



March 15, 2021 marked the ten-year anniversary of the day when the Syrian people took to the streets to demand their rights and call for an end to decades of oppression by the Assad regime. The results have been grievous. Over the past ten years, Syrians have been subjected to years-long sieges, arbitrary detentions, torture, mass displacement, and have been killed by the hundreds of thousands during indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial bombings. In response, millions were forced to flee both the violence of war and the threats posed to their lives and freedoms at the hands of Syria's security agencies, their allies, and non-state actors. Many sought and found refuge in neighboring countries and in Europe in hopes of securing their human rights and their rights for safety for themselves and their families. Denmark is now threatening this small bit of hard-won hope.

Military battles in Syria are now concentrated mainly in the north of the country, leading some to assert that it is perfectly safe for those who have been displaced to return. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth because nothing has really changed. Bashar Al Assad and his authoritarian regime are now in control of most of the country and still using force and fear to wield absolute power over the government and the population. Anyone who fled Syria, including everyday citizens, are considered 'terrorists' by the regime, leading to well-founded fears of persecution were they to return. The regime has publicly stated this sentiment, evidenced by the October 2017 statement by Issam Zahreddine, then a senior commander in the Syrian army: "To those who fled Syria to another country, I beg you don't ever return, because even if the government forgives you, we will never forgive or forget. I advise you not to come back, ever."

Many foreign governments acknowledge these realities. In the past few months, for instance, the Dutch and Canadian governments have both taken firm stands against the ongoing human rights violations in Syria. In September 2020, the Dutch government announced that it is seeking to hold Syria responsible under international law for "gross human rights violations," in a process that could ultimately trigger a case at the United Nations' highest court. Similarly, this month, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs [announced](#) that Canada "has requested formal negotiations, under the United Nations Convention Against Torture, to hold Syria accountable for the countless human rights violations it has inflicted on the Syrian people since 2011." These initiatives recognize the ongoing fear experienced daily by Syrians of being arrested, detained and tortured, as has been the fate of 100,000 Syrians over the course of the 10 years of conflict.¹

¹ The violations have been comprehensively documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and by the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

Yet, in stark contrast, since 2019, Denmark has been declaring parts of Syria “safe” and recently embarked on an egregious campaign of revoking or denying extensions of temporary residence permits granted to Syrians who were assessed to have fled solely due to the generalized situation of violence (section 7.3 Danish Aliens Act) rather than based on an individual risk of the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment on return (section 7.2 Danish Aliens Act). Last month, it denied applications to around 189 Syrians who had found refuge there and thought they had settled into a stable and secure future. Approximately 500 other Syrians in Denmark await a similar fate. Although Denmark cannot deport individuals who refuse to return, those who have lost their temporary residency status can be forced to reside in so-called [return centers](#), separated from their families, and can lose their cash allowance “if they do not co-operate on their departure.”

Denmark’s decision sets a hazardous precedent for other countries who host refugees. It risks undermining a cornerstone of international refugee protection: the principle of non-refoulement, which guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. To mask what it is doing, the Danish government is claiming that it is not breaching its obligation for non-refoulement and is merely asking Syrians whose documents have not been renewed to voluntarily return to Syria or risk being moved to deportation camps. This from a country who was among the original 26 states who drafted the Refugee Convention in 1951 and whose citizen, Mr. Knud Larsen, served as Conference President.

It is no secret to anyone that there is no place in Syria that can be considered a safe place, regardless of the authorities controlling it, and therefore it is not logical or moral to work to return Syrians to any region in Syria, let alone the areas controlled by the Assad regime. We urge the Danish government, the international community, and all countries hosting refugees to consider their humanitarian duty towards a people that has already suffered immensely over the past ten years and who are desperately seeking safety and security for their families.

Signatories of the Bridges of Truth project:

- The International Center for Transitional Justice
- Center for Civil Society and Democracy
- Badael Foundation
- The Day After
- Women Now
- Dawlaty
- The Syrian Institute for Justice
- The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
- Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights

The Bridges of Truth project is the result of the collaborative efforts of nine civil society organizations that have been working together in a partnership for four years. This is the group’s second major project and one of several products and initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the plight of Syrian victims and inspiring action to promote their rights and holistic justice for the crimes they have experienced. Each organization brings to the group a different mandate and unique set of strengths, but all are focused on promoting justice in the face of the widespread human rights violations being committed against Syrians.

Please direct inquiries to Diana Alsip (salsip@ictj.org)