

January 18, 2018

The Honorable Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen
Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20016

The Honorable Secretary Rex Tillerson
Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Nielsen and Secretary Tillerson:

We the undersigned human rights, immigration, advocacy, and faith groups and organizations write to you today to urge you to renew and redesignate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syrians in the United States. Syrian TPS recipients include innovative entrepreneurs, dedicated teachers, and hardworking employees who contribute directly to our country's economy, enrich our national fabric, and reflect positively on our diverse social heritage.

In response to a mounting humanitarian crisis and the commission of egregious rights abuses, in March 2012, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) first designated Syria for TPS on the basis that "there exist 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."¹ Explaining its decision, the TPS notice cited the Syrian government's excessive use of force, arbitrary executions, detentions, torture, repression, and killing of thousands of Syrians as a reaction to peaceful protests.

Since then--and in a testament to the deteriorating humanitarian and human rights crisis in Syria--TPS for Syrians has been extended and redesignated by DHS three times. Today, as the armed conflict and extraordinary circumstances that first prompted the TPS designation and its subsequent extensions continue without question, we urge you to act yet again to honor our government's commitment to protecting the world's most vulnerable populations, in a move that is consistent with our national interests and in line with our government's assessments about Syria.

Since the war first broke out in Syria, more than 500,000 Syrians have been killed, at least 5.5 million Syrians have become registered refugees, and at least 6.1 million Syrians have been internally displaced. The State Department's January 2018 travel advisory confirms that unprecedented violence continues: "No part of Syria is safe from violence. Kidnappings, the use of chemical warfare, shelling, and aerial bombardment have significantly raised the 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."²

¹ 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>.

² US Department of State, Syria Travel Advisory, January 10, 2018, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/syria-travel-advisory.html>.

In the unlikely chance that Syrians who are returned to their country are able to evade becoming the target of barrel bombs, airstrikes, sieges, or chemical weapons attacks, they are likely to face arbitrary arrest or forced conscription by Syrian authorities. According to the 2016 State Department Human Rights Report, “on their return to the country...persons who unsuccessfully sought asylum in other countries...faced prosecution.”³ The government has routinely arrested dissidents and former citizens with no known political affiliation who attempted to return to the country after years or even decades of self-imposed exile. Anecdotes from the ground further confirm that the Syrian government has been arresting individuals perceived to be of fighting age, as well as forcibly recruiting child soldiers.

Syrians who are returned to their country will additionally be unable to access basic necessities, including food, water, electricity, and their original homes. The State Department reports that “the humanitarian needs inside Syria continue to outpace the international response,”⁴ a reality that is starkly demonstrated by the fact that the UN’s humanitarian response plan for Syria is only 51 percent funded.⁵

The brutal war crimes and crimes against humanity, widespread arrests and repression, and starvation and medical deteriorations that Syrians inside the country are subjected to on a regular basis make the return of TPS beneficiaries untenable and tantamount to a death sentence. The United States should not only extend, but redesignate TPS for Syria. This will ensure that Syrians have a safe, legal place to reside until the situation in Syria stabilizes; until the ongoing armed conflict comes to a clear end; and until the extraordinary circumstances at hand subside.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned
(listed in alphabetical order)

Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice

Alianza Americas

American Relief Coalition for Syria

Americans for a Free Syria

Anti-Defamation League

Arab Resource & Organizing Center

³ U.S. Department of State, Syria 2016 Human Rights Report, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf>

⁴ US Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Syrian Crisis, September 21, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274360.htm>.

⁵ OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, <http://www.unocha.org/syria>.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta

Center for Victims of Torture

Church World Service

CLUE, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice

Coalition for a Democratic Syria

American Syriac Union

Association of Free Syrians

Syrian American Council

Syrian Christians for Peace

Syrian Emergency Task Force

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces

Council on American-Islamic Relations

Emgage Foundation

Farmworker Association of Florida

Florida Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy

Florida Immigrant Coalition

Franciscan Action Network

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

HIAS

Human Rights First

Human Rights Initiative of North Texas

Immigrant Justice Corps

Immigrant Legal Resource Center

Immigration Issues Committee of Herndon-Reston Indivisible

Interfaith Worker Justice

International Institute of New England

International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) at the Urban Justice Center

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees

Muslim Advocates

Muslim Public Affairs Council

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Center for Transgender Equality

National Council of Jewish Women

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

National Immigrant Justice Center

National Immigration Law Center

New York Immigration Coalition

OneAmerica (Washington State)

Oxfam

Presbyterian Church (USA)

RAICES

Refugees International

SEIU 32BJ

Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (SIREN)

Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies

Syrian Forum USA

The Syria Campaign

Together We Remember

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

USC International Human Rights Clinic

Valley Syria Relief Committee

Veterans for American Ideals

We Belong Together

Win Without War