

Statement

Repeated International

and UN Neglect in Syria:

**From the February 2023 Earthquake
to the July 2025 Fires**

Wednesday 9 July 2025



more than
14,000
hectares
of forests and agricultural land
consumed by the flames

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

First: Introduction:

An unprecedented environmental disaster reveals the depth of international neglect toward Syria:

Since June 30, 2025, Syria has been experiencing one of the most violent environmental disasters in its modern history. Devastating fires swept through coastal areas for six consecutive days, leaving behind widespread environmental and humanitarian devastation that requires an immediate international response. Initial estimates reveal the scale of the unprecedented environmental catastrophe: in just a few days, more than **14,000 hectares** of forests and agricultural land—equivalent to **140 square kilometers**—were consumed by the flames, representing more than **4%** of the country's total forest cover.

The destruction spread to **34 major** sites in the countryside of Latakia and Tartous governorates, including areas of environmental and vital importance such as Jabal al-Turkman, al-Farlaq, Ras al-Basit, Qastal Maaf, and Rabia. Flames have also reached the outskirts of the cities of Tartous and Baniyas. These fires have formed an active front extending over 23 kilometers, directly threatening the al-Farlaq Reserve, the last remaining dense coastal forest in Syria, which contains rare species of pine and oak of high ecological value.

The humanitarian impact was no less tragic than the environmental losses, as hundreds of families were forced to evacuate their homes in the villages of Beit Ayush, Al Mazra'a, Saboura, and Al Basit. Preliminary data indicates that **more than 5,000 people were directly affected**, in addition to more than **1,120 displaced persons**. Extensive damage was also inflicted on infrastructure, including the destruction of power lines, transportation networks, and water facilities, leading to power outages in several villages and rural areas, aggravating the suffering of the population.

The repercussions of the disaster extended beyond direct damage to local ecosystems, with the loss of vegetation leading to soil erosion and an increased risk of landslides. The deaths of large numbers of wildlife—including foxes, wild cats, turtles, birds, and insects—caused long-term ecological imbalances. This, in addition to the deterioration of air quality due to smoke and fine particulate matter, negatively impacted the health of residents, especially children and the elderly who suffer from respiratory illnesses.

Controlling this disaster was complicated by multiple factors, including strong winds exceeding 60 kilometers per hour, severe drought, and soaring temperatures. However, the greatest challenge was the presence of remnants of war—mines and unexploded ordnance—which hindered firefighters from reaching many vital areas and hampered efforts to contain the fires in a timely manner.

This disaster comes at a critical time, as the country undergoes a transitional phase following the fall of the Assad regime, making the need for effective international support more urgent than ever. Environmental damage not only threatens the ecosystem but also undermines economic recovery and political stability, particularly in vital sectors such as ecotourism and agriculture, which are the pillars of the economy in coastal areas.

Amid this bleak landscape, **the Syrian Network for Human Rights** stands to document what it describes as the «sluggish international response,» which has revealed a shocking level of neglect and discrimination faced by Syrians even in their most dire circumstances. While fires were devouring natural resources and people were fleeing their homes, the international response was slow, bureaucratic, and incapable of keeping pace with the gravity of the situation. Every hour of delay led to more loss and suffering.

What happened during the six catastrophic days can only be described as a blatant failure to uphold the most basic principles of human solidarity and the obligations stipulated in international law, which must guarantee protection for every human being without discrimination, regardless of their nationality or the political circumstances of their country.

Second: The international community has failed to address the Syrian environmental disaster

The international community's response to the coastal forest fires in Syria represents one of the most striking humanitarian failures in contemporary history. International mechanisms that are supposed to protect lives and the environment have been transformed into tools that reflect inaction, perpetuate suffering, and prolong disasters.

So far, the UN's involvement has been limited to what it describes as “urgent assessments,” with teams “determining the extent of the disaster” four full days after the fires broke out, while fires were consuming thousands of hectares of Syrian forests every hour. This is indicative of a flawed understanding of the nature of emergency responses by the UN, as every day of delay meant more lost trees, more displaced people, and more human suffering.

This pattern of delayed admissions and inadequate responses represents a tragic repetition of the same failures that marked the UN's response to the February 2023 earthquake, when the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator at the time, Martin Griffiths, was forced to admit that the organization had «so far failed the people of northwest Syria.»

The European Union, the Arab League, and the World Bank

The European Union failed to respond to the disaster for six days, despite its constant claims of leadership on climate and environmental issues, and despite its possession of the European Civil Protection Mechanism, which allows it to dispatch specialized firefighting teams and helicopters to any point within the continent within less than 24 hours. The EU ignored a real environmental disaster in a neighboring country in the Mediterranean basin, during which more than 4% of its forest cover was destroyed, without offering any significant intervention.

The failure of regional organizations is no less significant than that of international institutions. The Arab League failed to coordinate any collective response, despite the fact that the disaster affected an Arab region. Meanwhile, the World Bank remained completely silent, failing to provide any emergency support, despite the fires' direct impact on Syria's infrastructure and economy.

Regional Response: A Model That Proves Possibility

In contrast to this international silence, Syria's neighboring countries have provided an effective and rapid model of humanitarian response, demonstrating that urgent support is possible when there is a will. Türkiye dispatched two helicopters and 11 fire engines immediately after receiving a distress call on July 5. Jordan also dispatched specialized civil defense teams and two Black Hawk helicopters equipped with modern firefighting systems. Lebanon, despite its deep economic crises and internal challenges, was able to send two helicopters on July 7 to participate in firefighting efforts, placing the international community, particularly wealthy powers, in an embarrassing position. A country suffering from existential crises has not abandoned its humanitarian duty, while the major powers have remained silent and neglectful.

Pattern of Neglect: From the February 2023 Earthquake to the July 2025 Fires:

The international failure to respond to the Syria fires is the latest in a series of neglects that have characterized disaster responses in recent years. The bureaucratic delays and inaction that marred the response to the February 2023 earthquake are being repeated today, proving that the problem lies not in capacity or resources, but in the lack of political and humanitarian will.

At the time, Martin Griffiths, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, admitted that the organization had **«failed the people of northwest Syria.»** However, this admission did not lead to any concrete reforms in response mechanisms; rather, it remained a mere passing statement, while the same mistakes persist with each new crisis the country faces.

Third: Conclusions and Legal Analysis:

Violation of Fundamental Principles of International Humanitarian Law

The international response to the forest fires in Syria constitutes a clear violation of several fundamental principles of public international law, particularly in the humanitarian and environmental context.

Violation of the Principle of Non-Discrimination and Sovereign Equality

The principle of non-discrimination is one of the fundamental pillars of international humanitarian law, requiring the provision of humanitarian assistance without discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, or political affiliation. The disparity in the speed and intensity of international responses to natural disasters between Syria and other countries demonstrates a direct violation of this fundamental principle.

This discrimination also contradicts Article 2(1) of the United Nations Charter, which affirms the principle of sovereign equality among all member states. Natural disasters do not recognize political borders, and responses to them must be based on purely humanitarian principles, far removed from geopolitical considerations.

Violation of International Environmental Obligations

International documents, most notably the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Climate Agreement, highlight the importance of international cooperation in addressing environmental crises. Article 6 of the Paris Agreement encourages “voluntary cooperation” among countries to implement their national commitments. The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, in its seventh principle, also emphasizes the need for cooperation in the “spirit of global partnership” to preserve ecosystems.

The Syrian forest fires, with their resulting destruction of vegetation and increased carbon emissions, have a direct impact on regional ecosystems and the global climate. The lack of international intervention to halt this disaster represents a clear breach of these environmental obligations and contradicts the stated goals of combating climate change and preserving biodiversity.

Recommendations

To the United Nations and its specialized agencies

SNHR calls on the UN Secretary-General to take immediate action to activate emergency response mechanisms by:

- 1. Declaring a state of environmental emergency in Syria** and activating the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), allocating no less than \$75 million to address the effects of the disaster. The funds should be disbursed within 48 hours of approval.
- 2. Urgently deploy specialized technical teams** from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), equipped with advanced equipment, including heavy firefighting aircraft and helicopters, and begin field operations within 24 hours of their arrival.
- 3. Form an independent investigation committee**, headed by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, to investigate the reasons for the delayed UN response and submit a detailed report within 30 days, including reform recommendations. The report should be published and discussed at a special session of the Security Council.

4. Tasking the World Food Programme and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with providing urgent assistance to the displaced, including basic relief supplies, safe temporary housing, and specialized medical care for those affected by burns or smoke inhalation.

To the European Union and its Member States

1. Activate the European Civil Protection Mechanism (ECPM) to dispatch firefighting teams and specialized equipment within 48 hours, as is customary in emergency situations within EU member states.
2. Launch a European climate justice initiative in the Mediterranean region that includes Syria as an active partner and provides technical support through the provision of early detection systems and advanced warning mechanisms, while applying the same standards adopted in environmental protection programs in other Mediterranean countries.



SYRIAN NETWORK
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



info@snhr.org
www.snhr.org

No justice without accountability

© Syrian Network For Human Rights
(SNHR), July 2025

