



## Unlocking Rights in Northeast Syria: The Importance of Civil and Legal Documentation

## Acknowledgements

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Cover image: Teachers going ‘tent-to-tent’ to maintain education activities for children while their school undergoes rehabilitation by NRC in a displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023

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## I. Executive summary

As Syria enters a new phase in its history, all Syrians must have access to civil and legal documentation – such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, as well as identity cards and passports – that allows them to access and obtain essential services, exercise their human rights, and reintegrate into their communities. Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, Syrians have faced a variety of obstacles in accessing civil and legal documentation, including security fears that have prevented them from moving or travelling through checkpoints, and barriers stemming from Syria's economic crisis. Additionally, the rise of *de facto* authorities across the country has complicated the documentation landscape, as a number of these authorities have established their own documentation systems, each with distinct procedures and types of documentation issued. In Northeast Syria (NES) – which encompasses the governorates of Hassakeh, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor – approximately 3.25 million people have lived under the *de facto* control of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (DAANES) for a majority of the Syrian conflict.<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade, the DAANES has issued civil and legal documents to residents in parts of NES to varying degrees. Simultaneously, many Syrians in NES have continued to rely on documents issued by the former government of Syria (former GoS). Due to this dual documentation system, there is significant variation in the types of documents people living in NES may hold, posing legal identity challenges as DAANES-issued documents are not recognised nationally or internationally.

Based on research the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School have carried out, including a survey of NES residents, this briefing paper describes the complicated documentation landscape in NES and outlines the obstacles NES residents – whether longstanding residents or internally displaced persons (IDPs) – have faced

in accessing documentation, including financial costs, complicated procedures, and security concerns. These challenges are likely to persist and with increasing numbers of IDPs on the move, may become more acute.

Addressing the complex documentation reality – as well as grappling with challenges linked to the large stateless population in NES – will require a range of actors to develop and implement effective political and legal solutions. Accordingly, this briefing recommends:

- *The Syrian transitional government and the DAANES:* Coordinate to ensure the integration of civilian institutions, including any civil records, is handled in an efficient and responsible manner, placing the rights of Syrians first.
- *The Syrian transitional government:* Recognise information contained in DAANES-issued documents as *prima facie* proof of life events, identity, and family ties when merging civil records and, when necessary, work together with the DAANES to establish verification procedures for DAANES-issued documents and/or information the documents contain.
- *Donors and humanitarian organisations:* Support the integration of DAANES records into a robust civil and legal documentation system as well as expand legal and financial support for Syrians to obtain and renew documents.
- *The international community:* Recognise the content of DAANES-issued civil and legal documents, particularly when used in applications for asylum.

Keeping civil and legal documentation on the agenda of discussions regarding Syria's future will ensure systems and institutions that support the rights and needs of all Syrians are at the foundation of any lasting political settlements.



## II. Introduction

Syria is undergoing a moment of historical transition and change. On 8 December 2024 the previous Syrian government fell and has since been replaced by a transitional government. Despite this shift in the political and security situation, the humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire. Years of conflict have damaged and destroyed civilian infrastructure, including many Syrians' homes, and left millions reliant on humanitarian assistance. As of 2025, an estimated 7.2 million Syrians have been displaced within Syria, and another 6.2 million have sought refuge outside of Syria.<sup>2</sup>

One significant consequence and challenge of the Syrian conflict has been an ongoing documentation crisis.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the conflict, many Syrians' documents have been destroyed or gone missing. IDPs and refugees, in particular, have often lacked the financial or legal resources needed to obtain documents, or faced security hurdles that prevented them from obtaining documents. Those who have limited or no documentation face an inability to prove identity in official settings and restricted access to essential services and rights, including: the right to legal identity; the right to adequate housing; the right to work; the right to education; and the right to health.<sup>4</sup> Without documents and access to rights, individuals have increased exposure to protection risks, such as exploitation and abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Documentation challenges have been particularly acute in NES, where ongoing hostilities have devastated critical infrastructure and communities have faced repeated cycles of displacement. NES is estimated to be home to around half a million IDPs, with about 132,000 individuals residing in 12 camps across the area.<sup>6</sup> NES also has a large stateless population. Prior to the start of the conflict in 2011, the former GoS subjected the Kurdish population of NES to discriminatory and repressive practices.<sup>7</sup> Notably, a national census in 1962 deprived a portion of the Kurdish population (and their descendants) of their Syrian citizenship.<sup>8</sup> As a result, it is estimated that prior to 2011, there

were around 160,000 to 300,000 stateless Kurds, in addition to other stateless individuals, in NES.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that this population has increased over the course of the conflict.

In NES, both the DAANES and the former GoS issued civil and legal documents to residents, complicating an already severe documentation crisis. The DAANES has had effective control of most areas of NES since 2014 and has established governing institutions, including an administrative and court system, separate from the Syrian state. In this capacity, as of December 2024, the DAANES had issued a variety of civil and legal documents in some areas under its control, although not consistently, and in other areas, DAANES never issued documents. The types of DAANES documents NES residents may hold also varies significantly, as the DAANES issued different types of documents in different places, across different time periods, with different sets of procedures and rules. Moreover, camp-based documentation processes and policies have differed considerably by camp.

Additionally, DAANES documents are only recognised within DAANES areas; they were not recognised by the former GoS and remain unrecognised by foreign countries. In contrast, the DAANES recognises former GoS documents. Many NES residents residing in DAANES areas hold and have relied on former GoS documents – especially Syrian national identity cards – including in DAANES processes. Because former GoS documents are recognised internationally and throughout Syria, NES residents have had a strong preference for obtaining them and, in some cases, have been willing to take serious risks to do so.

As a result of prolonged conflict, challenges accessing documents, and the existence of two parallel and often overlapping, inconsistent, documentation systems, it has become increasingly difficult to predict what documents (if any) particular individuals living in NES may hold at any given time. An individual may have

no documents at all, only former GoS documents, a combination of former GoS and DAANES documents, or exclusively DAANES documents. There are no reliable statistics indicating how many Syrians fall into each category.

Addressing the documentation crisis in NES has been a pressing need for many years, but this need has become increasingly urgent after December 2024. Since the transition of the Syrian government, as of May 2025, former GoS civil registries (where Syrians register life events and apply for documents) have been closed, effectively pausing the registration of births, marriages, and deaths, as well as Syrians' ability to obtain and renew national identity cards. As of May 2025, recent political developments indicate significant changes to documentation systems may be imminent.

