Internet Restriction...

Refugee camps under security surveillance

A report monitoring the violations of

Syrian refugees' rights

to access information and Internet services in Lebanese camps

January 2023

Content

Access Center
for Human Rights (ACHR)

is a non-profit and non-governmental human rights organization founded in Lebanon in 2017 and was re-established in France in 2020; and consists of a group of human rights defenders with experience in law and local and international advocacy. ACHR launched its activities in Lebanon due to its belief in supporting refugee rights during a rise in grave violations against them.

ACHR is specialized in monitoring and documenting the refugees' human rights situation and publishes periodic publications to raise awareness and contribute to national and international advocacy efforts to ensure the refugees' rights in the countries of asylum until their voluntary, dignified, and safe return to their country of origin.

In this context, ACHR works to protect refugees from human rights violations through monitoring and documenting violations, raising awareness about the issues and conditions of refugees in their host countries, and providing them with legal aid and support when needed.

ACHR also works to support host communities by providing correct information to civil society, the private sector, decision-makers, supporters, and international organizations to help them understand the situation of refugees in a way supported by data with the aim of developing policies that reduce human rights violations and contribute to finding sustainable solutions to the issue.

In addition, ACHR seeks to create a common activity space for human rights defenders, which helps them submit complaints to the special procedures of the Human Rights Council and provides them with the tools and information necessary to continue their human rights and media activities.

Who
we are

Executive
Summary

Syrian refugees in Lebanese camps live in insecurity due to their lack of access to information and internet services that can clarify any decision they wish to take on a legal or personal level and any decision that might affect their future security, most notably regarding the voluntary return. Since the beginning of October 2022, the Lebanese army intelligence informed heads of camps in Lebanon of the decision forbidding internet installations in camps. This information was communicated after raids conducted in camps or through peaceful communication.

The multiple raids conducted by Lebanese Security forces on Syrian refugee camps in several areas in Beqaa to confiscate radio and TV devices, phones, internet devices, and satellites isolate refugees from their environment and the world around them. It creates a disconnected climate that deprives them of their right to communication and freedom of expression and hinders their access to information, which could influence their decisions. It also limits their access to charity, human rights, education, and health services.

According to what Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) monitored, many factors hinder refugees' access to information and internet services in Lebanese refugee camps, which prompts some of them to return to Syria despite the security risk. One of these factors is Lebanon's fragile electricity infrastructure, non-existent in some areas or barely sufficient in others, and the high cost of communication services. Also, raids conducted by the Lebanese Army Intelligence on camps and their confiscation of all internet and communication devices are one of the main reasons limiting refugees' access to digital rights.

Digital rights are an extension of rights stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their main goal is to guarantee refugees access to the Internet. Freedom of opinion and expression and access to information helps refugees avoid misinformation that can influence their life-changing decisions and affect the fate of their return to their areas of origin.

Digital rights are legal rights[1] approved and recognized by the law. They derive their universality from the globalization of the International Information Network, its global spread, and the urge to satisfy the human needs of digital rights in communication, publishing, browsing, correspondence, blogging, and reading published data.

[1] UN: Human Rights Council adopts resolution on human rights on the Internet, https://cutt.us/syUYC.

Introduction

Daily needs of digital technology give an adequate perception that the rights to access information and use Internet and communication devices, as well as radio and TV devices, are now fundamental rights recognized by countries and international organizations, including the United Nations, that deal with digital rights as one of the basic human rights. Therefore, the resolutions adopted by the United Nations[2] gave the legal recognition of these rights, conferred on them a legal character, and gave them a lawful basis on which they justified their existence and importance.

