

## Türkiye: Misleading Statements by Foreign Minister Regarding Forced Return of Syrian Refugees



- Testimonies from witnesses and other reliable sources contradict the Turkish minister's claim that "no one was forced to leave Türkiye" and prove that Syrian refugees were coerced into signing "voluntary return" papers





## **Türkiye: Misleading Statements by Foreign Minister Regarding Forced Return of Syrian Refugees**

*Testimonies from witnesses and other reliable sources contradict the Turkish minister's claim that "no one was forced to leave Türkiye" and prove that Syrian refugees were coerced into signing "voluntary return" papers*



During a joint press conference with his Saudi counterpart, Faisal bin Farhan, in Istanbul on July 14, 2024, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [denied](#) any allegations of forced deportation of Syrians in Türkiye, stating, "We will not force anyone to leave here unless they do so voluntarily. The provocative allegations on this issue are completely unfounded."

The Turkish minister made these allegations following a large-scale security campaign launched by Türkiye in Gaziantep in late June 2024. The campaign involved deploying over 60 checkpoints in markets, malls, shops, and transportation hubs. This information was [reported](#) by the Syria TV website, citing sources from inside the city.

Enab Baladi newspaper [highlighted](#) the growing fears among Syrians in the city, even those with legal papers, due to the spread of information about the deportation of individuals who are under the temporary protection system. Their failure to carry their identification card (*kimlik*) at the time of their arrest has led to their deportation without Turkish police officers adhering to the provisions of the [law](#) that prohibit forced return (Article No. 6).

After the "Kayseri incidents," during which Syrian property in the city was widely and unprecedentedly attacked following the spread of false information alleging that a Syrian refugee had harassed a five-year-old Turkish girl, the [Karar Haber](#) newspaper published a statement on 18 July 2024, by the head of the Turkish human rights organization [Mazlumder](#), Ahmet Tash. In the statement, Tash claimed that the Turkish authorities had detained around 150 Syrian families in a detention center in Kayseri, citing complaints against them, intending to deport them to Syria. Subsequently, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) confirmed from reliable sources that a number of these families had indeed been forcibly deported to Syria.

According to statistics STJ obtained from sources in charge of the border crossings linking Turkish territory to northern Syria, the Turkish government deported approximately 57,000 people during the first seven months of 2024. Specifically, the number of deportees from the Tell Abyad crossing reached 12,016 people; from the Bab al-Hawa crossing, 14,603 Syrians; from the Bab al-Salam crossing, 18,601 people; and from the Jarabulus crossing, 11,852 Syrians.

It is important to note that a source familiar with the operation of the Bab al-Salam crossing [informed](#) STJ in 2023 that the Turkish authorities had specifically asked border crossings to stop using the term "forced deportation" and replace it with "voluntary return." Later on, they requested the use of the term "leaving Turkish territory," which encompasses several categories: forced return, voluntary return, and return after attempted smuggling.

The Turkish minister's statements contradict the information obtained by STJ based on direct testimonies obtained from Syrian refugees who were forcibly deported from Türkiye despite having temporary protection cards (*kimlik*). This proves the falsity and inaccuracy of these statements. Additionally, in March 2024, Human Rights Watch (HRW) [documented](#) the deportation of thousands of Syrians from Türkiye to areas where "dire humanitarian conditions" prevail. They were pressured to sign "voluntary return" papers and leave the

country, which refutes the Turkish minister's statements that Syrian refugees are not being forcibly deported.

Testimonies obtained by STJ indicate that forced return operations have led to deportees being separated from their families in Türkiye and finding themselves in a difficult situation in northern Syria without job opportunities. Sources reported that during their detention, entire families, including children and women, were detained with the intent of forcibly returning them to northern Syria.

Several Syrian organizations issued a [joint statement](#) condemning acts of violence and incitement against Syrian refugees in Türkiye. They urged the Turkish government to fulfill its national and international obligations regarding the protection of human rights, especially for refugees and displaced persons within its borders. The statement also called on Türkiye to adhere to the principle of non-refoulement, which guarantees that no one should be returned to countries experiencing conflict. Additionally, other organizations [called for](#) the European Union (EU) to cease funding and supporting violations of Syrian refugees' rights in Türkiye and to impose immediate sanctions on Turkish political parties and individuals involved in hate speech targeting Syrian and other refugees in Türkiye.

This report is based on six detailed, first-hand testimonies obtained by STJ researchers online in July 2023. The sources were informed that the interviews were voluntary and were told how the information they provided would be used, including in this report. Five of the sources preferred to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of their testimonies, while one source, a journalist, agreed to provide explicit information. Importantly, all the witnesses are holders of *kimliks*.

### ▪ **Forced Deportation**

The testimonies heard by STJ confirm that deportations often happen in terrible conditions. Detainees are pressured and intimidated to choose between staying in deportation centers for a long time or signing “voluntary return” papers. Some detainees were even threatened with beatings if they did not comply with the signing order. The Turkish government also takes advantage of some refugees' lack of knowledge of the Turkish language and their inability to understand the content of the papers to defend themselves or hire a lawyer. They do this by not explaining the nature of the papers that must be signed or the responsibilities involved until the procedure is completed.