While the DAANES has acted as an independent non-state actor since 2012, the DAANES' military counterpart – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – signed a deal with the new Syrian transitional government on 10 March 2025.<sup>10</sup> This agreement includes an undertaking by the SDF to integrate with Syria's state institutions, both military and civilian. Although it is not yet clear what shape this integration will take, it will presumably include in some way integrating information from DAANES documentation systems into systems administered by the Syrian transitional government. It is critical that any

planned or proposed integration includes the establishment of policies and processes that enable all Syrians, including NES residents, to obtain and renew documents.

Government and humanitarian responses will also need to address the large stateless population in NES. Given the fact that there was already a significant stateless population in NES prior to the conflict, compounded by the length of the conflict, it is likely that substantial numbers of children have been born and grown up in NES without any documentation, or with very limited documentation.

### A. Methodology and limitations

This briefing draws on a survey of 190 individuals living in camps in NES carried out in November 2024, as well as analysis of ongoing developments and prior research by NRC's Syria Response Team and the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School on access to documentation. In this briefing, quotes are attributable to survey respondents, while uncited information comes from non-public research or the general knowledge of NRC staff. While most of the research for this briefing was conducted before 8 December 2024, its key findings remain relevant: the documentation challenges NES residents and others living in NES have faced have not fundamentally changed and are unlikely to simply disappear.



A displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023

### III. The DAANES as a *de facto* government

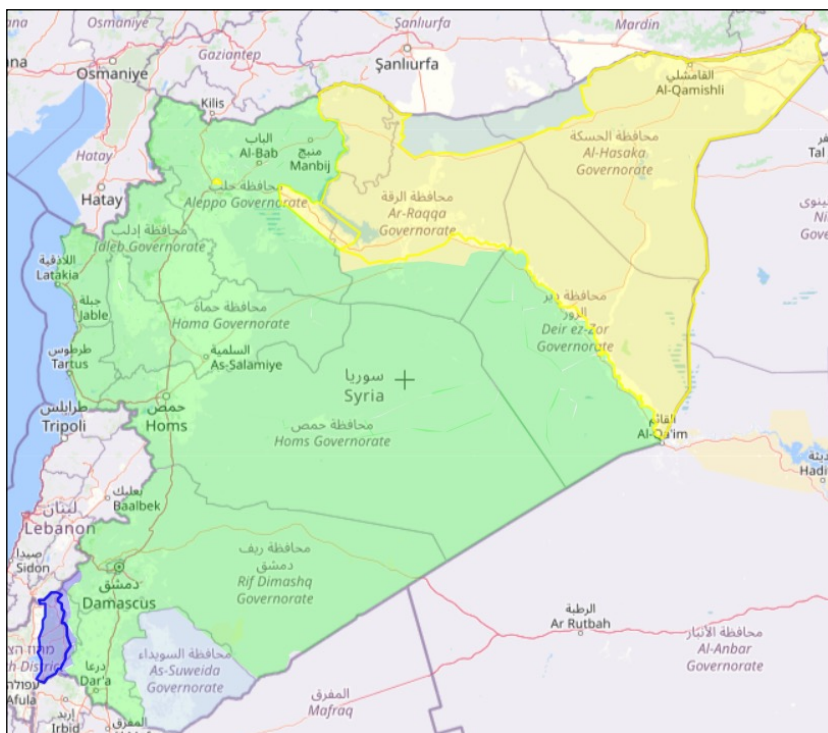
As the *de facto* government of NES, the DAANES has established extensive administrative and legal structures within NES and been an important player in the lives of Syrians residing there. During the Syrian armed conflict, Kurdish forces began to take control of NES after the former GoS withdrew from the area in 2012.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, Kurdish forces established the SDF alongside an administrative governance body, the Self-Administration, which started operating as a *de facto* government in NES. In December 2023, the Self-Administration revised its quasi-constitutional document, the Social Contract, and renamed itself the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES).<sup>12</sup>

Among other things, the Social Contract states that the DAANES is part of the Syrian Democratic Republic and can serve as the basis for building it; stresses the values the DAANES aims to uphold, including gender equality and decentralised democracy; and calls for the establishment of “a democratic system based on democratic autonomous administrations”.<sup>13</sup>

Administratively, the DAANES has separate Legislative, Justice, and Executive Councils to oversee affairs across its areas of control.

At the local level, the DAANES has utilised a system of local civil governance structures/communes, known as *komins*, that oversee state functions, including the issuance of civil and legal documents in areas where they issue documents. A second level of governance, at the neighborhood or district level, is comprised of councils, which are typically referred to as “Houses of the People.”<sup>14</sup> All *komins* are headed by two co-chairs, one male and one female.<sup>15</sup> *komins* perform key functions when it comes to obtaining documents, including validating individuals are from the specific area in which the *komin* is situated.<sup>16</sup>

As of May 2025, the DAANES continues to have formal authority over Al-Hassakeh (Jazeera), Afrin, Euphrates (al-Furat), Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir Ez-Zor.<sup>17</sup> Despite the DAANES’ control of large parts of NES during the conflict, the former GoS continued to maintain control of pockets of territory, notably the “security squares”, small areas of land in Al-Hassakeh and Qamishli. With the former government’s demise, however, these areas have come under the control of the DAANES (though the SDF’s March 2025 agreement with the Syrian transitional government may change this situation).



Map of Syria showing areas of control as of May 2025. The yellow area indicates area under the DAANES’ control; the large green area indicates area under the control of the new transitional government; the grey strip at the top is under Turkish control; the grey at the bottom is a nonaligned area; and the dark blue at the bottom left is the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel. Map courtesy of [liveuamap.com](https://liveuamap.com).



## IV. Benefits and risks of holding former government of Syria and/or DAANES documents in northeast Syria

Despite living in areas under the control of DAANES, many NES residents have continued to utilise and obtain former GoS documents: DAANES documents are not widely available or recognised outside of DAANES areas, while former GoS documents were recognised nationally and thus, have had more practical value. NES residents who have some form of former GoS documentation hold either expired documents obtained before the conflict or former GoS documents they received or renewed during the conflict by crossing into former-government areas (or obtained with assistance from brokers, lawyers, or relatives living in those areas).

In contrast to *de facto* authorities in Northwest Syria, the DAANES has consistently recognised former GoS documents and throughout the last decade has not discouraged NES residents from obtaining or using them. As a result, individuals who hold former GoS documents can use them within DAANES areas, including in DAANES documentation processes. Notably, the former GoS national identity card is a standard form of identification across NES. Former GoS documents have been particularly important in sub-areas of NES where the DAANES did not typically issue its own documentation, such as the Hassakeh region. In other parts of NES, residents may hold both former GoS and DAANES documents.

