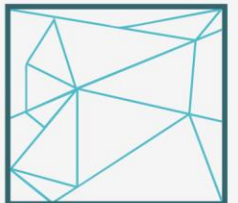


Syria: Decision Imposing the Exchange of \$100 on Syrians: Disguised Legalization and Extortion of Those Entering Their Country



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1. Background:

The displacement of Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria has brought the issue of “return procedures” back to the forefront. The fact that these returnees were not initially exempted from the mandatory \$100 exchange procedure has raised questions about the difficulties Syrians face if they wish to return to their country.

In light of these questions, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) conducted interviews with Syrians who returned to Syria through the country’s various air and land ports, from September to October 2024, for the purpose of this report. The collected testimonies documented details of the difficulties and violations that visitors or those wishing to return to their homeland are exposed to, including [the mandatory procedure of exchanging \\$100](#), arbitrary searches, financial extortion by employees and officers, in addition to [degrading treatment and harsh waiting conditions](#).

According to the sources that STJ interviewed, these practices were not limited to one crossing, but rather extended across various entry points to Syria, which may indicate a policy for dealing with those entering the country.

In a striking development, the Syrian government did not exempt Syrian refugees fleeing Lebanon from the exchanging procedure at the borders, but rather merely suspended it for a short period. This temporary suspension followed pressure from prominent Lebanese figures, which confirms the continuation of this practice and the lack of a real intention to permanently cancel it, even in light of the difficult humanitarian conditions that refugees are experiencing.

According to the same sources, these procedures began to escalate in conjunction with the increasing number of returnees to Syria in recent years, as the authorities exploit the need of citizens to return to visit their families to impose more restrictions and fees. This exploitation came under the difficult economic conditions that the country is suffering from, making the returnees an easy target for financial extortion and exploitation.

In this brief report, STJ monitors a number of violations that Syrians are exposed to upon entering the country (imposing mandatory fees, financial extortion, degrading treatment, arbitrary arrests, and administrative complications), based on detailed interviews conducted by STJ researchers with five people who entered Syria through different crossings. All interviews were conducted using a secure communication app. The sources were informed of the voluntary nature of the interview and how the shared information would be used, including publishing this report, after obtaining their informed consent, noting that all names used in this report are pseudonyms, for the safety of witnesses.

2. Exchanging \$100 to Enter My Country:

on [8 July 2020](#), the Prime Minister’s Office of the Syrian Government/Damascus issued a decision obligating all citizens wishing to enter Syria to exchange \$100, or equivalent in recognized foreign currencies, according to the exchange rate set by the Central Bank of Syria, in light of the economic crisis suffered by the Syrian authorities, with the aim of increasing [the government’s foreign currencies revenues](#), as the official exchange rate is much lower than the black market rate, which led to financial losses for returnees. (See Image 1).

According to testimonies obtained by STJ, this procedure causes a huge financial loss for the targeted segment, especially those returning with their families, including Wafaa Ali¹ (a pseudonym), a Syrian woman living in Sweden, who returned to visit her family through Nassib crossing, which is a border crossing linking Jordan and Syria. Wafaa described her experience:

“You have to exchange \$100 at the border before entering Syria, where there is a small window with commercial bank employees. Every returnee is forced to exchange \$100 at a loss on the black market, as the amount is exchanged at 13,000 Syrian pounds per dollar according to the Central Bank, while the rate on the black market is 14,500, i.e. a difference of 1,500 Syrian pounds. When we arrived, it was very crowded, and we had to wait in line. You can arrange with someone to let you skip the long line for \$50. Some people also know some officers and (inside) acquaintances who will help them cross the line without waiting.”

Murhaf Al Khalidi² (a pseudonym), a Syrian citizen working in the UAE who returned through Damascus International Airport, shared his experience with the procedure and how the authorities justified it:

“Our plane took off on 5 September 2024. When we arrived at the airport, we learned that there was a new decision issued by the Syrian government to exchange \$100. I was surprised by the decision, and some of the passengers on the plane were shocked as well. When we asked the officer in charge about the reason, he said that it was to bring foreign currency into the country, as there was a shortage, and no need for further thought. The exchange is exclusively done through the bulletin issued by the Syrian government via the Central Bank of Syria, where its rate is lower than that on the black market, as is well known. Frankly, I felt deep resentment towards this decision, not because we do not have the money, but because the decision is not right, and it feels like theft, especially since the exchange rate is lower than the black market’s.”

