

Syria: Urgent Joint Letter to the UN Special Procedures on Barriers to Return to Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad



Effective Oversight Mechanisms Must Be Activated To Ensure The Restitution Of Property To Its Lawful Owners, With Strict Adherence To The Principles Of Non-Recognition Of Any Demographic Situation Created Or Entrenched Through Forced Displacement And The Confiscation Of Property, And Non-Funding Of Any Projects That Would Perpetuate Such A Situation

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Effective Oversight Mechanisms Must Be Activated To Ensure The Restitution Of Property To Its Lawful Owners, With Strict Adherence To The Principles Of Non-Recognition Of Any Demographic Situation Created Or Entrenched Through Forced Displacement And The Confiscation Of Property, And Non-Funding Of Any Projects That Would Perpetuate Such A Situation

To the attention of the Mandate Holders:

- The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons;
- The Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing;
- The Special Rapporteur on minority issues;
- The Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.

We, the partner organizations—[Syrians for Truth and Justice](#), [the Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement](#), and [PÊL – Civil Waves](#)—submit this urgent letter to provide updated information on the persistent obstacles preventing forcibly displaced persons from returning to the cities of Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad and their surrounding rural areas, particularly Kurdish residents and other original inhabitants of the region, more than six years after Operation “[Peace Spring](#),” led by Turkey and allied “Syrian National Army” (SNA) factions in October 2019.

This letter follows up on [the previous communication](#) addressed to the Special Procedures in August 2025 concerning ongoing violations of property rights in the Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad areas, which stressed the need to guarantee voluntary, safe, and dignified return; the restitution of property; reparation; and the establishment of an effective mechanism to address property complaints.

Despite the political change in Syria and the accompanying official statements on the return of forcibly displaced persons, field information gathered by the signatory organizations – consistent with a recent report by [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) and an earlier report by [PÊL – Civil Waves](#) based on 75 interviews with displaced persons from Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad/Girê Spî – indicates that the “Peace Spring” areas still lack a clear and accountable civil and security authority, and that the return of displaced persons, Kurds in particular, continues to be obstructed by tangible risks, including fear of reprisals; the continued occupation of homes, shops, and land; the absence of property restitution mechanisms; and the enduring influence of the armed factions that seized control of the area after 2019.

This issue takes on added significance in light of [the agreement of 10 March 2025](#) between the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which included a declared commitment to guaranteeing the rights of all Syrians without discrimination and to recognizing the Kurdish community as an integral part of the Syrian state. Yet the persistence of obstacles to return to Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad/Girê Spî, particularly for forcibly displaced Kurds, demonstrates that these commitments have yet to be translated into practice in the “Peace Spring” areas.

1. Patterns of Violations and Persistent Obstacles

Testimonies documented by the partner organizations show that attempts to return or visit entail an interconnected set of risks: direct threats; assaults on those attempting to check on their properties; the continued seizure of homes, shops, and land; the presence of checkpoints and military positions; and the absence of any clear body to which victims can turn to recover their rights. Accordingly, the mere fact that some individuals are able to enter the city temporarily does not mean that the conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified return are in place, so long as access to one's home, land, or shop remains fraught with fear, extortion, discrimination, and the absence of redress.

1.1. Absence of a Clear and Accountable Civil and Security Authority

Testimonies and sources documented by our organizations indicate that the announced [dissolution](#) of the armed factions in December 2024 and their integration into the Ministry of Defense of the transitional government have not, in practice, affected the lives of displaced persons or their ability to recover their rights.

One local resident described the situation as a “cosmetic change,” explaining that the military factions formerly affiliated with the “Syrian National Army” had announced their integration into the new Syrian army, but that their commanders and their civil and military police personnel effectively remained in place, and that sectors such as policing, education, and health remained, in essence, as they were before the new chain of authority was announced. He also reported that the local council had not actually been replaced, and that the “claimed subordination to Damascus” does not match the local reality as residents experience it.

This bears directly on the right to return. According to documentation gathered by the partners, a displaced person who finds their home occupied, their land exploited, or their shop looted does not, in practice, know which authority has the power to compel the occupant to vacate or to protect the owner from reprisal. Integration or a transfer of authority cannot therefore be considered sufficient unless accompanied by a genuine restructuring of local civil and security authorities, an end to factional involvement in property matters and civil complaints, and the establishment of an independent and trusted body that victims can access without fear.

