



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

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Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
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06 March 2025

Dear Emily,

Thank you for your letter of 10 February about Syria. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

This is a critical but fragile moment for Syria. After more than 13 years of conflict, the country faces significant challenges. The UK's overarching objective is to support a Syrian-led, inclusive political transition which leads to a stable Syria. To achieve this, we are focussed on several areas, including:

- preventing escalation of conflict in northern Syria;
- tackling security threats, including the threat from terrorism, and the destruction of chemical weapons;
- supporting an inclusive political process, which respects the rights of all Syrians, and leads to a non-sectarian and representative government;
- supporting economic recovery, including through the lifting of sectoral sanctions that are currently a barrier to economic stability and growth, scaling up humanitarian assistance and playing a lead role in aid coordination with the UN and donors; and
- ensuring accountability, both for crimes committed under the Assad regime, and by ensuring social justice is embedded in a future governance structure for Syria. We are engaging with the interim Syrian authorities and working closely with international partners to this end.

In response to the issues you raise in your letter:

An inclusive political transition

Interim President Ahmed Al Sharaa has announced his intention to form an inclusive transitional government, leading to free and fair elections. We welcome this. However, we will judge him on his actions, not his words. As a next step, we expect to see representative figures from across Syria appointed to the transitional government and the recently announced Legislative Council, alongside a clear process and timeline for the next phase

of the transition that respects the rights of all Syrians. I made this clear, and emphasised the importance of an inclusive transition process during my meeting with interim Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, on 12 January at the International Contact Group on Syria's future in Riyadh. The Minister for Development attended talks in Paris on 13 February on international community support to Syria. Our engagement will continue, including through our Special Representative for Syria, who visited Damascus mostly recently on 29 January.

Diplomatic engagement and representation

We are keeping the re-establishment of a permanent diplomatic presence in Damascus under review. Our Syria Special Representative has visited Damascus twice since December and further visits are planned. Alongside the international community, in our diplomatic interaction with the interim Syrian authorities, we will be guided by a set of core principles – of which an inclusive political transition and the protection of human rights are key considerations. Lack of a permanent diplomatic presence does not prevent us from discussing these crucial issues with the interim authorities as our regular engagement demonstrates.

North-East Syria

I share your concerns about the many challenges in North-East Syria, including the risks of instability in the region to the detention facilities and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The recent ceasefire between Türkiye and the PKK has positive implications for stability, though it is still too early to assess the full impact. We are working through diplomatic, security and humanitarian channels to monitor and address these issues. Given the threat Daesh continue to pose, including to the UK, our people, and our interests overseas, we are working closely with partners to monitor this threat, including through our work with the Global Coalition Against Daesh.

I am also deeply concerned about the dire humanitarian conditions in North-East Syria, including in the camps and detention facilities. We provide support through our partners to improve humanitarian conditions, including support for the most vulnerable. The UK is aware of the tuberculosis outbreak in some detention facilities. We are coordinating closely with partners to respond. However, ultimately, responsibility for detention and camp facilities and the wellbeing, detention, transfer or prosecution of detainees is a matter for authorities under whose jurisdiction individuals are detained. We have been clear with all parties that they must respect their obligations and responsibilities towards civilians under international law.

We are working closely with US colleagues and humanitarian partners to assess the impact of the pause in US financial assistance on humanitarian operations in North-East Syria, in particular the impact on the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and on the security situation. The UK will continue to support those in need across the region, including in the camps. Our humanitarian assistance, delivered through INGOs and UN organisations, aims to improve conditions in the camps through the provision of assistance, including

water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH), health, nutrition, child protection, and education services.

British nationals

On your question about the repatriation of citizens, where other nationalities you mention are concerned, the decisions are ultimately a matter for those individual countries. When considering our own approach, our priority remains ensuring the safety and security of the UK, and we will continue to do whatever is necessary to protect the UK from those who pose a threat to our security. The UK has advised against all travel to Syria since 2011 and the lack of consular support available to British nationals from within Syria makes it extremely challenging to provide direct help. We are nevertheless committed to considering every request for consular assistance, including repatriation requests, on a case-by-case basis, considering the relevant circumstances in each case, including national security. Where British unaccompanied minors and orphans are brought to our attention, we will seek to facilitate their return to the UK where feasible, and subject to national security concerns.