It is important to note that these practices have become a common approach used by the Turkish authorities when dealing with Syrian refugees. Previous reports have [documented](#) the authorities' use of violence to coerce detainees into signing “voluntary return” papers.

- **“If You Do Not Sign, We Will Break Your Fingers”**

Turkish immigration authorities employ intimidating tactics to coerce detainees in deportation centers into signing a “voluntary return” form, which falsely suggests that the individual returned to Syria willingly, without facing any pressure. Mu'ayyad, a 32-year-old man from the Rukn ad-Din area in Damascus, was directly threatened to sign and comply with the demands of the deportation center staff.

Mu'ayyad has held a Bursa *kimlik* and has lived there since 2013, but that did not prevent his forceful deportation to Syria. He recounted,

**“On 14 July 2024, I was arrested by Turkish authorities along with ten other people. This occurred following an altercation between the restaurant owner where I work and a neighboring barber. Despite not being involved in the incident, I was deported to the north three days after the altercation, along with seven other young men. The deportation occurred on Sunday, 17 July, an official holiday in Türkiye”**

**The Turkish authorities are taking advantage of official holidays to deport Syrian refugees held in detention centres, preventing them from seeking help from human rights organizations, lawyers, or official departments.**

Mu'ayyad added:

“When we arrived at the deportation center on Milliyet Street in Bursa, they confiscated all of our documents and belongings and pressured us to sign a voluntary return form without giving us the opportunity to speak with any of the detainees at the center. They were afraid that the detainees would advise us not to sign and to wait it out, as they had been doing for months. They resorted to using threats and intimidation to force us into complying. One of the employees went so far as to threaten each of us individually, saying, 'If you do not sign, we will break your fingers,' which genuinely scared us and made us hesitant to refuse his orders”.

- **Prohibiting the Move to a Third Country**

On 20 May 2024, Turkish authorities deported journalist Mohammed Bilal from the Bab al-Hawa crossing along with 70 other people. This was despite him having obtained security approval from Egypt to leave Turkish territory after being unable to obtain a new work permit in Istanbul. Additionally, a later bus deported 35 more people, including women and a child no older than five years old.

Mohammed detailed his story to STJ,

“In 2021, I entered Türkiye and obtained a *kimlik* from the Turkish Immigration Department in the city of Urfa. Then, I moved to Gaziantep where I stayed for seven months. Later, I moved to Istanbul where I obtained a work permit and ensured all my documents were legal. However, after the earthquake of February 2023, I was unable to renew my work permit due to being from the affected areas.”

In February 2024, Mohammed Bilal was intercepted by the Turkish police in Istanbul. Upon examining his *kimlik*, the officers took him to the police station in the Arnavutköy district. There, an employee informed him that his address was registered in Urfa and that his presence in Istanbul was unauthorized. He was given 15 days to update his registration and relocate to Urfa. This prompted Bilal to consider Urfa's living expenses and realize he could not afford them.

Mohammed decided to move to Egypt and began preparing his documents, which cost him around \$3,000. While he was at the bus station on his way to Urfa to obtain permission to travel outside of Türkiye, the Turkish police apprehended him and took him to the Immigration Department in Arnavutköy. Mohammed recounted this experience saying,

“Two days after my detention, I was asked to sign voluntary return papers, but I explained that I intended to travel to Egypt. I presented the papers I had with me, including my passport and security approval. They did not accept the documents and insisted that I must have a visa to Egypt, even though Syrians are only required to have security approval, as the visa is granted upon arrival at the airport. I requested 24 hours to obtain a visa to Dubai, but they refused and continually pressured me to sign. When I refused to sign, they began to physically assault and insult me, kicking me with their feet and clubs all over my body.”

#### ▪ **Bureaucratic Hurdles Split Families Apart**

In 2013, Ammar (a pseudonym) entered Türkiye with his family of 12 people and stayed in a camp in Mardin for three years. They later moved to Gaziantep and then to Istanbul. However, they were not able to transfer their registrations successfully in Istanbul. As a result, they chose to transfer their registrations to Urfa while continuing to live in Istanbul. This decision put them at risk of direct deportation. Ammar shared his story with STJ, explaining the challenges they faced,

“After being arrested in Istanbul for residing illegally and deported to Urfa, I was required to visit the police station in Urfa every 15 days. I followed this requirement for only two months before deciding to return to Istanbul due to the lack of job opportunities and missing my family and wife, from whom I had been separated. In April 2024, after driving about five kilometers [from Urfa to Istanbul], I was stopped and arrested by the Turkish police. I was deported after being detained in the Harran camp in the city of Urfa to Syrian territory.”

Ammar concluded,

“The camp was not only for detaining people to be deported to Syria. I saw caravans with EU logos on them, carrying whole families of women and children. There were about 1,000 people from Syria detained in five camps, and on one particular day, 220 people, including myself, were deported.”

