



**PRIORITIES FOR THE 2024
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**THE SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTRE
SEPTEMBER 2024**

In preparation for the upcoming high-level week of the United Nations General Assembly, SJAC is outlining key policy priorities in three areas. 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 member states to focus their efforts on the following:

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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 syriaaccountability.org

PREVENT THE FORCED RETURN OF REFUGEES TO SYRIA

With a sharp rise in anti-Syrian sentiment in neighboring countries and increased efforts across the European Union (EU) to pursue externalization agreements, sustainable solutions are needed now more than ever to protect Syrians from refoulment and to safeguard their right to seek asylum.

In countries neighboring Syria, Syrians have continued to face anti-Syrian sentiment and unlawful deportation campaigns. In Türkiye specifically, [riots targeting Syrians erupted](#) in July across the country in what some labeled as [attempted pogroms](#), and Türkiye continued to return Syrians to Turkish-controlled regions of Syria – despite ongoing rights violations in these areas. In Lebanon, the repression of Syrian refugees persisted, with Syrians facing public attacks, raids on refugee camps, and [ongoing deportation campaigns](#).

Despite these well documented rights violations, the EU continues to externalize migration to neighboring countries, providing them with financial support while ignoring the ongoing rights violations these countries are committing. Beyond these agreements, the EU has taken continuous steps to limit the right to seek asylum within its borders, perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the European Parliament adopting the [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) in April. While the EU-Türkiye statement presented externalization as a “temporary and extraordinary measure,” continued developments show that this state of exception, and the accompanying lack of accountability, have become the norm.

To protect Syrians from forced returns and accompanying rights violations, UN member states should:

- » Immediately cease the unlawful deportations and involuntary returns of Syrian refugees to Syria and publicly acknowledge that Syria is not safe for return. Host countries should respond to the evidence civil society has consistently put forth to demonstrate that no part of Syria is safe for return, and States should withdraw assessments or rectify public statements that indicate certain areas of Syria can be classified as “safe zones.” States not directly engaging in unlawful deportations should apply international diplomatic pressure on neighboring countries like Türkiye and Lebanon to cease these rights violations.
- » Pressure EU member states to cease pushbacks and re-evaluate whether their externalization agreements with third countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Egypt meet EU and international law standards. The EU should also continue to investigate whether EU provided aid is being used for unlawful purposes, infringing on asylum rights, and present these findings to the public.
- » Explore alternative pathways to provide legal entry for Syrian human rights defenders, activists, and journalists still residing in Syria or in neighboring countries where they may remain at risk of persecution, including issuing visas to individuals in these categories.

SUPPORT JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

After the territorial defeat of ISIS, over [56,000 individuals were detained in Northeast Syria](#) due to alleged affiliations with ISIS. In June 2024, over five years later, more than 53,000 individuals remain detained without charge in camps and formal prisons, including women and children. Individuals in detention face poor humanitarian conditions, and the vast majority have no clear path for criminal trials or release. While detainees are suspected of membership in ISIS and, in some cases, of committing war crimes, evidence has been presented in few cases.

Not only is the ongoing situation in the Northeast a humanitarian and human rights crisis, but it also serves as a significant barrier to post-ISIS recovery in the region. The security conditions in Al Hol and Roj camps continue to deteriorate and threaten the safety of residents, while victims of ISIS violence continue to wait for justice.

TO FURTHER JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS IN NORTHEAST SYRIA, UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

- » Support the ICRC in gaining immediate and full access to detention facilities, including Al Hol and Roj camps, and obtaining the names of individuals in detention. The ICRC should be allowed to both monitor conditions and re-establish contact between individuals in detention and their families. Member states should also pressure the authorities in Northeastern Syria to cease the ongoing torture and mistreatment of individuals in detention facilities.
- » Support the Syrian Democratic Forces and Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria in developing vetting processes for Syrian residents of Al Hol and Roj camps, so those suspected of serious crimes can undergo trial and others can begin release procedures.
- » Support local authorities in conducting fair trials for Syrians held in detention and accused of serious crimes, including providing training to local judges and legal professionals on collecting evidence and fair trial standards. Funding and training should also be distributed to local civil society organizations to provide trial monitoring.
- » Repatriate third-country nationals still detained in Northeast Syria. Member states should prosecute individuals who committed serious crimes while providing reintegration support for individuals returning to their communities. Not only do Member states have the capacity to do so, but repatriation will allow local authorities to focus resources on the Syrians who remain.

RESIST NORMALIZING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

Thirteen years after the onset of the Syrian civil war, the government has not only continued to evade justice and accountability for the serious crimes it committed against its own people, but it also continues to commit many of these serious crimes today. Normalization symbolically condones rights violations the government has committed and allows the government new pathways to fund its ongoing repression. States should continue to resist normalizing the Syrian government and curtail its ability to operate with impunity.

Despite these historical and ongoing rights violations, many states have moved towards reintegrating the Syrian government in the last year. Syria rejoined the Arab League in 2023, and in the summer of 2024, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan restarted conversations around Türkiye restoring relations with Syria. In the EU, eight states as recently as July requested that the EU “[review and assess](#)” its approach to Syria. As part of these efforts, Italy appointed an ambassador to Syria despite having suspended diplomatic relations with Syria in 2012. As of now, none of these normalization efforts are being leveraged to obtain human rights concessions.

UN MEMBER STATES SHOULD RESIST NORMALIZING THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT; HOWEVER, WHEN RE-ENGAGEMENT DOES OCCUR, MEMBER STATES SHOULD:

- » Condition engagement with the Syrian government on concrete human rights concessions, starting with the release of political prisoners. The newly established Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP) in Syria should negotiate releases and secure access for its organization and the ICRC with member state support. Removing this issue from the stalled political process could open a window for progress.
- » States that are not engaging with the Syrian government should communicate with regional states that are re-engaging, such as the United Arab Emirates, to ensure such governments are attaching human rights concessions to the reengagement process and particularly the release of political prisoners.
- » Robustly fund war crimes units to pursue universal jurisdiction cases against perpetrators of rights violations in the Syrian conflict without delay. Such cases help ensure that the crimes of the Syrian government are not forgotten even as normalization continues.



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