



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE DEPORTATION OF REFUGEES FROM LEBANON?

EXPOSING THE FORCED DEPORTATIONS OF
SYRIAN REFUGEES AND THEIR HANDOVER
TO SYRIAN AUTHORITIES

CONTENTS

03

Executive Summary

•

05

Recommendations

•

07

Report Introduction

•

08

serious human rights violations:
where does the law stand?

12

Facts challenging the claims
of "voluntary return" and
"safe Syria"

15

The Implication of
Syrian officers and doubts over
Lebanese Army coordination

10

Testimonies of victims
and survivors



•

13

Testimonies of victims
and survivors



•

17

Testimonies of victims
and survivors



•

19

What is the relation between
the Syrian Fourth Division
and human smugglers?

22

Refugees' lack of options
leads them to seek asylum !

25

A geographical analysis of
arbitrary arrests and
forced deportations

•

21

Testimonies of victims
and survivors



•

23

Testimonies of victims
and survivors



•

28

Legal analysis of
Lebanon's obligations

•

30

Report methodology

•

Executive Summary

In April last year, a major security campaign in Lebanon targeted refugees, posing ongoing threats to their well-being and safety. Access Center for Human Rights published a report entitled **“Lebanon goes beyond human rights by forcibly deporting refugees,”**¹ highlighting the realities faced by refugees in this security campaign against them. As a result of ACHR’s follow-up of the ongoing violations, another report followed its precedent, entitled **“Kidnapping Crimes and Human Trafficking after the Forced Deportation of Refugees from Lebanon.”**²

1,080 arbitrary arrests were documented by ACHR from the beginning of 2023 until December 30, 763 people of which were forcibly deported to Syria.

These numbers reflect a stark reality facing refugees in Lebanon affirming their persistent exposure to threats and violations. Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) has shed light on these repeated and increasing violations, working to document the events and collect evidence accurately and professionally. This report highlights the extent of the impact of these repressive acts on Syrian refugees and the continued violations against them. It also confirms that arbitrary arrests and forced deportations ordered by the Lebanese authorities are still persisting, and focuses on presenting testimonies from victims and survivors offering insights into the stages of the incidents and the violations endured by refugees.

The testimonies ACHR obtained from the victims recounted horrific events and violations inflicted upon refugees, spanning from security raids on their residences to arbitrary arrests, subsequent transfer to Lebanese Army barracks and interrogations involving physical abuse, insults, harassment and intimidation. Following this, refugees are collectively transported to border crossings and unlawfully handed over to Syrian authorities.

A new phase of violations unfolds under Syrian authorities, including security investigations, military, political and civil settlement procedures, arbitrary arrest and detention, passing through military and civil courts, and in some cases subjecting them to forced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment, and processing those of compulsory or reserve military service age to join the Syrian army. In some cases, refugees are forcibly re-handed over by the Syrian Army’s Fourth Division to smuggling gangs on the border, which in turn detains refugees in their homes and border farms, manipulate their fate, and exploit their vulnerable situation to blackmail them financially and sexually, and take advantage of their plight. Testimonies suggest potential coordination between the two countries involving the Lebanese Army, Syrian Army, Syrian Army’s 4th division, smuggling gangs and certain individuals from the Lebanese Army.

Regarding the forcibly deported cases that ended up in Syria after their release, returning to their original areas became challenging for various reasons, including: the destruction caused by military operations, the fear of arrest, elimination, or killing by the Syrian authorities present there or the militias and armed groups that control their areas, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces and Iraqi armed groups in the areas east of the Euphrates, and Hezbollah and other armed groups in the Qalamoun and Qusayr mountain range at the border with Lebanon. Some testimonies also indicated that their original areas are located in northwestern Syria in Idlib Governorate, which is controlled by armed groups from the opposition and is absolutely inaccessible.



1080

Arbitrary Arrests

from the beginning of 2023 until December 30



763

Forced Deportations

from the beginning of 2023 until December 30



Horrific events and violations inflicted upon refugees, spanning from security raids on their residences

¹ /Lebanon violates human rights by forcibly deporting refugees <https://www.achrightrights.org/2023/05/19/13153>

² pdf. جرائم الاغتصاب وتجارة البشر بعد ترحيل اللاجئين قسراً من لبنان. <https://www.achrightrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06>



The Lebanese government should also cease media incitement against refugees within the statements of politicians and government officials

These decisions -including the decisions issued from the last Government- violate the International Declaration of Human Rights. To which Lebanon has explicitly committed itself in the introduction of its constitution.

According to Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)'s monitoring of the human rights situation of Syrian refugees over the past five years, Lebanon continues to leverage the Syrian Refuge issue as a bargaining tool and a means of exerting pressure on the international community, noting that escalation always occurs before international conferences in support of Syria, such as the Brussels conference, which is supposed to be held in the second quarter of the present year.

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) recommends that the Lebanese Government adhere to international and local agreements and laws, particularly to Article 3 of the Convention against Torture³, which is guaranteed by the Constitution, and grants refugees the right to legal protection and any plans to return them or enforce force deportations to Syria must be halted. ACHR also calls for the cancellation of the implementation of decisions that allow the deportation of refugees, including Supreme Defense Council Resolution No. 50\AR\XEAH\L of April 15, 2019, and Director General of Public Security Decision No. 43830\U.R.X of May 13, 2019.

The Lebanese government should also cease media incitement against refugees within the statements of politicians and government officials and develop clear policies for how to deal with refugees in accordance with the Lebanese Constitution and Lebanon's obligations to international law. Individuals facing deportation threats should be given the opportunity to appeal such decisions before the relevant judicial authorities. Refugees should also be granted the right to request legal residency without being subjected to impractical conditions, and the right to appeal rejections should be facilitated.

ACHR calls upon UNHCR to activate the role of its protection office, provide legal representation, respond to urgent requests to assist refugees that are at risk of deportation, always give priority to the protection of refugees at risk of deportation, activate resettlement policies or temporary protection in third countries, and provide shelter for refugees who lack security in their current residences.

ACHR also recommends that the international community and donors exert pressure on the Lebanese government to take decisive actions to combat forced deportations and call on it to reverse forced deportation decisions and periodic random arrests of refugees, human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers.

³Global Detention Project, "Country Detention Report Immigration on Detention in Lebanon: Deprivation of Liberty at the Frontiers of Global Conflict", February 2018, <https://bit.ly/3IUeq9q>.



Recommendations

The information presented in this report raises legitimate concerns that warrant investigation regarding potential undisclosed security coordination between Lebanese and Syrian authorities during the forced deportation of refugees.

It also indicates the possibility of the existence of an organized tacit agreement and a predetermined plan to forcibly return refugees to Syria. The existence of such coordination intensifies the severity of the situation and prompts questions about the Lebanese government's responsiveness in fulfilling its responsibilities. It is imperative for the government to initiate an inquiry into the doubts surrounding potential coordination or organized involvement between the Lebanese and Syrian armies. Holding those accountable for these operations becomes a necessity.

The Lebanese government must also ensure the necessity of providing serious protection for refugees and refraining from forcing them to return to a country considered unsafe, which exposes them to many grave violations that are still widespread in Syria. This was explicitly indicated in the report issued in March 2023 by the "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," which includes details of widespread violations in Syria, including the use of cluster munitions against civilians in the north, insecurity in areas controlled by the Syrian government, continuing clashes, killings, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and deaths during detention, with sexual and gender-based violence persisting throughout Syria, with 15 million people inside the country requiring humanitarian aid for survival.⁴

Based on the information contained in this report, concerned parties should take immediate actions to protect human rights in Lebanon, including security campaigns and hate speech, as Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) calls for through its recommendations:



To the Lebanese government:

