



PRIORITIES FOR THE 2023 UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
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In preparation for the upcoming high-level week of the United Nations General Assembly, SJAC is outlining its advocacy priorities. SJAC hopes that member states will use the opportunity afforded by the General Assembly to take concrete action on pressing human rights and justice issues and that Syrian civil society organizations will have the opportunity to voice their concerns.

During the high-level week, SJAC urges the special envoy and member states to focus their efforts on the following priorities:

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The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a, multilaterally supported non-profit that envisions a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law — where citizens from all components of Syrian society live in peace. SJAC promotes transitional justice and accountability processes in Syria by collecting and preserving documentation, analyzing and cataloging data, and promoting public discourse on transitional justice — within Syria and beyond.

Learn more at www.syriaaccountability.org

BUILD POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR THE UN MISSING PERSONS MECHANISM

The UN General Assembly voted on June 29 to adopt a resolution that **created** the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP), a new mechanism designed to (1) clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in Syria and (2) provide adequate support to victims, survivors, and the families of missing persons, in close coordination with all relevant actors.

The new institution has given hope to many Syrian families but extensive support will be required if it is to make meaningful progress. While the OHCHR works to draft terms of reference and ensure the timely creation of the mechanism, states should focus on ensuring that the IIMP will have the political support it needs in order to succeed. If the mechanism is not able to access Syria or receive even limited information from Damascus, it will be of little help to families. For that reason, states should focus on building the willingness of the Syrian government to cooperate on humanitarian and missing persons efforts, including the release of current detainees. This process could be led by Arab nations, such as the UAE, who have supported recent steps to normalize relations with the Syrian government. States should consider offering sanctions relief in exchange for concrete progress on this issue.

UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

- » Engage the Syrian government and its regional allies to the conflict in order to build political will for the acceptance of the new mechanism, exchange information with the mechanism, and possibly allow the mechanism to conduct activities within Syria. This includes building political will in Damascus to engage on the issue of detainees and missing persons by offering limited sanctions relief to the Syrian government in exchange for the release of detainees.
- » Leverage voluntary funding contributions to the mechanism to ensure adequate planning and involvement of relevant actors, victims, survivors, and families of missing persons in its development.

PREVENT THE FORCED RETURN OF REFUGEES TO SYRIA

Thousands of Syrians have been involuntarily and forcibly deported from Lebanon and Turkey in recent months, and European states continue to enact policies that violate international obligations of protection and non-refoulement of asylum seekers.

In Turkey, xenophobic rhetoric and policies targeting the Syrian refugee population increased during the election period. Following his election victory, Erdogan doubled down on promises to “voluntarily” return one million Syrians to areas of northern Syria under the control of Turkish forces. However, numerous reports detail the refoulement of Syrians to areas of northern Syria controlled by Turkish forces, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, all of which are accused of committing human rights violations. Lebanese authorities are also accelerating forced deportations of Syrians in Lebanon through arrests and systematic raids on Syrian households. Thousands of Syrians were forcibly deported from Lebanon by the Lebanese Armed Services [between April and May 2023](#).

In recent years, Denmark, [Sweden](#), Poland, Hungary, and Romania have [stripped](#) Syrians of residency and work permits, arguing that conditions in Syria are appropriate for their return. Other European states such as Greece, Bulgaria, and other Balkan countries have engaged in [pushback](#) policies that do not allow arrivals the chance to seek asylum.

It is not yet safe for Syrian refugees to return to Syria. Returnees report facing arrest, torture, and other human rights violations [upon return](#). Host countries must adhere to international law regarding the obligation to protect asylum seekers from persecution and involuntary deportation, and must not engage in policies and actions that endanger the lives and physical safety of asylum seekers.

UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

- » Immediately cease forced deportations of Syrian refugees to Syria or to “third countries” such as Turkey, Rwanda, and/or Russia.
- » Apply international diplomatic pressure and condition aid to host countries such as Turkey and Lebanon on strict adherence to international law regarding protection and non-refoulement of asylum seekers and refugee communities, including the immediate cessation of host government policies and practices that facilitate unlawful raids of Syrian households, unlawful detentions of Syrian refugees, and involuntary refoulement of Syrian refugees to Syria.
- » Pressure European states that have revoked residency and work permits of Syrians to reverse these policies and acknowledge that Syria is not safe for return.
- » Demand that European countries cease pushback policies that violate international law by withholding the provision of international aid, preventing asylum seekers from reaching safety, subjecting asylum seekers to cruel and inhumane treatment, and sending them back to their previous countries of transit or to other countries involuntarily.

ADDRESS SYRIA'S HUMANITARIAN AND ECONOMIC CRISES

Syrians face a worsening humanitarian crisis caused by a confluence of unprecedented economic challenges, protracted negotiations between the international community and the Syrian government over the cross-border humanitarian aid delivery mechanism in northwest Syria, and Western sanctions that have severely diminished the purchasing power of Syrians and the availability of basic necessities. With the Syrian pound depreciating to its **lowest** ever value on the black market at more than 13,000 pounds/USD in August and food and fuel prices continuing to rise, about **90 percent** of the Syrian population is currently living below the poverty line. Spikes in the price of fuel are compounded by a worsening fuel shortage that has dramatically reduced service provision and livelihoods with severe humanitarian consequences.

Humanitarian assistance is needed to provide vital food and fuel supplies, especially in northwest Syria where communities are still recovering from the devastating earthquake on February 6. In July, initial attempts by the UN Security Council to renew the cross-border mechanism at Bab al-Hawa crossing **failed** due to a Russian veto. On August 8, the Syrian government **extended** permission to the UN to use the Bab al-Salam and al-Ra'ee border crossings for an additional three months for the provision of earthquake relief assistance but the U.S. Treasury Department **refused** to extend sanctions exemptions for earthquake relief efforts, potentially obstructing the humanitarian response. On August 9, the UN announced that a **deal was reached** with the Syrian government to reopen Bab al-Hawa crossing for six months. However, the short timetable limits the ability of humanitarian organizations to adequately respond to needs in northwest Syria.

UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

- » Leverage limited sanctions relief in negotiations with the Syrian government to achieve objectives regarding long-term, principled humanitarian assistance access and delivery in northwest Syria without ceding control of aid operations to the Syrian government and its affiliates. Certain sanctions, such as targeted sanctions of individuals known to have been involved in human rights violations, should be maintained.
- » Prepare a plan for aid access and delivery to northwest Syria through Turkey in case the Syrian government closes the border crossings to humanitarian aid delivery. This includes coordinating with Syrian humanitarian groups to facilitate supply chains of essential needs that reach vulnerable populations in northern and northwest Syria.
- » Consider sanctions relief specifically related to the importation and production of oil and gas supplies within Syria to facilitate service provision in fuel and to alleviate hardship inflicted upon Syrian communities by fuel shortages.



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