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Statement regarding the holding of the Refugee Conference under the auspices of the Syrian government

Civil Society Organizations condemn the holding of a Refugee Conference under the auspices of the Syrian government.

Through an invitation by the Syrian and Russian governments, a conference is being held in Damascus on the return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons. This conference also coincides with a military escalation campaign led by the two governments in northwestern Syria. Since October 26, 2020 until today, it has recorded more than 60 casualties and 94 injuries among civilians, at least 12 of which are children. The Syrian government, its affiliated militias, and its Russian ally have been responsible for more than 90% of the attacks on humanitarian and service facilities in Syria over a period of ten years.

A survey study prepared by the High Commissioner for Refugees indicates that the percentage of refugees who do not wish to return to Syria during the year 2020 has increased to 89%. The study also considers that the main factor behind the refugees' decision not to return has to do with safety and security. This is because several human rights reports confirmed the conduct of security prosecutions against the returnees, not to mention more than 2000 arrests of refugees returning to Syria as well as more than twenty cases of murder under torture, some of which pertain to children.

Economic deterioration plays an additional factor in the refugees' decision not to return, as the destruction of infrastructure, which is a result of ten years of conflict, and the spread of COVID-19 are accompanied by major restrictions on the freedom of international and local institutions working in the humanitarian response. Equally important is the inability or unwillingness of the Syrian government to compensate those affected, especially ones from opposition areas. Furthermore, the Syrian government has issued several laws that limit the access of the displaced to their property and real estate, such as Law No.10 of 2018 and Law No. 39 of 2019, as well as the authority granted to the judicial police to seize citizens' properties and the significant restrictions that limit their access to documentation, restrictions, and national papers.

These invitations exploit the burdens and fears of the host countries and clearly aim for impunity and the failure of any efforts towards accountability for the crimes committed in Syria. They also aim to seek support under the pretext of reconstruction for the same government that imposes restrictions and clearly interferes in humanitarian operations which were directly or indirectly the reasons behind the displacement and emigration of Syrians.

Any international presence is ignoring all of the above facts and encouraging refugees to return in conditions that do not guarantee their safety and stability, which is a clear violation of the principle of non-refoulement in international law. This principle requires that the return be characterized as safe, voluntary, and

permanent. This contrasts with the on-going insecurity, arrests, and enforced disappearances, in addition to the pressures that refugees are exposed to in countries of asylum. The greatest guarantee for the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons is initiating real measures towards accountability for perpetrators of crimes from all sides, especially the Syrian government.

The signatories demand:

- 1. The Secretary-General of the UN and the UN agencies, especially the High Commissioner for Refugees, to work on putting a stop to any pressure exerted by the countries concerned, especially Russia and the Syrian government, regarding the return of refugees, to strengthen the mechanism for monitoring the security and living conditions in Syria, and to ensure that no initiatives or conferences are held concerning the return of refugees outside the UN umbrella and without real representation of the primary stakeholders, which are the refugees themselves and the civil society institutions concerned with their affairs.**
- 2. The countries hosting the refugees to not impose any pressure on the Syrian refugees, and to consider the security and living conditions in Syria as a basic criterion for plans to receive refugees in the coming years.**
- 3. International donors to promote grants to host countries, and to work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on programs that guarantee their access to a legal status that guarantees them a safe presence in countries of asylum.**

Signatory organizations:

1. Adel Center For Human Rights
2. Adopt a Revolution
3. Amals Healing and Advocacy Center
4. Basamat for Development
5. Baytna
6. Bousla for Development & Innovation
7. Caesar Families Association
8. Dawlaty
9. Hand in Hand for Aid & Development - HIHFAD
10. Hmedi for charity
11. Horan Foundation
12. Humanitarian Relief Association. IYD
13. Impunity Watch
14. International Relief and Development
15. Local Administration Councils Unit (LACU)
16. Local Development Organization
17. Onder Organization
18. Pro-justice
19. Sadad humanitarian organization
20. Social Development International - SDI
21. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
22. Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA)
23. Syrian Forum
24. Syrian General Union SGU
25. Syrian Lawyers Aggregation
26. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
27. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
28. Syrian Women Committee in Reyhanli
29. Syrian Women's Network
30. The Day After
31. The Syrian Feminist Lobby
32. Violet Organization for aid and Development
33. Women protection network