As former GoS documents are recognised nationally and internationally, holding them can enable Syrians to prove their nationality and identity, as well as exercise freedom of movement. For example, Syrians with former GoS documents have reportedly been able to leave NES to visit family, renew documents, and access services in other parts of Syria, such as former GoS areas. In particular, as NES has limited medical facilities, residents with former GoS documents who required advanced medical treatment have reported being able to travel to former GoS areas to access treatment.

### The importance of former GoS documents

“My family does not have any [former GoS] documents. But we need these documents to obtain all of our rights as citizens in terms of having a legal identity and nationality, registration of marriage and births, obtaining a family booklet and other civil and political rights.” – *Syrian IDP*

Although DAANES documents are not recognised outside of NES, they allow residents to prove identity, move with fewer restrictions, and access services within NES. Reports indicate that DAANES documents have enabled NES residents to access DAANES-subsidised services, including bread, gas, and heating.<sup>18</sup> The connection between access to services and DAANES documents has varied over time and in different sub-areas of NES. Holding DAANES documents that prove residency in NES has facilitated some residents’ ability to move easily throughout NES and reenter NES if they traveled outside the region.

In some cases, DAANES documents have helped stateless persons, or those who have otherwise been unable to obtain former GoS documents, to prove their identity and residency in NES. Stateless Kurds, Palestinian Refugees from Syria, and any individual whose father is not a registered Syrian have reportedly been able to obtain some, but not all, DAANES documents.<sup>19</sup> Documents they have reportedly been able to obtain include identification cards, temporary family cards, and proof of residency.<sup>20</sup>

Holding DAANES documents has also carried risks for some NES residents. In general, when NES residents passed through former GoS



checkpoints or moved through former GoS-controlled territory, they faced increased risks of questioning, demands for bribes, forced conscription (in the case of military aged men), and arrest and detention. Being in possession of DAANES documents placed the holder at security risk as their geographic area of origin/residence was often perceived as a signal of their political affiliation – in opposition of the former GoS. NES residents carrying DAANES documents into former GoS areas also risked their confiscation or destruction. Due to these risks, NES residents reportedly took mitigation measures such as travelling without or hiding DAANES documents, using different cellphones when travelling to former government areas (to avoid indicating that they have a sim card from DAANES areas), and not driving cars with DAANES-issued licence plates.

Individuals who have lacked both former GoS and DAANES documents have reported

not being able to officially marry, register the births of their children, sign lease agreements, access services, or obtain work. NES residents without documentation, or with insufficient documentation, have also reported limiting their movements to avoid attracting attention, seeking the help of relatives to complete processes and transactions (such as signing leases), and in rare cases, using fake documents.

### Checkpoints

“When I was searched at the Syrian government checkpoints they found that I had a travel permit issued by the DAANES camp administration; they began to question me and I had to pay them a bribe to get out of the situation.” – *Syrian woman living in a camp in NES*



NRC staff undergoing a legal counselling session with a project participant at a displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023

## Civil and legal documents in international law

International human rights law contains the right to legal identity and associated rights. Notably, every child has the right to be registered immediately after birth.<sup>21</sup> The UN Human Rights Council has stressed “the importance of birth registration ... as a means for providing an official record of the existence of a person and the recognition of that individual as a person before the law, and as a critical means of preventing statelessness.”<sup>22</sup> Birth registration is particularly important to protecting and promoting other rights. The Human Rights Council has noted that “registering a child’s birth is a vital step towards respect for and the protection and fulfilment of all human rights” and those without birth registration “are more vulnerable to marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, violence, statelessness, [and other exploitation and abuse].”<sup>23</sup> In practice, as proving identity and/or status is often required in governmental settings, access to civil and legal documents can be a prerequisite to the enjoyment of numerous other rights, such as access to work, education, and/or health services.

Syria is a state party to all major international human rights treaties, including those that guarantee the right to a legal identity, the right to birth registration, and the obligation to register marriages.<sup>24</sup> These treaties are binding on the Syrian transitional government. International jurisprudence suggests that the Syrian transitional government may also have an obligation to recognise the information contained on civil documents issued by the DAANES.<sup>25</sup> For third states, international jurisprudence indicates that the fact that a state or government is not recognised as internationally lawful should not deprive individuals living in that territory from registering key life events, including births, marriages, and deaths.<sup>26</sup>

## V. Challenges in access to former government of Syria documentation in northeast Syria

The challenges NES residents have faced accessing former GoS documents shed light on the types of challenges that may arise under new documentation arrangements. People holding former GoS documents live throughout NES – and in parts of NES where the DAANES has not typically issued documents, former GoS documents have often been the only documents available. Significant former GoS documents include Syrian national identity cards, family booklets (recording key information on all the members of a family such as date of birth), family/individual status extracts (copies of information contained in family booklets), and passports.

### A. Security and administrative challenges

Security concerns associated with travelling to former GoS territory acted as a deterrent to NES residents accessing former GoS documents, and in some cases prevented NES residents from obtaining them. In 2021, Syria updated its civil status law to modernise and centralise its civil registration system. Notably, the 2021 law allowed Syrian citizens to update or retrieve records – such as birth, marriage, and death certificates – from any civil registry office, rather than only from a registry in their place of origin, as had been the case previously.<sup>27</sup> As a result, NES residents seeking former GoS documents could either leave NES and cross into former government-controlled territory or enter the former GoS-controlled security squares within NES to obtain documents from the civil registries located there.

One of the most significant obstacles to obtaining former GoS documents was the need to pass through checkpoints controlled by the former GoS. At former GoS checkpoints, people perceived as opposition sympathisers or those who had previously fled former government territory faced a heightened risk of detention or harassment. As a result, some NES residents resorted to bribes or other strategies to mitigate risks.

### Using bribes and family members to obtain documents

*A Syrian displaced person living in NES who had been able to obtain some former GoS documents prior to being displaced was forced to find other avenues to obtain additional documents due to security concerns: “One of my relatives obtained the family civil status extract after paying bribes because I was worried about entering the security squares.”*

Checkpoints were particularly dangerous for men of military age, as they risked arrest or forced conscription by the former GoS. In an attempt to obtain documents without entering former GoS territory, some military-aged men reportedly sent female family members to former GoS civil registries or secured a power of attorney.