The testimonies indicate that the total cost of entering Syria may reach large sums, far beyond the financial capacity of many Syrians. Khorshid Salem³, an employee at Damascus International Airport, said:

“This decision is burdensome for families. For example, a family of four or five members, which is the minimum for Syrian families as is known, would have to pay between \$400 and \$500. You can look up the number of people entering Syria,

¹ A pseudonym has been used at the witness’ request during an online interview conducted by STJ’s researcher between September and October 2024.

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³ A pseudonym has been used at the witness’ request during an online interview conducted by STJ’s researcher between September and October 2024.

multiply that by \$100, and see the huge amount of revenue generated by this decision.”

He added:

“This decision was adopted due to the increasing number of Syrians arriving in Syria, as the number of arrivals increases every year compared to the previous one, due to the war moving away from the central cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs, and the long years in which Syrians have been deprived of seeing their loved ones.”

3. Financial Extortion and Degrading Treatment:

In addition to the mandatory exchange procedure, many Syrian returnees are subjected to degrading treatment during the entry process, which adds a psychological burden on top of the financial one. Ayoub Khayzran⁴ (a pseudonym), a Syrian citizen who was residing in Lebanon and was forced to return to Syria, through al-Masnaa crossing, due to the recent war, describes the inhuman conditions that returnees are forced to endure, including waiting for long hours in harsh conditions, and the disregard for the sick, children, and the elderly, saying:

“People sleep at the border until their turn comes. Some lay their luggage on the road. There are sick people who lose consciousness on the road without a single rescuer to help them. There are also the elderly and children who cannot stand. There are no exceptions, no matter what your situation is - whether you are sick, a child, or a woman - it does not matter. You have to wait for inspection, then go through inspection, then go and exchange the \$100. Some Syrians are even being beaten.”

Additionally to the inhumane waiting conditions, many Syrians who wish to enter the country are subjected to financial extortion by some employees and officers in many forms, such as requesting “commissions” or bribes, and requesting gifts from the arrivals in exchange for expediting procedures or sparing them harassment. Regarding this, Mamoun al-Sayed⁵, a Syrian citizen living in Lebanon who returned to visit Syria through al-Masnaa crossing, said:

“There is a long line and massive crowding, the weather is hot and the sun is burning us as we wait for the employee who works slowly. We also have to endure the indescribable insults from the (Syrian) border guards and employees. You cannot leave your spot in the line because someone else will take it. Everyone complains about the mistreatment and the obscene words. The work is extremely slow, and

⁴ A pseudonym has been used at the witness’ request during an online interview conducted by STJ’s researcher between September and October 2024.

⁵ A pseudonym has been used at the witness’ request during an online interview conducted by STJ’s researcher between September and October 2024.

we are left waiting for this to end. After about four hours, it was my turn. I handed him \$100 in two \$50 bills. He looked at me and said that one of the bills is not good, as it was old, and that he would only take a \$100 bill. He threw the \$50 at me and said that I either give him \$100 in a single bill along with a commission of 50,000 SYP, go back and stand in line again, or return to where I came from.”

He added:

“I had no choice but to take out \$100 from my pocket, with the 50.000 SYP of commission, and hand it to him. He took it and told me to wait. It took him about 15 minutes to print the bank notice because there was an issue with the computer and printer and they were of the old type, as it seemed to me. He was cursing the computer and printer, and describing them as “from the Stone Age”, while giving me inappropriate looks.”

As for Damascus International Airport, testimonies reveal widespread bribery and favoritism, as passengers experience discrimination based on their ability to pay bribes or give gifts to employees and officers. About the details of the complex bribery system at the airport, Khorshid Salem⁶ (a pseudonym), who works at the airport, said:

“Some travelers make friends with airport officers to pass quickly. Some pay them, others bring them gifts such as cell phones or other expensive gifts, while others invite them to dinner at fancy restaurants. As for those who do not know anyone, they have to go through the usual procedures of standing in line and undergo regular inspections. The inspection takes hours, and standing in the line to exchange the \$100 takes more hours, which takes the travelers half a day, if not all day. Despite that, of course, the arrivals still have to pay, where the amount paid in bribes to officers at the airport can reach half a million Syrian pounds.”

