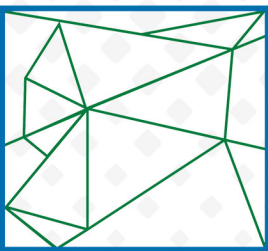


Algeria: Syrian Asylum Seekers Deported to Desert Border of Niger



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Over October and November 2022, the Algerian authorities transferred dozens of Syrian asylum seekers to remote desert areas, which lack resources basic to human life

In November and October 2022, the Algerian authorities deported dozens of Syrian asylum seekers to a desert area on the border with Niger. The authorities are using this measure against migrants and asylum seekers entering Algeria on their way to Europe.

Notably, the deportees suffered abuse at the hands of the Algerian police during the transfers and before, when the police arrested them. The deportees reported that the police robbed them of their valuable belongings.

While asylum seekers struggle with deportations, the bodies of 10 dead Syrians arrived in Northeastern Syria on 9 November 2022. The victims lost their lives in two refugee [boat-drowning incidents](#) off the Algerian coast on 3 and 4 October 2022.

Investigating the deportations, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reached out to several Syrian asylum seekers, three of whom were deported in two different batches. The deportees confirmed that they and other asylum seekers from diverse nationalities were subjected to looting by the Algerian police. The police confiscated their cell phones, money, and other personal belongings. They added that the Algerian authorities transported them to a desert area, which lacked basic survival means.

Additionally, STJ communicated with a member of a committee assigned by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to return the bodies of the victims of the two drownings off the Algerian coast.

Syrians Deported to Desert Border of Niger

Following leads on the deportations, STJ obtained the firsthand account of Mas'oud Muhammad Qader, through an online interview in early November. Qader is a Syrian asylum seeker from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city, who was recently deported to the border of Niger. He narrated:

“We were in Oran city. On 14 October, we left the city for Mostaganem coast, intending to cross to Spain. However, the Algerian authorities arrested us. We started a hunger strike after the authorities refused to register us as refugees and renounced proposed solutions to settle our legal status, including obliging us to pay a fine or granting us a five-day interval to relocate to Lebanon or Iraq. Instead, the authorities used force to break the strike and assaulted one of the Syrian asylum seekers. Then, the authorities transported us to Oran city, where they confiscated all our personal belongings, including money and cell phones, preparing us for deportation. We had no idea why they were withholding our belongings, as they transported us out of Algeria. They transferred us to a neutral area with Niger by car on a trip that lasted three nights. Upon arriving there, we attempted to enter Assamakka town in Nigeria, but we were not allowed in. There is a Doctors Without Borders center in the town, affiliated with the African Union and designated for African immigrants. The center refused to host us. At night, we crossed the border back into Algeria on foot. In addition to asylum seekers from Yemen and Palestine, there were about 55 persons from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city. We walked for nearly 30 KM before we reached the nearest border town. There, we contacted smugglers, who only took advantage of us. We agreed with the smugglers

that they take us to Oran city for 1,200 Euros. However, they abandoned us midway there. We could have never reached the city if it was not for the coincidence that led us to a man from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city. He helped us return to Oran. It remains unclear why the authorities sent us to the desert, with no way out but to return to Algeria through smuggling routes. The only logical conclusion I can think of, given that only human traffickers are profiteering from this, is that [the authorities] are probably encouraging, rather than, combating illegal immigration.”

Qader added:

"We appealed to the Syrian embassy in Algeria to intervene, but it did not respond. All we wanted and still hope for is that humanitarian organizations and those affiliated with the United Nations to intervene to help us gain access to refugee status and to ask the Algerian authorities to settle our situation, even if that requires imposing fines or similar measures on us, especially since the deportations did not stop. Another batch of over 50 people was relocated to Niger a few days after we were deported.”

Notably, the Algerian coast has been a major transit point for smuggling routes toward Spain for decades and, in the past few years, it has witnessed several tragic refugee boat drownings. The boats often sank because they were overloaded and several deaths happened because migrants were not equipped with any safety means.