However, based on what ACHR monitored, the Lebanese government doesn't guarantee these rights in Syrian refugee camps in Beqaa, but prohibits them in some camps. In fact, since the beginning of last October and until this report's publishing date, Lebanese Security Forces, especially the Lebanese army Intelligence, have confiscated radios, TVs, phones, internet devices, and satellites for unknown reasons. It is crucial to note that these camps already lack the necessities of a decent life.[3]

In refugee camps, the absence of digital rights implementation, the right to the use of the internet, as well as the right to access information technology and the virtual world, does not guarantee refugees' rights to benefit from the internet and the virtual world's information and services. Therefore, in this report, ACHR deems necessary that the Lebanese government commits to providing the basic needs guaranteeing a suitable living environment for refugees to benefit from these rights, as it helps refugees ensure a better quality of life in terms of knowledge, so they could be able to collect their rights and be aware of decisions to take in a particular situation, as well as their ability to act upon life-changing choices, and their ability to reach better humanitarian, legal, educational, and health services.

Although they are recent in origin, digital rights have multiple manifestations. A large part of their recognition, approval, and regulation at the international level is gradually done in terms of formulating the international legal system governing them. However, they are based on the basic principles of international law. Countries must comply with them, respect them, and treat them as fundamental rights and not as a manifestation of entertainment or complementary rights, given the developments of contemporary daily life and the emergence of the need to absorb new forms of human rights and to recognize them as independent and justified international rights.

[2] Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on digital rights 2016, https://cutt.us/XEfqn.
[3] UNHR, LEBANON- NEEDS AT A GLANCE- 2022, https://cutt.us/BrKbS.

The positioning of Syrian Refugees
in Lebanon toward their digital rights

Syrian refugees in Lebanese camps live in insecurity due to their lack of access to information and internet services that can clarify any decision they wish to take on a legal or personal level and any decision that might affect their future security, most notably regarding the voluntary return. Since the beginning of October 2022, the Lebanese army intelligence informed heads of camps in Lebanon of the decision forbidding internet installations in camps. According to published press reports[4], this information was communicated after a camp raid or through peaceful communication.

These decisions and the raids on the camps coincided with the succession of official statements stressing the need for the return of Syrian refugees to their country, as the Lebanese government developed a plan based on the return of 15,000 refugees per month[5] and began implementing it by registering the names of those wishing to return. As a result, the first return convoy departed in October 2022.

According to what ACHR monitored, many factors hinder refugees' access to information and internet services in Lebanese refugee camps, which prompts some of them to return to Syria despite the security risk[6]. One of these factors is Lebanon's fragile electricity infrastructure, non-existent in some areas or barely sufficient in others, and the high cost of communication services. Also, raids conducted by the Lebanese Army Intelligence on camps and their confiscation of all internet and communication devices are one of the main reasons limiting refugees' access to digital rights.

The economic crisis in Lebanon has negatively impacted communication services in Lebanon. Service providers could not pay for services and power outages, and increased prices limited users' access to the internet.

Lebanon's communication infrastructure is weak, and access to it is constrained. The ongoing economic crisis impacted communication services. As a result, users suffered service interruption and a decrease in Internet speed. As of October 2022, the Internet Penetration rate has reached 89.3% inside Lebanon[7], whereas the mobile penetration rate reached 68.4%. Internet speeds decreased, with an average broadband download speed of 8.13 MB/s and an average mobile download speed of 13.87 MB/s as of May 2022[8]. According to the Inclusive Internet Index, Lebanon ranks 74th out of 110 countries surveyed for internet availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness.[9]

The frequent power blackouts deprive citizens and refugees of Internet access, wherein telecommunication companies try hard to cover fuel prices necessary to maintain and operate their services[10]. In January 2022, one of the base stations ran out of fuel and stopped working for hours, an outage that affected around 26000 subscribed persons in Beirut.[11]

Power outages often impact rural areas more than urban areas. For example, in Beqaa and Northern Lebanon, mobile networks often break down due to power outages. The Syrian network has taken over amid a complete absence of Lebanese network coverage. The safety of Syrian networks is questionable because of the armed conflict in Syria. Also, it is impossible to say if the parties controlling Syrian mobile networks gather user identification data.[12]

Refugee camps primarily depend on Lebanon's electricity grid which has suffered since the beginning of 2019 frequent and prolonged power outages, according to what ACHR monitored. Since the beginning of 2022, power has been permanently cut in Lebanon. Syrian refugee camps were affected by it, as most of them live in total darkness. Those well-off found other solutions, including using small generators for lighting and alternative energy, most notably solar energy, which is highly costly. Others in the Zahle area in Beqaa relied on their subscription to private generators to secure electricity; however, due to their high cost, many were unable to keep their subscription and had to live in darkness rather than paying massive amounts of money beyond their capacity.

