

Experts interviewed for Danish Immigration Service report on Damascus condemn misuse of their interviews, most will not cooperate with DIS in the same way again

According to the responses from the researchers and experts on Syria, who were interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service for the Country of Origin report on Damascus and Damascus Countryside, the decision to remove temporary protection from Syrian refugees from these areas did not at all reflect the information they provided and most of them will refuse to collaborate with DIS in the future, or will do so under strict conditions to prevent the misuse of their interviews.

A number of these experts signed a letter last year in which they strongly condemned "the Danish government's decision to remove "temporary protection" for Syrian refugees from Damascus. This decision used our testimonies to the Danish Immigration Service for a country of origin (COI) report on Damascus, but we do not recognize our views in subsequent government conclusions or policies, and neither do we consider that Denmark's Syrian refugee policy fully reflects the real conditions on the ground. We are urging the Danish government to revise its conclusions on Damascus to better reflect the ongoing risks posed to potential returnees, and to amend its current refugee policies accordingly."

Signatories of this letter included:

Ammar Hamou, Syria Direct

Bente Scheller, Heinrich Boell Foundation

COAR Global

Jennifer Cafarella (on behalf of Christopher Kozak formerly of ISW)

Jusoor for Studies Centre

Omran Center for Strategic Studies

Sara Kayyali, Human Rights Watch

Suhail al-Ghazi, Syrian Researcher and Non-Resident Fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy

In preparation for this press conference, and in light of the information we received that the Danish Immigration Service is working to extend its assessment to other areas of Syria, including Hasakeh, where recently the ISIS carried out a bloody attack on a prison which killed hundreds and displaced some 45 000 people, we reached out to these experts with two questions:

1. Considering that withdrawals of protection for Syrian refugees by the Refugee Appeals Board referenced the DIS "Country Report Country of Origin Information (COI) Syria Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus" where you were named as one of the sources, do you think that the assessment that it is safe for Syrian refugees to return to Damascus and Rural Damascus correctly reflected the information you provided?
2. Would you ever consider being a source of information for DIS Country of Origin reports again?

These are some of the quotes from their responses:

“The conclusion reached by the Danish Immigration Authority is absolutely contrary to my understanding or reality in Damascus and its countryside. Multiple human rights organizations have documented cases of returnees being arrested and tortured, sometimes to death, by the Syrian regime. The DIS reached out to me last month asking to do an interview with me about the situation in Hasakeh. I wrote back to them refusing to participate to avoid becoming complicit in deportations of individuals from that region. The way the DIS used my responses was contrary to my intentions and was carefully curated and selected to prove the point they wanted to reach, likely due to political pressure. No part of Syria is safe.” **Elizabeth Tsurkov, Research fellow at New Lines Institute.**

“I don't consider the report reflected what I have said in the interviews. the way the first report was written and how the immigration office dealt with the our statement, sources of the report, makes it clear that I shouldn't be involved with the Danish Immigration Service anymore.” **Souhail Al Ghazi, Senior Researcher, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Istanbul.**

“It is not safe for the Syrian refugees to be DEPORTED even if there were some people able to go back. What is safe for some individuals is not safe for other Syrian refugees. I will not [engaged with DIS again].” **Assad Hanna, fellow, Columbia University, SIPA**

“The Danish Immigration Department extracted from my words in its first report in which it claimed that “Damascus is safe,” and gave the impression that I said that Damascus is safe. The truth is that I did not say that Damascus is safe. If Damascus and its countryside were safe, and I am from the city of Douma in the Damascus countryside, it would have been better for me to return to my destroyed city, so how can I say that Damascus and its countryside are safe while I am displaced?” **Ammar Hammou, Syria Direct**

“We were not aware of the special objectives of the Danish Immigration Institution and that the government will exploit it in this unfair way to incite [deportations of] the refugees. Therefore, we believe that our words were put in a political framework to serve the Danish government's orientation away from any humanitarian responsibility towards the refugees. So, we think that the assessment has not correctly reflected the information you provided at all.” **Mohammad Sarmini, Jusoor Center**

