

Civil Society Organizations Call on the EU to Stop Funding and Endorsing Rights Violations Against Syrian Refugees in Türkiye



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression



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Civil Society Organizations Call on the EU to Stop Funding and Endorsing Rights Violations Against Syrian Refugees in Türkiye

The undersigned organizations – representing a diverse collection of civil society – raise serious concerns regarding the sharp rise in anti-Syrian sentiment and accompanying violence in Türkiye. The actions carried out by the Turkish government and emboldened civilians have been, at best, ignored by the European Union (EU), which has financially supported Türkiye as part of its externalization efforts. In response to the recent and serious escalation of actions taken against Syrian refugees in Türkiye, the undersigned organizations call on the EU to act swiftly to protect the rights of Syrian refugees by adopting the outlined recommendations.

Anti-Syrian sentiment in Türkiye is reaching a crossroads – one that civil society has warned about for years – and the EU must address the role it has played in creating unsafe conditions for Syrian refugees in Türkiye. On June 30th, 2024, [anti-Syrian riots erupted](#) across Türkiye in the city of Kayseri and spread to areas as far as Hatay just two days after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that [restoring bilateral relations with Bashar al-Assad](#) remains a possibility. Rioters attacked Syrian-owned shops and property and demanded that Syrians be kicked out of the country in what [some are now labeling as attempted pogroms](#). Tensions then spilled over into Syria, where hundreds of Syrian civilians in Turkish-Controlled regions [held counter-protests](#) and at least seven people were killed in clashes with Turkish troops. In response, [Türkiye shut its main border crossings](#) into northwest Syria.

Now, the personal data of approximately three million Syrians living in [Türkiye has been leaked online](#), including their names, ID numbers, and addresses, among other things. The data was [shared widely on Telegram groups](#) and was paired with violent language that called for attacks on Syrian refugees living in Türkiye. The timing of the leak suggests that it had one objective – to threaten Syrians and put them on notice that they remain in danger so long as they reside in Türkiye.

EU member states have enabled this violence. In March 2016, the [EU entered](#) what is commonly referred to as the [EU-Turkey deal](#) to address the EU’s “migration crisis.” The deal outlined that Türkiye would receive 6.4 billion euros in exchange for Türkiye curbing the flow of migrants to the EU, an amount that was [increased to 9.4 billion euros](#) in 2023. The EU-Turkey deal rests on a basic premise: that Türkiye is a safe country for Syrian refugees. However, the overall conditions for Syrians in Türkiye and the increasing risk of forcible returns have long demonstrated that Türkiye cannot be designated as a safe country.

Civil society has consistently documented that [Türkiye has unlawfully returned refugees](#) to Syria in [violation of the principle of non-refoulement](#). With President Erdogan promising to [create safe zones](#) in Turkish-Controlled regions of Syria as recently as 2022, several of the undersigned organizations have documented that Türkiye has returned hundreds of Syrians to Turkish-Controlled regions in the last few

days, adding to the thousands returned over the past year alone.¹ These returns have been carried out despite the fact that Syrians in Turkish-Controlled regions are still subjected to [arbitrary detention](#); conflict-related violence; inhumane and degrading treatment in detention; [housing, land, and property violations](#); and a lack of access to justice mechanisms – all of which may threaten the lives and freedoms of forcibly returned refugees.

These forcible returns violate the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in International Treaties agreed by Türkiye, including the [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#); the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#); and the [European Convention on Human Rights](#). As the principle of non-refoulement is considered [customary international law](#), it binds Türkiye even as it maintains a geographical restriction to the 1951 Geneva Convention. In addition to violating non-refoulement, these deportations threaten other fundamental rights such as the right to family unity, as cases have emerged in which the Turkish authorities forcibly return only one family member, often either parent, to Syria.

In addition to the government carrying out forced returns of Syrian refugees, the conditions in Türkiye have [consistently deteriorated](#), with Syrians experiencing increasing rates of arrest, violence, deportation, and denial of services. The devastating earthquake that affected Türkiye and northern Syria in early 2023 further [worsened conditions](#), displacing many Syrians who then faced increased discrimination in relief efforts and exploitation in the labor market. These deteriorating conditions have coincided with a [rise in hate speech](#) spewed by politicians but also online, where such speech is often accompanied by threats of violence.

Instead of heeding the consistent and numerous warnings issued by civil society regarding Türkiye's flagrant international law violations, the EU has doubled down on its efforts to externalize migration to Türkiye and other nations. While the EU-Turkey statement presented itself as a “temporary and extraordinary measure,” continued developments show that this state of exception – and accompanying lack of accountability for rights violations – have become the norm. One need look no further than the additional externalization agreements the EU has recently entered with other countries including [Tunisia](#), [Lebanon](#), and [Egypt](#).

As demonstrated, the EU's efforts to externalize its borders have resulted in countless rights violations against Syrian refugees in Türkiye and an ever-worsening climate of

¹ SJAC also obtained data from two border crossings on the number of Syrians who were forcibly or voluntarily returned to Syria in 2024 thus far. The Bab Al Hawa border crossing reported a total of 12,361 Syrians forcibly returned from January to June 2024, with 1877 Syrians forcibly returned just in June 2024. An additional 11,973 Syrians were reported to have voluntarily returned from January to June 2024. Meanwhile, the Jarablus border crossing reported 6510 Syrians voluntarily returned from January to June 2024. As the data comes directly from the border crossings, cases reported as voluntary returns do not necessarily mean the individuals returned voluntarily.

persecution. The EU's unwillingness to act in accordance with its fundamental principles and uphold the right to seek asylum must be addressed to prevent further violence against Syrian refugees and to avoid further undermining the EU's commitment to fundamental rights. The undersigned signatories thus urge the EU to take immediate action by carrying out the following recommendations:

- Immediately impose sanctions against Turkish political parties and political figures involved in hate speech targeting Syrian and other refugees in Türkiye. Government officials and candidates for office too often use Syrian refugees as political pawns, engaging in hate speech that greatly contributes to anti-Syrian sentiment and signals that violence against Syrian refugees is tolerated.
- Publish an updated analysis of whether Türkiye can be considered a safe third country as defined under Article 38 of the EU Asylum Procedures Directive. This analysis should include information provided by civil society, consider the recent rise of attacks on Syrians in Türkiye, and be made available publicly. The EU must revoke the EU-Turkey deal upon a finding that Türkiye is not a safe country.
- In the interim, freeze all financial contributions to Türkiye until it ceases all deportations of Syrian refugees to Syria, including to Türkiye's established "safe zones," and prosecutes all cases of violence against Syrian refugees in Türkiye. If financial contributions continue, the EU should make serious efforts to ensure that funding is facilitating meaningful inclusion for Syrian refugees, especially in light of the Court of Auditors' recent findings on the lack of effectiveness of the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye. These efforts should include more frequent site visits carried out by the Council of Europe's Special Representative on Migration and Refugees to assess the conditions for Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Notably, country reports of fact-finding missions are only published every five years, with the last one being in 2021.
- Release a statement that acknowledges Syria is not a safe country for Syrian refugees. EU Member States are making increasing efforts to recognize Syria as a safe country; however, civil society has consistently and thoroughly documented that no part of Syria is safe for return. The EU should take a firm stance against Member States seeking to categorize Syria as safe and potentially violating the principle of non-refoulement.

Sincerely,

1. Baytna
 2. International Service for Human Rights - ISHR
 3. Justice For Life - JFL
 4. Syria Justice and Accountability Centre - SJAC
 5. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression - SCM
 6. Syrians for Truth and Justice - STJ
 7. Urnammu for Justice and Human Rights
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