4 موقع "الحرة"، تقرير بعنوان "عزل لاجئين سوريين عن العالم في لبنان.. قطع للإنترنت وتخوف من المقبل"، 6 من تشرين الأول/ أكتوبر 2022، https://cutt.us/qDmrk.
5 تصريح وزير المهجرين في حكومة تصريف الأعمال، عصام شرف الدين لموقع "الحرة"، 13 تشرين الأول/ أكتوبر 2022، https://cutt.us/nQBFy.
6 تقرير لجنة التحقيق الدولية المستقلة المعنية بالجمهورية العربية السورية، مجلس الأمن، 12 أيلول/ سبتمبر 2022، https://cutt.us/5wftM.

7 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: Lebanon," Data Reportal, February 15, 2022, https://cutt.us/YYdUo.
8 "Lebanon's mobile and fixed broadband internet speeds," Ookla, January 2022, https://cutt.us/BMHO3.
9 The Inclusive Internet Index, "Lebanon," accessed July 2022, https://cutt.us/XyDO0.
10 Generator fuel amounts for seven percent of the telecom sector's expenses. "Lebanon faces Internet service interruption amid fuel crisis," Arab News, January 16, 2022, https://cutt.us/zngZz.
11 "Lebanon faces Internet service interruption amid fuel crisis," Arab News, January 16, 2022, https://cutt.us/PxifN.
12 Abed Kataya, "Mobile Services At The Lebanese-Syrian Border: Outages And Clashing Networks," SMEX, January 12, 2022, https://cutt.us/PQJIe.

The monthly subscription cost for phone lines is now around 125,000 Lebanese Pounds (5 dollars), whereas it used to be about 23,000 Lebanese pounds (1 dollar), and the prices of internet bundles increased by the same percentage

Some concerned charity organizations distributed small solar panels to camps, which can only aliment one light bulb. But given their mediocre quality, they only work for one to two months. Thousands of camps live in total darkness.

Since the Syrian refugees started fleeing to Lebanon in 2012, refugee camps in Lebanon have been constructed on farmlands without any organizational study while placing refugees' tents. Farmlands were chosen to host camps because of their closeness to residential areas and main roads. However, according to what ACHR monitored, these lands lack the components for adequate housing, as they have no proper infrastructure for electricity cable wiring, communication, and pipes for wastewater.

Concerned organizations have interfered in trying to solve the lack of infrastructure, constructing sanitation systems, and covering campgrounds with remnants of small stones. But these organizations faced multiple obstacles, including the sole proprietorship of lands whose owners often refuse to make any changes to, in addition to municipal and commons ownership, and the real estate disputes that led to forced evictions and camps relocation. In contrast, hundreds of camps remained without any essential services related to last-mile infrastructure extension, which increased the daily suffering of refugees in their communication with the outside world, adding to the lack of funding for relevant associations and organizations. As a result, hundreds of camps drown in flood waters, rains, and snow, and until now, there is no prospect of a solution nor a global plan to address the situation.
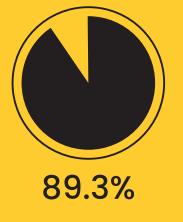
Refugees rely on the Internet and communication devices to communicate with their families and relatives on the one hand, and on the other hand, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partner associations to request assistance and report a problem, since it is required of every refugee family that they have one telephone line for easy communication, which forces refugees to constantly recharge their lines to guarantee their functionality, despite the high cost of communication they have to pay. Until July 2022, the Lebanese telecommunications sector continued using the official exchange rate of 1500 Lebanese Pounds per dollar in the billing of calls and internet service. With dwindling revenues, the government could no longer import enough fuel to operate telecommunications stations[13], which led to service disruption in 2021.