### ▪ **Deportation for Attempting to Improve Living Conditions**

The living conditions and widespread restrictions on Syrian refugees have led many to consider seeking asylum in EU countries. Two individuals holding *kimlik* cards testified to STJ for this report on how they were deported to northwestern Syria after attempting to migrate illegally to the EU via the land route between Türkiye and Bulgaria. Their goal was to improve their living conditions and the lives of their families.

Ahmed (a pseudonym) from Aleppo was deported with 74 Syrian refugees after being arrested by Turkish authorities on 1 September 2023, attempting to migrate illegally to the EU via the land route between Türkiye and Bulgaria. Upon their arrest, they were taken to the Edirne deportation center, which is normally designed to accommodate 200 people. However, they were shocked to find nearly 2,000 people, including 100 women and 25 children, detained for deportation to northern Syria. Ahmed testified,

“The 74 people who were arrested with me were transferred to Gaziantep after four days and were released, except for me. My record indicated code number G99, which charged me with 'human smuggling.' I was then deported to northern Syria after being detained for 35 days at the Oğuzeli Deportation Center in Gaziantep Province.”

Ahmed told STJ that he had a *kimlik* of Mersin city. Still, he considered seeking asylum in an EU country due to difficult living conditions, strict limitations on Syrian refugees, and his desire to provide a better life for his family. He made this decision despite Türkiye’s strong security measures to apprehend and deport individuals attempting to migrate to the EU illegally.

**The harassment of Syrian refugees is on the rise and taking various forms. This includes not allowing them to register or reside except in specific neighborhoods, imposing internal travel permits, and restricting their movement. These issues are compounded by difficult economic conditions, high rents, and exposure to daily racist attitudes.**

### ▪ **De Facto Authorities Arrest Deportees**

One of the six sources interviewed by STJ reported that the military police in Jindires town, which is under the control of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), arrested the young man Hassan (a pseudonym) and concealed him from his family before deporting him. Hassan’s father recounted to STJ the story of his son’s arrest and disappearance,

“We arrived in Türkiye in 2014 and obtained *kimliks* in Gaziantep. On 1 March 2022, my son Hassan, who was born in 1992, my wife, his daughter, and his wife traveled to Syria for a visit using the ‘governor's leave’ granted to Gaziantep *kimlik* holders. They returned after 15 days and updated their information with the Turkish Immigration Department. Towards the end of 2023, while submitting to obtain a *Kimlik* for my newborn grandson, the immigration officer informed Hassan that his *Kimlik* had been canceled because of his voluntary return to Syria. He explained that he was on official leave with his mother, who had used the “TC” number, the national identification number for the *kimlik*, to purchase medicine the day before. However, the officer insisted that they had voluntarily returned to Syria, which led to suspending their benefits and revoking their protection cards.”

One day, as Hassan was returning from work, he was arrested by Turkish authorities. After losing contact with Hassan at the beginning of July 2024, his family received a call from him saying that he was being forced to sign “voluntary return” papers at the Jarabulus crossing. This call was their last contact with him before his phone was turned off. Concerned about his whereabouts, the family reached out to their acquaintances in northern Syria and learned that he had been arrested by the military police in Jarabulus, who are affiliated with the SNA.

On the reason behind Hassan's arrest, his father stated,

“The military police accuse my son Hassan of being a ‘*shabih*’, because he was a soldier [in the Syrian Army] at the start of the Syrian revolution on 15 March 2011. However, he defected from the Syrian army on 14 April 2012, and there are documents to prove this. The military police have also, at times, denied his arrest and his presence with them.”

### ▪ Türkiye Violates its National and International Obligations

The [Temporary Protection Regulation](#) governs the residency of over 3.1 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye, according to official Turkish statistics. This law prohibits the torture, inhuman or degrading treatment of any person or sending them to a place where their life or freedom would be threatened because of their race, religion, nationality, or political opinions. Article 6 - (1) of the Law states,

**Geri gönderme yasağı - MADDE 6- (1) Bu Yönetmelik kapsamındaki hiç kimse, işkenceye, insanlık dışı ya da onur kırıcı ceza veya muameleye tabi tutulacağı veya ırkı, dini, tabiiyeti, belli bir toplumsal gruba mensubiyeti veya siyasi fikirleri dolayısıyla hayatının veya hürriyetinin tehdit altında bulunacağı bir yere gönderilemez.**

**Non-refoulement Article 6 - (1): “No one within the scope of this Regulation shall be returned to a place where he or she may be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment or, where his/her life or freedom would be threatened on account of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”**



The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights warned in a [report](#) released on 13 February 2024 that de facto authorities and other armed groups across the country are committing documented violations and abuses that include arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, enforced disappearance and abduction. The report emphasized that, “There are reasonable grounds to believe that the overall conditions in Syria do not permit safe, dignified and sustainable returns of Syrian refugees to their home country”. This is something that the Turkish authorities are not taking into account, in clear violation of the laws they have enacted.

Furthermore, the forced return of Syrian refugees by Türkiye, under the guise of “voluntary return,” violates the principle of “non-refoulement.” This principle is binding on Türkiye despite the latter’s geographical reservation when signing the 1951 Convention. It is also enshrined in international treaties signed 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](#).

---



## ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.