“We were all very surprised with the results of the DIS report. We issued a statement [to condemn the conclusions of the assessment]. Then the Danish met with us again, and they tried to clarify [themselves] to us. But we expressed our resentment. As Omran center, we had with us a lawyer, and we went over our answers to them and showed how our answers were segmented. At that time we announced that we will not cooperate with Denmark in the future with regards to this matter. [If we do participate in future], we will be more cautious, and we will always request the presence of a lawyer.” **Nawar Shaban, Omran Center**

“What happened with us might be different than what happened with others. They published our responses like we sent them. The manipulation they did was when they mentioned that they could not ‘verify’ the information, which is not acceptable, because we cannot say that they verified all the information that they received.” **Fadel Abdel Ghani, SNHR**

Annex I – Full responses of all interviewees

Souhail Al Ghazi, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Istanbul

1. I don't consider the report reflected what I have said in the interviews, for example, I have mentioned several times how civilians, returnees and locals, face extortion by the regime security forces and how they may be detained if they don't pay but the report mentioned it briefly once despite I have mentioned it in the interviews at least 4 times. I have also mentioned how there are dozens of cases of people arrested despite been given amnesty by the regime or even civilians who never been involved with the armed opposition but simply because they were relatives of people wanted by the regime. The situation hasn't changed and people find their self to be in danger of being arrested and forcibly disappeared.
2. Regarding if I would do again the report; the way the first report was written and how the immigration office dealt with the our statement, sources of the report, makes it clear that I shouldn't be involved with the Danish Immigration Service anymore.

Assad Hanna, Columbia University

1. No, not even nearly. There was a lot of mix [in my responses] between the different questions they asked. Also, the timing is different, what was true in 2019 could not be applicable in 2022. It is not safe for the Syrian refugees to be DEPORTED even if there were some people able to go back. What is safe for some individuals is not safe for other Syrian refugees.
2. No, i will not.

Ammar Hamou, Syria Direct

Regarding your questions, I would like to clarify that the Danish Immigration Department extracted from my words in its first report in which it claimed that “Damascus is safe,” and gave the impression that I said that Damascus is safe. The truth is that I did not say that Damascus is safe, but rather my response [related] to the comparison of assassinations between Damascus and Daraa. I told them that Damascus and the Damascus countryside are witnessing arrests and pressure on the families of the wanted persons, and the Immigration Department published another report that clarified that there were arrests. But after the controversy raised by the report, which was based on my testimony and that of Sarah Kayali from Human Rights Watch, we issued a statement that included most of those whose testimonies were taken by the Immigration Department. We objected to what was stated and confirmed that Syria is not safe. You can view the statement we issued here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/19/denmark-flawed-country-origin-reports-lead-flawed-refugee-policies>

1. The report issued by the Immigration Department does not express the contents of the testimonies it collected, and Syria in all its areas is not safe, and I mentioned to you above that we signed a statement published by Human Rights Watch. We denounced what was stated in the Immigration Department’s report and re-emphasized that Damascus is not safe, but here I would like to point out a very important point, that my testimony was taken after the middle of the year 2020, and Denmark had started withdrawing residence permits

since 2018, as if it had taken the report as an excuse to deport refugees, even though it had withdrawn dozens of residence permits before its report.

I also add, and I mentioned this in interviews with me in the Danish television and written press, if Damascus and its countryside were safe, and I am from the city of Douma in the Damascus countryside, it would have been better for me to return to my destroyed city, so how can I say that Damascus and its countryside are safe while I am displaced? I arrived three months ago in France after being pressured in Jordan, because Jordan changed its policies with regards to opposition journalists after its normalization with the Assad regime.

2. If the Immigration Department contacts me again, I will be a source of information while insisting that my testimony isn't segmented, and I do not think after the last scandal that the Immigration Department would dare to make the same mistake, but it is my duty towards my country and the people of my country to be in contact and respond to any party that contacts me to find out what's happening in my country.