Lebanon's telecommunications services are expensive, and the worsening economic crisis has exacerbated the prices. As a result, there is an immense gap in bridging between rural and urban areas. Communication problems are more frequent in rural areas like Beqaa and Northern Lebanon, and the rural population often finds difficulties in accessing communication networks.
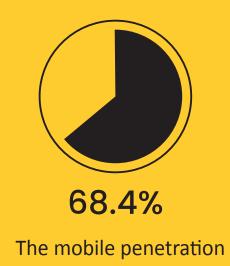
According to the telecommunication company "Cable," Lebanon ranks 169 out of 233 countries and areas in mobile data pricing[14]. However, the government determines subscription fees, and Internet Service Providers (ISP) cannot decrease the prices if the Ministry of Communications issues no decision.[15]

The monthly subscription cost for phone lines is now around 125,000 Lebanese Pounds (5 dollars), whereas it used to be about 23,000 Lebanese pounds (1 dollar), and the prices of internet bundles increased by the same percentage. The increase in communications costs in Lebanon has forced refugees to reduce communication, settle for minimal communication, and find alternative solutions, including relying on Internet networks (Wi-Fi) to maintain communication and access essential services. However, this did not last long, as Lebanese security authorities, including the Lebanese Army Intelligence and state security, raided camps and confiscated devices and Internet networks, especially in Beqaa and Rachaya camps, without any compelling reasons. As a result, they prevent refugees from accessing services and information and communicating with others, depriving them of one of their fundamental human rights.
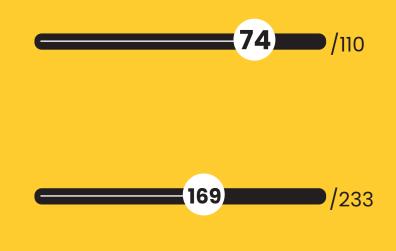
Arbitrary raids limit Syrian refugees' access to their digital rights and communication services in Lebanon. ACHR monitored four security raids in 2020 and four in 2021, whereas this number increased to 17 in 2022, as raids were extensively done. During these raids in refugee camps and residential settlements, some refugees are subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention, torture, ill-treatment, and/or discrimination.

[13] موقع "العربي الجديد"، مقالة بعنوان "ارتفاع أسعار الاتصالات في لبنان يقض مضاجع العمالة المهاجرة"، 11 تموز/ يوليو 2022. https://cutt.us/cGV1W.

[14] Cable, "Worldwide mobile data pricing: The cost of 1GB of mobile data in 233 countries," July 26, 2022, https://cutt.us/9y7Dt.

[15] Livia Murray, "Four reasons Lebanon's internet is so slow," Executive Magazine, April 8, 2015, https://cutt.us/hHSS7.

89.3%

The Internet Penetration rate inside Lebanon

68.4%

The mobile penetration

Lebanon ranks **for internet availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness.**

74 /110

Lebanon ranks **in mobile data pricing**

169 /233

Arbitrary raids in refugee camps and residential settlements

04 raids
year 2021

17 raids
year 2022

What is meant by digital rights and access to Information?

Communication technology such as the Internet, Smartphones, and wireless communication devices are now a part of every individual's daily life. By integrating drastic improvements to the possibility of accessing information and instant communication, innovative communication technologies have enhanced freedom of expression and facilitated the right to access information that can represent an essential pivot for refugees' decision-making process in the context of their daily life.

Digital rights are an extension of rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. Its main objective is guaranteeing access to the Internet and avoiding the so-called "digital divide,"[16] which means the inequality between people in their access to the Internet and information and communication technology. This right is linked to multiple other rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of opinion and expression, the freedom to circulate information, and the right to know.

