

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Ref.: AL SYR 3/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

26 May 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4, 52/9 and 50/17.

In this connection, we would like to bring to your attention information we have received concerning **the targeting and online defamation of a Syrian woman human rights defender, Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji, since April 2025.**

Ms. Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji is a human rights defender and the chief executive officer of Equity and Empowerment, a Türkiye-based non-governmental organisation that supports women's rights and democracy in Syria, including in the north-western Syrian governorate of Idlib. Together with Syria-based colleagues, Ms. Al-Hajji promotes gender equality, political empowerment and digital security. In July 2023, Ms. Al-Hajji was selected one of the ten faces of democracy by the European Endowment for Democracy (Ten Faces of EED).

Ms. Al-Hajji was the subject of communication [AL TUR 7/2023](#) regarding threats against her on social media, claiming that her work went against Islamic teaching. The communication was sent on 12 September 2023 to the Turkish Government, which had an obligation to protect the human rights of individuals under its jurisdiction, including from threats emanating from regions held by the de facto authorities in north-western Syria. In addition to its obligations under international humanitarian law, the de facto authority in Idlib at the time was responsible for ensuring the human rights of individuals under its effective control, including, but not limited to, the right to life.

According to the information received:

On 19 April 2025, a recording by an unknown source was circulated on social media with Ms. Al-Hajji's voice in which she appears to criticise the full face covering that some women in Idlib wore. Her alleged comments triggered a wave of defamatory statements against her, her family and the organisation she runs, Equity and Empowerment. At around the same time, Ms. Al-Hajji urged the Syrian government and the Ministry of Interior to investigate alleged cases of abduction of young women.

On 20 April 2025, Ms. Al-Hajji posted an explanatory video on her Facebook page in which she described the recording as being taken out of context, that

these were indeed her statements but that they dated to four years prior. Ms. Al-Hajji said that at the time she had asked fully veiled women to uncover their face during all-women training courses for security reasons.

On 22 April 2025, the defamatory campaign against her intensified, some accusing her of being an agent of the previous regime and of spreading false information about a slave market in Idlib – in apparent relation to her statements regarding the abduction of women. She has since received death threats on her Facebook page and on that of Equity and Empowerment and in direct messages to her. Members of her family in Idlib also were threatened physically and online. Sent by unknown users, these messages urged followers to post defamatory content against her and to take violent action and burn down the office of Equity and Empowerment in Idlib.

On 23 April 2025, the governor of Idlib filed a complaint against Ms. Al-Hajji and asked the public prosecutor to file a lawsuit against her for insulting the Islamic veil and for spreading false information about the presence of a slave market in Idlib.

On 24 April 2025, the Idlib police shut down Equity and Empowerment’s office in Kafr Yahmoul without official explanation, its only centre in the region. The office remained closed by the time of writing this communication, and the Idlib authorities have verbally informed the organisation that it was not allowed to operate any longer.

On 6 May 2025, Equity and Empowerment posted on its Facebook page that it was conducting internal procedures to ensure a safe working environment.

On 13 May 2025, two police officers visited her family home in Idlib demanding her presence to face charges against her by the governor of Idlib. They were told that she was in Türkiye. The police did not present an official document. Ms. Al-Hajji is currently wanted on charges of spreading false information about the presence of female slaves and a slave market in Idlib, and of insulting the full-face covering worn by women. She risks arrest and detention should she return to attend her hearing in court, a date for which has not been set so far.

Without wishing to prejudge the accuracy of the information received, we express serious concern at the reported renewed acts of hate speech, defamation and threats of violence using online platforms against Ms. Al-Hajji, her co-workers and her family members, and at the charges pressed against her in relation to her legitimate human rights work. We are further deeply concerned at the potential consequences for her physical integrity, resulting from the online defamation campaign and its death threats and we call for effective investigations into these allegations to ensure accountability. We are concerned that these acts were taken in retaliation for her work in the defence of women’s rights.

In her report on “Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression” the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and opinion called on States to “take all appropriate measures, including through laws, social

policies and programmes, to strengthen gender equality and eliminate gender stereotypes, negative social norms and discriminatory laws, policies, practices and attitudes,” and urged them not to “make, sponsor, encourage or disseminate statements that they know or should reasonably know to be false, nor should they support in any way the dissemination of gendered disinformation.” The Special Rapporteur also emphasized that “all measures to restrict gendered disinformation, hate speech or online gender-based violence should comply fully with international human rights standards, strictly and narrowly construed. (A/78/288, paras. 125, 126 and 127).

We would also like to note that the former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has firmly rejected the claim that religious beliefs can be used to justify violence or discrimination against women.

