



# **Lebanon's Violation of Human Rights Through the Forced Deportation of Refugees**

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**Access Centre for Human Rights (ACHR)**  
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Beirut, Lebanon

**Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) is a non-profit and non-governmental human rights organization founded in Lebanon in 2017, based in Beirut and Paris. It comprises 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.**



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## Executive Summary

The armed conflict in Syria left millions displaced, both internally and as refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries. Lebanon's geographical proximity made it a primary destination for Syrians who fled their country and origins to secure a decent and safe life, forced to do so due to the armed conflict and the human rights violations perpetrated by the Syrian government and other armed militias spread on Syrian territory.

Lately, Lebanese officials have increased political statements<sup>1</sup> asserting that the armed conflict in Syria has ended, calling for Syrian refugees to submit to the "voluntary return" plan proposed by the Lebanese government end of 2022. This plan aims for the return of 15,000 refugees per month, with the absence of any official participation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and without any consideration to the United Nations or any international organization's assessment of the reality of the situation in Syria.

The recent political trend involves the implementation of policies aimed at pressuring Syrian refugees to return to their home country, increasing their legal insecurity in Lebanon, as April 2023 witnessed an escalation of arbitrary security crackdowns and raids of places of residence of Syrian refugees in multiple Lebanese areas (Bourj Hammoud, Haret Sakher, Wadi Khaled, Hermel, as well as the Chouf and Keserwan districts), resulting in the arbitrary arrest and forced deportation of many refugees.

Many systematic decisions and inciting statements accompanied the security crackdown. Multiple municipalities issued arbitrary decisions limiting refugees' freedom of movement and depriving them of their fundamental rights.

Furthermore, Lebanese political parties and ministers in the caretaker government issued inciting statements stirring up Lebanese people against refugees, scapegoating refugees for the worsening economic crisis in Lebanon, completely disregarding the harmful

consequences of such a narrative on the relationship between the Lebanese population and Syrian refugees, noting that the current and previous Lebanese governments have neglected the need to develop clear policies to organize the stay of refugees in the country.

Syria has not yet reached an appropriate security state adequate for the return of refugees to their areas of origin. Syria's economy has collapsed due to the conflict; many infrastructures, public utilities, and residential buildings have been destroyed, with no sight of internationally coordinated reconstruction. As a result, more than 80% of the population in Syria lives in extreme poverty<sup>2</sup>; in addition to the ongoing hostilities in some areas, arbitrary arrests by various parties to the conflict on top of which the Syrian government, as Syrian intelligence officers accuse the refugees returning to their country of disloyalty and "involvement in terrorist acts," forcing them into military conscription, precisely because they decided to flee Syria.

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) documents in this report the human rights violations committed against refugees in the context of the security raids and arbitrary arrests in preparation for their forced deportation. The report is based on information gathered since the beginning of the security crackdown through dozens of testimonies conducted by ACHR's team with refugee victims and survivors, first or second-degree relatives, and witnesses of arbitrary mass arrests and forced deportations. The report sets out the methodology of the crackdown and its impact on the refugees' ability to live a decent life in light of a total absence of governmental institutions responsible for monitoring human rights and holding accountable perpetrators of violations.

Since the beginning of April until the 16th of May 2023, ACHR has documented no less than 22 security raids conducted by the Lebanese army on the residences of Syrian refugees.

Additionally, there were at least two temporary security checkpoints, one in Jounieh and the other at the Al-Rahab roundabout in the Zahle district.

As a result, a total of 808 refugees were arbitrarily arrested (including 17 who hold legal residency permits, 13 women, 25 minors, and two people of the LGBTQ+ community), some of whom were subjected to physical violence, ill, inhumane, or degrading treatment at the hands of army officers. In addition, at least 336 detained refugees were forcibly deported (including 12 refugees holding legal residency permits, 13 women, 22 minors, and 2 LGBTQ+ community).



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**22**

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75 of the deported refugees have told ACHR that Syrian authorities handed them over to human smugglers at the Lebanese borders, who negotiated with them for their return to Lebanon in exchange for sums ranging from 150\$ to 300\$ per person and 3000\$ for those facing imminent security threats. 51 of the 75 refugees confirmed that the Lebanese army directly handed them to the Syrian authorities.

In addition, ACHR has reported approximately 32 security raids and/or checkpoints circulated in the media or on social media platforms. Preliminary findings from field researchers estimate that from 900 to 1400 Syrian refugees were arrested. However, the team has not been able to verify the accuracy of the number of refugees arrested and deported until Tuesday, May 16, 2023. Still, activists claim the number of forced deportations has reached around 700 cases during the security campaign.

The escalation through a security crackdown seems to be based on the arbitrary decision issued by the High Defense Council to deport all Syrian refugees who irregularly entered Lebanon after the 24th of April 2019, without considering the security situations of these refugees who face risks if forcibly deported. Such decisions violate the International Bill of Human Rights enshrined in the preamble of the Lebanese Constitution.

According to ACHR's monitoring of the human rights situation of Syrian refugees in the last four years, Lebanon is still using the Syrian refugee file as a bargaining chip and a way to pressure the international community, noting that the escalation of violations takes place prior to international conferences in support of Syria, mainly the Brussels VII conference scheduled for mid-June 2023.

ACHR strongly advises the Lebanese authorities to uphold their international obligations under international treaties and local laws, most notably the "Convention against Torture"<sup>3</sup> guaranteed by the constitution, grant refugees legal protection, cease the implementation of the

publicly announced plan, and stop the forced deportation of Syrian refugees, in addition to the annulment of all resolutions allowing the deportation of refugees, including decision no. 50/ع.أ/م ج س/دا, issued by the Higher Defense Council on the 15th of April 2019, and decision no. 43830/ع.م.ق issued by the GDGS on the 13th of May 2019.