Digital rights and freedoms are based on many main principles: network equality, accessibility to a secure Internet, the right to access knowledge, and the right to privacy and data protection.[17] Therefore, digital rights are "the right to benefit from all services provided by the international information network, have safe and continuous access to it, and facilitate core requirements ensuring access to these services and guaranteeing beneficiaries are not deprived of them in any way."[18]

Digital rights are legal rights approved and recognized by the law[19]. They derive their universality from the globalization of the International Information Network, its global spread, and the urge to satisfy the human needs of digital rights in communication, publishing, browsing, correspondence, blogging, and reading published data. That, in itself, establishes the importance of giving digital rights more significance on a local level in Lebanon as well as on an international level, as well as the clear integration of these rights within the universal human rights system recognized by the international human rights law.

Therefore, digital rights are essential in spreading awareness, teaching, and training on Syrian refugees' rights in Lebanese camps. In addition, they are an efficient tool for monitoring, documenting, and data exchange related to the host country's commitment to these rights.

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[16] Iberdrola group, global energy leader, Digital divide throughout the world and why it causes inequality, https://cutt.us/2vRCa.
[17] The charter of human rights and principles for the internet, United Nations, August 2014, https://cutt.us/cmIYO.
[18]الحقوق الرقمية وآليات الحماية الدولية المقررة لها في إطار القانون الدولي لحقوق الإنسان، دكتور وسام السعدي، https://cutt.us/5RYku.
[19] UN: Human Rights Council adopts resolution on human rights on the Internet, https://cutt.us/syUYC.

Digital rights in
Lebanese legislation and international law —

Conducting raids on Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon to confiscate communication and Internet devices violates the Lebanese constitution[20], which, in the introduction of its political system, relied on its respect for human rights and public freedoms. It also goes against international laws and norms that guarantee human rights and the freedom of expression and opinion.

The United Nations Charter[21] has promoted respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as one of the organization's goals, without discrimination of sex, language, or religion. In 2016, the United Nations acknowledged digital rights as one of the human rights through the resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2016, which recognized that the use of the Internet is a "fundamental human right."[22] Most of the Member States accepted this resolution. It called for providing and expanding Internet access for all persons without discrimination. The resolution also stressed the importance of civil society and technical community participation in relevant processes, given that technical rights are essential to achieving the goal of any potential development in any United Nations member State.

This decision was based on the International Bill of Human Rights principles, which confirmed that human rights should be enjoyed and protected, especially the freedom of expression granted and protected under article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[23]. The United Nations resolution directly targets governments that shut the internet off from all persons living on its territory to pressure them or confiscate their right to expression by forbidding their access to the internet and communication services.

[20]ميثاق الأمم المتحدة، النص الكامل، **https://cutt.us/r9ql2**.
[21]Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on digital rights 2016, https://cutt.us/XEfqn.
[22]Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on digital rights 2016, https://cutt.us/XEfqn.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The multiple raids conducted by Lebanese Security forces on Syrian refugee camps in several areas in Beqaa to confiscate radio and TV devices, phones, internet devices, and satellites isolate refugees from their environment and the world around them. It creates a disconnected climate that deprives them of their right to communication and freedom of expression and hinders their access to information, which could influence their decisions. Moreover, these practices fail to give refugees the right to a decent living by transforming camps into a stressful environment that pressures them to leave the country that has been hosting them for around ten years.

Based on this, Access Center for Human Rights offers a set of recommendations:
- The Lebanese government must fulfill its international obligation regarding freedom of expression and opinion through the Internet and communication. This right includes the freedom of Syrian refugees to hold opinions without interference, seek information and ideas, and receive and impart knowledge through any medium and regardless of frontiers.[24]

- The Lebanese government should stop all ungrounded security raids on refugee camps, including the inspections and confiscation of any communication devices or tools owned by refugees.

- Civil Society organizations should pressure the Lebanese government to promote and protect the refugee's digital rights.

- Governments and donors should urge the Lebanese government to fulfill its obligation towards international principles that protect the human right to free expression and access to information.

[24] As enshrined by Article no.19 of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, https://cutt.us/T6YLn

ACHR
Centre d'accès pour les droits de l'homme

Syrian Refugees' Rights
to access Internet services in Lebanon:
Isolation and confiscation