

July 11, 2019

Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan
Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20016

RE: REQUEST FOR 18-MONTH EXTENSION AND REDESIGNATION OF TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS FOR SYRIA

Dear Acting Secretary McAleenan:

We, the 200 undersigned faith-based organizations and faith leaders from across traditions, call on you to extend for 18 months and redesignate Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, for Syria in order to protect the 7,000 current Syrian TPS holders and their families as well as those who would benefit from redesignation. Our request is rooted in morality, humanity, and the teachings of our faiths: we must welcome, protect, and offer hospitality to those in need. The Quran teaches: “They love those who emigrated to them and find not any desire in their hearts of what the emigrants were given, but rather give them preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. Whoever is protected from the greediness of his own soul, then those will be successful.”¹ Similarly, the Torah commands, “You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the LORD am your God.”²

Like the foundations of our faiths, offering help, safety, and security to those seeking refuge is the underpinning of our society. These are the American values that led Congress to create TPS. A failure to provide the maximum protection for Syrians in the United States now would go against the cherished principles that define our country.

“The main thing I felt instantly was that I was much safer. In the U.S. you feel security. You have rights, even if you are a foreigner. I love that about the U.S. TPS meant everything. Going back to Syria is not an option. You can’t imagine it. The military can destroy you, throw you in jail, detain you, torture you without accountability.”
– Wael, Syrian TPS holder

The situation in Syria remains one of the worst human rights crises of our time. At least 511,000 people have lost their lives since the start of the war.³ More than 1,100 children were killed in conflict in 2018 alone.⁴ The Syrian government continues to use chemical weapons, relentless bombing, arbitrary arrest, and torture.⁵ Throughout the war, there have been at least 336 chemical weapons attacks.⁶ As recently as April 2018, a chlorine attack in the city of Douma killed dozens of people and injured hundreds.⁷ At least 128,000 people have disappeared into Syrian prisons.⁸ Inside, people are beaten, sexually assaulted, electrocuted, covered in fuel and lit on fire, forced to kill one another, and subjected to other

¹ Surat Al-Hashr 59:9.

² Leviticus 24:22.

³ Syria: Events of 2018, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (2019), www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria.

⁴ Syria Crisis Fast Facts, UNICEF (March 2019), www.unicef.org/mena/reports/syria-crisis-fast-facts.

⁵ Syria: Events of 2018, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (2019), www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria.

⁶ Tobias Schneider, Theresa Lutkefend, *Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria*, GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE (February 2019), www.gppi.net/media/GPPi_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf.

⁷ For e.g., *Chemical weapons agency: ‘toxic chemical’ used in attack on Syrian rebel town last April*, REUTERS (March 1, 2019), www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons/chemical-weapons-agency-toxic-chemical-used-in-attack-on-syrian-rebel-town-last-april-idUSKCN1QI57V.

⁸ Anne Barnard, *What We Know About Syria’s Secret Torture Prisons*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (May 11, 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/world/middleeast/syria-torture-practices.html.

forms of torture.⁹ At least 14,000 people have been tortured to death over the course of the war.¹⁰

There are 13 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian aid.¹¹ The country is currently ranked the fifth most severe food crisis in the world.¹² USAID reports that 11.7 million Syrians need food assistance in 2019, with 9 million facing emergency food insecurity.¹³ Approximately 6.5 million people are facing “life-threatening food insecurity.”¹⁴ Compounding factors—in addition to conflict—include elevated food prices, inflation, and the 2018 drought, the worst in 30 years.¹⁵ Drought in Syria and destruction of infrastructure in the war (including deliberate attacks), have also led to severe water shortages.¹⁶ More than 50 percent of the population in three governorates depend on water being trucked in to survive.¹⁷

Approximately 12 million people in Syria were in need of medical assistance as of December 2018.¹⁸ Deliberate, targeted attacks on healthcare facilities and workers continue.¹⁹ There have been 566 verified attacks on medical facilities since the beginning of the war and 890 documented killings of medical professionals, including 264 doctors.²⁰ The Assad regime and its allies carried out almost all of the targeted attacks and killings of medical professionals.²¹ In addition to the destruction of half of the country’s health care facilities, ongoing, targeted aerial strikes and combat have left three million homes and forty percent of schools partially or completely destroyed.²²