1.2. Continued Seizure of Homes, Shops, and Land

Documented testimonies confirm that the obstacles to return extend to the continued occupation of displaced persons' homes, shops, and land by individuals with no legal right to them, including members or commanders of armed factions, as well as civilian newcomers whose presence in the area is tied to the period following Operation “Peace Spring.” In Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê, one witness reported that several houses belonging to his family remain seized and that the occupants prevented the rightful owners from

entering or photographing them. He also reported that a large tract of agricultural land belonging to his family was effectively placed in the hands of a person linked to the factions, before an inequitable usufruct arrangement was later imposed under which the original owners receive only a limited share of the produce.

Witnesses also reported that many homes were looted. For example, a witness from Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê reported that the floor he used to occupy in his family's house had been stripped of its doors, windows, marble, and sinks, and that a tractor, water tanks, and other contents had been stolen; he further noted that some of the family's shops were being used to keep livestock rather than for their original commercial purpose.

In Tel Abyad, testimonies indicate that some occupants of agricultural land refused to vacate it or hand it over to its owners before the end of the farming season, telling the owners that a legal complaint would be futile because they pay a share of the produce to the local council (which reports to the transitional authorities in Damascus). This example shows that land seizure is effected not only through direct force but also by tying the exploitation of land to local authorities, rendering property rights contingent on connections and influence.

Testimonies further show that some homeowners face financial demands in exchange for recovering their homes, on the pretext that the occupant had spent money on the house or installed fixtures in it. In one case, a homeowner was asked to pay USD 500 to recover his house; when he refused, he was subjected to harassment and ethnic slurs directed against Kurds. In another case, a witness reported that a former occupant of the family home demanded payment on the grounds that he had acted as the house's "guard." A further testimony from Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê indicates that one homeowner was forced to negotiate with the de facto occupant to recover his house: the demand began at USD 1,500, on the pretext that this sum had been paid to a military official, before the owner was compelled to pay USD 500 in order to take possession of his house some ten days later, with the electricity meter and water tank left in place. This incident reflects how property restitution has been turned into a coerced settlement in which the original owner pays a price to recover what is rightfully his.

1.3. Threats, Assaults, and Discrimination against Kurdish Returnees

The documentation indicates that Kurdish ethnicity, prior residence in areas of the Autonomous Administration, or presumed links to the Syrian Democratic Forces are used as pretexts to threaten or assault returnees or to call into question their right to return. Testimonies have documented assaults on Kurdish civilians who attempted to visit Tel Abyad/Girê Spî or to check on their properties, including damage to vehicles, physical assaults, theft of money, and accusations of affiliation with the Syrian Democratic Forces, in addition to explicit statements rejecting the return of Kurds to the city. This pattern turns ethnic identity or a person's previous place of displacement

into a basis for collective accusation, making return fraught with the risk of discrimination and reprisal even for people with no connection whatsoever to any military or security activity.¹

In one testimony from Tel Abyad, a displaced man reported that he had attempted to return to his city but refrained from doing so after receiving direct death threats. In words that capture the fear in which so many of the displaced live, he said: “How can we return when they are calling for our heads and threatening to kill us?”

1.4. Militarization of Cities and Roads and the Absence of Safety Guarantees

Testimonies indicate that return to Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad continues to involve passing through checkpoints and military positions and undergoing opaque security screening, and that some main roads are closed or unsafe for those returning. Testimonies from Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê further indicate that the city still bears clear signs of militarization, including earthen berms, barbed wire, and military deployments near public institutions and facilities.

In a testimony from Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê, a displaced person who had returned for a temporary visit reported that he was forced to enter via an alternative route passing through multiple checkpoints – some close to Turkish positions and others run by local security bodies – and that some of these checkpoints photographed the passengers, their identity documents, and the vehicle’s plate number before allowing them through. He also noted that roads leading to the market had been blocked with concrete blocks, and that military positions or walled-off buildings stood near public facilities. The persistence of these checkpoints, the recording of entrants’ personal data, and the manifestations of militarization within the city and near its public facilities undermine the conditions of voluntariness, safety, and dignity – particularly for displaced persons who fear that their data, or their subsequent visits, could be used against them.

1.5. Absence of an Effective Mechanism for Property Restitution and Reparation

As of the date of this letter (early July 2026), there exists no independent, transparent, and effective mechanism to receive displaced persons’ complaints concerning their homes, land, and shops; to verify ownership; to annul transactions concluded under duress or under military and factional control; or to guarantee fair compensation for those harmed.

¹ This is consistent with earlier international reporting. See, for example, the [2024 report of the European Union Agency for Asylum \(EUAA\)](#), which noted that Kurdish residents in areas controlled by “Syrian National Army” factions were subjected to serious violations, including property seizure and extortion by security bodies and armed factions affiliated with the SNA. [Human Rights Watch](#) has likewise found that Kurdish residents have borne the brunt of abuses in areas under the control of Turkey and Turkey-backed factions, owing to perceived links with the Kurdish-led forces in northeast Syria.

The absence of an independent property restitution mechanism forces victims to resort to informal and unsafe avenues: negotiation, mediation by influential individuals, and the payment of money to recover their property. These are not legal remedies; they are coerced arrangements born of the absence of an effective judiciary and of an independent administrative mechanism.

2. Responsibilities and Legal Analysis

The facts documented in Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad show that the obstacles to the return of the original inhabitants are bound up with a continuing pattern of forced deprivation of housing, land, and property, and with the absence of effective mechanisms for redress and the restoration of rights. The continued seizure of forcibly displaced persons' homes, shops, and land; their exploitation by armed factions or persons linked to them; and their disposal through sale, lease, or investment without the consent of the original owners constitute arbitrary deprivation of property, denial of adequate housing, and a direct obstruction of the right of forcibly displaced persons to return to their places of original residence in safety and dignity.

The Syrian transitional government bears responsibility for taking serious, public, and effective steps to ensure that all factions that have announced their integration into state institutions are placed under genuine and accountable command, and to prevent them from continuing to operate as de facto authorities within the "Peace Spring" areas. A declaration of integration is not sufficient unless it is coupled with an actual change in command and control and with the removal of the factions' hold over property, return, and civil complaint matters.

This obligation also finds its basis in the [Syrian Constitutional Declaration](#), which affirms the unity of Syrian territory and rejects calls for partition, secession, foreign intervention, or reliance on foreign backing, and which reserves the establishment of the army and of military formations exclusively to the state, prohibiting individuals or entities from creating military or paramilitary formations outside its framework (Articles 7 and 9). The documented facts accordingly raise serious concerns bearing on the sovereignty of the Syrian state and the unity of its territory.

The right to private property enjoys clear constitutional and legal protection. The Constitutional Declaration provides that "the right to private property is protected, and property may not be expropriated except in the public interest and in return for fair compensation" (Article 16). The Constitutional Declaration also links the transitional justice process to the repeal of the exceptional laws and measures that harmed Syrians, including the restitution of confiscated property and the annulment of the effects of security measures relating to civil and property records (Article 48). It follows, a fortiori, that the effects of the property violations committed in the "Peace Spring" areas under

de facto authority or under military and factional control must not be allowed to become entrenched.

[The Syrian Civil Code](#) likewise affirms that property may not be expropriated except in accordance with the law and in return for fair compensation, and that the owner alone, within the limits of the law, has the right to use, exploit, and dispose of the property, and is entitled to its fruits, products, and accessories (Articles 768, 770, and 771). Accordingly, any occupation, sale, or lease of displaced persons' property carried out during their forced absence or without their free consent cannot produce legal effect as against the original owners. [The Penal Code](#), moreover, criminalizes the usurpation of real property and the entry into homes by force or without their owners' consent (Articles 557 and 723), reinforcing the authorities' duty to protect private property from seizure.

Under international humanitarian law, Turkey's continued military presence and its direct or indirect security and administrative influence in the area engage its obligations to the extent that the requirements of "effective control" under Article 42 of [the 1907 Hague Regulations](#) are met. If such control is established, Turkey is bound to protect civilians and their property and to prevent pillage and seizure. The Hague Regulations prohibit the confiscation of private property (Article 46), and the [Fourth Geneva Convention](#) prohibits pillage (Article 33).

The right of the individual to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence is likewise protected under [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (Article 12). If it is established that these practices form part of a policy or pattern aimed at preventing a particular group from returning, or at altering the demographic composition of the area, their legal gravity extends beyond individual infringements of property to systematic violations linked to forced displacement and discrimination.

In addition, [the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) obliges States parties to guarantee the enjoyment of rights – including the rights to own property, to housing, and to freedom of movement – without discrimination on grounds of race or national or ethnic origin (Article 5). As both Syria and Turkey are parties to the Convention, the persistence of practices that prevent Kurds from returning, or that make the recovery of their property more difficult on account of their ethnic identity or their presumed political or military affiliation, gives rise to direct responsibilities under the prohibition of racial discrimination.