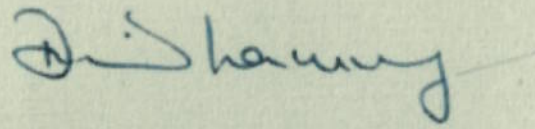
Everyone – male or female, above the age of criminal responsibility – who returns from taking part in the conflict in Syria must expect to be investigated by the police to determine if they have committed criminal offences, and to ensure that they do not pose a threat to our national security. Decisions on prosecutions are taken independently by the police and Crown Prosecution Service on a case-by-case basis. Decisions to deprive individuals of their citizenship are not taken lightly and are assessed based on all available evidence.

Sanctions

On 13 February, we announced in Parliament that we will bring forward measures in the coming months adapting the Syria sanctions regime, including amendments to the Syria Regulations, which Members of Parliament will debate. This will include the relaxation of restrictions in the energy, transport and finance sectors. Further, on 12 February HM Treasury's Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation published a General Licence, which allows for payments to be made further support humanitarian delivery. Bashar al-Assad and his associates must meanwhile be held to account for their actions against the people of Syria, and we will ensure that asset freezes and travel bans imposed on members of the former regime remain in force.

The Syrian people suffered for too long under the brutal Assad regime. They deserve a brighter future, and the UK remains committed to supporting them as they rebuild their country. I look forward to working with you and the Committee as we support Syria in taking its crucial next steps and as we manage the opportunities and risks of this moment.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Lammy', with a horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

THE RT HON. DAVID LAMMY MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs



Foreign Affairs Committee

Monday, 10 February 2025

Rt Hon David Lammy MP
Secretary of State
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

[By email]

Dear David,

The situation in Syria

On 28 January, the Foreign Affairs Committee held a one-off oral evidence session to examine the situation in Syria. We heard from witnesses including the last British Ambassador to Syria, Simon Collis, and the former Director of Counter-Terrorism at SiS, Richard Barrett CMG OBE. The evidence given during this session left the Committee feeling deeply concerned.

Progress towards an inclusive political process

The Committee heard in the session that HTS and its allies wish to retain power in their own hands, while serving the interests of the diverse groups in Syrian society. We would welcome a progress report on discussions that the Government, in cooperation with its partners, has been holding since the Aqaba meeting in December regarding the development of an inclusive political process. In particular, **we would like to know to what extent the current leadership of Syria is moving towards acceptance of direct representation of the many different communities in the future government.**

Security in northeast Syria

The Committee also considered the security situation in northeast Syria. We heard evidence that not only is Islamic State [Daesh] gaining strength rapidly in the region, but also that the detention camps and prisons holding Islamic State prisoners are on the brink of collapse. There are approximately 72 British nationals detained inside of these camps and prisons, of which it is estimated 60 are women and children.



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You will be aware that these camps and prisons are guarded by the UK and US-backed, largely Kurdish, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), some of whom have abandoned their duties in order to repel ongoing Turkish military incursions. The security of these camps and prisons, of which the latter holds up to 9,000 Islamic State fighters, and the former approximately 40,000 women and children, have been further threatened by US President Donald Trump's freezing of foreign assistance and aid. Witnesses told the Committee that the salaries of the SDF guards cannot be paid, nor can vital humanitarian assistance be provided. This also leaves no security guarantee. I am aware that, in relation to the Islamic State threat in northeast Syria, a general waiver for two weeks has since been granted by the US State Department, although not all details are yet clear, nor is it evident whether the waiver applies to both the camps and the prisons. This development, alongside the wider situation, presents a critical security threat.