“I lost my house in Syria. My house was hit by bombs and gunfire... After I got Temporary Protected Status, I felt secure. I started working right away. I need TPS to help provide for my sister who is 75 years old and sick. My sister is the only close family I have left.” – Anonymous Syrian TPS holder

A new wave of the humanitarian emergency in Syria is unfolding now as the Syrian government and allies wage a military campaign against rebel-held Idlib.²³ The area is home to three million civilians, with 1.5 million people internally displaced from elsewhere in the country.²⁴ In May 2019, as the government’s aerial bombardment intensified, hundreds of thousands fled.²⁵ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that 5,400 airstrikes have killed 316 people.²⁶ At least 61 children were killed by airstrikes in April and May 2019.²⁷ The United Nations predicts that millions may try to flee to Turkey

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Global Humanitarian Overview 2019*, UNOCHA (2019), www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf.

¹² *2019 Global Report on Food Crisis*, FOOD SECURITY INFORMATION NETWORK (2019), www.undispatch.com/a-new-un-report-details-food-crises-around-the-world/.

¹³ *Food Assistance Fact Sheet*, USAID (April 24, 2019), www.usaid.gov/syria/food-assistance.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*; *2019 Global Report on Food Crisis*, FOOD SECURITY INFORMATION NETWORK (2019), www.undispatch.com/a-new-un-report-details-food-crises-around-the-world/.

¹⁶ For e.g., Tom Miles, *Syria committed war crime by bombing Damascus water supply: U.N.*, REUTERS (March 14, 2017), www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-water/syria-committed-war-crime-by-bombing-damascus-water-supply-u-n-idUSKBN16L0W5.

¹⁷ *WASH Situational Overview: Whole of Syria, January 2019*, UN CHILDREN’S FUND (2019), <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wash-situational-overview-whole-syria-january-2019>.

¹⁸ *Medical Personnel are Targeted in Syria*, PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (2019), <https://phr.org/resources/medical-personnel-are-targeted-in-syria/>.

¹⁹ For e.g., Diane Cole, *In Syria, Reports Of 19 Medical Facilities Bombed Since April 28*, NPR (May 17, 2019),

www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/05/17/724281900/in-syria-reports-of-19-medical-facilities-bombed-since-april-28; *SAMS alarmed by heightened attacks on civilian infrastructure in northwest Syria*, SYRIAN AMERICAN MEDICAL SOCIETY (June 11, 2019), www.sams-usa.net/press_release/sams-alarmed-by-heightened-attacks-on-civilian-infrastructure-in-northwest-syria/.

²⁰ *Medical Personnel are Targeted in Syria*, PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (2019), <https://phr.org/resources/medical-personnel-are-targeted-in-syria/>.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *3m homes destroyed in Syria war*, MIDDLE EAST MONITOR (June 1, 2018), www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180601-3m-homes-destroyed-in-syria-war/; *Syria Crisis Fast Facts*, UNICEF (March 2019), www.unicef.org/mena/reports/syria-crisis-fast-facts.

²³ *Latest Idlib offensive threatens ‘unprecedented humanitarian disaster’*, REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL (May 6, 2019), <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/latest-idlib-offensive-threatens-unprecedented-humanitarian-disaster>.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Bethan McKernan, *‘Every day brings a new massacre’: Eid offers no respite for Idlib*, THE GUARDIAN (June 4, 2019), www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/04/every-day-brings-new-massacre-eid-offers-no-respite-idlib-syria.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *No funeral for children killed in Idlib as death toll rises*, SAVE THE CHILDREN (June 4, 2019), <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-funeral-children-killed-idlib-death-toll-rises>.

and that the battle in Idlib could be among the most brutal in the history of the war.²⁸

Many returnees to Syria over the past few years, whether forced returns or voluntary, have suffered at the hands of the Assad regime.²⁹ According to a 2019 survey, approximately 75 percent of Syrians who returned to government-controlled areas were harassed at checkpoints, extorted, conscripted into the military and forced to fight in the war, or arrested.³⁰ At least 2,000 returnees have been detained over the past two years.³¹ Returnees have been interrogated, tortured and forced to inform on their family members.³² A 2018 report documents at least 50 returnee children arrested with accusations of “revolutionary ties.”³³