The Lebanese government should also cease all political statements and media incitement against refugees, establish clear policies on dealing with refugees, which align with the Lebanese constitution and Lebanon's commitments to international law, allow victims at risk of deportation to appeal against the decisions issued against them through the competent judicial authorities, and grant all refugees residing on Lebanese territory the right to apply for legal residency permits and appeal against any rejection without being subjected to excessively burdensome conditions that hinder their access to this fundamental right.

ACHR also calls upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to activate the role of UNHCR's protection office, provide legal representation, answer urgent requests for help for Syrian refugees at risk of deportation, always prioritize the protection of vulnerable refugees at risk of deportation, increase pathways to resettlement or temporary protection in 3rd countries, and provide shelter to refugees who lack safety in their places of residence.

ACHR calls upon donors and the international community to pressure the Lebanese government to make strict decisions to fight forced deportations and urge Lebanon to reverse decisions of forced deportations and arbitrary arrests against refugees, human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers.



# 336

from detained refugees  
were forcibly deported

documented by ACHR since the beginning  
of April until the 16th of May 2023

## Documentation and research methodology

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) starts by gathering information from various sources using diverse methods such as in-person interviews with victims, phone calls, e-mails exchange, and social media platforms. Afterward, information is verified using different sources, such as cross-referencing data and assessing, when necessary, the credibility of the sources. The gathered information is analyzed and categorized following this stage, evaluating its source and confirming its veracity. ACHR adheres to international documentation standards, including identifying responsibilities and damages associated with human rights violations. ACHR's team also gathers available legal evidence that might incriminate or condemn the party responsible for the violation.

ACHR's team relies on several rules and standards they adhere to and consider during their work, most notably of which objectivity and neutrality, as the team refrains from favoring any party involved in the violation, the accuracy in obtaining information, the confidentiality of the information shared by the victim or their relatives, safeguarding the privacy of the victim and procuring safe and adequate locations for interviews or conducting them through secure communication channels. These rules and standards empower victims to speak for themselves and share their issues in securely-published reports and research papers.

During the interviews, the team seeks out information on the nature of the violation and the area where it was committed and tries to identify and gather information about the perpetrators, the victim, and eyewitnesses. The team also attempts to obtain official and unofficial documents, records, or evidence to prove the incident.

In certain cases, the team may confront difficulties obtaining information for security reasons. These include risks to the safety of field researchers, the reluctance of victims to provide information due to their fear of potential threats from the authorities, banning field workers from accessing the areas where the violation occurred, or victims' lack of awareness as to the importance of documenting human rights violations.

The reports and outcomes of the documentation process are published to raise the awareness of the general public and human rights organizations, follow up on documented cases and contact the relevant parties to ensure that the necessary measures are taken to protect human rights. Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) also helps in understanding the current situation of victims and addressing those responsible for the violations directly by issuing recommendations through customary methods.

## Introduction

Syria remains marked by the ongoing armed conflict and persistent security instability for over a decade, rendering it unsafe for return. On the other hand, lately, despite these circumstances, Lebanon has been one of the most prominent countries exerting direct or indirect pressures on refugees to forcibly deport them and calling for voluntary return initiatives and the repatriation of refugees.

The Lebanese authorities have been systematically issuing arbitrary decisions, exacerbating the imposition of harsh conditions on refugees. At the same time, the concerned executive entities have failed to undertake any measures to mitigate the prevalence of hate speech and incitement against refugees, frequently present in political statements or on local media channels.

While Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented economic crisis, including a collapse of its economy for more than two years now, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, and surging unemployment rates, it is crucial to emphasize that these economic challenges do not excuse or justify the violations committed by the Lebanese authorities against Syrian refugees, most notably the recent worrying escalation of arbitrary arrests and forced deportations.

ACHR's team recorded the arrest and deportation of many refugees with expired legal residency permits, which contradicts the Lebanese authorities' claim that the deportees have entered Lebanon irregularly and do not possess residency papers. Refugees encounter great difficulties obtaining legal residency permits due to the highly stringent conditions imposed by the General Directorate of General Security (GDGS). Despite the State Shura Council's revoking of the decision in 2018 and its call for the Ministry of Interior to reverse the decision<sup>4</sup>, it did not yet do so until the publication date of this report.

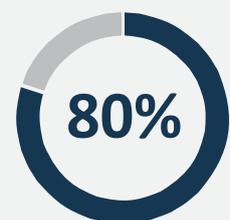
According to ACHR's documentation, mass forced deportation operations are being carried out against refugees and their families after their arbitrary detention or arrest amid a lack of clear monitoring mechanisms by the Lebanese government to oversee the situation of forcibly deported refugees, whether on the Syrian side or at the Lebanese-Syrian borders, which further compounds the issue. Moreover, any plan presented under the "voluntary return" framework cannot be regarded as voluntary if implemented through detention centers and if the asylum seeker lacks access to a fair asylum policy. Also, such policies must not be applied to a country like Syria without thoroughly examining whether the circumstances of refugees in Syria can provide refugees with a safe return.

Within this security landscape, the enforced disappearance of refugees means the sign-off on their inevitable forced disappearance, torture, or exposure to direct and indirect risks. Moreover, it exposes them to complex challenges as they try to lead a living in destroyed areas unsuitable for safe and dignified living.

At a time when almost 80% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon over the age of 15 do not have valid residency permits<sup>5</sup>, it can only suggest a probable increase in forced deportations unless the Lebanese authorities cease the arbitrary measures.