### Movement challenges for military-aged men

*“I was able to get the ID and military booklet myself but once I was required for military service, I could no longer obtain documents, my wife had to go get the family booklet.”*  
– Syrian father living in NES

Administrative challenges and the risks of exploitation that accompanied those challenges could also prevent people from obtaining former GoS documents. Around the same time that Syria’s civil status law was reformed, the former GoS established “The Gate”, an online platform managed from Damascus linked to civil registries that provided remote access to information and services. However, as not all former GoS civil registries were connected to the Gate, NES residents were often only able



to obtain paper copies of documents that were not officially recorded in the national system. Consequently, NES residents faced the potential for exploitation, as they could be subject to demands for bribes from officials who controlled the registration process, especially as there were often long delays in uploading documents, which added an additional layer of uncertainty.

## B. Eligibility restrictions

Former GoS restrictions on nationality and registration processes rendered segments of the NES population ineligible to receive former GoS documents.<sup>28</sup> Notably, former GoS policies created a large population of stateless Kurds who were ineligible to register life events or obtain other documents from the former GoS as they officially did not exist within the Syrian state.<sup>29</sup> Because status is inherited through a person's father in Syria, a child born to a stateless father is themselves stateless; as a result, the effects of these restrictions have compounded over generations.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, third-party nationals – refugees (including Palestinian Refugees) or people of foreign descent – were unable to register or receive documents from the former GoS.<sup>31</sup>



Teachers going 'tent-to-tent' to maintain education activities for children while their school undergoes rehabilitation by NRC in a displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023

## Being undocumented in your own country

A husband who is part of the *Maktumin* (stateless Kurds) community highlighted the generational burden of being undocumented: "I am *maktum*, my father is *maktum*, my children are *maktumin*, my grandchildren are *maktumin*, and my wife is *maktumin*. Although I was born in Syria 55 years ago, we do not have any kind of documents that prove our identity."

Another Syrian father explained: "Our lack of documents has had a major impact on my life since childhood and in the lives of all members of my family – we cannot own, move, learn, or obtain services." "We exist and do not exist" he said. "I am forced to transfer the ownership of anything I buy to other people's names, as I don't have the right to own property." He felt his children had been "robbed of their childhood" as they "were denied the education other children received and were forced to do heavy labor".

Similarly, a young woman, displaced within NES and part of the *Maktumin* community, expressed her desire to obtain Syrian citizenship so that she could "obtain legal identity, access education services, and move freely without the risk of arrest."



## VI. Challenges in access to DAANES-issued documentation in northeast Syria

Finding ways to address the documentation crisis in NES requires not only recognising NES residents' experiences with former GoS documents, but also understanding documents issued by the DAANES and the challenges NES residents have faced in obtaining them. DAANES-issued documents include family statements/booklets, "expatriate" cards, and certificates of birth, death, marriage, and divorce. The DAANES has primarily issued these documents – especially certificates for vital life events – in the Raqqa/Tabqa region.

### A. Procedural and financial barriers

Some NES residents, particularly IDPs, have struggled to fulfil procedural requirements to obtain DAANES documents for which they are eligible. Generally, to obtain a DAANES document outside of a camp, an individual must: (i) buy the required form or template from a shop, (ii) complete it, sign it and have it stamped by a *komin*, and (iii) have it stamped by the House of the People.<sup>32</sup> There are often additional requirements depending on the document type. For example, to obtain a family statement (which contains birth and marriage information about members of a family), an individual first has to obtain a residency certification (to prove they live in that area of NES) from a *komin* and then go to the local DAANES civil registry with two witnesses (who can also prove residency in that area of NES). To obtain a marriage statement (a record of a marriage), an individual might have to bring along documents such as fingerprints and personal photos. To obtain a driver's licence, after attending school for driving, an individual must acquire a sponsor who is from the area that is issuing the driver's licence, be physically present in the area before applying for a licence, and have a rental agreement to prove residence in the area. Formal camps have *komins* and councils of their own, which in some cases issue camp-specific or general identity documents.

Financial barriers to obtaining DAANES documents include the costs associated with meeting these procedural requirements, as well as DAANES fees, which have varied over time and have not always been clearly communicated. In some cases, NES residents who have not been able to travel to DAANES civil registries or who have struggled to meet procedural requirements (such as having a sponsor, witnesses, and a rental agreement) have turned to brokers or lawyers for help. However, few NES residents are able to afford the costs associated with professional assistance.

### B. Changing requirements and documents

The types of documents the DAANES has issued, and the associated procedures and rules, have varied significantly across different regions in NES and over time, causing confusion regarding documents individuals can or should hold and how to access them. For example, in mid-2024 the DAANES ceased to issue the Individual Registration Statement, an identity document similar to a family statement that had primarily been issued by the DAANES civil registry in the Tabqa/Raqqa region; no explanation was given and DAANES authorities have not commented on whether previously issued Individual Registration Statements remain valid.

Camp-based differences have been especially pronounced as certain camps have more restrictive measures than others. DAANES camp authorities in Al Hol and Roj camps, closed camps where individuals cannot freely leave or enter, have routinely confiscated the documents of camp residents on arrival and barred residents from leaving the camp, thereby preventing them from obtaining documents outside the camp.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, authorities in Mahmoudli and Areesha camps have typically allowed camp residents to retain their documents and leave the camp temporarily, including to obtain documents, or permanently.<sup>34</sup>

## Al Hol camp restrictions

“We cannot get documents from [the former GoS] due to security concerns and military conscription – yet for unknown reasons the DAANES does not allow Al Hol residents to obtain DAANES documents either.” – *A Syrian man living in Al Hol camp*

“As I was displaced to Al-Hol camp at a young age I couldn’t get any documents, so I don’t have anything to prove my identity, my marriage, and my children.” – *A young Syrian mother living in Al Hol camp*

## C. Challenges of expatriate cards

One of the most significant documents the DAANES has issued is the expatriate card, a document that until December 2024 the DAANES required Syrians from outside NES to obtain if they intended to live in or visit NES. The requirement to obtain an expatriate card was applied both to Syrians originally from outside NES and to Syrians relocating between different areas of NES. Security and military checkpoints in DAANES-controlled

areas screened all arrivals for an expatriate card.<sup>35</sup> If an individual was not able to produce a card, they typically had 15 days to start an application. However, IDPs residing in camps were not able to obtain expatriate cards. Following the change in government in December 2024, the DAANES has paused issuing the expatriate card (at least in Raqqqa). As of May 2025, anyone from outside DAANES areas can enter through checkpoints without producing an expatriate card. After the March 2025 agreement between the SDF and the transitional government, it is not clear if the DAANES intends to restart issuing expatriate cards and requiring non-residents to obtain them.

