

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	2033
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	The Refugee Documentation Centre (RDC)
Titel:	Syria - Information on the treatment of returnees
Udgivet:	16. februar 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	31. juli 2024

RESEARCHED AND COMPILED BY THE REFUGEE DOCUMENTATION CENTRE OF IRELAND ON THE 16 FEBRUARY 2024

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COI QUERY RESPONSE

SYRIA - INFORMATION ON THE TREATMENT OF RETURNEES

The *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)* in February 2024 states that “Many Syrians who had fled the war face gross human rights violations and abuses upon their return to Syria, according to a report by the UN Human Rights Office released today.”¹

The report further mentioned that: “One returnee said he was violently arrested once back in Syria and taken to an unknown location by local authorities' security forces, kept blindfolded for two days, and repeatedly beaten.” [...]

“A woman returnee, detained for a week with her two daughters by Government security forces as they tried to leave Syria for a second time, said her family had to pay a US\$300 bribe to speed up their release. “I was interrogated daily and asked about the reasons for travelling to Lebanon,” she said. The report further highlights that women returnees face specifically discriminatory restrictions on their liberty to move freely and independently.”²

Another report from the *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)* in February 2024 notes that “Information on instances of arrest and detention of returnees was also shared by those interviewed. Out of the interviewed returnees, two men and one woman described how they had been arrested and detained upon return to Syria. The two men were also subjected to torture and ill-treatment while in detention. One of the two had returned to an area under the control of pro-government forces, while the other returned to an area under the control of the SDF. The woman was detained on her way from Aleppo to Lebanon, in pro-government forces'-controlled areas. In all of these incidents, people arrested were not presented with an arrest warrant or informed of the specific reasons for their arrests, they were not provided the opportunity to seek legal aid, nor were they promptly presented before a judge. Meanwhile, their family members had

¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (13 February 2024) Syrian returnees subjected to "gross human rights violations and abuses", UN report details

² ibid

to endure long periods of time (ranging few months to several years and in certain cases until their death) without being informed as to their fate and whereabouts.”³

The report further mentioned that: “A number of interviewed women, particularly those who had returned without a male companion, recounted having been subjected to regular verbal harassment at checkpoints or in the streets by members of security forces in areas under the control of pro-government forces as well as in areas under the control of non-state armed groups.” [...]

“Many returnees interviewed by OHCHR reported facing significant difficulties with accessing civil documentation upon their return.”⁴

The *European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)* in October 2023 mentioned “Returning to Syria from abroad was described as a 'gamble' due to documented human rights abuses against returnees, including arbitrary detention, torture and forced disappearances.” [...]⁵

The same document points out that: “GoS forces and affiliated militias continued to 'detain, disappear, and mistreat' former refugees who had returned to reconquered areas, including persons who had coordinated their return with a GoS 'reconciliation committee'. Numerous arrests of returnees were reported at the Syrian Lebanese border (notably the al-Masnaa border crossing), including of individuals returning from Lebanon under a voluntary repatriation scheme after agreeing to security settlements with the GoS. Further concentrations of arrests were reported at the Syrian-Turkish border, especially at the Kasab border crossing. Those detained included returnees who were wanted for opposition to the GoS, draft evasion or defection from the Syrian military during the conflict. There were also cases of returnees being arrested for the purpose of exacting bribes in exchange for their release.” [...]