- The Lebanese government should conduct serious and transparent investigations into the dealings of some members of the Lebanese army with human trafficking gangs in border areas. Those implicated must be held accountable if they were proven to be involved in illegal activities;
- Ensure that domestic laws and policies are consistent with Lebanon's obligations under international law and repeal all discriminatory laws, decisions, and policies against refugees;
- Adjust the approach of Lebanese authorities towards refugees, prioritizing respect for their choice to return to Syria or stay in Lebanon, insulating them from political tensions within the Lebanese government;
- Cease forced returns to Syria and adopt policies that guarantee the necessary protection for all refugees on Lebanese territory;
- Revoke decisions allowing the deportation of refugees, including Resolution issued by the Supreme Defense Council No. 50\AR\XEAH\L of April 15, 2019, and Decision of the Director General of Public Security No. 43830\U.R.X. of May 13, 2019. Entailing to deport Syrian residents entering Lebanon through unofficial crossings;
- Promptly initiate the implementation of State Shura Council Resolution No. 421/2017-2018 of February 8, 2018, to ensure legitimacy and public order in Lebanon, and announce the cessation of implementation of the procedures issued by the General Directorate of Public Security in 2015 and their amendments regarding the conditions for the entry and residence of Syrian citizens in Lebanon;
- Halt security operations against refugees, and not resort to any form of forced deportation. Refugees must also be treated humanely, in a way that preserves their rights and dignity, and takes into account international laws;
- Establish legal mechanisms to prevent arbitrary arrests and detention and ensure the right of detainees to contact their families and/or a private or public defense lawyer before launching investigation procedures;
- Urge the military forces and security services to adhere to international agreements and local laws, the most important of which is adherence to Article Three of the Convention Against Torture, which is guaranteed by the constitution, and to grant refugees the right to legal protection and not be forcibly deported to Syria;

⁴Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syrian Arab Republic to the 52nd regular session of the Human Rights Council
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-march2023>

- Strengthen investigation and criminal prosecution of cases of illegal detention of refugees, provide necessary support to victims and ensure fair trials for perpetrators. Ensure that refugees who have been victims of kidnapping have access to fair reparation and compensation mechanisms and protect them from refoulement during investigation procedures in the context of detention cases;
- To ensure the security of Syrian refugees, and those at risk of detention abuse, extortion, or threats at the hands of gangs and human trafficking networks, measures taken should include, as a priority, adequate security measures in border areas;
- Fulfill international obligations in accordance with the Convention Against Torture by not forcibly returning Syrian refugees to Syria, as it is still an unsafe country;
- Conduct an immediate investigation, if no investigation has yet been conducted, by independent bodies into allegations that Syrian refugees were subjected to torture, violence, and degrading treatment during security raids carried out by the Lebanese army and in places of detention and hold accountable those responsible for these violations;
- Enable refugees to have effective and rapid access to effective remedies to report crimes committed against them regardless of their legal status and ensuring their access to qualified and independent lawyers and access to legal assistance and legal representation;



To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR:

- Establish a mechanism to monitor the conditions of those returning and forcibly deported to Syria, and work towards a presence on the Lebanese Syrian border to verify that returns are carried out in a safe, dignified and voluntary manner;
- Assume full responsibility before the international community for any violations of the principle of non-refoulement by the Lebanese government, after the approval of the UNHCR to hand over refugee data to the General Directorate of Lebanese Public Security;
- Increase the proportion of refugee resettlement files from Lebanon to third countries, especially those refugees who are particularly vulnerable or exposed to human rights violations in Lebanon;
- Regularly release information and statements detailing the number of refugees receiving aid, including specific insights into the percentage of refugees publicly expressing concerns about facing security risks upon returning to Syria.;



To the international community and donor countries:

- Violations by the Lebanese army and security services should be investigated and ensuring the support provided to the Lebanese government and the Ministry of Defense in particular does not contribute to the commission of crimes against humanity by members of the Lebanese army or security services;
- Establish and activate a mechanism to monitor the restrictions, procedures and measures imposed by Lebanon on Syrian refugees and their violation of international treaties and laws, and monitoring the means of violence, mistreatment, arrests, and harassment practiced by the Lebanese authorities against them;
- Contribute to pressuring Lebanon to respect and implement its obligations in accordance with ratified international agreements and provide protection and safety for all residents on Lebanese territory, including Syrian refugees;
- Provide necessary training to the security services affiliated with the Lebanese authorities focusing on proper detainee treatment in alignment with international agreements. Equip detention facilities with advanced techniques that enable effective monitoring of operations inside the facilities and prioritize the protection of detainees;
- Work and pressure the Lebanese government to take strict decisions to prevent forced deportation, protect human rights in Lebanon, and call on Lebanon to reverse its forced deportation decisions and periodic arbitrary arrests of refugees and human rights defenders;
- Increase the rate of refugee' arrivals within refugee resettlement programs from countries neighboring Syria, especially those refugees who are particularly vulnerable or exposed to human rights violations in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan;
- Ensure the protection of journalists, human rights defenders and their families from direct and indirect threats;
- Strengthen the role of civil society in the process of monitoring human rights in the country, and providing greater opportunities to review the human rights situation in international conferences;

Report Introduction

Syrian refugees stand as a primary concern for Lebanon, often projected onto the international stage among the country's core issues. Indeed, it is almost the only one that receives the attention of several ministries within or outside their specializations in supporting any discourse against the presence of refugees in the country. Refugees are also blamed for the lack of success of the governments that have passed in Lebanon since 2011. The refugee issue is at the forefront of some local media in particular, and a very significant amount of time is devoted to spreading incitement and sharing random information that is not based on any proven evidence. Notably, there is a lack of constructive dialogues with government officials in the media to find effective solutions to issues that partly stem from the government's unwillingness to regulate refugee affairs and its issuance of unfair decisions against them since 2015.

The Lebanese government's persistent disregard of human rights violations against Syrian refugees constitutes a clear violation of international laws and agreements designed to protect all individuals residing on its territory. Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) has published several reports and research explaining the human rights situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In its investigations of human rights violations, ACHR has highlighted Lebanon's overall failure to meet its obligations and appropriately address the refugee issue.

- **Despite Lebanon's commitment to international human rights conventions, discriminatory practices and arbitrary decisions persist against Syrian refugees in the country.**
- **Lebanon continues to forcibly return refugees to Syria, even in the absence of a secure environment in Syria that guarantees a voluntary, dignified, and safe return. Many returning and/or forcibly deported refugees face serious violations by security authorities in Syria.**
- **Despite the participation and contribution of some Lebanese political parties in supporting the Syrian regime in its operations to suppress civilians during the period of the Syrian revolution in 2011, directly and indirectly, on the security, military, and political levels, the Lebanese government has overlooked these practices and continues to this day. It did not support any of the demands of the Syrian people, the most recent of which was Lebanon's failure to vote on establishing the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic in Syria.**

Throughout this report, we urge the international community to intervene and take immediate action to stop these serious violations and work to achieve justice for the victims.

We are committed to ensure refugees' dignity and protection of their human rights on Lebanese soil and everywhere in the world

Serious human rights violations: Where does the law stand?



The intensity of security raids and arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon has recently increased and constituted a major phenomenon of violence against refugees

The intensity of security raids and arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon has recently increased and constituted a major phenomenon of violence against refugees, which was reflected in the local community's negative treatment of refugees, reaching the point of using a policy of collective punishment in some areas. The random security campaign that the Lebanese army began in mid-April 2023 - which is larger than its predecessors - represents an escalation in the intensity of violence against refugees. This involves forceful entries into homes and camps, arresting refugees without legal justification, echoing past patterns of violations without judicial permissions.

This behavior led to serious violations and caused panic among refugees, especially those living in unregulated camps. Fears and tensions also increased over forced deportations and arbitrary arrests, which led to the arrest and deportation of hundreds of refugees, as 1,080 refugees were arbitrarily arrested and 763 of them were forcibly deported, according to ACHR's monitoring since the beginning of 2023.

It was universally disclosed, by the 299 refugees that were interviewed by ACHR, that the majority of security raids on their residences were abrupt and forceful. These incidents involved the detention of women, children, individuals with illnesses and those with challenging physical and psychological health issues. Previous ACHR reports highlighted instances where mobile security checkpoints of the Lebanese Army and its intelligence detained refugee workers en route to work, including minors, who were subsequently handed over to security branches for potential deportation to Syria.



according to the testimonies of many refugee men and women, they and their children suffered major psychological trauma as a result of the violence they were exposed to during the raids

As a result, according to the testimonies of many refugee men and women, they and their children suffered major psychological trauma as a result of the violence they were exposed to during the raids, in addition to feelings of fear and anxiety regarding the repercussions of this on their fate and lives, while no clear official statements or clarifications were issued by the party responsible for the random security raids at the Army Command, which contributed to increasing the state of terror and uncertainty and the refugees' feeling of insecurity.

