

Open Letter from the Syria NGO Forum to the UN Secretary-General upon his visit to the Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. António Guterres,
Secretary-General
United Nations

Damascus, 26 July 2026

Dear Mr. Guterres,

The Syria NGO Forum, representing 198 international and Syrian NGOs working across the humanitarian and development response, welcomes your visit at this pivotal moment in Syria's transition. We urge you to use this visit to call for the protection of a neutral, impartial, and needs-based humanitarian response—one that enables humanitarian actors to continue delivering life-saving assistance to the millions of Syrians still facing acute need, and that ensures the most marginalized are not left further behind as Syria builds the foundations for a stable, inclusive, and sustainable recovery.

1. Pacing and Sequencing of Syria's Recovery and Transition

Syria's transition from humanitarian response to recovery and development is neither linear nor uniform. Humanitarian, recovery, development, and peacebuilding needs will continue to coexist for years to come, with priorities varying significantly across locations, communities, and governance contexts. Syria's legal, parliamentary, and financial institutions remain transitional and untested—a permanent constitution, credible elections, and predictable regulatory and financial governance are still pending, and government capacity varies sharply by area. A transition driven by predetermined timelines rather than conditions on the ground risks accelerating the phase-out of humanitarian structures before Syrian civil society, national authorities, and development actors are in a position to absorb their functions—leaving the most underserved communities further behind and protracting vulnerability.

We therefore ask that you urge the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and OCHA to ground transition planning in specific, transparent, and measurable benchmarks, and to resist political pressure to accelerate timelines ahead of conditions on the ground. The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan should be designed to coexist and speak to one another until those benchmarks are met, and humanitarian coordination structures should only be phased out when Syrian civil society, national authorities, and development actors can take on these functions safely, effectively, and accountably.

2. Protecting Principled Humanitarian Space

Humanitarian needs in Syria remain critically high: 15.6 million people—close to 70% of the population—require humanitarian assistance in 2026. Syria remains in an immediate post-conflict phase, with acute and widespread needs further compounded by recurrent natural hazards and the spillover effects of recent regional escalation. Vulnerable communities can only be served effectively if humanitarian actors are empowered to respond based on assessed needs, unhindered by political objectives. Yet humanitarian space is narrowing: slow, opaque, and inconsistently applied administrative requirements at both national and field levels are obstructing NGO registration and project approvals, creating a complex operating environment that delays or derails critical life-saving support.

We therefore ask that you call on the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates to uphold the conditions necessary for neutral, impartial, and needs-based humanitarian action—including expediting registration of NGOs, ensuring streamlined and predictable approval processes and unimpeded humanitarian access, and establishing a financial and banking environment that allows humanitarian organizations to operate effectively.

3. De-Linking Returns from Political Timelines

More than 5.5 million Syrians remain internally displaced, and millions more remain as refugees across the region. The Government of Syria's No Camps initiative reflects a legitimate ambition to move displaced families into safe and dignified living conditions—but the pace and framing of this initiative risk outrunning the enabling conditions that make return sustainable. Key prerequisites, including mine clearance, housing rehabilitation, restored basic services, civil documentation, and community-level security, remain absent or insufficient across large parts of the country. Where returns are driven by political timelines rather than conditions on the ground, they risk generating secondary displacement and deepening vulnerability rather than resolving it.

We therefore ask that you call on the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates to decouple the No Camps initiative from fixed timelines and anchor it explicitly in enabling conditions—including safety, housing, basic services, mine clearance, documentation, and livelihoods—with success measured by the sustainability of returns, not their speed or volume. Separately, we urge you to use your office to call on third countries to cease any pressure for forced or premature return of Syrian refugees.

4. Localization and Inclusive Local Leadership

For over 15 years, Syrian NGOs have been at the center of the humanitarian response, building deep community trust, contextual knowledge, and institutional capacity. Yet this national NGO community now faces a fundamental crisis. Funding reductions are the immediate driver, but structural imbalances such as limited direct access to funding, disproportionate compliance burdens, short grant cycles, and contracting arrangements that constrain national actors' decision-making power compound the problem. Without urgent action, well-established Syrian organizations that have sustained the response for over a decade risk being forced to scale down or close—eroding the very foundations that Syria's recovery will depend on.

