

Jan. 15, 2021

Biden-Harris Transition
1401 Constitution Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

RE: 113 STATE, LOCAL, AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS CALL FOR 18-MONTH EXTENSION AND REDESIGNATION OF TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS FOR SYRIA

Dear Biden-Harris Transition Team:

The undersigned 113 organizations — from across the community and legal services, human rights, humanitarian, labor and business, faith, and academic sectors — call for an 18-month extension and redesignation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syria. TPS for Syria is due to expire March 31, 2021,¹ leaving the 7,000 current TPS holders at risk of deportation to a protracted conflict and humanitarian disaster, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to protecting current TPS holders, we emphasize the necessity of redesignation in order to safeguard the lives of Syrians who have arrived in the United States since 2016. Given the country conditions in Syria, the maximum protection of an 18-month extension and redesignation is both legally and morally warranted.

By statute, the Secretary of Homeland Security must make a decision on TPS for Syria by January 30, 2021.² We call for a decision, publication of a Federal Register Notice, at least a 180-day re-registration period, and launch of a public education campaign to inform the impacted community by or on that date.

I. Ongoing armed conflict and extraordinary conditions make safe return to Syria impossible:

The civil war that initially justified TPS for Syria in 2012 has transformed but continues on. The Syrian conflict has claimed over half a million lives, internally displacing 6.2 million people and creating another 5.6 million refugees, which combined accounts for more than half of the country's pre-war population.³ At least 50 Syrian and Russian indiscriminate and unlawful air and ground attacks in Northwest Syria have destroyed roads, hospitals, schools, markets, and homes and killed 1,600 people between April 2019 and March 2020.⁴ The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported at least 882 attacks on civilian infrastructure in and around the city of Idlib between April 2019 to May 2020, "including 220 places of worship, 218 educational facilities, 93 healthcare facilities, 86 Syrian Civil Defense (SCD) centers, and 52 markets."⁵ In addition to the unlawful and indiscriminate attacks, civilians continue to be subject to arbitrary arrests and torture by the Syrian government and other actors.⁶ The Syrian Network for Human

¹ 84 Fed. Reg. 49751 (Sept. 23, 2019), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/23/2019-20457/extension-of-the-designation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status>.

² INA § 244 (b)(3)(A); 84 Fed. Reg. 49751 (Sept. 23, 2019), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/23/2019-20457/extension-of-the-designation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status>.

³ "The Current Situation in Syria: A USIP Fact Sheet," United States Institute of Peace (Aug. 26, 2020), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/08/current-situation-syria>.

⁴ "Syria conflict: 'Flagrant' war crimes committed in Idlib battle, UN says," BBC News (Aug. 18, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53322857>; "Targeting Life in Idlib" Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure," Human Rights Watch (Oct. 15, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure#>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Syria conflict: 'Flagrant' war crimes committed in Idlib battle, UN says, BBC News (Aug. 18 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53322857>.

Rights documented at least 947 cases of arbitrary detention and forced disappearances in the first half of 2020 alone.⁷

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria.⁸ Though a ceasefire in March 2020 initiated some to travel home, many returned to find themselves victims of decimated infrastructure, water and food shortages, bombings, and limited access to healthcare and education.⁹ The Syrian economy is one third the size it was before the war, and an estimated 80 percent of Syrians now live in poverty.¹⁰ Many Syrians keep their money in neighboring Lebanese banks, and a severe Lebanese financial crisis, exacerbated by this year's explosion of the Port of Beirut, has tanked the Syrian pound to as much as 3,500 to the dollar on the black market and will continue to weigh on Syria's economy.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has further destabilized already unstable conditions, risking the resurgence of ISIS and other violent non-state actors and further undermining any attempts at peace.¹² Investigators from the United Nations warn that conditions are "a perfect storm is in the making" as the economic and public health crises compound each other in the midst of continuing violence.¹³ The virus remains out of control in the country as Syria struggles to provide adequate testing or contact tracing for known cases and healthcare to those that need it.¹⁴ Thousands of internally displaced people and detainees live in overcrowded conditions with little access to the sanitation measures necessary to stop the spread.¹⁵