According to ACHR's team, the Lebanese army is still carrying out random raids targeting the places where Syrian refugees live en masse. This indicates the magnitude of the operation and its continued organization in a military manner. The Lebanese army detained large numbers of refugees, male and female, which led to the disintegration of refugee families and forcing some individuals to abandon their families and loved ones under the pressure of oppression and force, and the random security operations carried out by the army included excessive violence during the period of detention of refugees, as their hands were tied and their heads were covered with pieces of cloth, in addition to being subjected to mistreatment, discrimination and inhumane treatment.



members of the Lebanese army threatened the refugees who were forcibly deported to shoot them upon their return to Lebanon

The Lebanese Army transported arbitrarily detained refugees from their residences to barracks and main military units via military vehicles, with the aim of interrogating them about undisclosed topics. During these procedures, some of them, including women, men and children, were subjected to ill-treatment and humiliating, indecent, and inhuman treatment, including beating, bullying, discrimination, abuse and harassment. Following the investigations at the military sites, the refugees are transported, handcuffed and with their heads covered, via military vehicles to the border crossings with Syria, specifically the Masnaa and Wadi Khaled crossings, to be handed over to other members of the Lebanese army stationed on the border. Specifically in this barracks, the deported refugees were treated badly and more harshly by some members who dealt with increasing cruelty with the victims, and informed them of their intention to hand them over to the Syrian army located close to them, without any interference from the Lebanese General Security Service or the Syrian Immigration and Passports Department, which are responsible for organizing the movement of entry and exit to and from Lebanon.

The research team conducted extensive interviews that revealed the actual details of the events that occurred with the refugees. They reported that members of the Lebanese army threatened the refugees who were forcibly deported to shoot them upon their return to Lebanon. This suggests the use of violent threats to deter refugees from seeking asylum in a country they perceive as safer than their own.



the violence and intimidation practiced by the Lebanese army affected the psychological and physical health of detained Syrian refugee women

Also, the violence and intimidation practiced by the Lebanese army affected the psychological and physical health of detained Syrian refugee women. One of the refugee women who was subjected to forced arrest and deportation reported cases of gynecological bleeding that she and other refugee women experienced throughout the period of their detention and forcible deportation. This occurred without the provision of specialized medical equipment or necessary healthcare.

Also, a refugee woman reported from one of the testimonies interviewed that she was subjected to verbal sexual harassment by an officer in the Lebanese army during the period of detention in the military barracks, and a minor among them reported that he was subjected to bullying and humiliating treatment by members of the Lebanese army during the raid and during his arrest and deportation outside the Lebanese borders. The refugees' testimonies collectively depict a grim picture of bullying, ill-treatment, verbal abuse, physical beatings and emotional torment endured during arbitrary detention and forced deportation by the Lebanese army.

Testimonies of victims and survivors



they put us in a ZIL military vehicle, tied our hands with plastic ties, and forced us to sit in a humiliating manner on top of each other, blindfolded



Khaled, 53-year-old Syrian refugee: They did not consider our health situation. I suffer from epileptic seizures and my child is mentally ill.

“About eight soldiers, along with two members of Military Intelligence and municipal police, arrived at my place of residence in the camp, and asked me for my residence papers, but they had expired three months and 20 days prior, and they were under the sponsorship of the UNHCR and had not been renewed because I did not obtain a new residence permit.” But they said: “We don't care, take him to the car.” My 14-year-old son was with me. They did not consider our health condition. I suffer from epileptic seizures and my child is a psychiatric patient. He has, a civil extract as an official document but they arrested him as well. My wife hurried to tell them about our health condition and the death of our other son and showed them the medical reports and psychiatric medications for my child, and my epilepsy medication, but they refused to listen to her, and used insulting language and discriminatory slurs with her (you are all liars go out of this country). After that, they put us in a ZIL military vehicle, tied our hands with plastic ties, and forced us to sit in a humiliating manner on top of each other, blindfolded. We were about 70 people divided into two cars and were taken to a nearby military barracks.”



Nasser, 45-year-old Syrian refugee: I entered legally and still have legal residency. What do they want?

“During detention, we were beaten, kicked, and slapped on our heads. We could not lift our eyes from the ground. We were subjected to emotional abuse, discrimination, and sexual insults from some elements because of our Syrian nationality and our cumbersome appearance. After detention, they took us, at approximately 4 p.m., to the Ablah intelligence branch in two military cars, each containing between 25 and 30 people, but they did not agree to receive us at the Ablah branch. After about an hour, the cars headed to the Masnaa border crossing, where we arrived at a military battalion belonging to the Lebanese army on the border. We were handed over to an officer and members of that battalion. Their treatment was harsher and accompanied by verbal and emotional abuse. We were all afraid of the unknown fate. Our number exceeded 55 people. They deported us all after half an hour in cars that headed to the border with Syria.”



After you finish the investigation, put on your makeup and come back to me in the office

A woman syrian refugee was subjected to sexual harassment during detention and searches



Safaa, 39-year-old Syrian refugee: Yes, I was subjected to sexual harassment during detention and inspection.

“Last April, the Lebanese army forces stormed my house, took down the door, and arrested me and my husband’s daughters. They gathered the detainees in the municipal square. We were about 50 people. They put us in four cars and took us to a military barracks in the Alia-Alshouf area. We also found Syrians from different areas in the mountain. We were approximately 200 people, including women, men, and children. The officers began going through papers, mobile devices, and bags, and placed them in the security department. They took pictures of us. One of the officers took my bag and found a UNHCR paper in it. He tore it up and threw it on the ground. He cursed me and the UNHCR and said: “You are coming here in Lebanon to beg.” He also found a box of makeup and said to me: “After you finish the investigation, put on your makeup and come back to me in the office.” Yes, I was subjected to sexual harassment during detention and search. The situation was very disturbing and of course I could not say a word. I remained silent throughout the inspection until the time of the investigation. We asked for water for the children, but they refused to give it to us. Their treatment was very bad. The boys panicked and some of them suffered from diarrhea. Many women, including myself, suffered from gynecological bleeding as a result of the intimidation and violence we experienced.”



Youssef, a 21-year-old Syrian refugee: I am a military defector in Syria, and my papers are held by Lebanese General Security, and I have no proof of that. What have I done wrong?

“It was me and two of my young brothers, along with about 40 other people. They tied us with plastic wires and put us in cars as if we were animals. They took us to a military area near the town. There, I was surprised to find my father and my 12-year-old brother. We became 5 of the same family, and the army personnel began photographing us and recording our names, and they sorted us into two groups: those who entered secretly and those who had legal residency. Some people were released, including my little brother and my father, and me and my two brothers remained, one of them 18 years old, and the other 22 years old with a disabled child. They told us to go to deportation immediately. Of course, we were subjected to beatings, and sexual and emotional abuse from all sorts before we were deported, they were screaming at us as if we were really guilty and we should believe it. I am a military defector in Syria, and my papers are held by Lebanese General Security, and I have no proof of that. What have I done wrong?”



They tied us with plastic wires and put us in cars as if we were animals

A syrian refugee his papers are held by lebanese general security



Facts challenging the claims of “voluntary return” and “safe Syria”

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) published several reports about the direct risks to which refugees fleeing Syria are exposed due to their fear of arrests, being subjected to torture, or being forcibly disappeared, despite the statements of Lebanese officials in the current caretaker government stating that Lebanon does not intend to forcibly deport Syrian refugees however the facts indicate the exact opposite, and their statements have not been fulfilled. ACHR has indicated in several press statements that refugees forcibly deported to Syria are subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance by the Syrian security services, and warned of the consequences of persisting forced deportation and Lebanon’s failure to adhere to the principle of non-refoulement, to which Lebanon is committed.