## Expatriate cards and freedom of movement

“IDPs in camps are prohibited from obtaining expatriate cards but they are vital to freedom of movement within DAANES’ areas ... Without the expatriate card, IDPs can only move using a visit permit from the camp administration which is not guaranteed to be provided.” – *A Syrian IDP in a DAANES-administered camp*



Young children outside of their tents in a displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023



The process to obtain an expatriate card was onerous and challenging to complete. First, a person seeking a card needed a sponsor – an individual willing to vouch for them who was from the area where they intend to apply.<sup>36</sup> According to the DAANES, the purpose of the expatriate card was to ensure that “all residents [of DAANES areas] enjoy security and safety and continue their lives in a normal manner, given that the sponsorship system established is to confirm the true identity of the person.”<sup>37</sup> Next, the applicant was required to secure a document from the DAANES internal security forces that included personal and family information, along with statements from two witnesses, including the sponsor. The applicant and sponsor were then required to appear together before the DAANES internal security forces with a rental agreement showing the applicant’s local residence. Additionally, the applicant had to have a certificate of identification from the

neighborhood *komin* confirming the applicant is known locally. Copies of identity documents for the applicant, their family members, and the witnesses were also required. Once issued, the expatriate card was valid for six months, and renewing it required the sponsor’s presence.<sup>38</sup>

#### D. Fear of conscription

Fear of conscription has also suppressed access to DAANES documentation. The DAANES required all men between the ages of 18 and 25 to serve in the SDF and carry their DAANES-issued military booklets for inspection at DAANES checkpoints. Certain exceptions to mandatory conscription, however, have existed for educational, health, or familial reasons. Out of fear of conscription, men without required exemptions have reportedly limited their travel within NES and sought the help of family members to obtain DAANES documents.



A woman doing laundry outside of her tent in a displacement camp in north-east Syria. NRC/2023

## VII. Recommendations

NES residents have faced documentation challenges that are common to many parts of Syria, such as damaged infrastructure and limited access to necessary financial and legal resources. Many Syrians have also faced challenges – particularly non-recognition of documents recording vital life events – associated with residing in areas of Syria under the control of *de facto* authorities. In NES, these challenges are compounded by the DAANES' position as the *de facto* government for more than a decade, leaving citizens with limited access to former GoS civil and legal documents and resources.

A range of actors have a role to play in developing political and legal solutions that address both general challenges and those specific to NES. Importantly, a focus on documentation in the transitional period has the potential to lead to robust and sustainable policies and systems that help guarantee Syrians' human rights into the future. This opportunity requires commitment and coordination from all relevant actors.

As Syria moves through this period of change, ensuring all Syrians can obtain the documentation necessary to live dignified lives should be a priority. To that end:

### *The DAANES:*

- Continue to coordinate with the Syrian transitional government, as outlined in the March 2025 agreement, to ensure the integration of civilian institutions, including any civil records, is handled in an efficient and responsible manner, placing the rights of Syrians first.
- Scale up coordination, ensure unhindered access with and to humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors in DAANES-area camps, especially those providing documentation and document-preservation support – including transitional

government documents through, for example, mobile clinics to ensure those living in camps are able to renew or obtain their documents.

### *Syrian transitional government:*

- Streamline integration of civilian institutions and related administrative processes, ensuring efficient and responsible handling of civil records.
- Recognise the information contained in documents issued by the DAANES when merging civil records. If authenticity of documents is unclear or challenged, the DAANES and the transitional government should establish aligned verification procedures. To continue not recognising DAANES-issued documentation risks further marginalising an entire segment of the population at a time when inclusion and representation is critical.
- Ensure procedures for verifying DAANES-issued documents are gender-sensitive and accessible to all Syrians, including those with disabilities.
- Ease administrative procedures, fees, and legal costs for obtaining or renewing civil and legal documents, particularly for widows with missing/dead husbands, and undocumented children with missing/dead fathers.
- Facilitate unhindered access and streamlined coordination with humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors for the establishment of mobile legal clinics across NES and the rest of Syria, particularly in camps and remote areas where access to civil registries and/or courts remains limited and difficult.
- Ensure that *maktumin* and other stateless individuals are recognised as Syrian citizens and have access to civil and legal documentation, including through registration at civil registries.