The U.N. cautions that “safe, voluntary and dignified return” to Syria is not possible at this time.³⁴ Earlier this year, Pope Francis reminded us, “A person’s dignity does not depend on them being a citizen, a migrant, or a refugee. Saving the life of someone fleeing war and poverty is an act of humanity.”³⁵ In line with our belief and understanding of humanity as a common family, called to support and protect one another, we urge you to grant the maximum protection possible through 18-month extension and redesignation.

Sincerely,

Faith Organizations

Adrian Dominican Sisters Immigration Assistance
Alumna of the University of Notre Dame
American Friends Service Committee
Arizona Justice For Our Neighbors
B'nai Jeshurun
Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Boston
Catholic Charities Diocese of Laredo
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington
Catholic Charities of West TN
Catholic Immigration Services - Little Rock
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
Christ Church
Christian Reformed Church Office of Social Justice
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

²⁸ *Health agencies warn Idlib offensive could uproot 700,000 Syrians*, REUTERS (Aug. 8, 2018), www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-idlib/health-agencies-warn-idlib-offensive-could-uproot-700000-syrians-idUSKBN1KT0ZE.

²⁹ *TIMEP Brief: The Return of Refugees*, THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY (March 18, 2019), <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-r-return-of-refugees/>; Louisa Loveluck, *Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation*, THE WASHINGTON POST (June 2, 2019), www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html?utm_term=.0a86ef59fde7.

³⁰ Louisa Loveluck, *Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation*, THE WASHINGTON POST (June 2, 2019), www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html?utm_term=.0a86ef59fde7.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *TIMEP Brief: The Return of Refugees*, THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY (March 18, 2019), <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-r-return-of-refugees/>.

³⁴ *Global Humanitarian Overview 2019*, UNOCHA (2019), www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf.

³⁵ See <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1009400469314138112>.

Crossing Borders - Dubuque
Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries
Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids
Dominican Sisters of Adrian
Dominican Sisters of Houston
Engage Action
Emmaus Catholic Community
Faith in Public Life
Franciscan Action Network
Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
Franciscan Sisters of the Poor US Area
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Greater New York Labor Religion Coalition
HIAS
Hispanic Apostolate
Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ
Immigrant and Refugee Committee, Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, O'Fallon, MO
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Jesuit Social Research Institute
Justice For Our Neighbors East Texas
Justice for Our Neighbors-Michigan
Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Priests of the Sacred Heart, US Province
Leadership Team of the Felician Sisters of North America
LUCHA Ministries, Inc.
Lutheran Community Services NW
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Mary's Place Refugee Outreach
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Ministries Across Generations Team, Disciples Home Missions, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees
Muslim Public Affairs Council
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Jewish Women
National Justice for Our Neighbors
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
NHCUC Immigrant and Refugee Support Group
Project IRENE
Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order
Refugee Support Committee of Temple Israel of Greenfield
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Eastern American Province
Rompiendo Las Aguas-Radio Program
School Sisters of Notre Dame - Central Pacific Province
Sisters of Charity of New York
Sisters of Charity, BVM
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Justice Team
Sisters of Mercy West Midwest
Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York

Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities
Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet
Sisters of the Presentation, Dubuque, Iowa
Sisters of the Presentations
St. Therese Catholic Church
The Interfaith LGBTI Clergy Association
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Westwood Congregational Church
Wheaton Franciscan Sisters Justice and Peace Office
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
World Relief

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Bro. Brian McLaughlin
Campus Minister Sean Farry
Chair of the Buffalo Catholic Diocese Care for Creation Sharon Goodremote
Chairperson David Carlson
Chaplain Ben Tousley
Deacon Leo Bistak
Deacon Steven Beumer
Dr. Antonelle Chunka
Dr. Beverly Huff
Dr. Beverly Johnson-Miller
Dr. Zaher Sahloul
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Reverend Corey Sanderson
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