For additional information on the deportations, STJ reached out to Azdishir al-Kurdi, from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city. Out of 15 Syrians, he is the only survivor of the [boat drowning](#) on 3 October 2022. After his rescue, the Algerian authorities deported al-Kurdi to the border with Niger. He recounted:

“On the morning of 4 October, Algerian fishermen rescued me after my boat drowned; it carried me with other 14 Syrians. The rest, all 14 died. I had been in the water for nearly 16 hours when they took me out. Then, they handed me over to the Algerian Coast Guard. The guards took me to Mostaganem City Hospital for treatment. Later, I was interrogated at a detention center in Mostaganem city. Three days later, they gave me a cell phone to call my family in Syria. They kept me in custody for 22 days and summoned me to identify the dead bodies they recovered from the sea. I managed to identify six of them. During my stay, they arrested other Syrians and brought them into the detention center where I was held. Then, the Algerian National Gendarmerie forces relocated us to Oran city. After 26 days in detention, they deported me to Niger, ignoring my injury at sea and that my body was weak. The trip to Niger took several days. We reached a desert area between the two countries. The batch consisted of over 60 persons, mostly Syrians from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab, Draa, and Idlib. There were families among us. We remained there for a day and then walked for nearly 30 KM until we reached an Algerian town. We borrowed the cell phone of an Algerian citizen and called smugglers to come to take us.”

Al-Kurdi was transferred with Qader in the same batch and gave matching information about the Algerian pre-deportation measures:

“The post-arrest measures included a quick trial, during which the refugees are cleared of charges, exempted from the fine, and released. However, refugees are deported to Niger immediately after their release. The Algerian authorities robbed us of all our possessions, including money, cell phones, and even watches. A few days after I returned to Algeria, I managed to relocate to Morocco. The other Syrians, who also returned to Algeria, sought different destinations; they went to either Iraq or Lebanon. Notably, a new batch of asylum seekers was deported to the border with Niger only a few days after our batch was sent there. Additionally, several people remain in detention, including a cousin of mine, Nihad Muhammad. After the gendarmerie hands him over to the police, he will probably be subjected to a brief trial and then be deported to Niger in the same way we were taken there.”

In addition to testimonies, STJ obtained a set of photos from the interviewed Syrian asylum seekers. They said it was taken in the area they were deported to.

Notably, several [media outlets](#) and [rights organizations](#) have published reports documenting deportation as a policy common to Algerian authorities, who continue to transfer migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees to the desert border into Niger, known as “Point Zero”. The reports also demonstrate that the authorities are likely involved in human rights violations against the deportees.

On the condition of his anonymity, a third Syrian asylum seeker gave STJ a matching account on the pre-deportation measures. He was deported to the same area that both al-Kurdi and Qader were sent to and suffered similar abuses at the hands of the Algerian police. He said:

“I am from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city. The Algerian Gendarmerie arrested me with other four persons in Mostaganem city. They transferred us to a police station, where they created an arrest report. Next, they took us to court and then handed us over to the police. The police did not ill-treat us at the detention center. However, when we asked them to buy us goods, they refused even though we asked them to use the money they confiscated from us. They deported us to Niger 15 days later. I was handcuffed the entire time, for nearly 48 hours. Throughout the transport, they offered us only a piece of bread and three pieces of cheese. We had no breaks and we were not allowed to go to the toilet until we arrived in [Tamanrasset](#) city. In the city, they gave us only our passports. We asked them to return our money and other belongings. They said that money and other personal objects were not sent with them. Then, we arrived in [In Guezzam](#) area, located nearly 10 KM away from the border with Niger. The area was home to 5000 African displaced persons. Our group consisted of 36 persons, including three families, among them women and babies. The driver of the car that transported us tried to help and return us. However, the Algerian police noticed that he did not unload. The officers assaulted the driver and his assistant. Then we had to walk back for nearly 30 KM before we reached the nearest border village. In the village, Algerian soldiers gave us water and food and allowed us to call smugglers. On board two cars, the smugglers took us to Tamanrasset area, located about 500 KM from the border. There, we were taken to a house and made a deposit payment of 12,000 Euros in exchange for returning us to the place we were. During the transport, I saw the Algerian police confiscate people’s identity documents (IDs). These people did not get their IDs back; they were only given their passports back.”

All the Syrian asylum seekers that STJ met, including those whose testimonies are not included in the report, gave identical information about the financial arrangements asylum seekers make with smugglers. They said: "Asylum seekers usually deposit sums that sometimes amount to 8,000 Euros with a third party, a broker who leads communication between them and the smugglers. The brokers make sure that smugglers do not get the money until refugees had reached Spain. However, the brokers refused to return the money to asylum seekers and migrants during the deportations, leaving them with no financial resources to support themselves, especially since the Algerian authorities confiscated all the money they still had. Additionally, several asylum seekers and migrants received death threats from smugglers, who warned them against disclosing the names of any of the persons involved or information about the extortion they faced."

Bodies of Dead Refugees Arrive home

Following upon the situation of Syrian asylum seekers in Algeria, STJ also obtained an update on the progress in the transport of the bodies of Syrian refugees who drowned in October. STJ learned that the bodies of 10 of the victims arrived home on 9 November 2022.

