

July 16, 2019

The Honorable Secretary Michael Pompeo
Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan
Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20016

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Acting Secretary McAleenan:

We the 46 undersigned human rights, immigration, humanitarian, and advocacy organizations write to you today to urge you to **renew and redesignate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syria**. The current 6,900 Syrian TPS holders are hardworking, dedicated, and innovative individuals, and include everyone from a physician in Santa Clara to a small business owner in Kalamazoo to an IT specialist in West Virginia.¹ They have, in their short time in this country, enriched our national fabric deeply, reflected positively on our diverse social heritage, and contributed immensely to our economy.

In March 2012, in response to an escalating and now-unprecedented humanitarian and human rights crisis, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in consultation with other government agencies, designated the Syrian Arab Republic for TPS after deeming that “there exist[ed] extraordinary and temporary conditions in Syria that prevent Syrian nationals from returning in safety, and that permitting such aliens to remain temporarily in the United States would not be contrary to the national interest of the United States.”² When making the designation, DHS pointed to a number of factors inside Syria which persist today, including but not limited to: the violent repression and killing of citizens who express peaceful dissent, arbitrary detentions and disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, wide-scale displacement, and limited or non-existent access to humanitarian services.

Since the original designation, the extraordinary circumstances upon which the TPS designation was based have continued and in some areas of the country, worsened. To date, more than 500,000 Syrians have been killed, more than 5.6 million have been made refugees, and 6.6 million have been internally displaced across Syria.³ Active hostilities continue as a result of barrel bombings, shellings, and chemical weapons attacks; at least 8.2 million Syrian civilians are living in areas with ongoing hostilities or explosive hazards.⁴ In the past two months alone, over 320,000 people have been displaced and at least 37 schools and 26 healthcare facilities have been destroyed as a result of intensified attacks in the northwest.⁵ While the vast majority of violence throughout the last eight years has been and continues to be perpetrated by the Syrian regime and Russia, Syrians also remain at risk of violence and abuses committed by other parties to the conflict, including ISIS, HTS, and other armed factions.

¹ According to a survey of 80 Syrian TPS holders conducted by the American Relief Coalition for Syria, over 65 percent of those surveyed hold a master's or doctorate degree.

² Designation of Syrian Arab Republic for Temporary Protected Status, 77 Fed. Reg. 61,19026 (Mar. 29, 2012), <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/10/03/fr29mar12.pdf>.

³ “Syria Emergency,” UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

⁴ “The Syria Crisis in Numbers,” UNOCHA, March 2018, <https://unocha.exposure.co/the-syria-crisis-in-numbers>.

⁵ “Statement by Panos Moumtzis,” UNOCHA, June 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RHC%20Statement%20on%20aid%20worker%20death_ambulance_21%20June%202019.pdf.

The infrastructure and basic services necessary to enable Syrians to return to Syria are non-existent. On average, one in three houses and half of all medical facilities in Syria have been destroyed. Legislation passed by the Syrian regime, including Law No. 10 (2018), threatens to dispossess property owners of their land and contribute to the forced demographic change initiated during the war. The country continues to suffer from significant gas shortages⁶ and reports of unsafe conditions, including theft and kidnappings, are widespread due to the presence of militias and unregulated armed groups.⁷ The Department of State's Syria Travel Advisory, which was updated most recently in April 2019, states: "No part of Syria is safe from violence. Kidnappings, the use of chemical warfare, shelling, and aerial bombardment pose significant risk of death or serious injury. The destruction of infrastructure, housing, medical facilities, schools, and power and water utilities has also increased hardships inside the country."⁸

In addition to facing abysmal humanitarian conditions, those who have been forced to prematurely return to Syria face severe threats to their life, as human rights abuses continue across the country. According to the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, 75 percent of returning Syrians have been "harassed at checkpoints, in government registry offices or in the street, conscripted into the military despite promises they would be exempted, or arrested."⁹ In some cases, returnees have been disappeared, and even killed.¹⁰ Reports by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic have documented egregious detention practices, extrajudicial killings, the weaponization of sieges, and sexual and gender-based violence, among other abuses.¹¹

The United States must demonstrate leadership in upholding international norms. Forcing Syrians to prematurely return to a country in which they face continued violence; in which they risk arrest, torture, and in some cases, even death for the most mundane forms of peaceful expression; and in which they lack the basic necessities and infrastructure to survive would constitute a clear violation of non-refoulement, the fundamental legal principle which commits a state not to expel or return refugees.¹² Failing to extend and redesignate TPS for Syria would result in these forced returns and would constitute a clear violation not only of the principles upon which this nation was founded, but also of U.S. domestic law.

Taking into account the extraordinary conditions that make it entirely untenable to prematurely return Syrian refugees and displaced persons, we urge you to extend and redesignate TPS for Syria in order to guarantee that these necessary protections extend both to Syrians who currently maintain this status, as well as those who have been forced to flee more recently due to continued violence and abuses.

⁶ "Waiting for a place in the gas line": Residents of government-held Syria voice discontent over fuel, electricity shortages," Syria Direct, January 30, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98waiting-for-a-place-in-the-gas-line%E2%80%99-residents-of-government-held-syria-voice-discontent-over-fuel-electricity-shortages/>.

⁷ "Indiscreet Kidnappings in Damascus," Enab Baladi, January 8, 2019, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/01/indiscreet-kidnappings-in-damascus/>.

⁸ Syria Travel Advisory, U.S. Department of State (April, 2019). <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/syria-travel-advisory.html>.

⁹ "Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation," June 2, 2019, <https://t.co/2bdF19fpGm>.

¹⁰ "A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees," Foreign Policy, February 6, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/a-deadly-welcome-awaits-syrias-returning-refugees/>.

¹¹ "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," UN Human Rights Council, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>.

¹² "The 1951 Refugee Convention," <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned
(listed in alphabetical order)

Adhikaar

African Communities Together

Alianza Americas

Americans for a Free Syria

American Relief Coalition for Syria

Anti-Defamation League

Arab American Association of New York

Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)

CARE USA

Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Boston

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN-LA)

Church World Service

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries

Engage Action

Family Action Network Movement

Families Rights Network

Farmworker Association of Florida

Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ

Hanan Foundation

Human Rights First

Interfaith Worker Justice

Karam Foundation

Mercy-USA for Aid and Development

Mercy Corps

Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees

Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)

National Council of Churches

National TPS Alliance

New York Immigration Coalition

Norwegian Refugee Council USA

NuDay Syria

OneAmerica

People Demand Change

Pro-justice

Refugees International

Relief International

Save the Children

Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Syrian American Council

Syrian Emergency Task Force

Together We Remember

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

Win Without War

Zakat Foundation