

To the attention of Süleyman SOYLU  
Minister of the Interior  
T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı  
06580 Çankaya  
Republic of Turkey, Ankara

Paris, 19 August 2019

Dear Minister,

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international NGO with consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, would like to express to you its deep concern about the forced return to Syria of Syrian journalists who had sought refuge in your country, and about the grave risks that these forced returns pose to their physical safety.

RSF is aware of at least three cases of Syrian journalists who have been forced by the Turkish authorities to return to dangerous areas in their country. Before being expelled, at least one of them was coerced by the Turkish authorities into signing a statement saying he wanted to return to Syria.

### 1) Empirical evidence

The three cases are detailed below:

- **Obieda Al Omar**

Mr. Al Omar is a Syrian journalist who had sought refuge in Turkey and was living there without a residence permit. He was arrested in Antakya on 26 July 2019 and was forced to sign a Turkish-language document for which he was refused a translation but which proved to be a “voluntary return to Syria” request form

Mr. Al Omar worked as a correspondent for five Syrian media outlets: *Syria Revolutionaries Gathering*, *Radio Fresh*, *Mobader magazine*, *Horrya Press* and *Al Etihad Press*. Because of his journalistic activities and his critical articles, he had been threatened in Syria by two radical armed groups, Jound al-Aqsa in 2015 and Hay’at Tahrir AlSham (HTS) in 2017. He first sought refuge in Turkey in early 2019 but was arrested when he tried to leave for Europe, and was expelled to Syria. After returning to Turkey earlier in July, he was arrested on the 26th of that month and, on the basis of the “voluntary return to Syria” statement, he was sent to Idlib, where HTS has a very strong presence

It is very disturbing that this journalist has been sent to Idlib, given the threats he has received from this violent extremist group, which is ubiquitous in the Idlib region. In an indication of the danger to which he is exposed in Idlib, two journalists – Hamoud Jneed and *Radio Fresh* founder Raed Fares – were killed there in November 2018.

- **Hussein Al Taweel**

Mr. Al Taweel is a Syrian journalist from Idlib who had entered Turkey in search of refuge in February 2019. He was arrested in June 2019 in Reyhanli (a town near Syrian border) while trying to reach a province where he could get an official Turkish document recognizing his refugee status (a document

known as the “Kimlik”). The Turkish authorities sent him back to Syria without making him sign a “voluntary return to Syria” statement. He has since returned to Turkey.

Mr. Al Taweel, who worked for the *Deir Al-Zor TV* channel in 2014-2015 and for the *Al Jisr TV* channel from 2015 to 2019, was subjected to threats by the armed extremist group Jabhat Al Nosra in Idlib. He left for Turkey in February 2019 so that his son could receive medical care.

- **Yarub Al Daly**

Mr. Al Daly is a Syrian journalist from Homs governorate, where he worked for the *Syrian Net* and *Syrian Mubasher Network* news websites and for local information groups. In 2016, he appeared in an *Al Jazeera* TV documentary about negotiations between Russia and the forces opposed to the Syrian regime. After receiving threats from an armed group in the Homs region, he left Syria in early 2019 and sought refuge in the Turkish city of Osmaniye.

He was on the point of obtaining the official Turkish document recognizing his refugee status, the “Kimlik,” when he was arrested on 9 July 2019 and was expelled to Azaz, a city on the Syrian side of the border. When he tried to reenter Turkey, he was arrested by the Turkish army at the border and, he says, was subjected to physical and psychological torture before being sent back to Syria. Since his arrival in Azaz, he has been threatened by an armed group with a presence there.

## 2) Concerns and recommendations

While we have so far documented only three cases of journalists being forcibly returned to Syria – and only one case of a journalist being coerced into signing a “voluntary return” statement – many Syrian refugees who are not journalists have been subjected to such procedures and we are concerned that the number of journalists will increase.

Turkey claims that it is not returning any Syrians against their will and that only those who express the wish to go back are being helped to reach “safe areas.” But the reality is quite different, according to many international actors<sup>[1]</sup>, who say that Turkey threatens refugees with imprisonment until they sign a “voluntary return” statement or even coerces them into signing these forms, and then sends them back to areas in Syria where the conflict is still very active.

Some refugees are subjected to **verbal and physical violence** and those who refuse to sign these forms can continue to be detained for long periods. Despite being properly registered in Turkey, some refugees have even had their residence permits confiscated and have been forced to sign the voluntary return form. This seems to have become standard practice on the part of the Turkish authorities, who have already for a long time been refusing to allow Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey to be registered as refugees by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The forcible return to Syria of those who fled the country constitutes a **serious danger to their safety**. According to some reports, men aged 18 to 42 who are sent back to government-controlled areas either end up in the army or in prison for “abandoning their country.” Journalist sent to areas controlled by armed extremist groups are at the mercy of those whose violence they often condemned.

While it is undeniable that **Turkey has played a major role in receiving millions of people** who had to flee the war in Syria, it cannot be acceptable to allow journalists to be sent back to dangerous areas against their will and without their knowledge, in violation of Turkey’s international obligations.

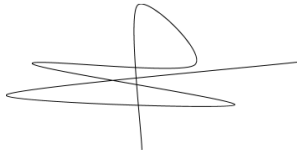
We therefore respectfully urge you, as Minister of the Interior, to ensure respect for the 1951 Geneva Convention, to which Turkey is party, with regard to the Syrian journalists who have sought refuge in

your country. This convention enshrines the **principle of non-refoulement**, under which refugees cannot be sent back to a country where they risk persecution, torture or mistreatment or where their lives or freedom are seriously threatened. We also ask you to put a stop to the use of harassment and violence against refugees to pressure them to return to their country, and to put a stop to the practice of coercing refugees into signing a voluntary return statement.

We also urge you, as Minister of the Interior, to do everything in your power to enable Syrian journalists to continue residing in Turkey and to continue their journalistic activities there. Turkey can make a major contribution to Syria's recovery by allowing Syrian journalists to continue shedding light on the reality of the conflict. Only independent information that is free of all pressure will enable the Syrian community to rebuild.

Sincerely,

Thomas Friang,  
Head of the Advocacy Global Division,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.