II. Syria must be redesignated to protect human life:

Redesignation is a tool provided to the Secretary of Homeland Security in the TPS decision-making process allowing the Secretary to add or change reasons for a TPS designation and/or to provide protection to more recently arrived people by moving forward residence and physical presence requirements.¹⁶ Redesignation serves the underlying intent and principles that led Congress to create TPS: the U.S. will provide safe haven and not return people to countries where their lives or freedom would be at risk.¹⁷ This risk and need for protection is the same whether a person is a current TPS holder or more recently arrived from a country in turmoil.

Prior to the Trump administration, TPS for Syria had been both extended and redesignated at every decision.¹⁸ The need for redesignation of TPS for Syria has existed for the past four years, despite the failure to redesignate, and is even more urgent today. Syria must be redesignated to

⁷ At least 947 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests/ Detention Documented in Syria in the First Half of 2020, Syrian Network for Human Rights (July 2, 2020), <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2020/07/02/55151/>.

⁸ "UN officials denounce bombings in northern Syria," UN News (Nov. 25, 2020), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1078482>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ben Hubbard, "Syria's Economy Collapses Even as Civil War Winds to a Close," New York Times (June 15, 2020),

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/world/middleeast/syria-economy-assad-makhlouf.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Current Situation," USIP, 2020.

¹³ "Syria conflict" BBC News, 2020.

¹⁴ "Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 13 - 9 December 2020," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Health Organization, Dec. 9, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-covid-19-response-update-no-13-9-december-2020>.

¹⁵ Carla E. Humud and Christopher M. Blanchard, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, Congressional Research Service, RL33487, July 27, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>.

¹⁶ INA § 244(b)(1).

¹⁷ Jill Wilson, Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues (Oct. 26, 2020), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS20844>.

¹⁸ 78 Fed. Reg. 36223 (June 17, 2013), [federalregister.gov/documents/2013/06/17/2013-14101/extension-and-redesignation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2013/06/17/2013-14101/extension-and-redesignation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status); 80 Fed. Reg. 245 (Jan. 5, 2015), [federalregister.gov/documents/2015/01/05/2014-30871/extension-and-redesignation-of-the-syrian-arab-republic-for-temporary-protected-status](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2015/01/05/2014-30871/extension-and-redesignation-of-the-syrian-arab-republic-for-temporary-protected-status); 81 Fed. Reg. 50533 (Aug. 1, 2016), [federalregister.gov/documents/2016/08/01/2016-17933/extension-and-redesignation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/08/01/2016-17933/extension-and-redesignation-of-syria-for-temporary-protected-status).

protect Syrians in the United States who have arrived more recently than 2016 as the conflict continues and the humanitarian crisis continues to widen and deepen.

III. It is in the U.S. National Interest to Extend and Redesignate TPS for Syria:

As a country without the capacity or conditions for a safe, voluntary, and dignified return of nationals, TPS is vital as part of an ongoing humanitarian response and necessary to meet the Biden-Harris administration's stated goals on Syria. The danger of returning to Syria is well documented, with one study showing 75 percent of a group of 350 "had experienced arrest; harassment at government checkpoints, registry offices, and in the street; as well as conscription despite promises of exemption."¹⁹ The Biden-Harris administration has already committed in its Plan for Partnership with Arab American community to "protect vulnerable Syrians."²⁰ An 18 month extension and redesignation of TPS for Syria is essential to achieve this objective.