Finally, I would like to point out that I have published a number of reports on refugees in Denmark, and this is one of them: <https://syriadirect.org/denmarks-policy-to-return-syrian-refugees-unleashes-anxieties-splinters-families/>

Mohamad Sarmini, Jusoor Center

1. We were not aware of the special objectives of the Danish Immigration Institution and that the government will exploit it in this unfair way to incite [deportations of] the refugees. Therefore, we believe that our words were put in a political framework to serve the Danish government's orientation away from any humanitarian responsibility towards the refugees. So, we think that the assessment was not correctly reflected the information you provided at all.
2. After what happened we will approve to be a source for the organization such as DIS Country of Origin reports only if, on any future occasion, both the DIS synthesis of the interview and the final version of the report are sent to us for approval before publication, and any amendments and/or objections by us to the presentation of information provided by us, including the order in which information citing by us is presented, are taken into account and revised accordingly. Any refusal to take these into account or revise accordingly would lead to us withdrawing permission to use the interview.

Nawar Shaban, Omran Center

1. We were all very surprised with the results of the DIS report. We issued a statement [to condemn the conclusions of the assessment]. Then the Danish met with us again, and they tried to clarify [themselves] to us. But we expressed our resentment. Our meetings with them were official. As Omran center, we had with us a lawyer, and we went over our answers to them and showed how our answers were segmented. At that time we announced that we will not cooperate with Denmark in the future with regards to this matter.

Yet this didn't stop there. Recently, the authorities in Austria wanted to meet with us, but it was postponed due to the third Covid outbreak. The Netherlands is also holding meetings. They tried contacting me, but I didn't respond.

2. As Omran Center or me personally, we will participate, but we will be more cautious, and we will always request the presence of a lawyer. We also won't participate until we know the type of questions that will be asked. This is because our goal is not to only explain that there is no safety in areas under regime control, but also clarify that it is not possible to send Syrian refugees back to any region in Syria, even the refugees living in Europe. This breaches many laws in Denmark, and this is why there are several lawsuits by the opposition against the Danish government. And so yes, despite that we were quoted in the DIS report, we issued a statement to condemn it.

Fadel Abdul Ghani, SNHR

1. It was the first time they contacted us. They didn't contact us in their previous reports. In our opinion, and if someone reviews their previous reports (2019), the previous reports were worse. Personally, I criticize the report and its methodology. The report was exaggerated, because eventually this is a political decision. The language in the report, despite the fact that it could have been better, does not explicitly say that Syria is safe. That's if we will look at the report from a research [and academic] point of view, and as experts in this domain. I already mentioned this in interviews for the Danish media: The government played it smart and referenced the report, but in fact, it was a political decision already made. The report was used as an excuse. But it is not accurate to say that the decision was based on the report.

We need to keep in mind that references mentioned in the report were just sources; they didn't participate in writing the report. They sent us specific questions, and we answered them. To be more specific, we literally answered the questions that they sent, and only elaborated a little. We signed the statement that condemned the report. But it is fair to say that our answers were not manipulated or the language we used. They asked whether they should use 'Syrian government' but we told them to use 'Syrian regime'. In the annex to their report, they also included our annex, which had a tough language explaining the situation where there are detentions and arrests. We were asked to sign a statement, which said that there was manipulation in the responses, but we didn't sign it because our answers were not manipulated. What happened with us might be different than what happened with others. They published our responses like we sent them. The manipulation they did was when they mentioned that they could not 'verify' the information, which is not acceptable, because we cannot say that they verified all the information that they received.

2. Yes we will participate. But unfortunately, they haven't contacted us again. We will participate so that we do not leave that space empty. But next time, we will increase the data and explain our position thoroughly. I believe that the information we provided in the report and in the annex contributed to enhancing the report with our clear position that Syria is not safe because we gave statistics of the arrests, deaths under torture, checkpoints, repression, arrests without warrants which amount to kidnapping and so on. This is why our participation is important and we must provide our data and explain the reality on the ground.

Elizabeth Tsurkov, New Lines Institute

1. The conclusion reached by the Danish Immigration Authority is absolutely contrary to my understanding or reality in Damascus and its countryside. Multiple human rights organizations have documented cases of returnees being arrested and tortured, sometimes to death, by the Syrian regime.
2. The DIS reached out to me last month asking to do an interview with me about the situation in Hasakeh. I wrote back to them refusing to participate to avoid becoming complicit in deportations of individuals from that region. The way the DIS used my responses was contrary to my intentions and was carefully curated and selected to prove the point they wanted to reach, likely due to political pressure. No part of Syria is safe.