The testimonies obtained by STJ confirm the widespread corruption within airport procedures, with bribes distributed at various administrative levels. Khorshid Salem described the mechanism of bribe distribution at the airport:

“At the airport, every employee and officer plays a specific role, and this role makes him part of the bribe distribution. For example, a small portion of the bribes paid by families to the police, not exceeding ten percent, goes to the policeman, while the rest goes to the officers present at the airport.”

⁶ A pseudonym has been used at the witness' request during an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher between September and October 2024.

Financial extortion is not limited to the entry point, but rather extends all the way to the final destination, greatly increasing the total cost of the trip, which is what Wafaa Ali stresses, noting the extent of financial extortion that returnees are exposed to:

“My trip from Sweden to Nassib crossing and then to Damascus cost me around \$600, including bribes at the crossing and checkpoints controlled by both the Syrian government and the remaining opposition forces in Daraa, while incurring losses from currency exchanges, to ensure things went smoothly. I paid around \$50 at each checkpoint. Despite that, I experienced poor and degrading treatment and bad looks.”

4. Arbitrary Arrests:

In addition to the financial and mental suffering, a number of returnees face the risk of arbitrary arrest or being forced into military service. Ayoub Khaizaran said:

“Some people were arrested in front of me, while others were dragged off for reserve military duty or mandatory service, besides those who had security reports against them. There were officers from the military security to take people to the army, and officers from the air force security to drag (arrest) people for name similarities or those who had security reports filed against them. The situation is terrifying, you just hold your breath and pray (say Istighfar - asking God for forgiveness and mercy) that God will save you from their grasp.”

Ayoub added:

“I stayed at the border for three consecutive days until my turn came. I paid 200,000 SYP to have my belongings cleared. As for the check-up (to check if a specific name is wanted by any security agency in Syria), I paid 100,000 SYP to pass quickly. Three people were arrested in front of me on various charges: reserve military duty, mandatory military service, and one due to a report filed against him.”

Also, Ayoub pointed to the additional variable expenses that those entering Syria may face:

“Each of them set a specific amount, ranging from 200,000 to one million Syrian pounds. If you are wanted for reserve duty, you can pass for one million pounds. To keep your belongings safe during inspection, you need to pay 200,000 pounds. However, if you go through the inspection process and don't have the money to pay, you will face a very difficult situation, and you may end up arrested.

5. Administrative Complexities and Total Cost of Returning:

In addition to the above-mentioned difficulties, returnees face several administrative complications which increase their suffering and prolong the entry procedures, as the insufficient infrastructure and complicated bureaucratic measures add more obstacles to the

returnees, making the returning process more stressful and frustrating. Regarding this, Murhaf al-Khalidi said:

“When I left the airport, I went to a branch of the Commercial Bank, where they told me that I could not exchange money because there was no internet connection at the bank, and they did not know when it would be restored. I returned home after waiting for two hours hoping that the network would reconnect. The next day, I went back to the bank, and it was the same, the network was not available. On the third day, the excuse was that the program icon would not open, but they said that the program would work at noon. We waited that day, but to no avail, and we returned with nothing.”

The psychological and emotional effects of these measures on returnees are not less important than the financial effects. Murhaf al-Khalidi pointed to the psychological impact of these procedures, saying:

“The only thing I cared about then was to do the exchange and get it over with. Every time I went to the bank, I felt as if I were guilty, that I made a huge mistake by coming to Syria.”

6. Legal Opinion and Recommendations:

The right to freedom of movement is a fundamental human right that must not be restricted or denied except for legitimate legal reasons, and in a manner consistent with what is stipulated in international covenants and charters and relevant domestic legislation.

