



The “Arab Belt” Project in Syria:

51 Years of Structural Discrimination and Denial of Justice

**A Facts Sheet Marking the Passage of 51 Years Since the
Launch of the Discriminatory Project on June 24, 1974**



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On this day, June 24, 1974, the Regional Command of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party issued Decision No. 521, officially launching what became known as the “Arab Belt” Project—one of the most systematic and discriminatory policies in modern Syrian history. The project aimed to alter the demographic composition of Kurdish-majority areas in the northeast of the country and sever the geographical and cultural continuity between Syrian Kurds and their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq.

The Arab Belt marked the culmination of escalating marginalization and institutionalized discrimination against Kurdish citizens in Syria. It extended the policy of “Arabization” by forcibly displacing Kurdish populations from their villages and lands, while incentivizing and resettling thousands of Arab families—whose lands were submerged by [Lake Assad](#)—into newly constructed “Model Villages” established on expropriated Kurdish lands under earlier so-called “Agrarian Reform Laws.”

This project was not an isolated act, but part of a broader framework of repressive policies and practices aimed at suppressing and erasing Kurdish presence in Syria. Foremost among these was the exceptional 1962 Census in al-Hasakah Governorate, which arbitrarily stripped over 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian nationality. Consequently, they and their descendants—ultimately numbering over 500,000—were rendered stateless and deprived of fundamental civil and political rights for decades.

Project Background: When Law Betrays Justice and Becomes a Tool of Discrimination and Exclusion

Following the construction of the Tabqa Dam and the formation of Lake Assad, vast swathes of agricultural land inhabited by Arab farmers in the Raqqa countryside were submerged. Instead of responding to this environmental crisis and addressing the displacement of these communities in a just and equitable manner, the Syrian government exploited the situation to implement a demographic engineering plan that dated back to 1965. At that time, authorities proposed creating an “Arab Strip” 10–15 kilometers deep along the Syrian-Turkish border, running through Kurdish-populated areas of Syria’s Jazira Region—from al-Malikiyah (Dêrik) to Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê).

Although the Syrian authorities publicly presented the project as part of an “Agrarian Reform” Initiative, official records and documents from credible human rights reports—particularly [Human Rights Watch](#)—clearly demonstrate that its true objective was to prevent the formation of a contiguous Kurdish geographical region across borders. This was pursued by displacing Kurdish inhabitants and resettling Arab families in their place, in line with broader policies of denial and marginalization.

“Model Villages” were established as part of what came to be known as “state farms,” constructed on land confiscated from Kurds and other local residents—either under the guise of agrarian reform or due to the fact that the rightful owners had been stripped of their citizenship during the exceptional 1962 Census. In 1975, nearly 4,000 Arab families were resettled in 41 such Model Villages, while Kurdish families were prevented from returning to their lands — a blatant violation of the principles of equality and property rights.

Historical and Political Context: A Prolonged Legacy of Denial

The “Arab Belt” Project was not the product of a single decision nor an isolated incident—it was the culmination of a long trajectory of systematic discriminatory policies targeting the Kurdish population in Syria. Its roots date back to the 1930s, when successive Syrian governments, driven by narrow nationalist ideologies, promoted plans aimed at displacing Kurds from their regions, based on the belief that Kurdish presence posed a threat to Syria’s Arab identity and unity.¹

Within this framework, the Syrian government conducted what became known as the “Exceptional Census” in 1962 in the northeastern province of al-Hasakah. Under this decree, Kurds had to prove residency in Syria since at least 1945 to retain their citizenship; failure to do so resulted in the revocation of Syrian citizenship and, consequently, the loss of all associated civil and political rights. According to a Human Rights Watch report published on November 26, 2009, titled [“Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria”](#):

“The government conducted the census in one day, and failed to give the population sufficient notice or information about the process. As a result, the authorities revoked the citizenship of some 120,000 Kurds, leaving them stateless and facing difficulties of all sorts, from getting jobs to obtaining state services². The number of stateless Kurds in Syria has grown since then to reach an estimated 300,000 today, because the children of stateless men are themselves considered stateless”.

¹ Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: An Existence Denied* (Berlin: EZKS, 2005); and Gary Gambill, “The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 6, no. 4, April 2004.

² Human Rights Watch, *Syria – The Silenced Kurds*, vol. 8, no. 4(E), October 1996, www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm; Refugees International, “Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria,” February 13, 2006, <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/policy/in-depth-report/buried-alive-stateless-kurds-syria>; Radwan Ziadeh, United States Institute of Peace, “The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?” April 2009, pp. 3-4; and Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria*,

Following the Ba’ath Party’s rise to power in 1963, these repressive policies intensified. The denial of Kurdish identity was further institutionalized under the guise of reinforcing “Arab nationalism.” According to Human Rights Watch, the creation of an “Arab Belt” aimed at separating Syrian Kurds from their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq was a central element of this strategy:

“The government developed the plan for the ‘Arab Belt’ in 1965 and envisaged the creation of a band 15 kilometers deep (about 9 miles) over a distance of 280 kilometers (174 miles) along the Turkish border. The plan also anticipated the deportation of Kurds who were living in villages falling inside this band to areas in Syria’s interior.”³

By the early 1970s, according to Human Rights Watch, the government began implementing this plan on the ground—but under a different name: the “Plan for Establishing State Model Farms in al-Jazira Province.” “Model State Agricultural Villages” were established in Kurdish-majority areas, designed to house Arab families who had been forcibly displaced from lands submerged by the construction of the Euphrates Dam. The Kurdish land on which these villages were built was confiscated under the pretense of agrarian reform or because their owners had been rendered stateless as a result of the 1962 Census.

In 1975, approximately 4,000 Arab families were resettled in 41 model villages in the heart of Kurdish regions. Prior to the resettlement, a so-called “Flooding Committee” (*Lajnat al-Ghamr*) was formed to persuade Arab tribal families affected by the dam to leave their lands and move to expropriated Kurdish lands. Local authorities and security agencies in [al-Hasakah](#) were instructed to pave the way for the plan's implementation, and for over a year, state-organized delegations were sent to showcase the new areas to be inhabited—despite moral and religious objections voiced by some Arab communities at the time.⁴

Although the Syrian government officially halted the project in 1976, it never reversed its consequences. The model villages remained in place, the confiscated lands were not returned to their rightful Kurdish owners, and the infrastructure built to support the project was left intact. In this way, the “Arab Belt” endures as a living symbol of the structural discrimination faced by Kurds in Syria for decades.

Impact on Identity and Social Cohesion

It is worth recognizing that many of the Arab families relocated to the so-called “Model Villages” were not willing participants in this discriminatory project, but rather victims of political manipulation. Forcibly displaced from their original lands—flooded by the Tabqa Dam—these families were inserted into a plan driven by narrow nationalist agendas. Testimonies from members of these communities reflect deep moral resistance. Some refused to bury their dead in

³ For further reading, see the report “[Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria](#)”, published by Human Rights Watch on November 26, 2009. Read the full report here: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria>.

⁴ See: Abdul-Samad Dawood, *The Arab Belt in al-Jazira – Syria, Qamishli, Syria*: Published by the Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria, 2nd edition, 2015, p. 53.

the new villages, declined to build mosques without the consent of the original landowners, or rejected performing the Hajj pilgrimage using income generated from the confiscated Kurdish lands. These testimonies reveal a profound ethical stance that challenges the imposed narrative and deserves both recognition and documentation.⁵

The harm caused by the “Arab Belt” project extended far beyond violations of property rights. It deeply fractured the social fabric of the region, institutionalized ethnic division, and sowed seeds of mistrust and hostility among communities that had coexisted for decades in Syria’s al-Jazira Region. The project also exacerbated the sense of marginalization among Kurdish Syrians and deepened the rift between the state and a significant segment of its citizens.

The long-lasting effects of this project cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader pattern of structural discrimination that Kurds in Syria have endured for decades—ranging from revocation of citizenship and prohibition of Kurdish language education, to the suppression of cultural expression and systematic political exclusion.

