

الائتلاف الوطني لقوى
الثورة و المعارضة السورية



National Coalition of Syrian
Revolution and Opposition Forces

Representative Office to the United Nations

Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy
European Commission
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Dear Baroness Ashton,

On behalf of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, it is my grave responsibility to draw to your attention the worsening plight of Syrian refugees and the urgent need for the European Union to take immediate measures to protect the rights of Syrian citizens seeking refuge in Europe.

Over the past three years, Syria has emerged as the world's single largest humanitarian crisis. The brutality of the Syrian regime has cost the lives of over 160,000 Syrians, and forced close to three million men, women and children to flee their homes and country. Most have taken refuge in neighboring states like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, where they are often confronted by overcrowded refugee camps and human rights abuses. As a result, many Syrians have sought to make the difficult journey across the Mediterranean Sea to the European Union. For far too many Syrians, that journey has proven perilous.

2014 has proved the deadliest year yet for Syrian civilians seeking refuge in Europe by sea. Hundreds of Syrians have died as they sought to cross the Mediterranean. Increasingly, their arrival along the coasts of Italy and Greece has been made more precarious by the ill-treatment Syrians receive by local coast guards.

Growing numbers of Syrian refugees report illegal push-backs, intimidation and physical violence by European coast guards. Syrians who seek to reach Europe by sea have revealed horrific stories of boats being towed, encircled, and in some cases, damaged. Others have been turned back in unseaworthy vessels only to be abandoned in Turkish waters. Of those Syrians who have succeeded in boarding coastguard vessels, too many report being beaten, harassed and/or held at gunpoint by European coastguards. For example, on 16 March 2014, three Syrian refugees aboard a Turkish vessel headed for the Greek coast sustained gunshot wounds. According to Amnesty International, such incidents suggest "a widespread and routine pattern of abuses that cannot be explained by the actions of a few rogue officers or one single law enforcement unit".

While the Syrian Coalition is grateful for all the support the European Union has provided to the Syrian people throughout the course of the three-year conflict, we are deeply disturbed by the growing accounts of violence and intimidation met by Syrian refugees seeking asylum to Europe by sea. Push-backs and collective expulsions are prohibited under both EU and international law, including the European Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. They also contravene the Schengen Borders Code and EU asylum and returns Directives. EU member states have an obligation to fulfill their commitments under international and European law. The

Syrian Coalition therefore asks that the EU move with urgency to stop and condemn the breaches of EU law occurring across the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. We ask, specifically, that the European Union:

- call upon responsible EU member states to immediately stop the practice of push-backs and expulsion of Syrians seeking asylum by sea, and demand that those Syrians who are taken into custody have the means to lawfully challenge any deportation decision;
- implement measures to ensure that all allegations of push-backs and/or ill-treatment by EU member state coast guards are investigated impartially, independently and promptly and that no Syrians are detained arbitrarily, unnecessarily or disproportionately;
- where necessary, impose penalties on EU member states that continue to violate the rights of Syrian refugees and breach EU law.

The Syrian Coalition echoes the concerns of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, who on 24 July 2014 called on EU member states to take immediate action to stop the rising deaths of refugees seeking to reach the European continent by sea. As the High Commissioner remarked, “Europeans need to take urgent action to stop this catastrophe [from] getting worse in the second half of 2014”. Indeed, it is vital that the EU take such action without delay.

Once again, the Syrian Coalition thanks the European Union and EU member states for the generous support they have shown the Syrian people, particularly in the area of humanitarian relief. We ask now that the EU follow through on its international legal commitments, and enforce fully the Schengen Borders Code, EU asylum and returns Directives, and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, so that those seeking refuge from violence and terror in Syria, are not subjected to violence and intimidation along Europe’s shores.

Sincerely,



Noura al-Ameer
Vice President

Cc: Gil Arias-Fernandez, Executive Director, Frontex
António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Baroness Valerie Amos, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator