



United Nations Targeted by Allegations of Complicity with the Assad Regime

Social Media Monitoring

June 2023

To support the earthquake response in Türkiye and Syria, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in these countries and contribute to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community feedback.

Summary

This research brief presents the findings of a review of social media trends to identify possible misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation related to the United Nations (UN). It focuses primarily on Syria and Türkiye, where the organisation has in recent months stepped up its humanitarian efforts in the aftermath of the February earthquake, but the data collected also includes inputs from the wider region, including Lebanon. The period covered is from 15 April to 15 May 2023.

The brief highlights viral allegations – viewed by at least 144,000 social media users – claiming that the UN is part of an operation to hand over Syrian dissidents and refugees to the regime in Damascus. A review of the response to these claims suggests that these allegations reflect fears and beliefs widely held among some sections of the Syrian refugee and opposition communities, which in turn affect trust in the services offered by aid agencies.

Context

Since 2011 the civil war in Syria has forced millions of civilians to flee the country, with an estimated [5.5 million Syrian refugees](#) residing in neighbouring Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The UN, through agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM), has in recent years provided close support to millions of displaced Syrian refugees in a number of countries.

Following the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in February, the UN's role in Syria – in particular in the rebel-controlled areas in the country's north-west – grew after it negotiated the opening of [two new border crossings](#) to ease humanitarian access to zones hit by the earthquake.

The regime's control over the aid sector in Syria has meant that the UN and other international organisations have gradually developed a [complex relationship](#) with the government in Damascus, which has included the employment of relatives of regime loyalists and the procurement of supplies or staff accommodation from businesses linked to the Assad regime. These compromises, although aimed at preserving access to beneficiaries in Syria, have undermined the UN's reputation as a neutral aid actor among Syrian refugee and opposition communities. Furthermore, since April 2023 the Lebanese Armed Forces have deported hundreds of Syrian refugees following raids in several neighbourhoods across Lebanon. According to Amnesty International, many of those deported are "[registered or known to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#)".

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Methodology

Social data relating to UN relief operations in Syria and Türkiye was first collected from two social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook) during the period 15 April-15 May 2023. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data. The data was filtered using a Boolean search query using the following search string: “الأمم المتحدة” “الأمم”. For Twitter, the tool captured data in the form of both Tweets (i.e. posts) and replies to Tweets, while in the case of Facebook only posts were captured in the dataset.

The collected data was further filtered by human analysis to exclude irrelevant content and identify possible UN-related misinformation, disinformation or malinformation. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e. the number of social interactions by other social media users with the original post). Posts with suspected dangerous content were manually investigated, including the profile source of the posts and public reaction to them.

Although the original dataset consisted of data that was intentionally collected from Syria and Türkiye, the virality of social media posts with high engagement actions resulted in the inclusion of data – in the form of Twitter replies – from other countries (e.g. social media users residing in Lebanon).

The UN subject to allegations from the Syrian refugee and opposition communities

On 30 April 2023 a Türkiye-based journalist associated with [Syria TV](#) – an anti-government media outlet – published a [Tweet](#) on his [public Twitter](#) page arguing that “an employee of the United Nations in Lebanon cooperates with the Lebanese general security to hand over defected Syrians and those fleeing compulsory conscription” (see below image taken of the first part of the original Tweet in Arabic). In the same post the journalist continues to provide several names of Syrian refugees who were purportedly handed over to the Syrian regime with the help of the UN employee, including one he alleges is now in a Syrian prison. He claims that “[the employee] contributed at least ten [Syrian refugees] to the [Syrian] regime”. The name and characteristics of the UN employee at the heart of these allegations are also mentioned. Under the post, a screenshot of a message sent to the journalist – apparently the source of the claims – is also provided. At the time of writing the post had been viewed 144,600 times, liked by 787 social media users, and retweeted 271 times.

موظفة في الأمم المتحدة بلبنان تتعاون مع الأمن العام اللبناني لتسليم السوريين المنشقين والفارين من التجنيد الإجباري

In another [Tweet](#) published two days later on 2 May 2023 the journalist – whose Twitter page has 186,200 followers – followed up on the claims mentioned above. Although the allegations related to the UN employee are repeated in the video accompanying the Tweet, in the text heading the post the journalist appears to extend the allegations to implicate the entire UN in Lebanon participating as an organisation in the handing over of Syrian refugees to the Syrian regime in Damascus: “The United Nations in Lebanon participates in handing over Syrian dissidents to the Assad regime” (see below image taken of the original Tweet in Arabic). At the time of writing the Tweet had been viewed 56,000 times, liked by 566 social media users and retweeted 150 times.

الأمم المتحدة في لبنان تشارك بتسليم المنشقين السوريين إلى نظام الأسد

The virality and influence of these two posts among the Syrian refugee and opposition communities – two communities within which the UN has a significant humanitarian role to play – cannot be underestimated. Indeed, these Tweets were the most viral posts with the key words “United Nations” in Arabic on Twitter in both Syria and Türkiye from 15 April to 15 May 2023 in terms of total engagement actions (i.e. views, likes, retweets, etc.).

Public response to the allegations on Twitter: indications of a deeper malaise

Some social media users expressed their doubts as to the veracity of these claims or disagreed with the dissemination of personal information concerning an individual. For example, one user reacted with concern regarding the safety of the implicated UN employee, asking “*why are you publishing information about a female employee of the United Nations [who might] be physically abused [as a result]?*”

Others, however, expressed agreement with the claims. One Twitter user, for example, reacted by saying “*criminals*”, and another argued that “*from experience, UN employees in Lebanon make you feel like you are sitting with Shabiha (pro-Assad militia) or a Syrian security branch*”. Another argued: “*most United Nations employees working on Syria are related to the Syrian regime and those who are independent would never get the job*” (see below image taken of the original Tweet in Arabic).



Some of these reactions suggest that the belief that the UN is strongly linked to the Syrian government is not limited to the journalist at the origin of the Tweets presented above, but rather reflect notions widely held among at least some sections of the Syrian refugee and opposition communities, both of which have been targeted by the Assad regime.

To date, the veracity of the claims discussed above is not known. Prior to the publication of this brief, Insecurity Insight shared the draft with human rights organisations and the journalist who first published these allegations. While the human rights organisations were not aware of the situation of the specific individuals, the journalist claimed that the allegations published on social media are based on corroborated first-hand testimonies.

Recommendations to the aid sector

These allegations – viewed by around 144,000 people on social media, with most being part of the Syrian refugee communities in Türkiye and Lebanon and opposition communities in north-west Syria – will reinforce suspicions that the UN is deeply linked with the Syrian regime, further undermining trust in the organisation and in the aid sector more generally among two key affected communities.

For aid organisations operating in opposition areas in Syria and servicing Syrian refugee communities in Türkiye and Lebanon:

- **Be aware that earthquake-affected populations in opposition to the Syrian regime may not trust aid organisations**
- **Apply and enforce ‘do no harm’ principles in complex political contexts**
- **Communicate organisational values clearly.**

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- [Attitudes to the Aid Response to the Türkiye Earthquake](#) (May 2023)
- [MSF Ambush in Burkina Faso](#) (March 2023)
- [Massacre of Red Cross Volunteers in South Sudan](#) (March 2023)
- [Wagner Mercenaries in the DRC?](#) (February 2023)
- [Disinformation targeting the WFP in Ethiopia](#) (November 2022)
- [Ebola in Uganda](#) (November 2022)

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