Testimonies of victims and survivors reported that the Syrian authorities transported the deported refugees en masse via military vehicles belonging to one of the two sides (the Republican Guard and the 18th Brigade Border Guard) towards the Syrian military posts and barracks with the aim of interrogating and investigating them and conducting what is called a security settlement and reconciliation. During the detention of refugees in the military unit, a delegation composed of a group of Syrian officers came from Damascus, in preparation for conducting what is called a “security settlement and reconciliation” for the returnees. According to testimonies, a full investigation session was conducted by the committee for each family and individual, during which the refugees were asked personal questions in a humiliating and disturbing manner. For example, but not limited to, about their personal identity, the reasons that prompted them to leave Syria, their places of residence in Lebanon, what they did during their stay in Lebanon, the nature of work in Lebanon, their marital status, family members, the reason for their deportation by the Lebanese army. Then they forced them to sign papers, the contents of which not everyone was able to read.



refugees forcibly deported to Syria are subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance by the Syrian security services

According to ACHR press statement

The testimonies indicated that a security procedure was implemented against deported refugees known as “darb el-fiesh” (checking the security status) to verify the identity of people with the aim of knowing security details about them related to the events in Syria to verify that they are not wanted by the Syrian security branches. This procedure aims to determine the security status type of people whose identities are documented. As a result, people are divided into:

- *Those who defaulted from compulsory military service.*
- *Those who defaulted from compulsory reserve military service.*
- *Deserters from compulsory military service.*
- *Political activists, or those suspected of participating in opposition political activities.*
- *Individuals with opinions opposing the government of the Syrian regime (often categorized according to their origin).*

Based on these security classifications, people are arrested and directed to security branches in the capital, Damascus, and among those branches are the “Military Police Prison in Qaboun” and the notorious “Palestine Branch,” which is internationally known for its violations. The victims reported in their testimonies that they were arrested by the Syrian authorities and transferred to various security agencies, where they were tied with iron chains, tortured, and subjected to many humanitarian violations.

Based on testimonies and other previous documentation, it was found that the Lebanese authorities are handing over some forcibly deported refugees to the Republican Guard of the 4th Division, while others are being handed over to the 18th Brigade Border Guard in Syria near the Masnaa border point with Syria, despite the potential risks they, the refugees, will be exposed to at the hands of the Syrian authorities and other parties to the conflict, as the report of the “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic” issued in July 2023 indicated persisting patterns of systematic violations in Syria, including detention, cruel treatment, torture, and enforced disappearance in Syrian security branches and among the armed conflict parties spread across various Syrian territories.⁵

⁵Torture and abuse in the Syrian Arab Republic <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyrria/A-HRC-53-CRP5-Syria-Torture-AR.pdf>

Testimonies of victims and survivors



I saw with the Syrian investigator the same papers that I had previously seen with the Lebanese officer when they investigated me.

Syrian Refugee were forcibly deported



Nahla, 41-year-old Syrian refugee: Syrian security arrested many young whose current whereabouts remain unknown.

“After we were forcibly deported by the Lebanese army to Syria, members of the Syrian army received us at the Syrian border, and they conducted a security check known as “darb el-fiesh” and interrogated each family separately in a large hall. I remember that about 30 people appeared to be wanted by the Syrian authorities, 4 young men were wanted for compulsory reserve military service, 5 were soldiers who defected from the Syrian army, and the rest were wanted for compulsory military service. Military security arrested them all and we do not know their fate yet. Some of them were brothers. They were not allowed to say goodbye to their brothers.”



Safaa, 39-year-old Syrian refugee: They arrested all the wanted young men, and we did not know anything about them, not even their families.

“After we were deported, the Lebanese army placed us on the border near the Syrian military barracks. Four Syrian military cars came, stopped everyone, and took us to the barracks where they came from. Our names were registered. We were about 300 people, including 60 children. They separated the women and children from the men, and we remained in the barracks for the next day, before they took us to register us to enter Syria through the Jdeideh crossing, accompanied by tens of intelligence and police officers, during the investigation, I saw with the Syrian investigator the same papers that I had previously seen with the Lebanese officer when they investigated me. They arrested all the wanted young men, and we did not know anything about them, not even their families. According to their statements, they were withdrawn for compulsory military service, and on the same day they returned the rest to the military unit on the Syrian border. A number of officers in civilian clothing conducted what is called “security settlement and reconciliation.” We were interrogated. They questioned us about the smallest details regarding why we left Syria, and they put us in buses and distributed us to various Syrian governorates.”



The arrest of my children is agony, and their return was a dream. Now they are here at home, and I do not allow them to go out even to the store for fear that they will be arrested again and deported



Hind, 35-year-old Syrian refugee: He was beaten and tortured, and this was the last news I received about my husband. He has disappeared!

“The Lebanese army arrested my husband and deported him to Syria, and I no longer know anything about him. I later learned from those who were with him that one of the Lebanese soldiers hit him on his back with his weapon. I learned that they took him and handed him over to the Fourth Division in Syria. Some of the people who were deported with my husband contacted their families by phone, but my husband did not contact me. They told me that military security arrested him in Syria because it appeared in the security bulletin that he was wanted by the regime in several political and security cases, and he was beaten and tortured. This was the last news I learned about my husband. He had disappeared! I later asked some broker-lawyers about him in Damascus, but they asked for huge sums of money that were impossible to provide just to start searching for him. My husband had disappeared, and I no longer knew anything about his fate. Because of the fear of a reiteration of what happened to me in Lebanon, my children and I moved to another area inside Lebanon.”



Abu Majed, 46-year-old Syrian refugee: The arrest of my children was agony, and their return was a dream.

“My two children - minors - were arrested while returning from their workplace in Beirut. They were stopped by a Lebanese army checkpoint in the Zahle area and taken to the Ablah intelligence branch. They were transferred directly to the Masnaa border crossing for deportation without any charges, legal or illegal. Days later, I received a call from them, and they informed me that the Syrian authorities had referred them to a civil court in Damascus, and that they had been released, and because of what happened they could not return to Lebanon legally. I contacted a smuggler and paid \$400 to help them return to us in Lebanon. The arrest of my children is agony, and their return was a dream. Now they are here at home, and I do not allow them to go out even to the store for fear that they will be arrested again and deported. It will be a disaster next time.”

The Implication of Syrian officers and doubts over Lebanese Army coordination



150-200

The cost of smuggling to Lebanon

per person

There are several complex and dangerous challenges in Syria that greatly affect the daily lives of Syrians. Among the most prominent of these challenges are the poor economic conditions and the issue of corruption, which includes corruption of Syrian officers and members of the Syrian army, as testimonies indicate the possibility of military and security officers being involved in smuggling and coordination with human trafficking gangs, of which refugees are considered to be its victims. On the other hand, the testimonies also reflect the possibility of the involvement of some individuals from the Lebanese army in the coordination process with smuggling and human trafficking gangs.

One of the testimonies reported that a bribe was paid to a Syrian officer present in the military unit where refugees who were deported from Lebanon through the Masnaa border crossing were being held, with the aim of allowing him to escape with his son from that military unit. Refugees are forced to pay bribes to avoid greater hardship during deportations. He was forced to pay a bribe to the Syrian officer and was able to escape from the military unit with his neighbor and his son, who suffers from psychological disorders. During their harsh escape from the Syrian military unit, due to the health and psychological conditions of those involved, and with increasing pressures, they decided to contact a smuggler in order to return to Lebanon.

The victim said that he paid \$60 per person (\$180 for three people) to facilitate their return. This experience reflects the cost of refugees searching for other exists, regardless of how dangerous they are, other than returning to Syria, and the challenges that refugees face in their effort to stay out of harm's way. ACHR had stated in its report, "Kidnapping Crimes And Human Trafficking After The Forced Deportation Of Refugees From Lebanon,"⁶ issued last June, that the cost of smuggling to Lebanon ranged between \$150/200 per person, and reached \$3,000 for some wanted individuals.



Refugees are forced to pay bribes to avoid greater hardship during deportations

Testimonies also indicated that refugees who safely passed through and arrived in Damascus found themselves without shelter, food or money. This stage demonstrated the extent of the economic and social pressures that Syrian refugees faced, and the challenges that had to be overcome to ensure their basic needs were met. This came in light of the difficult and harsh economic conditions in Syria, and because of their inability to return to their original areas that were damaged by military actions. Therefore, after the refugees settled for a short period in Damascus, they tried to contact their relatives in Lebanon to ask for financial assistance. After that, they decided to return to Lebanon through smuggling operations, where they and/or their relatives contacted the smugglers. Some of the refugees who decided to return to Lebanon were people who had escaped compulsory military service in Syria. This was after the Syrian authorities re-enrolled them as soon as they arrived at the Syrian border and were handed over by the Lebanese army. Evading compulsory military service is common during conflicts in countries such as Syria, compulsory service requires people to participate in the conflict and face the risk of injury or death.

⁶Kidnapping and human trafficking crimes after the forced deportation of refugees from Lebanon
<https://www.achrighs.org/2023/06/19/13174/>



Some testimonies that were smuggled from Syria to the Lebanese border also indicated that they were placed in a house belonging to smugglers, and there they met other groups of refugees coming from Syria, numbering more than 100 people.