***The Lebanese authorities have been systematically issuing arbitrary decisions, exacerbating the imposition of harsh conditions on refugees***



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## Facts documentation – Database analysis

Since the beginning of April until the 16th of May 2023, ACHR has documented no less than 22 security raids conducted by the Lebanese army on the residences of Syrian refugees. Additionally, there were at least two temporary security checkpoints, one in Jounieh and the other at the Al-Rahab roundabout in the Zahle district. As a result, a total of 808 refugees were arbitrarily arrested (including 17 who hold legal residency permits, 13 women, 25 minors, and two people of the LGBTQ+ community), some of whom were subjected to physical violence, ill, inhumane, or degrading treatment at the hands of army officers. In addition, at least 336 detained refugees were forcibly deported (including 12 refugees holding legal residency permits, 13 women, 22 minors, and 2 LGBTQ+ community).

75 of the deported refugees have stated that Syrian authorities handed them over to human smugglers at the Lebanese borders, who negotiated with them for their return to Lebanon in exchange for sums ranging from 150\$ to 300\$ per person and 3000\$ for those facing imminent security threats. 51 of the 75 refugees confirmed that the Lebanese army directly handed them to the Syrian authorities.

In addition, ACHR has reported approximately 32 security raids and/or checkpoints circulated in the media or on social media platforms. Preliminary findings from field researchers estimate that from 900 to 1400 Syrian refugees were arrested. However, the team has not been able to verify the accuracy of the number of refugees arrested and deported until the morning of Tuesday, May 16, 2023. Still, activists claim the number of forced deportations has reached around 700 cases during the security campaign.

The security campaign started on the 5th of April 2023 when the Lebanese Army Forces conducted a series of arbitrary security raids targeting Syrian refugee residences, including houses, residential complexes, and camps, across various Lebanese provinces and districts: Keserwan, Aley, Chouf, Metn, Zahle, and Western Beqaa were particularly affected. These security raids entailed searches of residential premises, arbitrary arrests of a significant number of refugees and their families, and subsequent forced deportations.



**75 of the deported refugees have stated that Syrian authorities handed them over to human smugglers at the Lebanese borders, who negotiated with them for their return to Lebanon in exchange for sums ranging from 150\$ to 300\$ per person**



approximately

**32**

security raids

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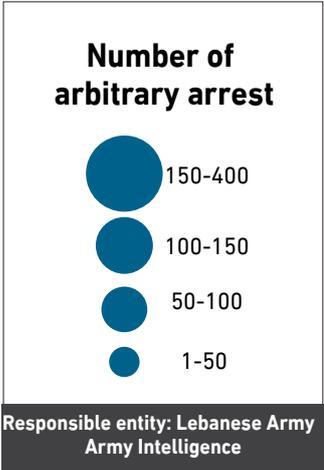
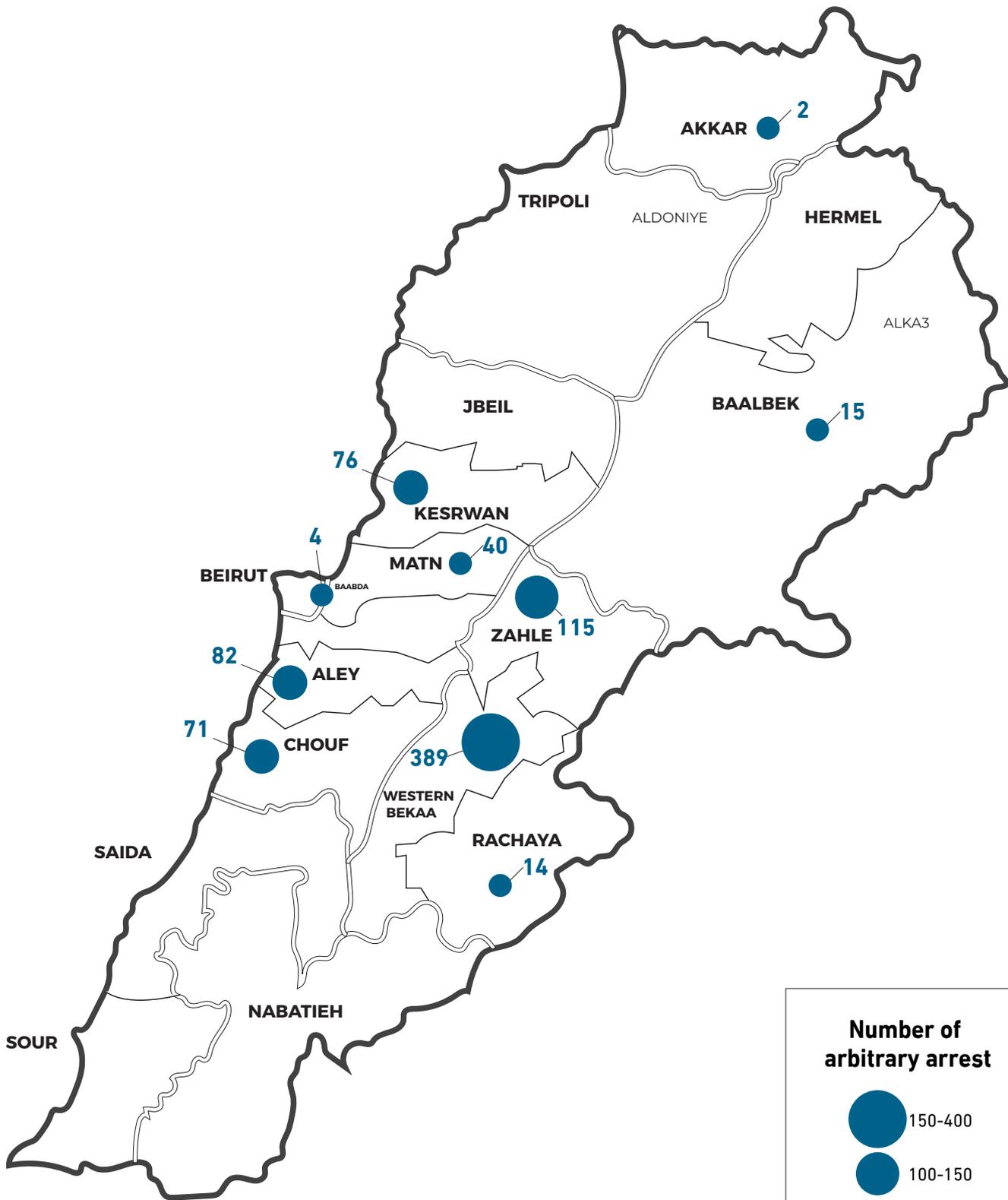