If confirmed, the facts alleged would appear to contravene, among other norms, with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Syrian Arab Republic acceded to on 23 March 1976, and which the interim authorities have considered an integral part of its Constitutional Declaration.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide full details of any protective measure put in place to ensure the physical and psychological security and integrity of Ms. Al-Hajji, her family and her co-workers.
3. Please provide information regarding any investigation carried out with regard to the above-mentioned allegations, and if none has been conducted, please explain why.
4. Please indicate what measures have been taken to ensure that human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Syria are able to carry out their peaceful and legitimate work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of threats or acts of intimidation and harassment of any kind.
5. Please indicate what measures have been taken to ensure the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, and community members exercising their legitimate rights are guaranteed.

This communication and any response received from the interim authorities will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will

also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Irene Khan
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Gina Romero
Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above allegations and concerns, we would like to bring Your Excellency's attention to the following:

In this context, we wish to stress that in accordance with article 6, 9 and 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Syria is State party since 23 March 1976 and which the new Syrian authorities have considered an integral part of its Constitutional Declaration, everyone has the inherent right to life, to liberty and the security of person; and no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence nor to unlawful attacks upon his honour or reputation.

In this regard, we also refer you to article 19 of the ICCPR that protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and article 21 of the ICCPR, which provides that everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media". In its general comment No. 34, the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including "political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse" (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11).

The Committee further asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23). Recognizing how journalists and persons who engage in the gathering and analysis of information on the human rights situation and who publish human rights-related reports, including judges and lawyers, are frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and attacks because of their activities, the Committee stresses that "all such attacks should be vigorously investigated in a timely fashion, and the perpetrators prosecuted, and the victims, or, in the case of killings, their representatives, be in receipt of appropriate forms of redress" (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant and restrictions must be "the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function". (CCPR/C/GC/34, paras. 34 and 35).

An attack on a person because of the exercise of his or her freedom of opinion or expression, including arbitrary arrest, torture, threats to life and killing, cannot be

compatible with article 19.

In her report on “Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression” called on States to “take all appropriate measures, including through laws, social policies and programmes, to strengthen gender equality and eliminate gender stereotypes, negative social norms and discriminatory laws, policies, practices and attitudes,” and urged them not to “make, sponsor, encourage or disseminate statements that they know or should reasonably know to be false, nor should they support in any way the dissemination of gendered disinformation.” The Special Rapporteur also emphasized that “all measures to restrict gendered disinformation, hate speech or online gender-based violence should comply fully with international human rights standards, strictly and narrowly construed. (A/78/288, paras. 125, 126 and 127).

We would also like to refer to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Furthermore, we would like to refer to the provision of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in article 12, paragraphs 2 and 3, which provides that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.

Human Rights Resolution 47/23 recognizes the risks that new and emerging digital technologies may have for the protection, promotion and enjoyment of human rights, including but not limited to the right to equality and non-discrimination, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, the right to an effective remedy and the right to privacy, in accordance with States’ obligations under international human rights law.

Further, General Assembly resolution 71/199, recognizes that women were particularly affected by violations of the right to privacy in the digital age, and called upon all States to further develop preventive measures and remedies.

In the report on the situation of women human rights defenders (A/HRC/40/60), the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted that women continue to face systematic discrimination, marginalisation and repression (paragraph 107). The Special Rapporteur pointed out additional gendered risks and obstacles women human rights defenders face, including public shaming, stigmatisation, attacks on honour and reputation, the threat of violence, including sexual violence, online harassment, violence and attacks (paragraphs 37-39, 42, 45). The Special Rapporteur recommended the States, inter alia, to:

- Protect the rights of women defenders, including by taking a public stand against all State and non-State actors who violate these rights, ceasing all attacks and threats against women defenders and investigating all that occur, ensuring that impunity does not prevail;
- Ensure that women defenders enjoy a safe and enabling environment to exercise their rights, considering their specific and diverse needs;
- Prioritise the protection of women defenders in online spaces and adopt laws, policies and practices that protect their right to privacy and protect them from libel and hate speech.

In the report on celebrating women in activism and civil society: the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by women and girls, (A/75/184), the Special Rapporteur on the freedom of assembly and association further expressed concern about threats and attacks against women human rights defenders that target their family members – in particular, their children, partners, and relatives – owing to gender stereotypes about their caregiving roles. These pressures give rise to guilt and affect women’s health and well-being, while coercing them to stay silent, self-censor and give up their activism. Some women may face stigma and domestic violence within their own homes, including sexual violence, as reprisals for their activism.

In relation to the targeting in the digital public sphere, the Special Rapporteur emphasized that online gender-based violence remains a major barrier to women’s rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. Social media, in particular, has become a hostile space imbued with extreme risks for women in civil society and activism. Women human rights defenders face rampant online harassment and massive social media attacks and notes with concern that States continue to fail to protect women in civil society from online attacks and violence. The Special Rapporteur called on States to publicly condemn and duly investigate smear campaigns and online harassment against women exercising their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.