

January 9, 2024

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 2052

Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

**RE: ORGANIZATIONS CALL FOR EXTENSION AND REDESIGNATION OF
TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS FOR SYRIA**

Dear President Biden, Secretary Mayorkas, and Secretary Blinken,

The undersigned 51 national, state, and local immigration and humanitarian organizations write to urge the extension and redesignation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syria for 18 months. The designation of TPS for Syria is set to expire on March 31, 2024, with the decision date coming up on January 30, 2024.

War-torn Syria continues to endure bombings, armed clashes, kidnappings, natural disasters, disease, and various human rights abuses and crimes against humanity. These include extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture. The earthquakes in early February 2023 devastated the already-fragile infrastructure throughout many parts of Syria and exacerbated a worsening humanitarian crisis. These temporary conditions make it impossible for Syrian TPS-holders to return safely to their country, and thus warrant the extension and redesignation of TPS for Syria.

I. Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

The United States can designate a foreign state for TPS if the state is experiencing ongoing armed conflict, a natural disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions that prevent nationals from the designated country from temporarily returning to that state safely.¹ TPS is a life-saving humanitarian protection; it allows its beneficiaries to temporarily stay in the United States during the designated period and receive work permits. On October 1, 2022, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) extended and redesignated TPS for Syria for 18 months.² The armed conflict that originally warranted the designation of TPS for Syria persists. With the country's humanitarian situation worsening, conditions continue to warrant an extension and redesignation of TPS for Syria.

II. Conditions in Syria Merit TPS Extension and Redesignation

A. Ongoing Armed Conflict

This year witnessed “the most significant” escalation of hostilities in the country since 2019, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).³ Since October 5, 2023, fighting in north-west Syria has killed at least 92 civilians – nearly 40 percent of them children – with over 400 others injured.⁴ More than 120,000 people were displaced as a result of

the shelling and airstrikes, and at least ten percent remain displaced in temporary shelters.⁵ Civilian facilities and critical infrastructure in north-west Syria have been significantly impacted by the escalation of hostilities, with 40 health facilities, 27 schools, and over 20 water systems damaged by the violence.⁶

In eastern Syria, heavy clashes continue to result in civilian casualties and damage to critical infrastructure, including water stations and schools. About 27,000 people remain displaced since late August, when the hostilities began.⁷ Communities in regime-held areas of Syria have also continued to clash with regime forces or Iran-backed militias, leading to casualties and temporary siege conditions.⁸ According to the U.N. Deputy Special Envoy to Syria, “the 12-year-long conflict [has] continued unabated, with airstrikes, bombardment, clashes and assassination attempts in several places.”⁹ Syria thus continues to undergo an armed conflict and extraordinary and temporary conditions that pose a significant threat to the safety of Syrian TPS-holders if they are forced to return.

B. Extraordinary and Temporary Conditions

If Syrian TPS recipients are forced to return to Syria, they also face the risk of arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, torture, and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (“ill-treatment”). All major actors in the conflict continue to carry out documented acts of these crimes to various degrees. An estimated 135,000 to 150,000 civilians in Syria are detained and forcibly disappeared, with at least 221 cases of arbitrary arrest recorded in November 2023.¹⁰ Many Syrians abroad who returned or were deported to Syria have been arrested and/or disappeared upon their return.¹¹ Authorities also continued to unlawfully confiscate property and restrict access to areas of origin for returning Syrians.¹²

In its July 2023 report to the U.N. Human Rights Council, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) found that torture and ill-treatment are still “a significant risk” in all parts of Syria, but particularly in regime-held areas, for “Syrian nationals abroad who return.”¹³ Since March 2011 and as of October 2023, at least 15,300 identified individuals have died as a result of torture in Syria.¹⁴ Corruption and extortion have also proliferated against the background of the deepening economic crisis and state decline in Syria. The COI found that regime forces in Syria “seem to be institutionalizing extortion” as they have targeted Syrians returning from abroad with phony charges and steep payments as conditions for their release.¹⁵ Several Syrian nationals reported to COI that they were either arrested or kidnapped upon their return and held, sometimes “entirely outside the legal system,” until their families paid thousands of dollars for their release.¹⁶ General criminal kidnappings for ransom have also spiked and taken place in the absence of any intervention by police forces.¹⁷

C. Environmental Disasters

Natural and environmental disasters this year have exacerbated already-stressed civil and medical infrastructures and led to the internal displacement of thousands of Syrians. On February 6, 2023, a catastrophic 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern Türkiye, with an epicenter located near the border of northern Syria, which was followed by more than 11,000 aftershocks across the region in the following three weeks.¹⁸ The series of earthquakes “created a disaster of colossal proportion” in the northern, central, and coastal parts of Syria, impacting at least 8.8 million people across the country, including “almost every person living in north-west Syria.”¹⁹ In the direct aftermath, at least 5,791 people were killed by the earthquake and more than 10,485 individuals were injured.²⁰

As of March 20, 2023, 1,869 buildings had been totally destroyed, with 8,731 buildings partially destroyed.²¹ Following the earthquake, a dam collapsed in northwestern Syria, causing the overflow of the Orontes River and leading to 1,000 houses flooding and 7,000 people evacuating.²² Moreover, only months after the earthquakes, fires burned across northwestern and coastal Syria, taxing an overstretched emergency response system.²³ These disasters have compounded pre-existing humanitarian issues and resulted in a substantial disruption of living conditions in Syria, which has not yet recovered from them.

D. Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis

If forced to return at this juncture, Syrian TPS-holders would face a country struggling with a ballooning humanitarian crisis and “severe, extreme, or catastrophic conditions,” which have contributed to a breakdown in state machinery and security.²⁴ The U.N. estimates that 15.3 million people need humanitarian assistance across Syria – a 5 percent increase from 2022.²⁵ There have been recent cholera outbreaks in Syria. Over 12 million people also lack regular access to sufficient food. Nonetheless, the U.N. World Food Program will end its main assistance program across war-torn Syria in January 2024. Of the 5.5 million people in Syria who had been receiving food assistance, the “unprecedented funding crisis” would cut aid to 2.5 million.²⁶ These temporary conditions, coupled with the damage to critical infrastructure and housing this year, have added to the country’s inability to reconstruct and provide for its citizens, much less adequately handle the return of Syrians from abroad.

III. Extension and Redesignation of TPS for Syria is in the United States Best Interest

An 18-month extension and redesignation of TPS for Syria aligns with U.S. commitments to support vulnerable Syrians. The United States remains the single largest humanitarian donor to the Syria crisis response.²⁷ USAID lists Syria as “the largest and most complex humanitarian crisis of our time, driving record levels of displacement.”²⁸ Moreover, Syrian TPS-holders, while unable to return to their homeland, are contributing to the U.S. economy and enriching U.S. communities, and many served as essential workers during the pandemic. Extending and redesignating TPS for Syria would not only be an appropriate use of your authority granted by Congress, but also a critical tool to meet both your administration’s goals to enhance our nation’s security, safety, and prosperity, and your commitments to the Syrian people.

IV. Conclusion

Syria remains in the midst of armed conflict, undergoing temporary deteriorating country conditions and humanitarian crises. We urge the administration to immediately extend and redesignate TPS for Syria for 18 months and request a timely publication of the Federal Register Notice to avoid employment disruptions and other hardships that result from any delays.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

African Communities Together (ACT)

Alianza Americas

Americans for a Free Syria

Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC)
Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project (ASAP)
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC)
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding
and Policy
Church World Service
Citizens for a Secure and Safe America (C4SSA)
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Franciscan Action Network
Haitian Bridge Alliance
Human Rights First
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Immigrants Act Now
Immigration Hub
International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)
Justice Action Center
MPower Change
Multifaith Alliance
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center (NILC)
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness
Pro Justice
Project ANAR
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
Syria Faith Initiative
Syrian American Council
Syrian Christians, Education Committee USA
Syrian Forum USA
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice

State and Local Organizations

Adhikaar for Human Rights & Social Justice

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House, Washington DC
Estrella del Paso
Florida Immigrant Coalition
Immigrant Defenders Law Center
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
Interfaith Welcome Coalition - San Antonio
Interfaith Welcome Coalition - San Antonio
Just Neighbors
Michigan Immigrant Rights Center
Mozaic
Nigerian Center
Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center

¹ INA § 244 (b)(1)(C).

² Extension and Redesignation of Syria for Temporary Protected Status
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/08/01/2022-16508/extension-and-redesignation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status>

³ “OCHA tells Security Council situation remains dire in Syria.” 2023. OCHA.

<https://www.unocha.org/news/ocha-tells-security-council-situation-remains-dire-syria>.

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⁴ Id.

⁵ “OCHA tells Security Council situation remains dire in Syria.” 2023. OCHA.

<https://www.unocha.org/news/ocha-tells-security-council-situation-remains-dire-syria>.

⁶ Id.

⁷ “Today's top news: Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria.” 2023. OCHA.

<http://unocha.org/news/todays-top-news-occupied-palestinian-territory-syria-1>.

⁸ E.g., قتل لى وجرحى للنظام خلال محاولة اقتحام حي سكني وسط "الرسنن" بريف حمص. 2023. شبكة شام الإخبارية.

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<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/syria-government-forces-must-lift-siege-on-civilians%20-in-predominantly-kurdish-areas-in-aleppo/>.

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- "Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situations in Syria." 2023. United States Mission to the United Nations. <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situations-in-syria-5/>
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- ²⁶ Kareem Chehayeb, "The World Food Program will end its main assistance program in Syria in January, affecting millions," December 4, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/syria-world-food-program-food-aid-5daed470afbb1761dffe19e1fc4a8520>.
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