Violation of the Syrian Constitution and International Law

In addition to its evident political objectives and devastating consequences—particularly on the social fabric—the “Arab Belt” Project also represents a flagrant violation of Syrian domestic law. The 1973 Syrian Constitution, under which the majority of this project was implemented, explicitly states in Article 15: **“Private ownership shall not be expropriated except for the public interest and in return for fair compensation.”** Neither of these conditions was met in the execution of the project, which did not serve a legitimate public benefit, but rather facilitated demographic engineering to the advantage of one group at the expense of another, based solely on ethnic identity.

Moreover, the project blatantly violates the principle of equality before the law, as enshrined in Article 25 of the same constitution. It also contravenes Article 771 of the Syrian Civil Code (Legislative Decree No. 84 of 1949), which asserts that: **“No one shall be deprived of their property except in cases prescribed by law, and with fair compensation.”**

These violations are not limited to domestic law; they also constitute serious breaches of fundamental principles of International Human Rights Law (IHRL). The project stands in contradiction to key international instruments, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as conventions concerning the rights of indigenous peoples and the prohibition of racial discrimination.

⁵ For further reading, see the report: [“Deprivation of Existence: The Use of Disguised Legalization as a Policy to Seize Property by Successive Governments of Syria”](https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/), published by Syrians for Truth and Justice on October 9, 2020. Read the full report here: <https://stj-sy.org/en/deprivation-of-existence-the-use-of-disguised-legalization-as-a-policy-to-seize-property-by-successive-governments-of-syria/>.

At the Heart of Transitional Justice: Restitution as a Cornerstone for the Future

As we mark 51 years since the launch of this discriminatory project, we at [Synergy Association for Victims](#) emphasize that justice is not achieved by the mere passage of time, but through recognition, reparation, and accountability. Although the Arab Belt Project was officially suspended in 1976, its consequences remain deeply entrenched to this day—evident in the continued existence of “Model Villages” on confiscated lands, the lasting suffering of Kurdish communities, and the displacement of Arab families who were relocated under coercive political agendas.

Amid Syria’s current political transitions and the emerging discourse on transitional justice, property restitution must be a central pillar of any political process aimed at sustainable peace and stability. Restoring rights, acknowledging violations, and compensating victims are not only legal obligations—they are essential prerequisites towards genuine reconciliation and rebuilding confidence between citizens and the state.

With this understanding, Synergy Association for Victims puts forward the following recommendations:

1. **Address the “Arab Belt” file responsibly and transparently as part of transitional justice mechanisms and political negotiations**, by establishing specialized committees to document violations, identify affected individuals, and propose fair remedies for all victims.
2. **Return confiscated properties and lands to their rightful owners** and ensure just compensation for all affected individuals and families, including Arab families who were forcibly resettled.
3. **Officially and publicly acknowledge the violations** committed within the framework of this project, and **guarantee non-repetition** through the establishment of a constitutional legal framework that prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, language, or religion.
4. **End all exceptional and discriminatory measures and projects against Syrian Kurds**, especially the **consequences of the 1962 special census**, and restore nationality and full civil and political rights to those who were denationalized.
5. **Adopt a new constitution grounded in equality and inclusive citizenship**, which guarantees the restitution of property to its legitimate owners, facilitates the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of displaced persons and refugees to their original homes, and provides compensation for losses and damages incurred.
6. **Establish independent and impartial legal committees** to adjudicate property disputes arising from the project and to oversee reparations and restitution processes in accordance with transitional justice standards.

Towards a Syria Founded on Memory, Not Forgetting

At ***Synergy Association for Victims***, as we commemorate one of the most unjust and darkest chapters in modern Syrian history, we reaffirm that justice is **NO** distant memory to be forgotten with time—It is an **evergreen** pledge —both moral and legal—that must never fade.

True transitional justice in Syria can only be fulfilled when the truth is openly acknowledged, when those harmed receive the reparations they deserve, and when a future rooted in dignity and rights is built.

There can be no justice without reparation, and no reparation without acknowledgment.

For a Syria where every son and daughter stands equal, recognition, accountability, and restitution are the foundations upon which peace must rise..

June 24, 2025

Synergy Association for Victims