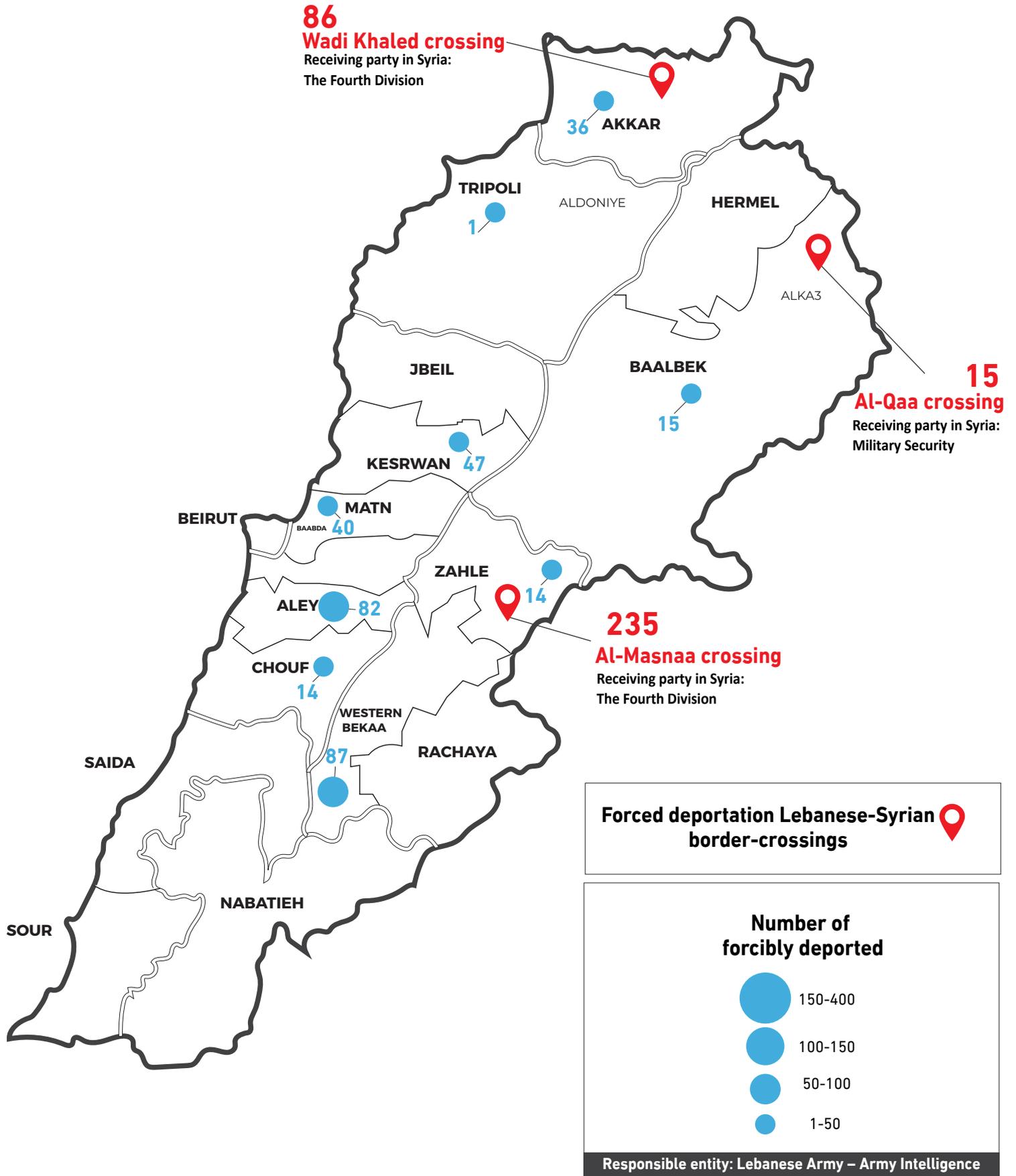
estimate that from

**900-1400**

numbers of arbitrary detainees that have been circulated across media and social media platforms