With respect to housing, land and property (HLP) rights, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) affirms everyone's right to own property and prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of property (Article 17). The right to adequate housing, protected under the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), is in turn tied to legal security of tenure and to protection from forced eviction, harassment, and threats (Article 11).

The [UN Commission on Human Rights](#) has affirmed that forced eviction constitutes a gross violation of human rights, in particular the right to adequate housing, and has urged governments to take immediate measures to eliminate this practice.

In the same vein, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons noted in her [report of April 2021](#) that the loss of land and housing is a defining feature of internal displacement, and that violations of HLP rights frequently result from discriminatory strategies designed to displace particular groups on account of their religious, ethnic, social, or political affiliation and to prevent them from returning to their homes. This analysis applies directly to cases in which displaced persons are denied return to their property because of their identity or because armed actors control their homes and land.

The [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) likewise affirm that the competent authorities bear the primary duty and responsibility to establish the conditions, and provide the means, that allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes. The same Principles stress the importance of the participation of displaced persons in the planning and management of their return, the prohibition of discrimination against them by reason of their displacement, and the authorities' duty to assist them in recovering the property they left behind or were dispossessed of upon displacement, or in obtaining appropriate compensation.

The [UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons](#) affirm that all refugees and displaced persons have the right to have restored to them the housing, land, and property of which they were arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived, or to be compensated where restitution is impossible.

International standards further impose a duty to provide an effective remedy. Under [General Comment No. 31 of the Human Rights Committee](#), States parties must provide protection and accessible, effective remedies, including by investigating violations, holding those responsible to account, and ensuring appropriate reparation for victims (paragraphs 15–18).

3. Recommendations to the Mandate Holders

1. Send an urgent joint communication to the Syrian transitional government and the Government of Turkey requesting detailed information on the measures taken to guarantee safe, voluntary, dignified, and non-discriminatory return to Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad, including the protection of returnees, the restitution of property, and the prevention of reprisals and discrimination.
2. Urge the Syrian government to announce a clear, time-bound plan to ensure that all armed factions in the “Peace Spring” areas are placed under genuine, accountable command; to bar their members and commanders from interfering

in matters of return, property, and civil complaints; and to end any unlawful occupation of private homes, shops, and land.

3. Request clarification from the Government of Turkey regarding the nature of its military, security, and administrative presence in parts of northern Syria, and the measures it has taken to prevent violations committed by the factions it supports or is associated with, to investigate such violations, and to ensure accountability and prevent impunity.
4. Call on the Syrian government and Turkey, each within its sphere of effective control or influence, to support the establishment of an independent and effective mechanism for the restitution of housing, land, and property, mandated to receive displaced persons' complaints; verify ownership; annul unlawful or coerced transactions; suspend any sale, lease, or investment of displaced persons' property pending the resolution of complaints; and ensure the safe handover of unlawfully occupied properties, or appropriate compensation and reparation.
5. Urge the parties concerned to declare an immediate temporary moratorium on any sale, transfer, lease, or investment of property belonging to displaced persons in Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tel Abyad, pending the establishment of an independent mechanism to verify ownership and adjudicate complaints.
6. Urge the Syrian government and Turkey to take effective measures to protect returnees – Kurds in particular – from reprisals and discrimination, to ensure that the main and regular routes are open for the safe return of civilians, and to remove unlawful security restrictions.
7. Urge the Syrian government and Turkey to guarantee the meaningful participation of victims, forcibly displaced persons, women, youth, and representatives of the original local population in any plan concerning return, property restitution, or reconstruction, and to ensure that such arrangements are not confined to political or security understandings between the controlling parties.
8. Call for independent and impartial monitoring of return conditions and issue a joint public statement or urgent appeal affirming that return to the “Peace Spring” areas cannot be considered safe, voluntary, or dignified unless the underlying causes of forced displacement are addressed, together with property seizure, militarization, discrimination, and the absence of accountability and effective redress.
9. Call on the international community and donors to integrate human rights standards—particularly HLP rights—as an essential and non-negotiable condition in any plans for reconstruction or the promotion of investment in Syria. This requires activating strict oversight mechanisms to ensure the restitution of property to its lawful owners, with strict adherence to the principles of non-recognition of any demographic situation created or entrenched through

confiscation, pillage, and forced displacement, and non-funding of any projects that would perpetuate such a situation.

Respectfully,

Syrians for Truth and Justice

Dar Association for Victims of Forced Displacement

PÊL – Civil Waves

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.