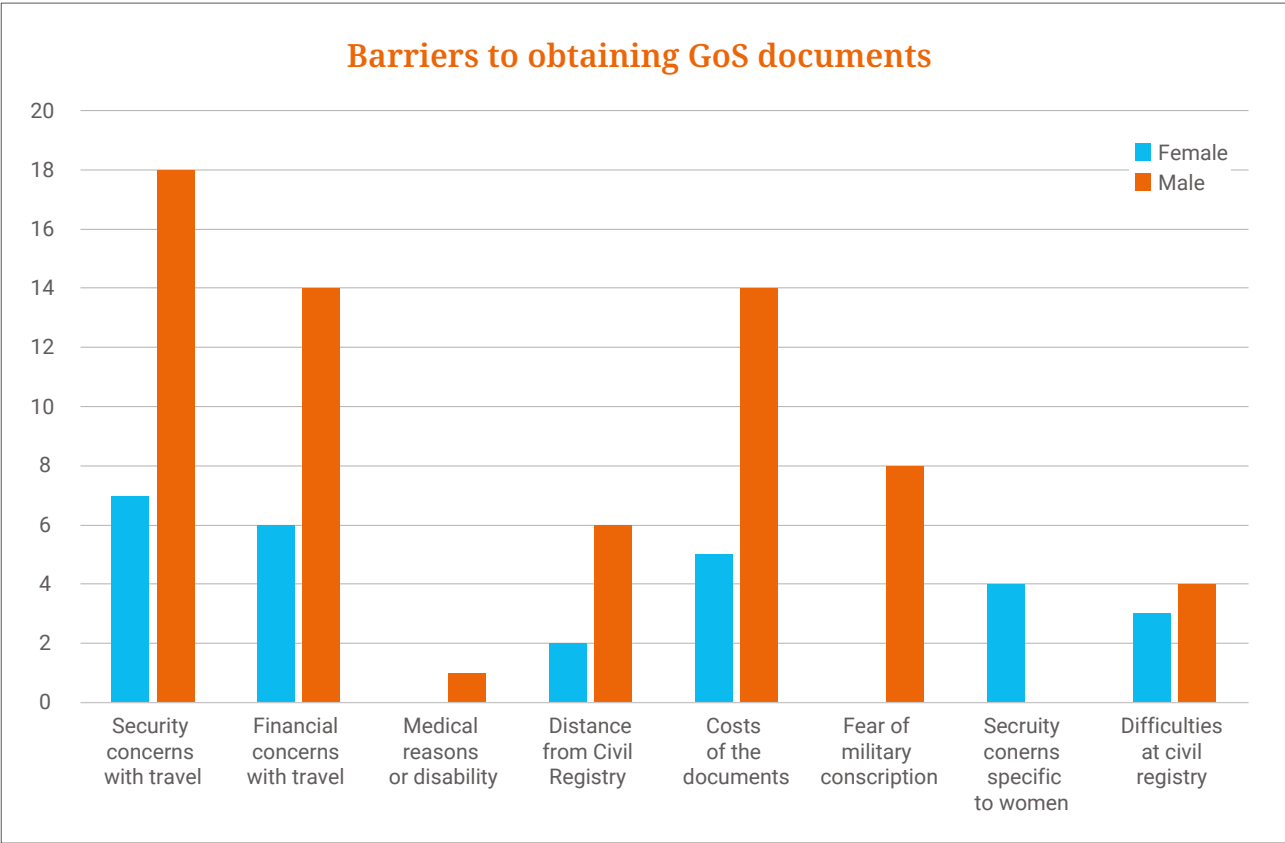
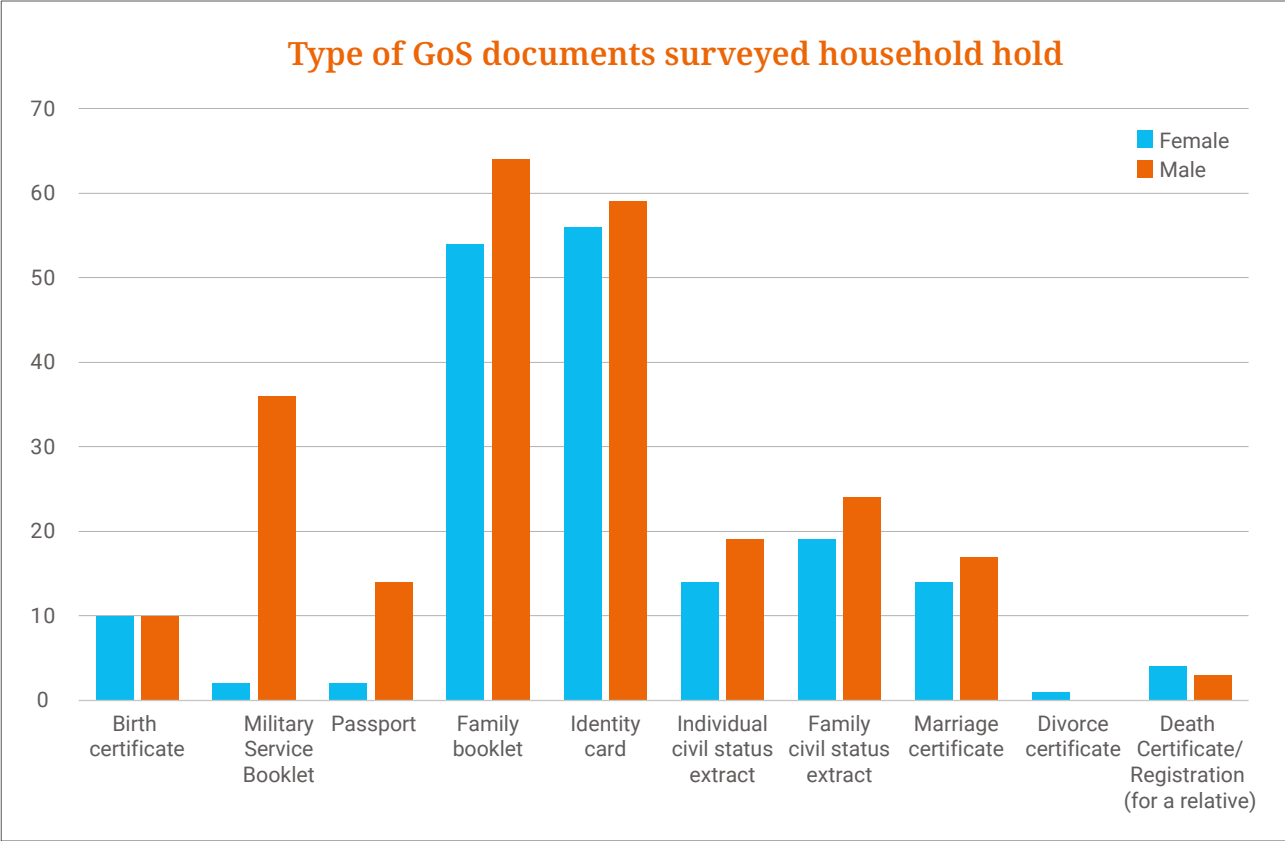
### *Humanitarian and development actors:*

- Commit to an efficient, Syrian-owned, Syrian-led response that is appropriately tailored to the humanitarian needs of Syrians, avoids duplication in efforts, and is sustained, coherent, and meaningfully and responsibly coordinated.
- Ensure that the redesign of Syria's humanitarian coordination architecture avoids unnecessary delays, is reflective of the diversity of response actors, and is fit for purpose to meet the needs of those it is intended to serve, including by having a coordinated Area of Responsibility within the Protection Cluster mandated to support legal restitution mechanisms.
- Scale up coordination with the transitional government to support legal aid and mobile clinics ensuring legal services and documents are accessible.
- Bolster legal support through hosting well-informed and targeted awareness sessions on the importance of obtaining or renewing documents, providing legal representation (for complex documentation cases), and delivering legal counselling to communities.
- Provide economic support to cover legal and practical costs associated with obtaining civil and legal documents, such as fees, transportation to and from civil registries, and legal assistance through representation or other means, especially for any process developed to convert or recognise DAANES documents within new or reformed government institutions.