Preliminary findings from field researchers

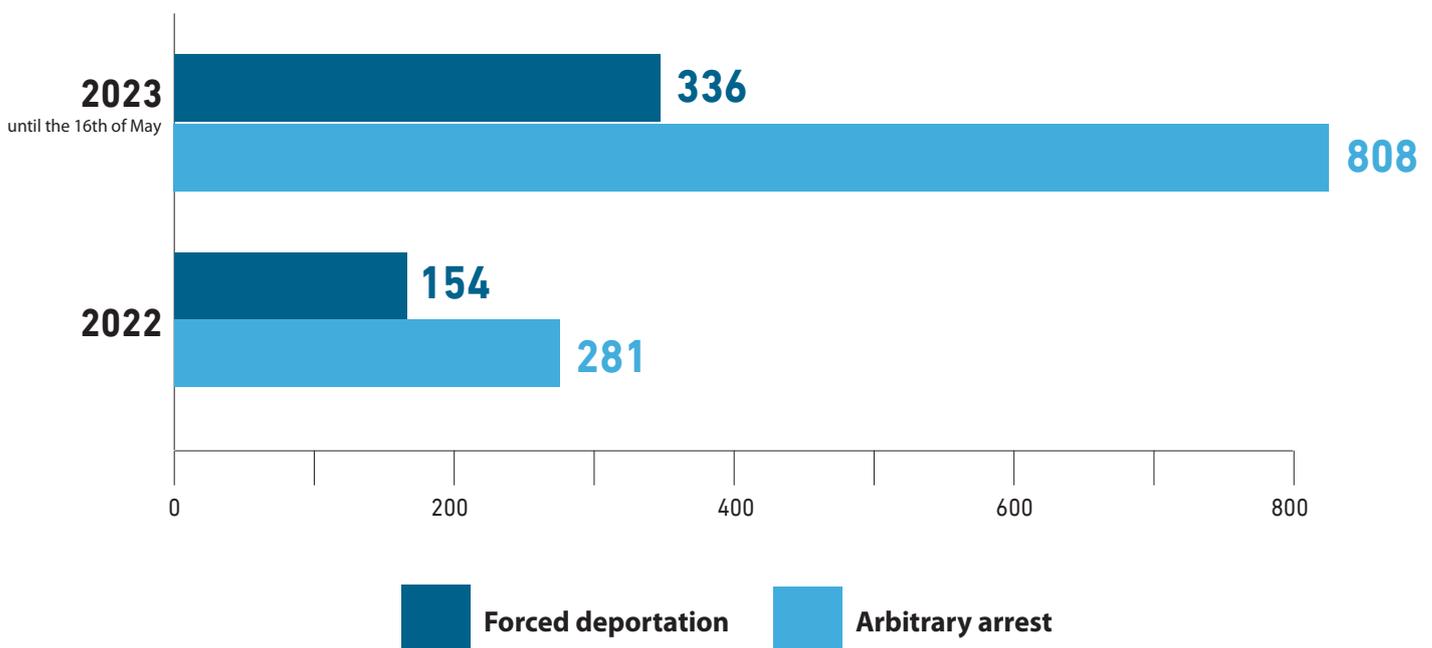




The Lebanese authorities use the pretext of the refugees' lack of legal residency papers or irregular entry to Lebanon to justify their arrest and deportation. However, these conditions do not apply to all people arrested or deported, as 17 of the 808 individuals arrested and 12 of the 336 deported had valid legal residency permits in Lebanon. This incongruity undermines the justifications made by the Lebanese government to legitimize their security campaigns of raids, arrests, and deportations.

Some forcibly deported refugees had initially entered Lebanon regularly, and their legal residency had expired; others entered irregularly. Most of them were registered with the UNHCR. It should be noted that during their arbitrary detention and prior to their deportation, dozens of refugees were subjected to ill-treatment and physical violence and were handed directly to the Syrian authorities through three border crossings: Wadi Khaled, Masnaa, and Al-Qaa.

The fate of most deported refugees, totaling 336 people, remains unknown. However, ACHR confirmed that two of them were conscripted into compulsory military service, and two others were asked to report back to military security due to their evasion of military service. In addition, two other persons were arrested and transferred to a military barrack before being sent to the Palestine branch due to their defection from the former regime's army. Upon being deported from Lebanon, a considerable number of refugees fall victim to financial exploitation by human smugglers who promise them a means to return to Lebanon. 75 of the deported refugees have stated that Syrian authorities handed them over to human smugglers at the Lebanese borders, who negotiated with them for their return to Lebanon in exchange for money. This exposes them to significant dangers and sometimes leads to their death. However, the security risks in Syria force many refugees to resort to irregular means to return to Lebanon after being deported. Despite the presence of criminal kidnapping gangs in border areas, some refugees consider this option to be safer than returning to Syria.



## Testimonies

The Lebanese government overlooks refugees' harsh conditions and the absence of viable options for safe and dignified voluntary return. It also disregards the reports of United Nations institutions that debunk the conditions of refugees in Lebanon and Syrians inside Syria. Lebanon uses refugees as mere numbers and exploits their plight as leverage on the international community to bargain for financial support and political interests.

Refugees are legitimate individuals with legal status and must be ensured full entitlement to their rights while they uphold the legal obligations of any hosting country. As there has been no official statement from the Lebanese government regarding the misconduct of Lebanese army officers in deporting children to Syria, we will present a small selection of testimonial stories to shed light on the situation:

### The First Testimony

On the 26th of April 2023, a Lebanese army patrol arbitrarily arrested two underage brothers, "Mohammed" and "Saad" (aliases used for security purposes), at a temporary security checkpoint in the Al-Rahab roundabout in Zahle. The reason for their arrest was their non-possession of legal residency permits. The arrest happened while the brothers were returning to Beirut after spending the Eid holiday with their family, during which they had been working at a farm in Kfardan, west of Baalbek.

After their arrest, the brothers were transferred to an undisclosed location. ACHR later documented that they had been deported to Syria and handed to the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army. To date, their family has had no communication with them, and no information about their fate was made available to the publication date of this report.



***After their arrest, the brothers were transferred to an undisclosed location. ACHR later documented that they had been deported to Syria and handed to the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army***



### The Second Testimony

On the 20th of April 2023, a joint patrol of the Lebanese army and army intelligence raided the residence of "Samer" (An alias used for security reasons) and his family. The family comprises five members, including women and children. They were arbitrarily arrested and forcibly deported to Syria, even though "Samer" had been in the military, defecting from it since 2014, and might be subjected to imminent danger if handed over to the Syrian authorities.