Smuggling operations of Syrians constitute a widespread phenomenon in Syria and reflect the corruption and the coordination between members and officers of the Syrian army and smuggling gangs. Smuggling operations represent a complex choice that refugees take in light of the harsh and deteriorating living conditions and the security risks they face in Syria. Some are also forced to evade their compulsory recruitment after coercively enrolling them in the Syrian army, and forcing them to engage in the armed conflicts.

After the refugees contacted the smugglers, they were asked to go to Homs as the first smuggling station. The smugglers then transported the refugees, after they met them in Homs, via motorcycles to the Lebanese border. Testimonies described this process as dangerous and frightening. The smugglers' group used rugged and border roads to cross. Testimonies reported that the smugglers passed them through checkpoints belonging to the Fourth Division in Syria after paying bribes to facilitate the passage process, and sometimes passwords or codes were used to obtain approval to pass. This reflects the possibility of strong coordination and connections between smugglers and members of the Fourth Division, indicating widespread corruption on the border and among members of the Syrian army.

Smuggling operations entail a high risk of relying on unsafe and unsecured routes to cross borders, which exposes refugees to serious risks. The journey includes factors such as the threat of getting arrested, crossing through dangerous areas, and exposure to exploitation and human trafficking. In addition, refugees are exposed to financial extortion and exploitation by the organized groups and smugglers.

The Wadi Khaled is a major crossing used by smuggling gangs to cross the border between Syria and Lebanon. Some testimonies showed suspicions of coordination between smugglers and some members of the Lebanese army, as they heard about bribes being paid to the Lebanese checkpoint or to members of the Lebanese army by smugglers present on the border, and this indicates the presence of corruption or illegal agreements between some members of the Lebanese army and smugglers, which must be investigated.

Some testimonies that were smuggled from Syria to the Lebanese border also indicated that they were placed in a house belonging to smugglers, and there they met other groups of refugees coming from Syria, numbering more than 100 people. This indicates the existence of a humanitarian crisis in Syria, as these people are trying to flee conflicts and unrest in their country, despite the risks surrounding them, by taking very difficult routes, where they only found the option of escaping through illegal routes due to the restrictions on the Lebanese borders for those coming from Syria to Lebanon. One of the testimonies also indicated that it was smuggled using a car belonging to a well-known Lebanese party that she didn't want to reveal his name.

Testimonies of victims and survivors



We were subjected to the worst types of beatings, torture, and insults. The last thing we thought was that we would get out of there alive



Youssef, 21-year-old Syrian refugee: We were subjected to the most horrific types of beatings, torture, and insults. We never thought we'd make it out alive.

"The Lebanese army deported me and my brother through the Masnaa crossing, and we were handed over to the Syrian army, which detained us for three days in the military barracks on the Syrian border before transferring us to the military police prison in Qaboun in Damascus. We were 24 young men, most of us had missed compulsory military service, and had deserted mandatory reserve service. We were tied with iron chains as if we were criminals. We were subjected to the worst types of beatings, torture, and insults. The last thing we thought was that we would get out of there alive. I was sorted to a military barracks in the city of Al-Sanamayn in the Daraa countryside, after undergoing a 50-day Aghrar course, and because of my commitment, I was able to get a leave on Eid Al-Adha, and I agreed on a deal with a smuggler in Homs who had strong coordination with the Fourth Division, which facilitated our passage. We also passed through Syrian military checkpoints, and they did not stop us at all. When we arrived in Lebanon, we were about a 100 people. A Lebanese army car arrived, as we felt afraid and terrified, but the smuggler stepped out and spoke to them for a few minutes and then they left, they were aware of our presence."



Khaled, 53-year-old Syrian refugee: God was guiding our way back.

"They threw us in a remote area between the Lebanese and Syrian borders. Immediately, 10 armed soldiers came with "Republican Guard" written on their uniform badges. When we arrived at the military barracks, they asked for cars to take us to the new crossing. In the evening, I spoke with an old officer, who seemed to be treating us in a nice way. I told him that my child suffers from epileptic seizures, and that my wife and children have no breadwinner except me. My neighbor, who lived with me in the same area in Lebanon, approached him and begged him as well. The officer agreed to an amount of \$200 for each person, and late at night we were allowed to walk from the military barracks without the knowledge of others. We walked and did not know where to go. God was guiding our way back because we did not want to turn on our phones immediately. My sick child and I fell down more than once. After two hours of walking, we turned on our phones and met the smugglers at the border at dawn who took us through long procedures into Lebanon."



They treated us in a humiliating manner when we arrived at the military barracks. They insulted me and beat me up



Khalil, a 17-year-old minor Syrian refugee: This situation is truly hellish. Do we flee from the Syrian regime or the Lebanese army?

“I am now 17 years old, and I entered Lebanon legally. Why did they arrest me like that?, as if I were a criminal? They raided the camp with seven military vehicles. They treated us in a humiliating manner when we arrived at the military barracks. They insulted me and beat me up. After several hours, they sent us to the Lebanese border. There, the treatment of the Lebanese army was crueler than what we were exposed to in the military barracks. Maybe they think we are terrorists. That is okay. Why did they put cloth bags on our heads? I am a civilian and I have not done anything in Lebanon that violates the law. In Syria, we were received by the Republican Guard, all the young men wanted for compulsory military service were arrested, and I was released with other people. We arrived in Damascus, and I called my father using the phone of a passer-by to send me money just to eat and then I thought, where will I stay if our house is destroyed, and my family is in Lebanon? Should I stay on the streets? I returned to Lebanon after my father called the smugglers and they helped me pass through. This situation is truly hellish. Should we flee from the Syrian regime or from the Lebanese army?”



What is the relation between the Syrian Fourth Division and human smugglers?



The refugees experienced mixed feelings of fear, confusion, and extreme anxiety about their unknown fate when they met Syrian security personnel

The refugees who were forcibly deported through the Wadi Khaled crossing on the Syrian Lebanese border faced serious and complex challenges. The Lebanese army forcibly transferred them via military vehicles to the border crossing, leaving them very close to the Fourth Division of the Syrian authorities. The distance ranged between 50 and 100 meters, according to different testimonies, without any consideration of the consequences they will face. The refugees experienced mixed feelings of fear, confusion, and extreme anxiety about their unknown fate when they met Syrian security personnel. Especially for those who believe they will face security challenges due to their previous peaceful activity in Syria, and some due to their desertion from compulsory military service in the Syrian army. Those moments brought back painful memories for many refugees. They expressed the harsh psychological conditions and recalled the violations they were exposed to in Syria before they left for Lebanon. They were accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and psychological tension, due to their forced deportation to the country they fled seeking political and humanitarian safety.



The Fourth Division took advantage of the refugees' fear of returning to Syria and facing security threats and the possibility of being subjected to enforced disappearance and offered them to return to Lebanon in cooperation with smugglers

In the deportation cases that ACHR documented, in addition to the lengthy interviews conducted for the purpose of compiling this report, the testimonies unanimously agreed that the Fourth Division was in charge of receiving the refugees and that their behavior was peculiar as it did not transfer them to a military barracks or interrogate them, but instead offered them either to enter Syria to face all possible dangers or to return to Lebanon through irregular means in cooperation with human smuggling gangs allied with the Fourth Division. This exposed the refugees to the dangers of the smugglers' routes, as smuggling gangs that closely coordinated with the Fourth Division received them, took them to farms and border houses where they detained them, practiced financial blackmail using threats, abused them and threatened them with violence, and threatened to hand them back over to the Fourth Division if they did not respond, for the purpose of returning them to Lebanon through irregular means.

Testimonies from deported refugees on the Syrian Lebanese border from the Wadi Khaled crossing point indicated that the Fourth Division offered them entry into Syria as they have to bear the risks of doing so or returning to Lebanon through smuggling gangs, which consists of Syrian and Lebanese individuals. These gangs are active on the Syrian Lebanese border as they aim to exploit refugees, as forced deportations facilitated the access of smugglers to refugees. These gangs work in coordination with the Fourth Division to smuggle people across the border through illegal means. The smuggling occurs in exchange of sums of money amounting to 150 US dollars per person, which is shared equally between the smuggling gangs and members of the Fourth Division, according to information received by the research team during the research and interviews conducted.

The deported refugees found themselves entangled in negotiations and blackmail at both ends of the border. The Fourth Division took advantage of the refugees' fear of returning to Syria and facing security threats and the possibility of being subjected to enforced disappearance and offered them to return to Lebanon in cooperation with smugglers. At the same time, smuggling gangs took advantage of the vulnerable situation of refugees, subjected them to psychological pressure and blackmailed them financially to secure illegal gains.