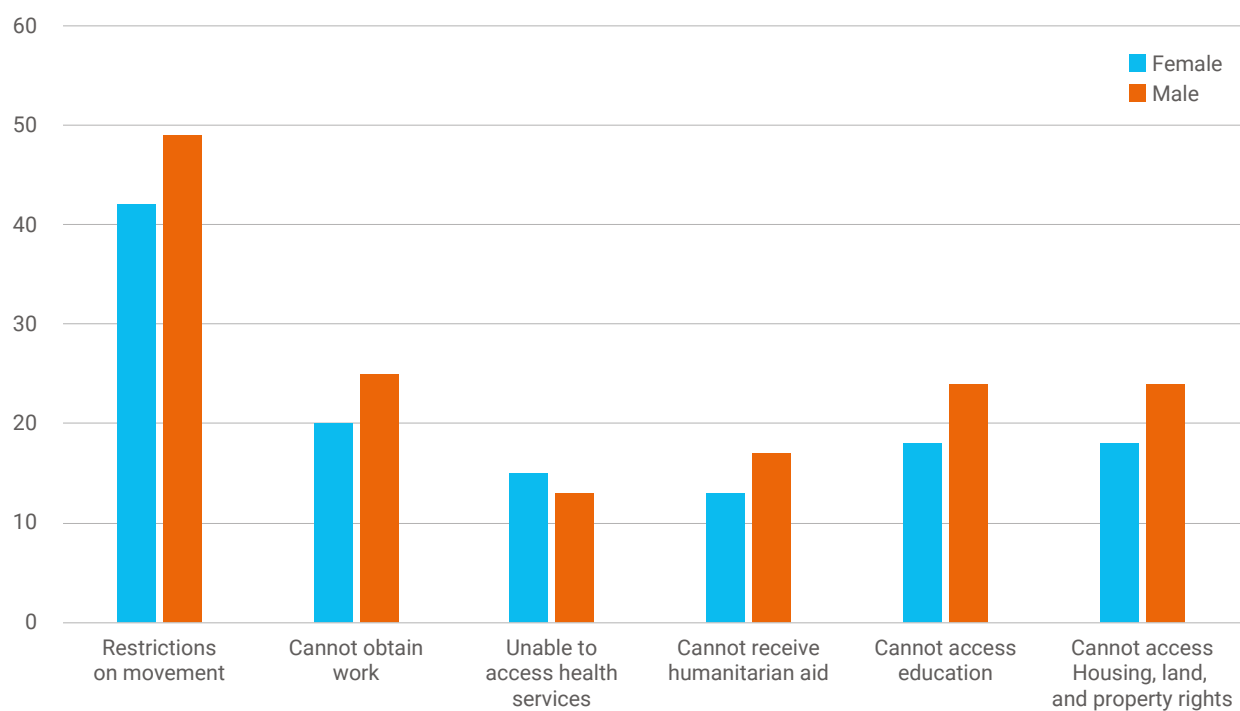
### *Donors and international community:*

- Support and fund the expansion of programmes assisting Syrians to obtain and preserve critical documents, including tailored programmes tackling specific barriers women face.
- Invest in economic support and programmes that cover the legal costs of obtaining and accessing civil and legal documents, including costs of legal services (representation, costs of documents, and representation), as well as transportation.
- Ensure scaled-up funding and funding modalities, including moving beyond emergency assistance and considering parallel longer-term flexible and integrated approaches that address cycles of aid dependency and build the foundations of increased resilience.
- Recognise the content of DAANES-issued civil and legal documents, particularly with applications for asylum. Put in place linkages with Syrian lawyers or local organisations to authenticate the validity of information in DAANES-issued documents when unsure about the information they contain.

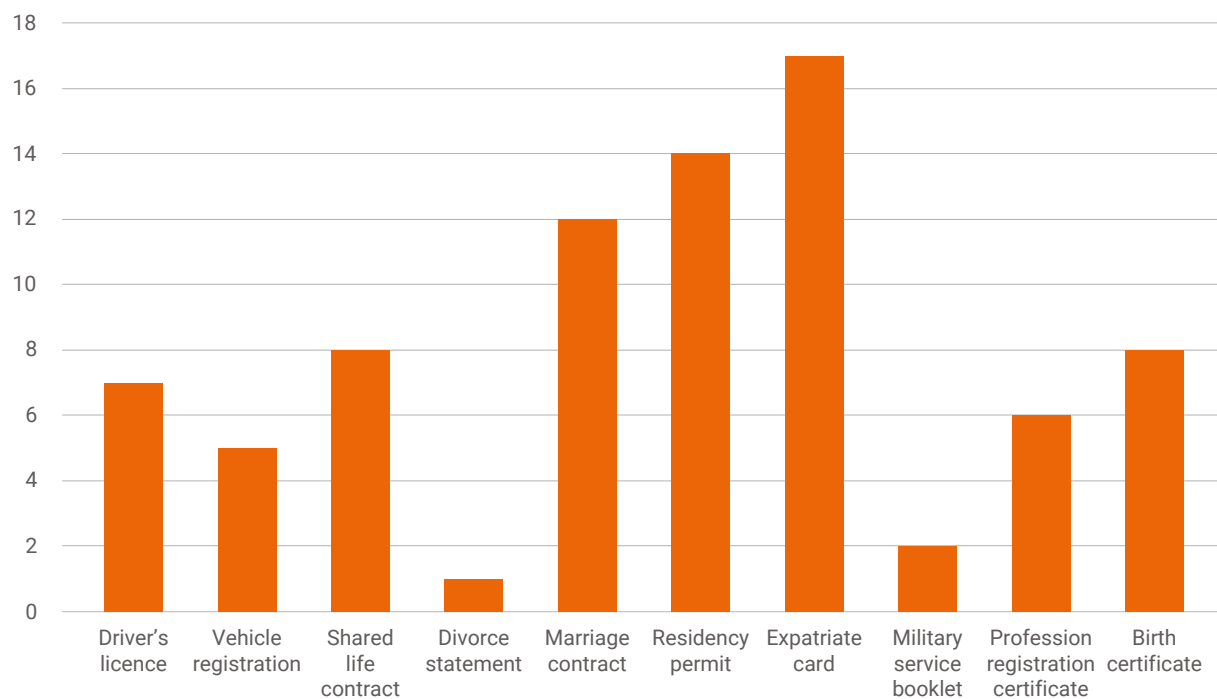
# VIII. Key findings from November 2024 survey