Accordingly, imposing unjustified fees or procedures, as is the case with Prime Minister’s Decision No. 46 of 2020, the subject of this report, is considered a violation of the principle of freedom of movement, which was affirmed in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, which is binding on Syria since it [ratified](#) it in 1969. This right must not be restricted except for specific and exclusive reasons, as stipulated in the aforementioned article: **“The above-mentioned rights (the right of free movement within the country and leaving the country) must not be restricted by any restrictions except for those provided for by law, and are necessary to protect national security, public order, public health, public morals or the rights and freedoms of others. They must also align with the other rights recognized in this Covenant.”**

Obligating Syrians wishing to enter their country to exchange \$100 into Syrian pounds at the rate determined by the Syrian government cannot be justified on the basis of protecting national security, public order, public morals, or other reasons mentioned in the aforementioned article. According to what is understood from the aforementioned decision, in case the person concerned does not have the amount requested, they may be arbitrarily deprived of entering their country. This contradicts Paragraph 4 of the above-mentioned

Article 12, which stresses that **“No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter their country.”**

According to the sources interviewed for this report, the return and inspection procedures (measures to check whether the person is wanted by the security branches), and the process of exchanging the required amount in Syrian pounds, were not devoid of humiliating and degrading treatment, which contradict the obligation to recognize that the inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, as affirmed in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in the preamble to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Restricting the citizens right to enter their country under unfair conditions contradicts what is stated in Article 38 of the current Syrian Constitution, which states that **“No citizen shall be expelled from the homeland nor prevented from returning to it.”** It also contradicts the right granted to the Syrian citizens to have their dignity preserved according to Article 19 of the aforementioned Constitution, which states that **“Society in the Syrian Arab Republic is based on solidarity, interdependency, respect for the principles of social justice, freedom, equality, and the preservation of the human dignity of every individual.”**

According to what was stated in this report by the people who entered Syria, whether through the airport or the land border crossings, they were obligated - in addition to exchanging \$100 - to pay additional sums of money or offer valuable gifts to officers and/or policemen and/or employees to facilitate their passage and not obstruct their entry. These actions are considered bribery punishable under Articles 340, 341, and 342 of the Syrian Penal Code.

Additionally, the decision of the Prime Minister is considered null and void, as it was issued in violation of the provisions of the current Constitution, as mentioned above, since the Constitution is the supreme law of the country, and no law, prior or subsequent, shall contradict it, in accordance with the principle of the hierarchy of legal rules, which means that a lower legal rule cannot violate or contradict a higher rule. Moreover, no administrative decision shall contradict the laws in force, and a fortiori the Constitution, especially since administrative decisions, including those of the Prime Minister’s office, are issued by the executive authority.

Accordingly, STJ recommends the immediate rescinding of mandatory fees imposed on returnees, ensuring freedom of movement for Syrian citizens, not preventing or restricting their right to return to their homeland, and guaranteeing that returnees are treated in a manner that is consistent with their human dignity, in accordance with what is stipulated in international covenants and charters and the current Syrian Constitution.

STJ also calls for ending all forms of financial extortion and degrading treatment at border crossings and airports, conducting a comprehensive and independent investigation into documented violations and holding those responsible accountable, and ensuring that all returnees are treated with dignity and respect, in accordance with international human rights standards.

Additionally, STJ calls for simplifying administrative procedures, ensuring their transparency for returnees, combating the system of bribery and favoritism at border crossings and airports, and providing effective mechanisms for complaints and grievances for returnees who are subjected to violations.

Furthermore, STJ calls for respecting the principle of the hierarchy of legal rules, preventing the enforcement of any administrative decision or legal text that contradicts the provisions of the Constitution, and ensuring the independence and impartiality of the Supreme Constitutional Court, freeing it from the dominance of the executive authority, so that it can perform its assigned role in monitoring the constitutionality of laws.

STJ urges the international community to pressure the Syrian government to respect its international obligations in the field of human rights, and urge it to adhere to the international conventions it has ratified, and to recognize the supremacy of these covenants, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, over domestic laws, and to prioritize them in application before the judiciary in case they contradicts the Syrian legislation.



Image No. (1) - A copy of the decision of the Prime Minister's office imposing the exchange of \$100, or its equivalent in foreign currencies, on Syrian citizens upon their entry into Syrian territory.



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.

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