The gangs would sell them food and drink, or give them small amounts of it

According to testimonies and ACHR documentation, smuggling gangs were receiving refugees, including children and women, and transporting them in civilian cars to border areas. There, they are detained in abandoned houses and farms away from populated areas, as they are placed under heavy armed guard. The gangs would sell them food and drink or give them small amounts of it. One of the interviewees indicated that some victims were detained for an entire month. The food provided to them consisted of a loaf of bread and small amounts of water daily. On another hand, another interviewee stated that the victims were forced to pay for some food and drink for their children, who were also detained with them.

After detaining the refugees, the gangs blackmailed them financially. The gangs' threats to hand over the refugees specifically to the Fourth Division and Syrian Military Security reveal the extent of the risks that the refugees were facing if they don't comply with the smugglers' demands, which may increase the possibility of refugees being exposed to the risks of arrest, torture, and persecution at the hands of the Syrian authorities. The refugees were in a difficult financial situation, as not all of them had the means to communicate with their families inside Syria and Lebanon, and all of this coincided with fear and the urgent need to feel safe and escape from the suffering of forced deportation and the violations that accompany it, to which the Lebanese Army, the Fourth Division, and human trafficking gangs contributed according to the testimonies.



Human trafficking networks operate in an organized manner, suggesting the existence of well-established smuggling networks that collaborate with both Syrian and Lebanese authorities

Some refugees detained by smuggling gangs took the initiative to communicate with their relatives inside Lebanon to collect the necessary funds to cover the costs of returning to Lebanon and getting rid of their detention by smuggling gangs. In other cases, the smugglers contacted the victims' relatives using their phones, and requested \$150 per person for their release. One of the testimonies declared that a woman and her son borrowed \$900 to pay back the smugglers, with the aim of freeing his mother and siblings from detention, while another said that the husband paid \$300 to free his wife and children.

After that, the smuggling gangs informed the relatives of the victims of the locations to deliver the money and receive the refugees. The refugees were then transported via a mountain road, which took them about 4 hours on foot. They were then transported by civilian vans to the capital, Beirut, where they were handed over to their relatives at a pre-agreed location.

Human trafficking networks operate in an organized manner, suggesting the existence of well-established smuggling networks that collaborate with both Syrian and Lebanese authorities. The refugees are transported in Lebanese trucks, through an arduous and dangerous road, especially for the children and women who are part of the refugee group. They also have to walk long distances through mountainous and rugged terrain, often in the dark. The journey can take several hours in harsh and life-threatening conditions, and refugees face significant difficulties along the way.

Testimonies also reveal that smugglers brought refugees to areas within the Lebanese territory, which indicates the possibility of collusion or corruption among some members of the Lebanese army or checkpoints. This raises concerns about the safety and protection of refugees even after they have crossed the border. The refugees are faced to choose between either returning to Syria and dying in the context of conflicts, or continuing to be with smugglers, which reflects a real human tragedy.

The refugee situation underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the refugee crisis, with a focus on improving conditions inside Syria and ensuring safe and legal pathways for those seeking asylum in neighboring countries. In addition, efforts to combat smuggling and corruption networks on both sides of the border are essential to protect the lives and rights of vulnerable refugees fleeing conflict and unrest in Syria.

Testimonies of victims and survivors



The smugglers spoke to us and asked us for \$150 per person



We were in a real prison, but it was not under state supervision. It was a real disaster that I could not believe I had actually escaped from.



Firas, a 19-year-old Syrian refugee: Everyone left, and I was left in detention with 13 other people for a whole month.

“When we were deported, we were about 200 people. At dawn, we were deported following a security raid on our places of residence conducted by eight members of the Lebanese army. They placed us only 50 meters away from where the 4th Division was present on the Syrian side. 10 members of the 4th Division approached us, while we feared them. Then a group of masked Syrians and Lebanese who were armed came. Members of the Fourth Division told us that they were smugglers. Either you enter Syria and bear the risks, or you go with them. The smugglers spoke to us and asked us for \$150 per person. Most of us agreed for fear of being re-handed over to the Fourth Division. We walked towards the Lebanese border and arrived at a village. Then they detained us in abandoned houses and farms belonging to them. They negotiated with us as if we were a commodity in a supermarket, and they threatened everyone with having them returned to the Fourth Division to be brought into Syria in case we don’t pay. Everyone left, I was left in detention with 13 other people for a full month. We only got a loaf of bread and a bottle of water every day.”



Sumaya, 23-year-old Syrian refugee: I was able to get over what happened, but how can I deal with my children's memory now?

“My family and I woke up to the sound of the door being opened. Five masked men entered, dressed and masked in black, heavily armed. They brutally arrested me and my two daughters, one was two years old, and the other was three years old, under the pretext that we did not have legal residency papers. They took us to a Lebanese military barrack with a military vehicle. I was subjected to many insults, I did not really know the reasons behind it because I was not convinced that not having legal residency warranted my arrest and my children’s. After that, we were transported via a military vehicle also towards the border, and the Fourth Division received us, which in turn handed us over to the armed smuggling gangs. From there, they contacted my husband and asked him for \$300 on my behalf and my children’s. After a few days, the smugglers asked us to walk between the rugged mountains. They transported me with other refugees in cars towards Beirut. We arrived around four in the morning, and then they contacted my husband to bring the required money. I do not know what more horrific can happen. I was able to overcome what happened, but how can I deal with my children's memory now?”



Souad, 53-year-old Syrian refugee: A real disaster, I couldn't believe I actually survived.

“Our deportation was strange. The Lebanese army handed us over to the Fourth Division of the Syrian authorities through the Wadi Khaled crossing. They literally gave us a choice between returning to Lebanon through smuggling or entering Syria and going into investigations with military security. There was an armed group of Lebanese and Syrians wearing civilian clothes. The Fourth Division officers asked us to accompany them. They returned us to abandoned villages and detained us. There were a significant number of children and women among us. We were all subjected to humiliation. It was an unenviable situation. Some of us did not have a phone. The smuggler called my son and asked for \$900 on my behalf and my children’s who were detained with me. My son borrowed the money to free us from the smugglers’ detention. We were in a real prison, but it was not under state supervision. It was a real disaster that I could not believe I had actually escaped from.”

Refugees' lack of options leads them to seek asylum!



there are children who lost their parents due to forced deportation and suffered from psychological disorders as a result of trauma. Some children lost the ability to speak

The difficult experience of the refugees, which started from arbitrary arrest to forced deportation and handover to the Syrian authorities and then to smuggling gangs or return via smuggling, greatly affected their psychological and physical condition, and as a result feelings of fear and anxiety spread among them if these events were to happen again. Testimonies showed that returning refugees are anxious about being arrested again after their return to Lebanon, which indicates the difficulty and seriousness of the conditions they face. The refugees expressed their desire to obtain a fair solution to their case and to provide them with a safer and more stable environment, as the fear of being arrested again made some of them change their places of residence after returning, which confirms the impact of security raids and arbitrary arrests on the general stability of the victims.

As for the refugee children who went through these harsh experiences of arrest and deportation, in addition to the coercive and inhumane conditions at the border, and during their period of detention by smuggling gangs, their health and psychological condition deteriorated. Testimonies reported the emergence of cases of bedwetting and sleep disorders in these children, which reflects the resulting negative psychological and health impact. On the other hand, there are children who lost their parents due to forced deportation and suffered from psychological disorders as a result of trauma. Some children lost the ability to speak.

The victims' choice to return to Lebanon despite the security threats and risks involved in the smuggling process reflects that the bad situation in Lebanon is safer for them than the current situation in Syria. The urgent need to feel safe is what prompted some refugees to resort to borrowing money and communicating with smugglers to return to Lebanon. There are also other concerns that appear in the testimonies of some of them. Some refugees return to Lebanon to avoid compulsory military service in Syria, because such service would put them at risk of losing their lives or becoming involved in the military conflicts of which Syria continues to undergo. Also, some refugees belong to the eastern regions controlled by the SDF militia, and they have a fear of returning to their original areas because that may expose them to punishment or being asked to join the SDF militia.

Refugees lost their homes in their areas of origin due to military operations in Syria over the past years, in addition to the lack of security and stability, which made the areas of origin currently unlivable for most refugees. One of the testimonies indicated that she is from a border town with Iraq near the city of Albukamal, and that her town was destroyed by the Iraqi army, the SDF militia, and ISIS.