Before the transfers were carried out, STJ reached out to doctor Muhammad A'raf Ali, a member of the committee assigned by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to return the bodies of the victims of the two drownings off the Algerian coast. On 5 November Dr. Ali told STJ about the timeline and stages of the transfers over the phone:

"The legal procedures for returning the bodies of 10 of the victims have been completed. The bodies will be flown next Monday to Qatar because there are no direct flights to [Syria]. Then, they will arrive in Beirut the next day at 6:00 p.m., after which they will be transported by land to Syria. Eight of the victims are from Kobani; one is from Latakia and the other is from Manbij. Two additional bodies are yet to be returned home; [these are of Riber Bouzan Abdi from Minas village and Muhammad Mahmoud Osman from Koushkar village. Both villages are located in Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city]. The legal procedures of their transfers have yet to be completed, while it is expected that they will arrive home also next week."

Additionally, Dr. Ali provided STJ with an update on the number of Syrians, who went missing following the two drowning incidents:

"Five Syrians went missing after the two boats flipped. Moreover, two batches of Syrian refugees have been deported, and a batch of detainees has been released. However, as a committee, we are only concerned with returning the bodies of the victims, while the Autonomous Administration has assigned other people to address the affairs of detainees and the deportees stranded in Algeria and to help them return to Syria."

STJ crosschecked the information researchers collected on the drownings with the accounts presented by both the committee member, Ali, and the survivor, al-Kurdi. STJ managed to verify that 17 Syrians drowned and five went missing in the two incidents, contrary to 18 deaths and 6 missing persons reported by local media outlets.

While reporting the drownings, media outlets presented contested information about the two tragic trips. This contested information has led families to suspect the situation, and question if there are criminal motives behind the deaths of their sons – and even whether the boats that carried their relatives to presumably safer areas were deliberately sunk.

However, al-Kurdi stressed that the boat drownings were not pre-mediated. He recounted:

“On Monday, 3 October, 15 Syrian refugees, 13 of whom were from Kobanî/Ayn al-Arab city, set off on three small boats from the coast of Mostaganem. Each boat carried five [asylum seekers]. Nearly 15 KM away from the shore, we moved to a larger boat. The Algerian captain refused to steer the boat and decided to return using one of the smaller boats. Then, a man from Kobanî/Ayn al-Arab took over the boat. We sailed for two hours. At 8:30 p.m., our boat sank because of a huge wave. We could not get the water out of the boat. Some used containers to float and remain above the surface. We had no life jackets, which was the reason why many of the people died. Only four remained. We fought for life, with all means possible, while waiting for help. One of my friends passed me his waterproof phone. I turned on the light, trying to draw attention to our presence, but it was in vain. Shortly after, the waves drove us away from each other, and I remained in the sea for nearly 16 hours. It was not until the next morning that I was miraculously rescued by fishermen.”

Algerian Silence

Drownings and deportations are often shrouded in silence because Algerian authorities rarely comment on the tragedies happening off the coast or the measures applied against asylum seekers entering Algerian territories illegally.

For instance, none of the official [platforms](#) of the Algerian police had reported the transfers of refugees to the borders with Niger.

Notably, the deportations are a violation of the obligations of the Algerian State under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its Additional Protocol of 1967. Algeria became a ‘[successor](#)’ to the Convention and Protocol on 21 February 1963. In relation to multilateral treaties, succession means the State expressed its consent to be considered as bound thereby.

Despite this status, according to [Amnesty International](#), "The Algerian constitution prohibits the *refoulement* of political refugees (Article 69) but does not mention the right to seek asylum. It does not recognize the needs of those fleeing persecution and other forms of violence, in accordance with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees."

The drownings and the deportations are a continuation of the Syrian refugee crisis, described as the “the world’s largest displacement crisis” by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a 2022 [briefing](#).

The UNHCR has reported that “More than 13 million people have either fled [Syria] or are displaced within its borders”, adding that dozens of immigrants have died in the Mediterranean Sea since January 2022.

Illegal crossings to Europe through Algerian and Lebanese waters are among the alternative routes that desperate Syrians are [increasingly](#) taking as regular portals pose growing risks to their lives. Earlier, refugees used to cross the borders into Turkey, their first stop to Europe, through Iraqi Kurdistan territories and points across the [areas controlled](#) by the Syrian National Army, also known as the “Peace Spring” strip.

The sea journey has proven to be no less a fatal endeavor. Only recently, at least 94 persons [died](#) off the Syrian shore, in Tartous city, on 22 September 2022. The boat was carrying Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese asylum seekers.



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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