"Samer" and his family were deported to Syria through the "Masnaa" border crossing, where they were handed over to the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army. Four days after their detention by the Fourth Division, and because he defected from the army, "Samer" was arbitrarily arrested and moved to the infamous "Palestine branch" in Damascus, known for its criminal history. His family was released in Damascus; they have no information regarding his fate under this report's publication date.



***"Samer" was arbitrarily arrested and moved to the infamous "Palestine branch" in Damascus, known for its criminal history***



### The Third Testimony

On the 22nd of April 2023, a Lebanese army patrol conducted a security raid on residential complex accommodating refugees along the Deir Zanoun – Riyak road. They arrested four refugee families comprising 15 people, including women and children, and forcibly deported them to Syria. It should be noted that despite some of them having valid residency permits and all of them being registered with the UNHCR, they were nonetheless deported and handed over to Syrian military security.

Hours after their arrest in Homs, the military security released the women and children and kept two men in custody due to their defection from the compulsory conscription; no information regarding their fate is available until now. Two other men were given a 15-day deadline to report to military security for further review.

### The Fourth Testimony

On the 27th of April 2023, a joint patrol of the Lebanese army and army intelligence carried out a security raid at 5 AM on several Syrian refugee camps in Western Beqaa. They searched the camps and arbitrarily arrested all refugees who entered the Lebanese territory irregularly or lacked valid legal residency permits. Among the arrested were two minors: one child aged 11 and another aged 14. It is important to note that the children's families entered Lebanon regularly.

During the raid, the children's parents objected to their arrest, so the army resorted to physical violence, mistreatment, and discriminatory behavior. On the evening of the incident, one of the children called his father to tell him they were forcibly deported to the Syrian side and handed to the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army. At that time, the children had no shelter in Syria, nor did they possess any money to buy necessities like food or blankets. Until this report's publication date, the children's parents have no further information about their whereabouts.

### The Fifth Testimony

On the 19th of April 2023, a joint patrol of the Lebanese army and army intelligence conducted a raid on a refugee camp in Mount Lebanon, arbitrarily arrested three brothers **who were** then transported to the military barracks of Aitat in Mount Lebanon, where they underwent a 12-hour interrogation following which they were transported in military vehicles to Al-Masnaa border crossing and forcibly deported, directly handed over to a security checkpoint belonging to the Fourth Division of the Syrian Army.

The siblings and 90 other people from the same area gathered at a Syrian military checkpoint on the Syrian-Lebanese borders. They were arrested for seven days and underwent inhumane and degrading treatment. Detainees wanted for conscription underwent an interrogation lasting over an hour.

After the interrogation, the detainees were transferred to the Syrian border crossing of "Jdeidat Yabous." A settlement was reached for all individuals wanted for compulsory and reserve military service. They were then allowed to legally enter Syrian territory and given a 10-day deadline to join the army. After that, they were taken by bus and distributed to various provinces in Syria.



***They were arrested for seven days and underwent inhumane and degrading treatment. Detainees wanted for conscription underwent an interrogation lasting over an hour***



## Factors that enhance forced deportation policies

Refugees in Lebanon are among the most vulnerable, as they lack legal protection and representation in negotiations with the Lebanese government and as UNHCR encounters significant pressures from the Lebanese authorities. Moreover, Lebanon doesn't recognize refugees as asylum seekers for political or security reasons. Consequently, refugees depend on humanitarian assistance as they face multiple challenges arising from discriminatory measures enforced by the Lebanese authorities, such as restrictions on employment limited to specific sectors like agriculture, sanitation, and construction, as well as the potential destruction of their homes and seizure of personal properties by local authorities or security agencies who aren't held accountable, although these refugees do not pose a security threat to Lebanon, and it is inappropriate to deport them systematically and forcibly to their country. However, several factors contribute to the escalating and ongoing forced deportations, summarized as follow:

### Legal factors

Under Lebanese law – disregarding the High Defense Council's decision - Syrian refugees without valid entry documents to Lebanon or residency permits in Lebanon are considered "irregular" or "illegal," which diminishes their legal status within the country. This categorization applies to anyone who crossed unofficial borders or failed to renew their residency permit. As a result, Syrian refugees who fail to possess valid residency permits feel trapped in a state of legal irregularity, as they are pushed into informality, forced to limit their movements, and afraid of arbitrary arrest or forced deportation.

The limited legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has direct detrimental implications for their capacity to access protection and assistance throughout their stay in Lebanon. The restricted legal status of refugees amplifies the risks of abuse, exploitation, and forced deportation, as Lebanese Law requires people to present valid residency papers in order to file a complaint with gendarmerie units.

The Lebanese government has forbidden the UNHCR to register more Syrian refugees since 2015. However, even the registered ones do not have any protection granted by UNHCR, as this registration provides some legal services but does not grant them the right to seek asylum or obtain legal residency or even refugee status, which leaves them in a risky situation full of security challenges.

Furthermore, the Lebanese authorities confiscate the official documents of refugees during their arrest. The confiscation of documents by any authority without lawful justification impacts the right to legal identity and other associated rights, such as freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to healthcare. Furthermore, it serves as a prelude to the forced deportation of these people to Syria.

Forced evictions and the demolition of refugees' places of residence, documented by ACHR, are grave violations as they directly impact refugees' right to secure and dignified housing. These operations have a direct and detrimental effect on refugees' well-being, impeding their access to adequate shelter, undermining their sense of security, and exposing them to risks of forced deportations and other potential dangers, including the loss of housing, deprivation of primary livelihood means, and the inability to access safety and basic necessities.