Resurgence of the Islamic State

Witnesses told the Committee that the Islamic State has conducted raids and 'jailbreaks' on the prisons, freeing their fighters. The consequences of a resurgent Islamic State which has the capabilities to attack the UK, our citizens or UK interests should not be countenanced. **The threat posed by the Islamic State cannot be understated, and we in the UK should not be complacent. As a part of efforts to engage with the new Syrian administration, the security of prisons holding Islamic State fighters must be a top priority. Can you please set out how the UK plans to work with Kurdish, Syrian and regional partners to ensure the stability of these prisons.**

UK funding of prisons which are reportedly implicated in human rights abuses

Further, the Committee heard evidence that the UK, directly and as a part of the Global Coalition Against Daesh, is funding prisons wherein, according to reports by the United Nations, there are detailed accounts of torture, malnutrition, overcrowding and diseases, including tuberculosis. Those detained have not been tried by a court of law, nor have they been formally charged with a crime. This includes boys as young as ten years old. The UK has a historic opposition to torture and has a duty to uphold the rule of law internationally. **Can you please let us know your understanding of the situation in these camps and what action the UK Government is taking the appropriate action to ensure right to life, sanitation and decent conditions for those imprisoned, irrespective of their alleged crimes.**



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British nationals held in detention camps in northeast Syria

Most alarming was the situation of British nationals held in the detention camps, whom we understand to be the families of those who fought for Islamic State before its [then] defeat in 2019. Whilst our closest neighbours and allies, including France, Germany and the US have repatriated, for the most part, women and children from these camps, the UK has not. Richard Barrett, the former Director of Counter-Terrorism at SiS, called this a “moral and legal dereliction of our duty,” and said it not only impacted gravely upon the UK’s international reputation as a leader in countering terrorism, but also as a leader which can be relied upon and trusted in all affairs.

The Committee understands that the UK is a world leader in programmes which aim to counter violent extremism, as well as deradicalisation and rehabilitation initiatives. We also have an independent and established judicial system. UK foreign fighters who had travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State and returned to the UK before 2019 have been successfully prosecuted and deradicalised. Likewise, revoking their nationality and rendering these individuals stateless or, in the case of dual nationality, the burden of other countries where they may not face a fair trial, is a moral and security abdication. **Leaving these individuals, of which the number of British nationals is low, in an increasingly insecure environment where they may escape, or be used by the Islamic State as suicide bombers or child soldiers, is a risk that cannot be taken. Abandoning UK citizens in these camps, where they are at risk of illness and disease, as well as at the serious risk of further radicalisation, does not set the precedent for a rules-based and fair world. I’d be grateful if you could set out the Government’s aim for these citizens.**

The independent reviewer on the Government’s terrorism legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, said on 11 January 2025 that “repatriation would not be moral absolutism.” **The former Director of Counter-Terrorism at SiS told the Committee that the UK has the resources and the capabilities to repatriate these nationals, as well as gather evidence and prosecute them on a case-by-case basis. This must be done at once.** As we heard, “these individuals will return to the UK whether you like it or not. By repatriating them, you can control how they return.” Our current policy of limbo is incredibly detrimental to British security and to our interests in both a stable Syria and wider Middle East. It is also damaging to our relationship with the United States and the Trump administration, who have expressed frustration at the UK’s inaction.



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Diplomatic representation in Syria

To repatriate these nationals, it is crucial that we have a diplomatic presence. The last British ambassador to Syria before the embassy was closed in 2013, Simon Collis, said during evidence to the Committee that **the UK should take the lead and re-establish diplomatic ties. Having consular access will allow for the UK to assess the security situation on the ground in northeast Syria, to establish the level of threat and to make contact with our nationals. Can you please let us know what circumstances you would need to see before you will re-open the British Embassy even with more limited functions and staffing.**

Sanctions

Further, to maximise our engagement with the new Syrian regime and the role played by the UK, **we should consider the gradual lifting of country-level financial sanctions.** We propose the Government make as soon as practicable a full review of all current sanctions, including sanctions on Syria as a whole and sanctions on Syrian officials, to determine which sanctions might be retained and which lifted, either immediately or at an appropriate time during the political development process. Witnesses told us that now is “the time to be bold” and that sanctions can always be reimposed at a later stage; now is the time for the UK to carve out a role for itself and push for democratic and inclusive governance in Syria.

This is a fast-moving and precarious situation. I would greatly appreciate your quick response before the House rises on 13 February. I will be placing this letter and your response in the public domain.

Dame Emily Thornberry MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee