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BRIEFING: SECURITY SITUATION FACING RETURNEES

Four Cases of Human Rights Violations Against Recently Returned Syrian Refugees Highlight How Syria is Still Not Safe.

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Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

ACHR has followed four cases of Syrians who have recently returned to Syria following the fall of the Assad Regime in December 2024. Cases include Syrian returnees who were killed, died in detention and later found with signs of torture, or were subjected to enforced disappearance and/or arbitrarily detained upon their return to Syria without any subsequent contact with their families. Despite persistent narratives portraying Syria as a safe place to return, these documented cases highlight the serious risks returnees continue to face, alongside other security risks shape their willingness to return.

DETAILS OF THE CASES:

1. Nourredine al-Labbad (Syrian): On 12 March 2025, he was shot dead in Al-Sanamayn in Daraa Governorate, after returning from France in January 2025 to settle in his hometown. He was shot by an unidentified gunman inside his home along with his brother. Ha was a diplomat who defected from the Syrian regime in 2013. He later represented the opposition in Paris and was involved in human rights work and peaceful protests in many events linked to the Syrian revolution. The perpetrators and motives remain unknown.

2. Rani Muhammad al-Masalmah (Syrian): On 29 July 2025, he was arrested in Daraa after returning from Germany to Syria in mid-June 2025. Reports indicate that he was kidnapped by an armed group in Daraa and then handed over to the Syrian General Security Directorate, which later transferred him to the Al-Fayhaa Security Branch in Damascus. His family has confirmed that all communication with him ceased after he was handed over to the security services. They fear he may have been subjected to torture or enforced disappearance. There are also suspicions that he was killed due to the lack of information about his whereabouts.

3. Yusuf al-Labbad (Syrian): On 30 July 2025, he died while being held in a detention center in Damascus under the control of the security forces affiliated to the Ministry of Interior. He was detained and declared dead three days after his return to Syria from Germany on 27 July. According to his family, he was arrested by a security patrol on 29 July while he was at a mosque in Damascus. The following day, his body was handed over to his family and bore clear signs of torture, including bruises and wounds across his entire body. Despite indirect pressure on his family, information indicated that General Security was responsible for his death, while Syrian authorities avoided handling the case transparently in public discourse, offering only a vague recorded promise shared on social media, made by Interior Minister Anas Khattab to his mother residing in Germany.

4. Kindi al-Aday (Syrian): On 3 August 2025, his body was found hanged inside his apartment in the Al-Joua neighborhood in Deir ez-Zor city, roughly one month after his return from Germany. According to a report by a correspondent for a local newspaper, the body showed signs of torture. Local media described him as one of the most prominent peaceful activists from Deir ez-Zor province. While the circumstances of his killing remain unclear at the time of this statement, he had previously published a social media post criticizing the interim authority led by Ahmed al-Sharaa.

The cases above are different in nature and vary in terms of recorded violations; yet they represent how significant security threats facing Syrian returnees, including gross violations such as torture, enforced disappearance, and arbitrary detention are still being registered in Syria. While the cases are grave and concerning, they do not yet amount to widespread, state-sponsored violations. Rather, they underscore a fragmented security environment characterized by weak actual state control, erosion of monopoly over violence, and the ongoing ability of diverse actors to commit violations with impunity. The cases include unknown perpetrators — as in the cases of Kindi al-Aday and Nourredine al-Labbad; as well as actors linked to various security entities, including the current interim government, as in the case of Youssef al-Labbad.

ONGOING SECURITY THREATS IN SYRIA:

In addition to the documented violations above, several security threats and safety risks continue to shape the security landscape in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. These deeply impact Syrians everyday lives and shape the way refugees assess their willingness to return to Syria.