“The UNCOI in a July 2023 report covering the period from January 2020 to April 2023, noted that the GoS authorities arrested returnees at checkpoints for carrying outdated or inadequate papers and inflicted torture to coerce confessions from returnees, including about their previous involvement in protests.”⁶

Another document from the *European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)* in October 2023 notes that “The UNCOI pointed in February 2023 to reports of returnees who had to pay bribes to members of the local administration in order to access their properties. In case of refusal to pay, they were reportedly denied access to their homes. Other returnees reported that neighbours had taken over their property and threatened them when they tried to get it back. In one case, neighbours reportedly severely damaged the house before returning it. The UNCOI noted that remedies were 'lacking or ineffective' as in some cases local authorities did not react to complaints from returnees, while in other cases, returnees refrained from submitting complaints for fear of reprisals. Similarly, in April 2023.”⁷

³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (13 February 2024) “We did not fear death but the life there”: The Dire Human Rights Situation Facing Syrian Returnees

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (9 October 2023) EUAA COI Report - Syria - Country Focus (October 2023) [1.1. Persons perceived to be opposing the Government of Syria (GoS)]

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (9 October 2023) EUAA COI Report - Syria - Country Focus (October 2023) [2. Socio-economic situation in Damascus city], p.6

iMMAP in September 2023 mentioned “Returnees and out-of-camp IDPs also face discrimination and are often perceived negatively within their communities.” [...] ⁸

In July 2023, the *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)* reports “Torture and ill-treatment remain a significant risk for those who live within Government-controlled parts of Syria, including areas retaken in recent years, and for Syrian nationals abroad who return. This risk is particularly concerning given increasing pressure on Syrian refugees and asylum seekers to return from neighbouring countries and elsewhere.” ⁹

“Another detainee, who was arrested upon return from Lebanon in 2021 said that his and other relatives were being asked “to provide money in order to get news about their detained relatives and link them with their families.” [...] ¹⁰

The document also states that: “Another detainee, who was arrested upon return from Lebanon in 2021 said that his and other relatives were being asked “to provide money in order to get news about their detained relatives and link them with their families.” [...] ¹¹

“Interviewees increasingly reported that Government forces seem to be institutionalising extortion, including targeting young merchants returning from stays abroad including in Türkiye, Jordan, or UAE.” [...] ¹²

A report issued in July 2023 by the *Syrian Network For Human Rights (SNHR)* points out “As the statement noted, since the beginning of April 2023 up to June 2023, SNHR has recorded the refoulment of no fewer than 874 Syrian refugees to Syria from Lebanon, including 86 women and 104 children. Of these forcibly returned individuals, SNHR has so far documented the arrest by Syrian regime forces of 87, including two children, five women, and two members of the same family, in al-Masna border area, with most of them being arrested by the regime's infamous Military Intelligence Directorate.” ¹³

The report also states “Two main reasons why many refugees remain reluctant to return to Syria in the short term: first, concerns about the lack of livelihoods and work opportunities, which is a domain where donors could help; and second, concerns about the lack of safety and security, which is the Syrian government's remit.” ¹⁴

In July 2023, the Danish Immigration Service states that “The Syrian authorities also call up men who return from abroad to the reserve service. The returnees will be told upon their arrival in Syria that they must report to a recruitment division office within 15 days. Those who do not report for service within the deadline will have their names put on a wanted list.” ¹⁵

In July 2023, the *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)* reported that “Refugees surveyed have mostly said they fear returning because of the security

⁸ iMMAP (17 September 2023) Post-Earthquake Perspective Challenges and Strategies for Humanitarian Aid in Northwest Syria, p.27

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (10 July 2023) “No end in sight”: torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ Syrian Network For Human Rights (SNHR) (7 July 2023) Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in June and the First Half of 2023

¹² ibid

¹³ Danish Immigration Service (7 July 2023) Syria: Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs

situation in the country and the risks they run of extortion, being arrested and imprisoned, being conscripted and sent to the front lines, alongside a critical lack of livelihood and work opportunities. Very small numbers from the over 7 million Syrians who fled abroad are returning.”¹⁴

A report published by the *US Department of State* in June 2023 states that: “In addition, there were reports the regime deceived and potentially coerced returning refugees into military service. An NGO reported the government and government-aligned armed groups subjected women, men, and children in detention to conditions amounting to sexual slavery.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (5 July 2023) Statement by Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (July 2023)

¹⁵ US Department of State (15 June 2023) Trafficking in Persons Report 2023: Syria

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