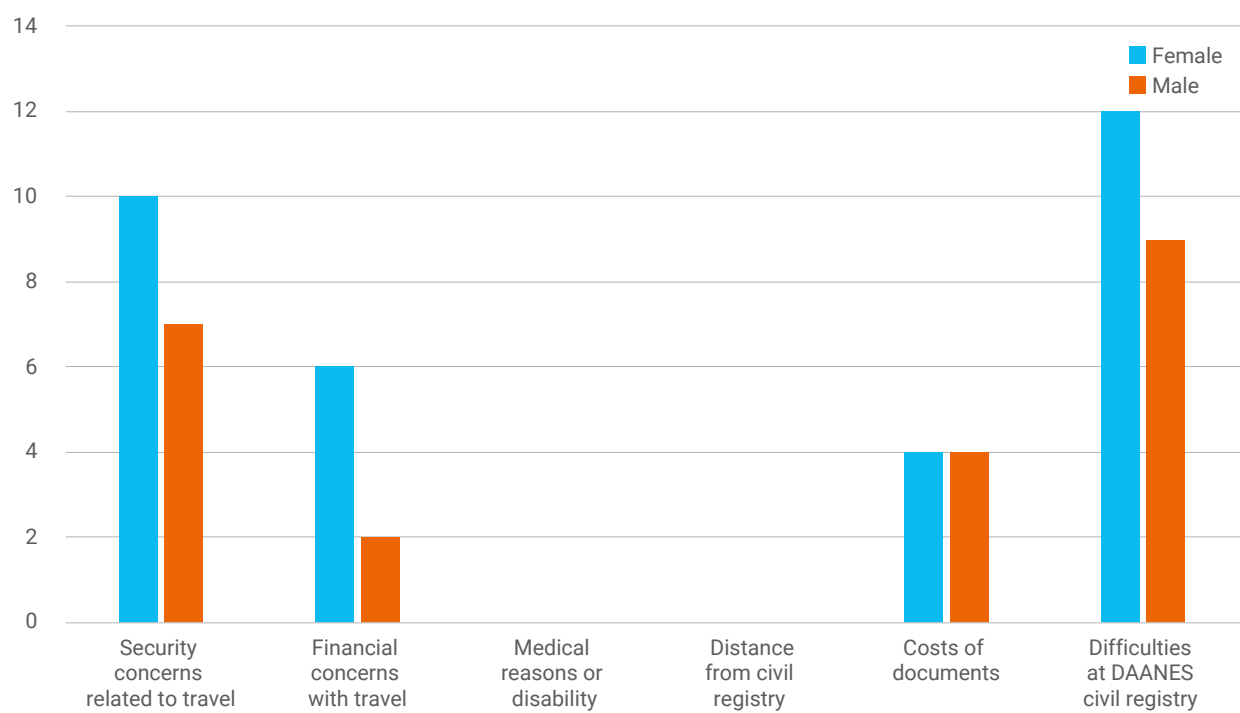
### Consequences due to lack of GoS documents



### Types of DAANES documents respondents want to obtain



### Barriers to obtaining DAANES documents





## Endnotes

- 1 Population figures vary depending on the source, this estimate is from USAID. USAID, Syria: Complex Emergency, June 2024, p. 2.
- 2 UNHCR, “Syria Situation”, 2025.
- 3 NRC, Syrian refugees’ documentation crisis, 26 January 2017.
- 4 See, for example, Adamczyk, S and Doumit, J, “Legal identity in limbo: humanitarian challenges and responses to civil documentation issued by de facto authorities in Northwest Syria”, Citizenship Studies, February 2024.
- 5 See UNHCR and NRC, Legal Identity and Housing, Land and Property Rights of Syrian Refugees from a Durable Solutions Perspective, December 2021.
- 6 Note that the 132,000 figure does not include those living in informal settlements or collective centers, and the number of those displaced fluctuates frequently. See Sites and Settlements Working Group Northeast Syria Portal, “Camps”, accessed June 2025.
- 7 McGee, T, Implications of legal identity documentation issued by the Kurdish-led Self Administration in Northern Syria: competition and compromise with the central state, Citizenship Studies, 2023, p. 836.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 There is no exact population statistic on the number of stateless Kurds. See NRC and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, “Nationality, Documentation, and Statelessness in Syria”, 2016.
- 10 Reuters, “Syria’s interim president signs deal with Kurdish-led SDF to merge forces”, 11 March 2025.
- 11 McGee, Implications of legal identity documentation issued by the Kurdish-led Self Administration in Northern Syria, p. 836-7.
- 12 Kurdistan 24, “New administration name adopted for local administration in northeast Syria,” 13 December 2023.
- 13 Rojava Information Center, DAANES Social Contract, 2023 Edition, 14 December 2023.
- 14 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 65.
- 15 Syrian Democratic Council U.S. Mission, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), accessed June 2025.
- 16 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 64.
- 17 Syrian Democratic Council U.S. Mission, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), accessed June 2025.
- 18 See, for example: Enab Baladi, “Bread prices increase in AANES areas”, 21 December 2024; Syria Direct, “Fuel crisis and weak subsidies threaten Syria’s northeastern bread basket”, 2 February 2024.
- 19 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 66.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 21 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 24; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 18(2).
- 22 United Nations Human Rights Council, “Birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition everywhere as a person before the law”, A/HRC/RES/52/25 (2023).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 16 and 24(2); Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 16(2). United Nations Treaty Body Database, Ratification Status for Syrian Arab Republic.
- 25 See European Court of Human Rights, *Ilaşcu and Others v. Moldova and Russia*, Application No. 48787/99, para. 334; *Horn v. Lockhart*, 84 US [17 Wallace] (1873); *George W. Hopkins (U.S.A.) v. United Mexican States* (Reports of International Arbitral Awards) (31 Mar. 1926), Vol IV, 41–47, 43, para. 4.
- 26 International Court of Justice, Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia (South West Africa) Notwithstanding Security Council Resolution 276(1970), 21 June 1971, para. 125.
- 27 NRC, The 2021 Syrian Civil Status Law: Implications For Syrians Living Abroad, December 2022, citing Syrian Civil Status Law of 2021.
- 28 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 61.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 European Network on Statelessness, Statelessness in Syria, October 2022, p. 1.
- 31 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 61.
- 32 NRC, Access to Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Northeast Syria, March 2020, p. 66.
- 33 Note that Al Hol and Roj Camps are more restrictive due to the securitised nature of the camps as they include individuals with suspected ties to IS (*Da’esh*).
- 34 NRC, Freedom of Movement in Northeast Syria, April 2023, p. 30.
- 35 Justice for Life Organization, Expat Card in Northeastern Syria, February 2022, p. 2.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 37 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 7.