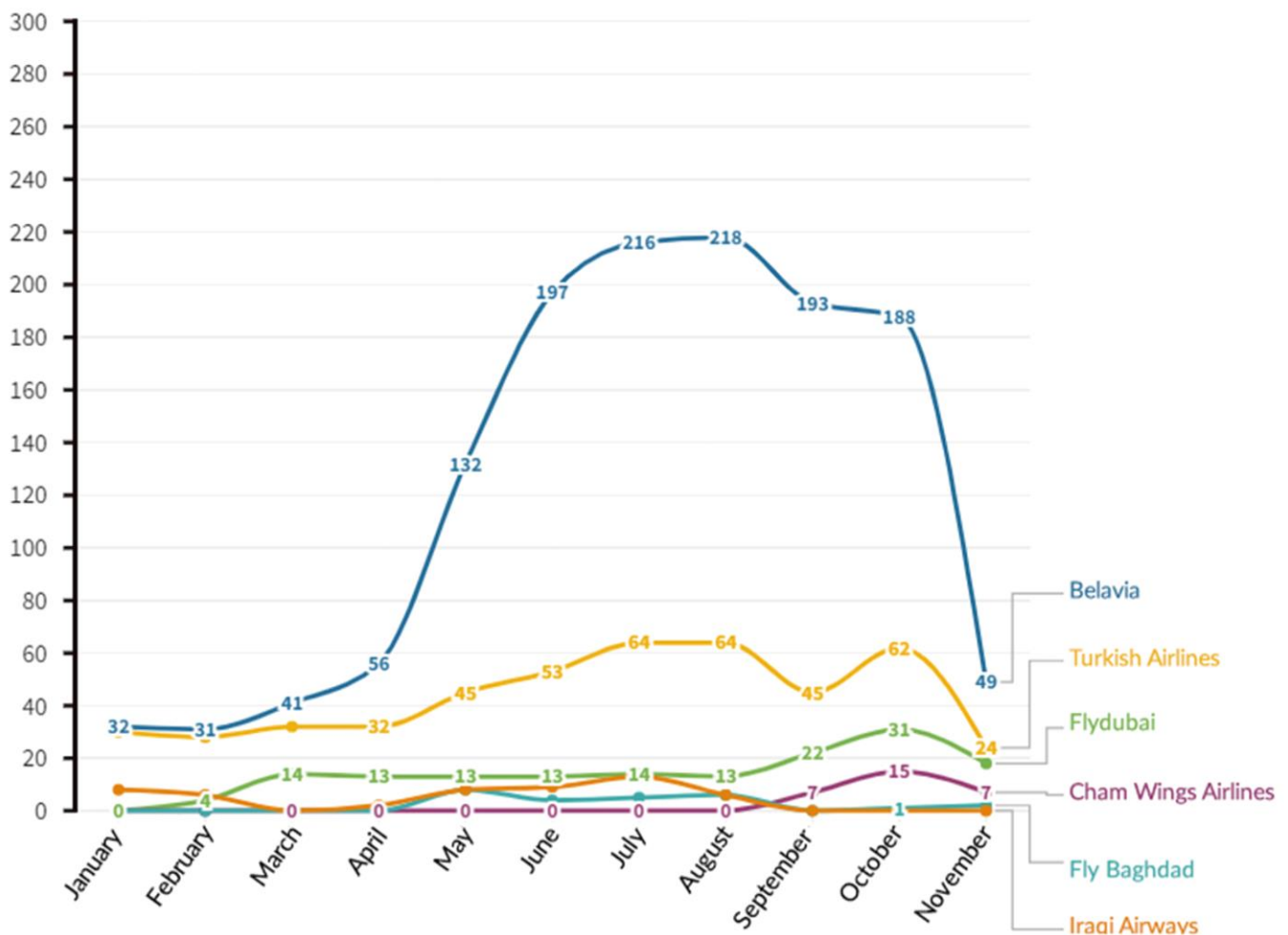
2021 Flydubai Flights from Dubai to Minsk



2021 Flights by Belavia Airlines, Turkish Airlines, Cham Wings, Iraqi Airways, Fly Baghdad, and Flydubai from Damascus, Istanbul, Baghdad, Dubai, and Sulaymaniyah to Minsk



2021 Flights by Belavia Airlines, Turkish Airlines, Cham Wings, Iraqi Airways, Fly Baghdad, and Flydubai from Damascus, Istanbul, Baghdad, Dubai, and Sulaymaniyah to Minsk



Violations at the Polish border:

According to STJ's sources, when refugees arrived in Belarus, they would immediately go to the Belarusian-Polish border in order to cross into other EU countries. Moreover, at the border, the Belarusian army would direct refugees to unofficial border crossing points and show them ways to enter Poland.

Among those refugees was Sami, who succeeded in going from Belarus to Germany. He narrated:

"After we reached the border, the Belarusian army guided us through the roads that we should pass. They said that if we were arrested by the Polish forces, we could go back to them to lead us through other roads toward the border. We

tried three times, but the Polish forces pushed us back, until we managed to cross in the fourth attempt”.

A [report](#), published on 20 December 2020 by Amnesty International, stated that:

“People including families with children, often in need of immediate help, have been beaten with batons and rifle butts and threatened with security dogs by Belarusian forces, as well as being forced to repeatedly cross the border in dangerous conditions by both Belarussian and Polish authorities, including through a fast-flowing river”.