We therefore ask that you direct OCHA to reform the governance of the Syria Humanitarian Fund so that national and local actors hold genuine decision-making authority—not merely consultative status—and to establish a defined, transparent, and publicly reported share of pooled humanitarian funding flowing directly to national and local organizations. We further ask that you use your engagements with bilateral donors and Member States to call explicitly for more direct, flexible, and multi-year funding to Syrian NGOs, recognizing that localization commitments must be backed by financing that reflects them. Finally, we ask that you engage Security Council members and UN agencies to ensure that women, young people, and minority communities are meaningfully consulted in discussions about Syria's recovery.

5. Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Financing Gap

The limiting constraint on Syria's recovery is financing. Despite stated international commitments to Syria's transition, donors have not yet stepped meaningfully into early recovery or development financing, even as the \$2.9 billion HNRP remains significantly underfunded. The result is a widening gap between recovery aspirations and funding reality, with the humanitarian system increasingly being asked to absorb functions such as livelihoods, service restoration, and institutional capacity-building that require development financing instruments and timelines.

We therefore ask that you use your convening authority to champion a high-level resource mobilization effort for Syria that explicitly bridges humanitarian and development financing, engaging Member States, bilateral donors, and international financial institutions to close the gap between stated ambitions and available resources. In doing so, we ask that you make clear that humanitarian and development financing must be treated as complementary and concurrent streams, not as a trade-off, and that NGOs—including Syrian NGOs who bring demonstrated track records in early recovery—must be recognized and resourced as genuine partners in Syria's recovery.

6. Peaceful Conflict Resolution and Protection of Civilians

Syria's transition remains fragile, and the risk that political negotiations spill over into civilian harm is present. In Sweida, ongoing tensions between local authorities and the Syrian Government have already had direct consequences for civilians: the failure to organize national examinations within the city meant that the vast majority of students were effectively unable to sit their exams this academic year, depriving an entire cohort of their right to education due to political and security dynamics beyond their control. This is not an isolated incident: communities in northeast Syria continue to navigate uncertain governance arrangements, and the March 2025 coastal violence demonstrated the catastrophic human cost when political tensions escalate without adequate civilian protection measures in place.

We therefore ask that you engage the Syrian Government at the level of the Presidency to emphasize that political negotiations in Sweida and other contested areas must be pursued through inclusive and peaceful dialogue, and that civilians must be protected from the consequences of political and security dynamics. Concretely, this means ensuring unimpeded access to education, essential services, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance regardless of local negotiation status.

7. De-escalation and Civilian Protection in Southern Syria

While Syria navigates a fragile transition, new conflict dynamics in the south risk compounding an already acute humanitarian situation. In Daraa and Quneitra, Israeli military operations are displacing families, destroying agricultural land, water networks and civilian infrastructure, restricting movement, and cutting off access to livelihoods and essential services. The harassment of a UN convoy in the area on June 29 underscores the direct threat these operations pose to humanitarian actors and the populations they serve. Left unaddressed, these dynamics will deepen forced displacement, reverse fragile recovery gains, and undermine the conditions that any credible humanitarian-to-development transition requires.

We therefore ask that you reiterate your public call on Israel to immediately cease military operations in Syrian territory and uphold its obligations under the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement. We further ask that you call on the Security Council to ensure the UN Disengagement Observer Force is adequately resourced, its mandate renewed, and full UN peacekeeping access restored to areas seized since December 2024. In the interim, we ask that you press for unimpeded humanitarian access to southwestern Syria and provide NGO partners with clarity on what diplomatic efforts are underway to mitigate the protection risks posed by ongoing violations of international humanitarian law.

Sincerely,

Syria NGO Forum