



To the Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Home Secretary

As leading press freedom and human rights organisations, we are concerned by delays in granting British citizenship to Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning journalist who has frequently been targeted by the Syrian authorities because of her work.

Ms Erhaim, who has lived in the United Kingdom since 2017, applied for British citizenship on 1 October 2023, a process which should take six months. Yet more than a year later, her case is still pending. The Home Office has told Ms Erhaim that other “agencies” are conducting enquiries on its behalf, and that it does not know how long those enquiries might take.

Given the Syrian regime’s prior attempts to interfere with Erhaim’s right to travel and reside in the United Kingdom, and Britain’s failure in the past to adequately protect her from such targeting, we are concerned that she is once again being punished for her courageous work. Seeking to limit the freedom of movement of exiled journalists, human rights defenders and other refugees is a recognised tactic of transnational repression conducted by hostile states, including Syria.

In 2016, Ms Erhaim’s [passport was confiscated by UK Border Officials](#) at the request of Syrian authorities, and she was briefly detained. She had travelled to the UK in her capacity as winner of an [Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression award](#), one of [several international accolades](#) she won for her work training citizen journalists to report on the Syrian war. The issue was only resolved following the intervention of press freedom and human rights organisations.

The current delay to her citizenship application is limiting the ability of Ms Erhaim to work and travel, as well as causing her considerable distress.

We therefore call on the UK authorities to be fully transparent about the nature of its enquiries with regards to her application for British citizenship, and to ensure that Ms Erhaim is not being exposed once again to the sort of persecution she was forced to flee. Allowing foreign governments to manipulate the immigration system to punish journalists would be in total contravention of the UK’s commitment to press freedom.

Signed:

Council for Arab-British Understanding

Committee to Protect Journalists

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Reporters Without Borders