Refugees' fear of being kidnapped, eliminated, and killed upon returning to Syria is another motivation for returning to Lebanon, as they hear about tragic cases to which some returnees or forcibly deported have been subjected. Testimonies indicate that some refugees made the decision to return to Lebanon due to the difficult security conditions in their original areas in Syria. Areas such as Saraqeb in Idlib and Aleppo are still suffering from military transformations and divisions, and it may be difficult for people to return to these areas because of the security threats that may affect them and because of the laws imposed by the militias controlling there. Also, in some areas such as Idlib which is under opposition control, returning is dangerous due to the unstable security situation, and the lack of safe roads to get there.

It is clear that refugees face significant challenges in returning to their areas of origin and may find that conditions in Lebanon appear more favorable even with the risks associated with smuggling and the difficult economic and security situation, and that it is the only country that may be more accessible than other bordering countries. This information also shows that the decision to return for some depends on evaluating the security and social situation in each country based on the expertise and experiences of others. These complex situations reveal major challenges facing refugees and force them to deal with dangerous decisions which are the only ones available to them.

Testimonies of victims and survivors



They detained us, beat us, insulted us, and deprived us of food and water until the next day



Hassan, a 28-year-old Syrian refugee: I cannot believe that I am with my family that does not have any breadwinner in this world except me.

"I was returning from my work in agriculture at noon when a Lebanese army checkpoint stopped me for inspection in the Zahle area. The checkpoint arrested us and 11 other refugees. They took us to Rayak Military Airport in Bekaa. They detained us, beat us, insulted us, and deprived us of food and water until the next day." Then they transported us to the Masnaa border crossing with Syria and handed us over to the Syrian Immigration and Passport Center on the Syrian border. We were detained there for one day by Syrian security, then they transported us to the Abbassy in Damascus, and brought us before a civil judge, the judge released us after signing a pledge to check in with The General Military Recruitment Division, I was hosted by a friend of mine in Damascus, as I started communicating with smugglers. The cost was 150 US dollars to return to Lebanon via Hermel - Bekaa. My story is not similar to the stories of many, rather it is exactly what happens to us. These are the options available to us, I cannot believe that I am with my family, which does not have any breadwinner in this world except me. I have not and will not leave the threshold of this house, and at the same time I fear that the house will be raided, as it happens to other Syrians."



Ahmed, a 14-year-old Syrian refugee: The world must understand that Syria is a slaughterhouse for Syrians.

"The worst thing that happened during the deportation was that they made me crawl on my stomach in the military vehicle. They told me, 'So that the flesh will melt off of you.'" My father is an elderly man with epilepsy, and I am mentally ill because of the shock I got after my brother's death" ... The world must understand that Syria is a slaughterhouse for Syrians, and the Lebanese must understand that we do not love any country in the world, we are only here to survive."



The worst thing that happened during the deportation was that they made me crawl on my stomach in the military vehicle



Syria is not a safe country for me and for millions of Syrians, even those living in it



I don't like to remember any of those moments. They insulted us like animals when the Lebanese army arrested me and my husband's young daughters



Souad, 52-year-old Syrian refugee: My village does not exist. My husband is forcibly disappeared, and I know nothing about him.

“We have no options. I cannot return to Syria while our homes are destroyed. My village does not exist and there are no people in it. My children are wanted for compulsory service by the SDF militia that controls the area. It is a border area with Iraq, as it was destroyed by the Iraqi army, SDF, ISIS, and the Syrian regime. They bombed everything and displaced us, and my husband was forcibly disappeared, and I know nothing about him. I fled with my children in 2017 to Lebanon in search of safety and to escape death, waiting to know the fate of my husband so that he could return to us. When the Lebanese army deported me to Syria, we were handed over directly to the Fourth Division. Syria is not a safe country for me and for millions of Syrians, even those living in it. Buy us an island and we will definitely leave from here.”

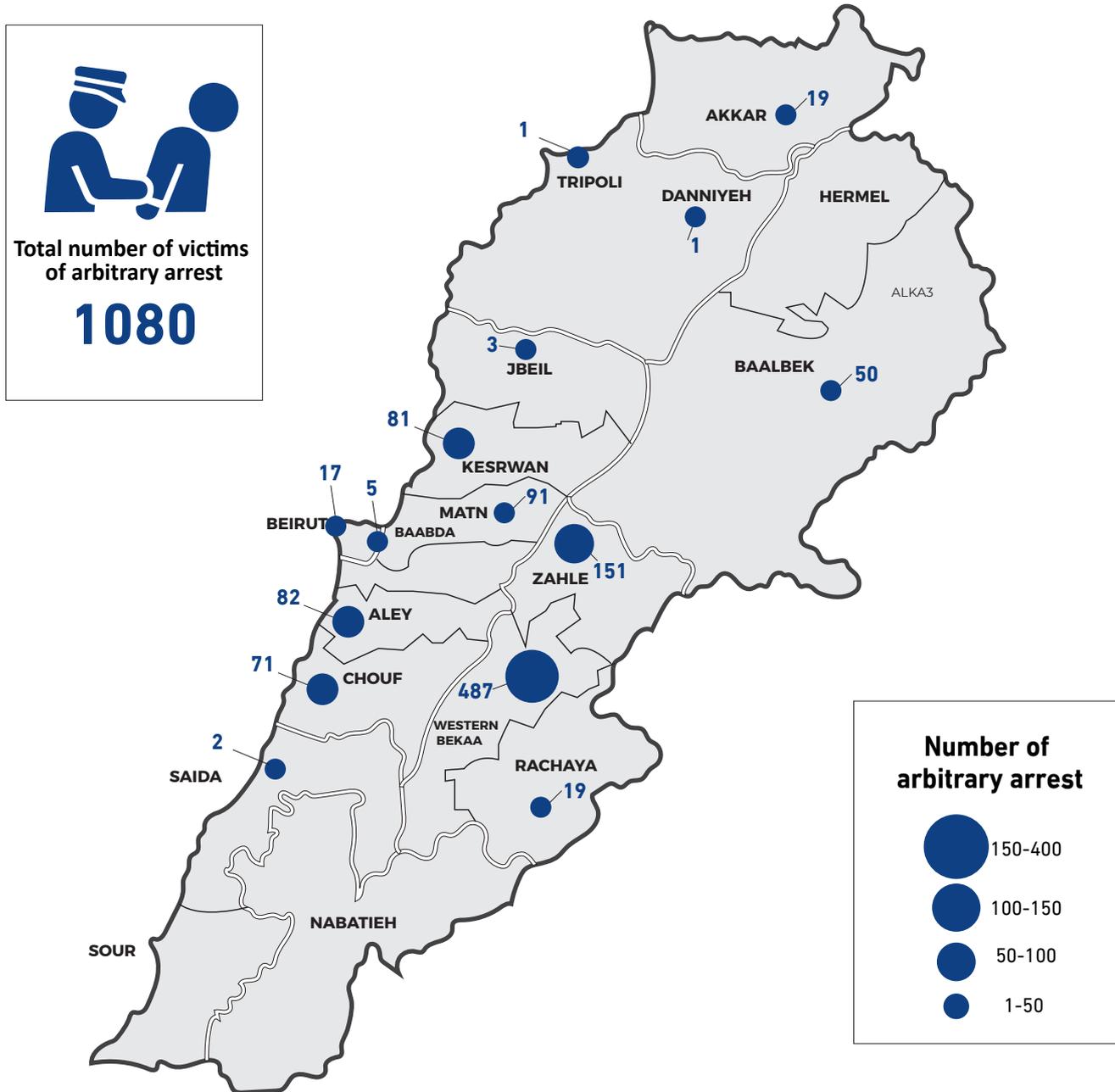


Safaa, 39-year-old Syrian refugee: The children had cases of involuntary urination. I was treated for gynecological bleeding. I don't know if I will ever get over what happened.

“I don't like to remember any of those moments. They insulted us like animals when the Lebanese army arrested me and my husband's young daughters. The experience was very terrifying, especially when we were handed over to smugglers by the Fourth Division. The children suffered from involuntary urination because of fear and psychological shock for more than a month after our return. I suffered a lot during their treatment, but they still wake up at night due to recurring nightmares. They received some psychotherapy sessions, but I can no longer afford the costs of treatment, and I do not believe in the services provided by associations at all. They still suffer from isolation and fear still clouds their memories, and their faces are always pale. I was treated for gynecological bleeding. I don't know if I will ever get over what happened.”