Significant security incidents include the massacres and sectarian violence in the Sahel targeting Alawites in March 2025[1]. A committee appointed by the interim government to investigate the attacks recently announced its findings in July and found that more than 1,400 people (mostly civilians) were killed and 298 suspects involved in serious violations were identified. The committee has been accused of lacking independence and impartiality, as it did not implicate the interim government forces despite contrary claims by human rights groups.[2] These massacres led to new waves of displacement to neighbouring countries, with an estimated 40,000 new refugees fleeing into Lebanon.[3]

Also in July, a local incident between a Druze man and members of a Bedouin tribe escalated into significant violence in the Druze-majority southern province of As-Sweida. The incident escalated into widespread violence between the two communities including widespread human rights violations, the intervention of the interim government forces (who have also been accused of involvement in human rights violations) and the illegal intervention of Israel including airstrike attacks on the capital Damascus.[4] Tensions remain high with a number of piecemeal ceasefires, staggered humanitarian aid access and large-scale internal displacement of over 176,000 people (mostly within As-Sweida Governorate).[5] Recently, the interim government announced a the formation of a committee to investigate the "As-Sweida incidents", which was widely rejected by the residents of As-Sweida.[6]

Security incidents targeting minorities also occured earlier in April in Sahnaya, Ashrafieh and Jaramana, towns with a large Druze population located on the outskirts of Damascus.[7] Furthermore, a terror bombing in a Greek Orthodox church near Damascus in June highlighted the continued ability of terror groups to launch targeted attacks.[8] Other security incidents such as kidnappings, revenge attacks and housing land and property (HLP) violations have also been recorded across Syria. Further, gender-based attacks (including of a sectarian nature) have also been recorded. According to Amnesty, since February, there are at least 36 credible reports of Alawite women and girls who have been abducted and kidnapped by unidentified individuals[9] and media sources have recorded at least 80 Druze women who have disappeared in As-Swieda.[10]

Syria continues to face severe security fragmentation and various security vacuums across the country allowing individuals and armed groups to continue to operate with impunity. Israeli incursions in the south of Syria and continued airstrikes further de-stabilize the country and the continued existence of armed groups further fragments the security landscape. In addition, Syria continues to face significant challenges that undermine safety conditions including a large-scale internal displacement crisis, significant and widescale destruction and damage to homes, critical infrastructure and agricultural lands, contamination of explosive remnants of war, housing land and property violations, a weak economy and a large-scale humanitarian crisis that is ongoing – all of which undermine safe and durable conditions within Syria and pose significant protection risks. As stated by UN Deputy Special Envoy Najat Rochdi in June, "the risks of further escalation in the region are not hypothetical – they are immediate, severe, and risk unravelling the fragile progress toward peace and recovery in Syria."[11]

SYRIA IS STILL NOT SAFE FOR WIDESCALE REFUGEE RETURNS:

The Assad regime was a key security issue for millions of Syrian refugees and a main obstacle to their safe return - gross human rights violations facing returnees included forced conscription, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings and executions and torture.[12][13] Since the fall of the regime, Syrians have expressed optimism to return, but many continue to feel concerned about the lack of uncertainty in Syria including the security situation. A recent report by UPINION (sample: 214 refugees in Lebanon) clarifies return intentions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon indicating that only 12% of those interviewed planned to return to Syria and 50% expressed "no desire to return to Syria."[14] A return intention study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) covering over 3,000 Syrian households (representing more than 17,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye) produced similar findings, indicting that 29% do currently intend to return and the majority either remain unsure (37%), or do not intend to return at all (34%).[15]

In addition, returnees to Syria have consistently reported severe economic hardship and lack of access to basic services such as electricity, clean water, healthcare and education. Many face difficulties to secure housing due to widespread destruction and high rental costs, while job opportunities remain scarce and salaries are insufficient to meet daily needs.[16]

CONCLUSION:

As highlighted in the four documented cases above, Syrian returnees continue to face human rights violations upon their return including torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary arrest. The cases, along with ongoing significant security risks inside Syria, seriously challenge the notion that Syria is safe. Security risks deeply factor into how Syrians can live their lives and shape refugees' intention and willingness to return. Furthermore, security concerns cannot be seen as independent from the political landscape; without genuine justice and accountability that is deemed to be inclusive and comprehensive – addressing truth and reconciliation with significant institutional reform and addressing the legacy of gross human rights violations – conditions will not be of a durable nature. Sustainable political stability and the necessary conditions associated with it remain a primary demand of Syrians and are deeply linked to the ability of those who wish to return to do so safely, voluntarily, and with dignity.

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15-https://www.rescue.org/report/syrians-move-regional-refugee-intentions-briefing
16-ACHR Report: Return without guarantees, 18 July 2025: https://achrights.org/en/2025/07/18/15826/

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@ACHRights
info@achrights.org