Umm Lana, whom STJ spoke to for the purpose of this report, failed to enter Poland to travel to Germany. Therefore, she decided to return back. She was living in the Belarusian capital, in a house that a broker rented for her. Umm Lana witnessed several violations committed against asylum seekers. In her interview with STJ she narrated:

“The smugglers accompanied us to the border. They walked with us for a short period of time and then abandoned us in the forests. The Belarusian forces helped us reach the so-called exclusion zone (the empty area between Belarus and Poland). Our group of 19 people tried 6 times to cross the border, but in vain. We went through great difficulties and fell into swamps. Once a group of young men tried to cut the barbwire, the Belarusian forces beat and tortured them cruelly. They beat a girl with a baton until she fainted for three hours. They also beat an old man from Aleppo while his daughter and wife were watching. Those trapped there were assaulted with batons and kicks of the Belarusian forces. The Polish forces took the injured to hospitals inside Poland, but in the end, they returned them to Belarus”.

The witness continued:

“I finally gave up the idea of crossing. Therefore, I returned to Minsk along with eight other people. Only two managed to cross the border and reach Germany, while the rest of the group was lost in the forests, and we do not know their fate”.

She concluded:

“We were deceived. The smugglers made us believe that the way was open and easy. They also secured our visas. However, in the end we found out that it was just a deception, and that they all work in an organised network for human trafficking. They organise their business through travel agencies under the cover of tourism to Belarus”.

Syrian Refugees between Frost and Darkness of Detention:

Asylum seekers were left in inhumane conditions on the Belarus-Poland border in an area called the "exclusion zone", a formerly fenced area separating Belarus from the EU. Asylum

seekers were suffering in this open area, deprived of food supplies and clean water. Commenting on the situation of those refugees, Amnesty International stated in its aforementioned [report](#):

"People at the border find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Stranded in what is effectively an exclusion zone on Belarus's border with the EU, they face hunger, exposure and shocking levels of brutality from Belarusian forces repeatedly forcing them into Poland where they are systematically pushed back by Polish officers. The opposing forces are playing a sordid game with human lives".

Amnesty International also mentioned that stranded asylum seekers face the risk of unlawful deportation to their countries of origin, without an evaluation of their protection needs. They face forcible return to Syria and not the countries they departed from, including Egypt, Turkey, and Lebanon, due to re-entry bans.

In this context, STJ managed to interview the parents of two young Syrians who returned from Belarus to Damascus, and subsequently, they were both arrested by the intelligence services in Syria once they entered the country.

Abu Ahmad, the father of a young man from the Qalamoun area in the Damascus countryside, told STJ that his son returned to Syria after he was stranded in Belarus not able to cross to the EU, then he was arrested by the Air Force Intelligence Services. The source recounted:

"When my son arrived in Belarus, he tried four times to cross to Europe, but he failed. Therefore, he decided to return to Syria. He actually arrived at Damascus International Airport and left it smoothly without any obstacles. However, the next day an Air Force Intelligence patrol raided our house and arrested my son without any explanation. We called one of our acquaintances, an officer in the Air Force Intelligence, to find out the reason behind the arrest. The answer was that he had left the country and returned again, which indicates that he had money. Thus, the intelligence arrested him to find out the source of this money. The officer told us that we must pay bribes to the investigators, so that no other charges are filed against him. In fact, we have paid two and a half million Syrian pounds so far, and we have received a promise that he will be released".

Furthermore, Suhail is a young man, who returned to Syria from Belarus and was arrested by the Syrian intelligence services in the Damascus countryside. STJ interviewed his father, and he said:

"My son Suhail has graduated from the Information Engineering Faculty, and he was following a master program. It is well known that upon completing his master's degree, he would be liable for conscription. In order to avoid that, he travelled to Belarus. To secure the high cost of this trip, I sold an agricultural land of mine, and borrowed money from friends. When my son arrived in Belarus, he tried four times to enter the EU, but in vain. The conditions at the

border were catastrophic; he suffered from cold and hunger. Therefore, he decided to return to Syria, especially since he had three months before his "Postponement of Recruitment" document expired. So, we went to the airport in Damascus to meet him, but he did not show up. I paid a bribe to an officer at the airport, so he told me that the intelligence services had arrested my son to be transferred to the "Recruitment Division", despite the fact that his conscription was postponed. After his arrival to the military unit, my son was able to contact us. He told us that the intelligence services arrested, insulted, and beat him severely. He also said that he was arrested with four other young men who were on the same aircraft. Some of them were released after their relatives managed to find a mediator who helped them".

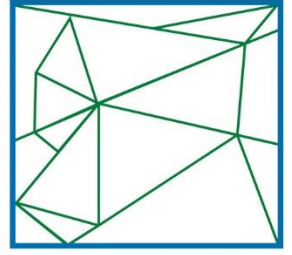
The source concluded:

"They knew we have money to travel, so they insisted on torturing my son severely in order to take money from us. They were very clear about it when they said: if you want your son to be in a better condition, you should pay us the money he was allocating for travel'."

However, for other Syrians, returning to Syria was not an option, especially for those who departed from Turkish airports. "Ayman", who remained stranded at the Belarusian-Polish border, said at the end of his interview with STJ:

"I saved \$8000 to marry, but when I heard about the trip, I changed my mind and decided to travel to start a new life in Europe because life in Turkey was very difficult. However, we were stranded at the border when Poland shut the door in our face, and now we are stuck over here. When I left Turkey, I signed a document that prevents my re-entry for five years. This means that I am not able to return to my former life. What options do I still have? It is impossible to go back to Syria because as an opponent, I am wanted there by the Syrian government. I will be arrested if I return. That is why I have no choice but to endure cold, hunger and oppression until a solution is found or until we are allowed to enter Europe".

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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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