Notwithstanding Lebanon's obligation to the principle of non-refoulement, the Lebanese authorities maintain their policies of forced deportations. The Lebanese army carries out these deportations by transferring refugees to the Lebanese-Syrian border crossings. On the 15th of April 2019, the Lebanese High Defense Council issued a decision<sup>6</sup> mandating the deportation of refugees who irregularly entered Lebanon after the 24th of April 2019. This decision poses a significant threat to many refugees who entered irregularly and did not possess evidence of their entry to Lebanon before the date mentioned above.

Refugees also lack fundamental human rights due to the absence of any meaningful resolution to their legal status. On the 26th of April 2023, a ministerial meeting was held, chaired by the current Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, to discuss the developments concerning the humanitarian situation of "displaced" Syrians in Lebanon. The meeting reiterated the implementation of measures established under the 2019 decision of the Higher Defense Council, thereby subjecting refugees to further economic exploitation and extortion, weakening their legal position.

## Social factors

Last April 2023, forced deportation operations targeting Syrian refugees became a concerning phenomenon requiring the attention of civil society organizations and Lebanese media outlets. However, in many instances documented by ACHR, political statements covered and fueled by local media outlets<sup>7</sup> have escalated tensions between refugees and the host community.

The incitement and hate speech resulted in the dissemination of antagonistic and discriminatory posts on social media platforms as part of a campaign opposing the presence of refugees in Lebanon, as some Lebanese politicians believe that refugees pose a significant threat to the country's economy, infrastructure, and social cohesion. These campaigns constitute a substantial risk to social harmony in Lebanon and should be addressed and stopped.



***Forced deportation operations targeting Syrian refugees became a concerning phenomenon requiring the attention of civil society organizations and Lebanese media outlets.***



## Economic factors

The banking crisis in Lebanon began to unfold in 2019 and has been the primary factor that severely impacted the living conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in the past few years. It was followed by the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, leading to a rise in food and consumer goods prices, resulting in a decline in the value of income earned by Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, the economic and financial crisis in the country has increased the closure of many privately-owned businesses of Syrian refugees, leading to the layoff of refugee workers and increasing the unemployment rate among refugees.

## Political factors

Since the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon nearly a decade ago, the Lebanese government has been using the Syrian refugee file as a bargaining chip to pressure the international community to secure funding for Lebanon and support the country's economy. Parallely, there was an increase in violations against refugees and a lack of serious intention from the Lebanese authorities to abide by international conventions and treaties regarding the respect of refugee rights and not to forcibly deport them to their country, which is unsafe until this day.

Since the Syrian government began reestablishing control over most areas in the country in 2016, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been subjected to increasing pressure to force them to return to Syria. Stricter border management policies have been implemented, including terminating visa exemptions<sup>8</sup> in a decision issued in January 2015. Lebanon officially requested UNHCR to cease the registration of Syrian refugees, and the Lebanese General Directorate of General Security (GDGS) imposed restrictive and expensive conditions for the renewal of residency permits of Syrian refugees.

## Syria is not safe

While the Lebanese authorities continue its systematic policy to return refugees to Syria, military operations continue unabated within Syria, accompanied by violations committed in the context of the armed conflict, in addition to human rights violations, most prominently of which arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence, in addition to the persisting concerns of reprisals and other issues related to the protection of civilians in Syria that continue to hinder their access to a safe and dignified life.

According to the report done by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, issued on the 12th of September, 2022, almost all cases of arbitrary arrest and detention investigated in the report have resulted in enforced disappearance<sup>9</sup>. These incidents occurred in the districts of Daraa, Homs, Quneitra, Damascus countryside, and Suweida. The parties implicated were the Syrian Security Forces, including the Syrian Military Intelligence Department and the Military Police.

The report suggests that the 12-year-long conflict in Syria might become more threatening by further military operations and terrorist activities; while the Syrian government controls around 63% of the territory<sup>10</sup>, with the support of Russian and Iranian, and other foreign forces, the opposition military factions maintain control over significant areas and residential homes in northwestern and eastern Syria. Turkey and the United States also retain effective control over part of the Syrian territory, in addition to Israel's continuous occupation of Syrian lands in southern Syria.

Security remains absent in the areas under the Syrian government's control, especially in the southern province of Daraa, where dozens of former opposition leaders, military security officers, and government employees have been killed. Moreover, efforts to reach a settlement to alleviate the ongoing security tensions have failed, especially with the redeployment of Russian Forces and the continued reliance on militias and armed groups affiliated with the Syrian government and involved in drug trafficking flourishing in the region. All these factors demonstrate the fragility of the current security state in Syria.

In Idlib and Western Aleppo, military operations and acts of violence continue, accompanied by mutual bombing between the forces of pro-government and armed opposition factions, including "Hay'at Tahrir AL Sham (HTS)," classified as a terrorist group by the United Nations.

Furthermore, the military police and factions of the Syrian National Army (the Syrian armed opposition) continue to arrest individuals alleged to have connections with the People's Protection Units (YPG). At the same time, civilians in areas under the Autonomous Administration of Northern Syria, including women and children, have been subjected to abduction and forced recruitment, especially over the past two years.

In the midst of an ongoing armed conflict, Syrians are suffering from a severe economic deterioration that reached its peak and persisted for over a decade now, exacerbated by government corruption, the COVID-19 pandemic, Western sanctions, and the economic crisis in Lebanon, which provides for the worst economic, living, and humanitarian situation since the beginning of the conflict.

Children in Syria are subject to child labor amidst severe economic hardships. Displaced individuals, in particular, face a heightened risk of sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, and human trafficking<sup>11</sup>, even in areas considered relatively stable under the control of the Syrian government, as access to employment and investment in these regions frequently relies on personal, political, or social affiliations.

Despite the important criminal indictments in European countries concerning war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, there has been a lack of comprehensive accountability for the severe human rights violations and war crimes committed by the Syrian government, armed opposition factions, listed terrorist groups, and foreign forces.

Voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return is one of the solutions to displacement and refugee issues in accordance with the principles of the International Refugee Regime. However, in some instances, such a return may be premature and happens within a hazy and legally ambiguous context, as is the case in Syria, given the unsuitable security, political, and human rights conditions. Despite the Lebanese government's efforts to forcibly return refugees to their country, the conditions in Syria are not adequate for safe, dignified, and safe return, as regions continue to grapple with a complex security situation and face the persistent risk of military operations and arbitrary arrests, in a total absence of security stability as one of the crucial pillars for "early recovery" and the safe return of refugee and displaced people.

## Local and international law relevant to Forced deportations

Lebanon adheres to multiple local and international legislations emphasizing the respect and protection of human rights and the criminalization and accountability for human rights violations, particularly affecting marginalized groups, including Syrian refugees.

Forced deportation operations violate Lebanon's obligations under local laws and international treaties, which prohibit the deportation of any refugee residing on Lebanese territory to a country where they might face death risks, torture, or persecution.

Although Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it remains bound by other international commitments, such as Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>12</sup>, which states that "everyone has the right to seek asylum and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution," and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>13</sup> that criminalizes forced deportation, stipulating that "An alien lawfully in the territory of a State Party to the present Covenant may be expelled therefrom only in pursuance of a decision reached per law and shall, except where compelling reasons of national security otherwise require, be allowed to submit the reasons against his expulsion and to have his case reviewed by, and be represented for the purpose before, the competent authority or a person or persons especially designated by the competent authority."

By international human rights law, Lebanon is committed to prohibiting hate speech against refugees, as outlined by Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination<sup>14</sup>.

Lebanon also commits to ensuring refugees' access to justice for the purpose of seeking redress without discrimination. This includes the right for refugees' claims to be examined individually and the right to resort to competent judicial authorities to challenge forced deportation decisions and appeal judgments.

Article 3 of the Convention against Torture<sup>15</sup> (1984) stipulates that "No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture."

Furthermore, according to Article 26 of the Lebanese 1962<sup>16</sup> Law on Entry and Exit of Foreigners, "Any foreign national who is the subject of a prosecution or a conviction by an authority that is not Lebanese for a political crime or whose life or freedom is threatened, also for political reasons, may request political asylum in Lebanon." Furthermore, article 32 of the same law states, "The decision of deportation against foreigners who entered stealthily is subject to criminal jurisdiction after the foreigner has received a fair trial, during which he has the opportunity to proper defense against the penalty of deportation."



## Conclusion and recommendations

Forced deportations constitute grave human rights violations that transgress the boundaries of law and justice and require comprehensive cooperation efforts from and between the Lebanese authorities and civil society, in addition to the promotion of legal and security measures. The Lebanese authorities must shoulder their responsibilities in protecting Syrian refugees and promoting decisions and legislation aimed at combatting forced deportation operations. ACHR calls upon the Lebanese government to take strict decisions to monitor the forced deportation file seriously and closely in order to promote human rights in the country. It also calls upon the international community and donor entities to intervene directly in refugee issues and cooperate with the local civil society.

ACHR recommends the below:

### To the Lebanese government:

- Urge the military forces and security agencies to adhere to international agreements and local laws, most prominently of which Article 3 of the Convention against Torture, guaranteed by the constitution, grant refugees legal protection, and not forcibly return refugees to Syria.
- Cease the implementation of the publicly announced plan to return 15,000 refugees per month to Syria, commit to the principle of non-refoulement, recognize Syria as an unsafe country, and revoke all resolutions allowing the deportation of refugees, including decision no. 50/أع/م ج د/س, issued by the Higher Defense Council on the 15h of April 2019, and decision no. 43830/ق.م.ع issued by the GDGS on the 13th of May 2019.
- Take immediate measures to halt any incitement against refugees done by members of parliament, their respective parties, ministers, and political officials.
- Monitor all discriminatory practices and require municipalities to adhere to the directives issued by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities regarding the prohibition of unlawful issuances.
- Establish clear policies on dealing with refugees and arrivals from Syria that align with the Lebanese constitution and Lebanon's obligations under international law.
- Allowing victims at risk of deportation to appeal against the decisions issued against them through the competent judicial authorities in accordance with local laws.
- Grant all refugees residing on Lebanese territory the right to apply for legal residency permits and appeal against rejection without imposing onerous conditions that hinder their access to this right.

### To the UNHCR:

- Activate the role of UNHCR's protection office, provide legal representation, ensure its presence and accessibility all around the country, and answer urgent requests for help for Syrian refugees at risk of deportation.
- Confirm that UNHCR will always prioritize the protection of vulnerable refugees at risk of deportation to Syria over the request for individual data by the Lebanese government.
- Work with global partners to increase pathways to resettlement or temporary protection in 3rd countries, especially those particularly vulnerable or subjected to rights violations in Lebanon.
- Work on providing shelter to refugees who lack safety in their places of residence.
- Work with CSOs to develop a holistic and durable plan to organize refugees' stay in Lebanon and protect refugees at risk in Syria.
- Coordinate with UNOCHA on the situation of those deported to Syria and assist the families of victims of torture in filing legal cases against the Lebanese government.
- Conduct a proper needs assessment process for registering/suspending refugees in Lebanon, following the official protocols/procedures to support their legal presence in the country.

### To donors and the international community:

- Pressure the Lebanese government to make strict decisions to fight forced deportations and protect human rights, and urge Lebanon to reverse decisions of forced deportations and arbitrary arrests against refugees, human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers.
- Enhance the international community's role in monitoring the country's human rights situation and facilitate opportunities for conducting comprehensive reviews of the human rights situation in international conferences.

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