In addition to important foreign policy and humanitarian objectives, like all TPS holders, Syrians have the right to work in the United States, and are serving as essential workers during the pandemic, contributing to the economy, and enriching U.S. communities.²¹ Syrian immigrants in general are notable for their high rate of business ownership and for creating American jobs.²² Eleven percent of Syrian immigrants in the workforce are business owners, as opposed to 4 percent of all immigrants and 3 percent of native-born U.S. citizens owning businesses.²³

IV. Conclusion:

Thank you for your consideration of our request. As mentioned in our introduction, we are calling for the Biden-Harris administration to publish a Federal Register Notice and launch a public information campaign to notify the impacted community of the decision and any actions they need to take by January 30, 2021. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we call for *at least* a 180-day re-registration period. The failure to take these actions under the previous administration caused grave harm to TPS communities, and we urge the Biden-Harris administration to not only grant the maximum protection, but to implement that decision in a way that honors the dignity and humanity of the Syrian community in the United States. Please contact Hazem Rihawi, American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS), at rihawi.h@arcsyria.org and Jill Bussey, Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC), at jbussey@cliniclegal.org with any questions or to arrange for stakeholder engagement.

Sincerely,

African Communities Together
Alianza Americas
American Friends Service Committee
American Relief Coalition for Syria
America's Voice
Amnesty International USA
Arab American Civic Council

¹⁹ TIMEP Brief: The Return of Refugees, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Studies (Aug. 26, 2019), <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-return-of-refugees/>.

²⁰ "Joe Biden and The Arab American Community: A Plan for Partnership," Biden Harris Campaign, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/joe-biden-and-the-arab-american-community-a-plan-for-partnership/>.

²¹ INA §244 (a)(1)(B).

²² David Dyssegaard Kallick, Cyierra Roldan, and Silva Mathema, Syrian Immigrants in the United States, Center for American Progress (Dec. 13, 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/12/13/294851/syrian-immigrants-in-the-united-states-a-receiving-community-for-todays-refugees/>.

²³ *Id.*

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta
Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence
Austin Region Justice for Our Neighbors
Big Heart Foundation
BU Law Immigrants' Rights & Human Trafficking Program
CAIR Washington
Cameroon American Council
CARE USA
CASA
CASA in Action
Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Boston
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Center for Victims of Torture
Central America Resource Center of Northern California- CARECENSF
Central American Resource Center
Central Washington Justice For Our Neighbors
Children's Law Center of MA
Church World Service
Cleveland Jobs with Justice
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
Colorado Jobs with Justice
Congregation Beit Simchat Torah
Congregation Beth Shalom
Congregation Rodeph Sholom
Connecticut Shoreline Indivisible
Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries
Emgage Foundation Inc.
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Family Action Network Movement (FANM)
Florida Immigrant Coalition
Foreign Born Information & Referral Network
Franciscan Action Network
Greater Boston Legal Services
Haitian Bridge Alliance
Harbor Communities Overcoming Violence (HarborCOV)
Harvard Immigration and Refugee Clinical Program
HIAS
Hispanic Federation
Human Rights First
Human Rights Watch
Humanity & Inclusion

Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
Interfaith Welcome Coalition
International Refugee Assistance Project
Islamic Relief USA
Islamophobia Studies Center
Jewish Theological Seminary
Jobs With Justice
Just Neighbors
Justice Center of South East MA
Karam Foundation
Libyan American Alliance
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
MCC U.S. Washington Office
MedGlobal
Mercy Corps
Metrowest Legal Services
Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center
National Justice for Our Neighbors
National Network for Arab American Communities
National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
New York Immigration Coalition
Northern Illinois Justice for Our Neighbors
Norwegian Refugee Council USA
NuDay
Oxfam America
PAIR Project
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Presbyterian Church USA
Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration
Refugees International
SAMS
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
Sisters of St Francis of Philadelphia Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Committee
Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God
Sisters of St. Francis, Clinton, Iowa
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
St Joseph Valley Project Jobs with Justice
Synagogue Coalition on the Refugee & Immigration Crisis
Syria Relief & Development (SRD)

Syrian American Council
Syrian Community Network
Syrian Forum USA
The Advocates for Human Rights
The Episcopal Church
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
The SAJ
The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)
The Workers Circle
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
UndocuBlack Network
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
United Stateless
United We Dream
Win Without War
Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center
World Relief