A geographical analysis of arbitrary arrests and forced deportations

The numbers of Syrian refugees who were arrested and forcibly deported according to the areas where the arrests occurred and the responsible authorities, which includes the period from the beginning of 2023 until November 30, 2023.



A map showing the areas where arbitrary arrests occurred

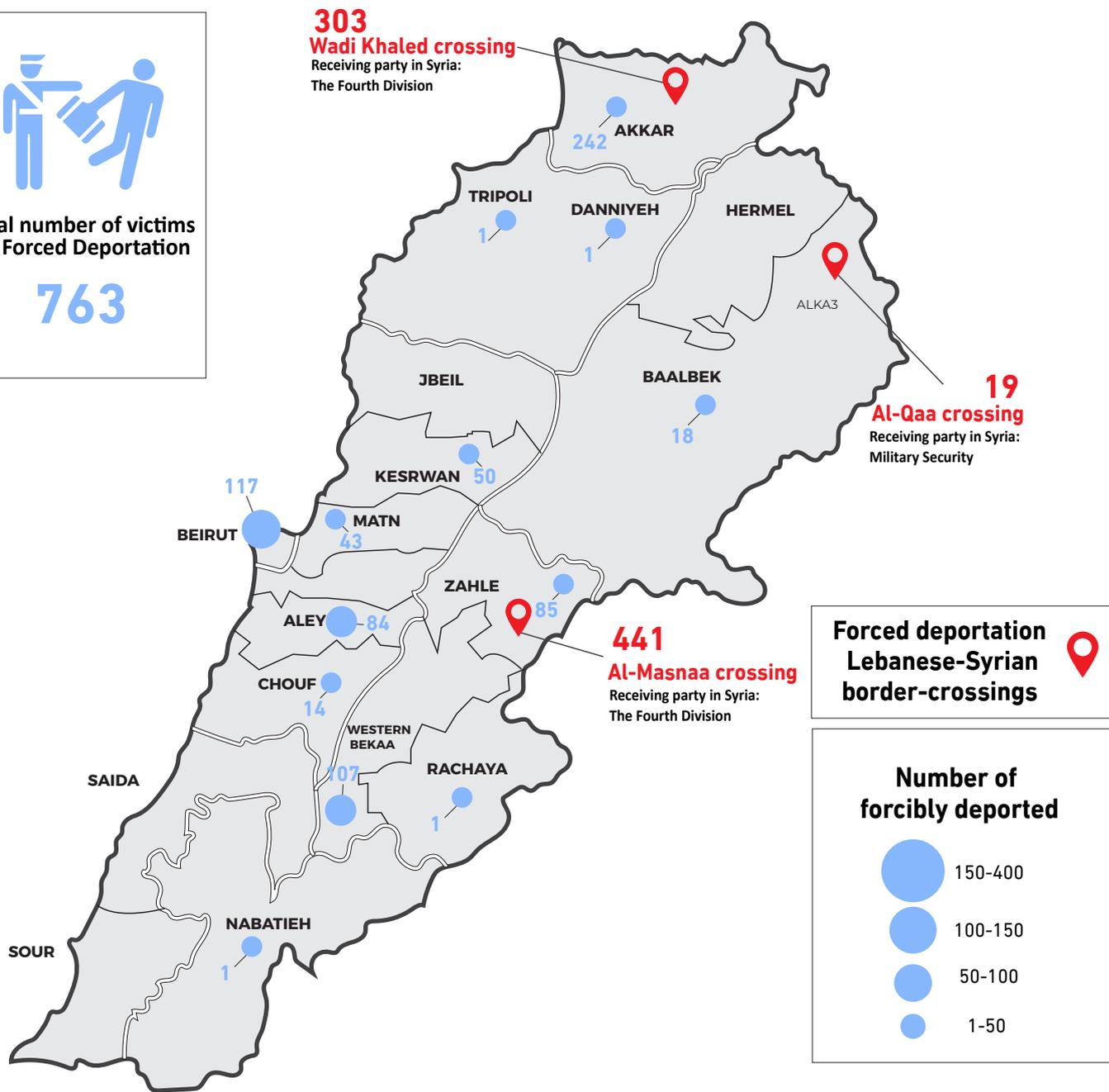
The responsible authorities	Lebanese Army Intelligence	General Security	Information Branch	Municipal Police	Lebanese Internal Security	Lebanese Army	State Security Branch	Armed Groups
The number of victims	223	33	4	2	3	792	22	1

A map showing the authorities responsible regarding arbitrary arrests



Total number of victims of Forced Deportation

763

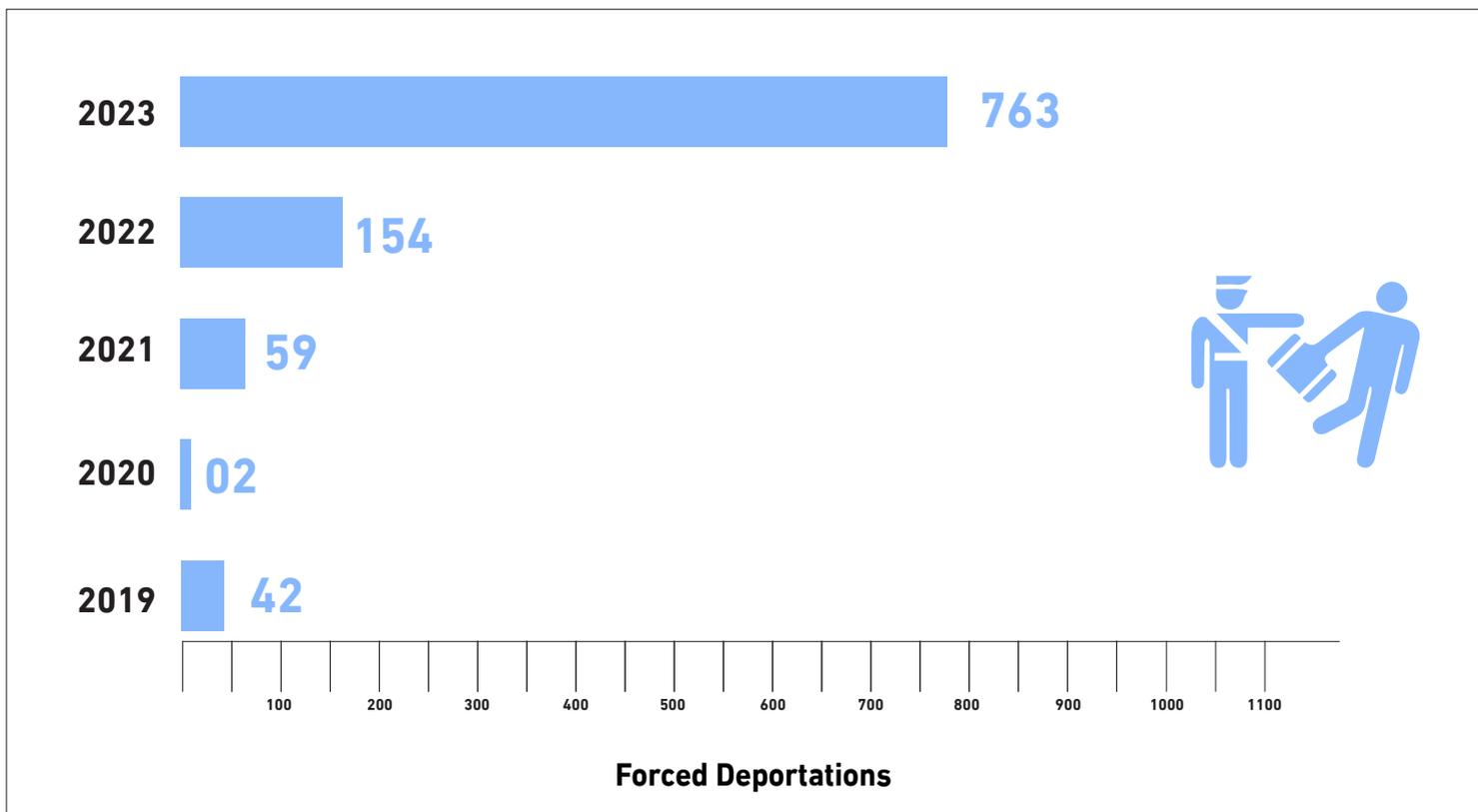
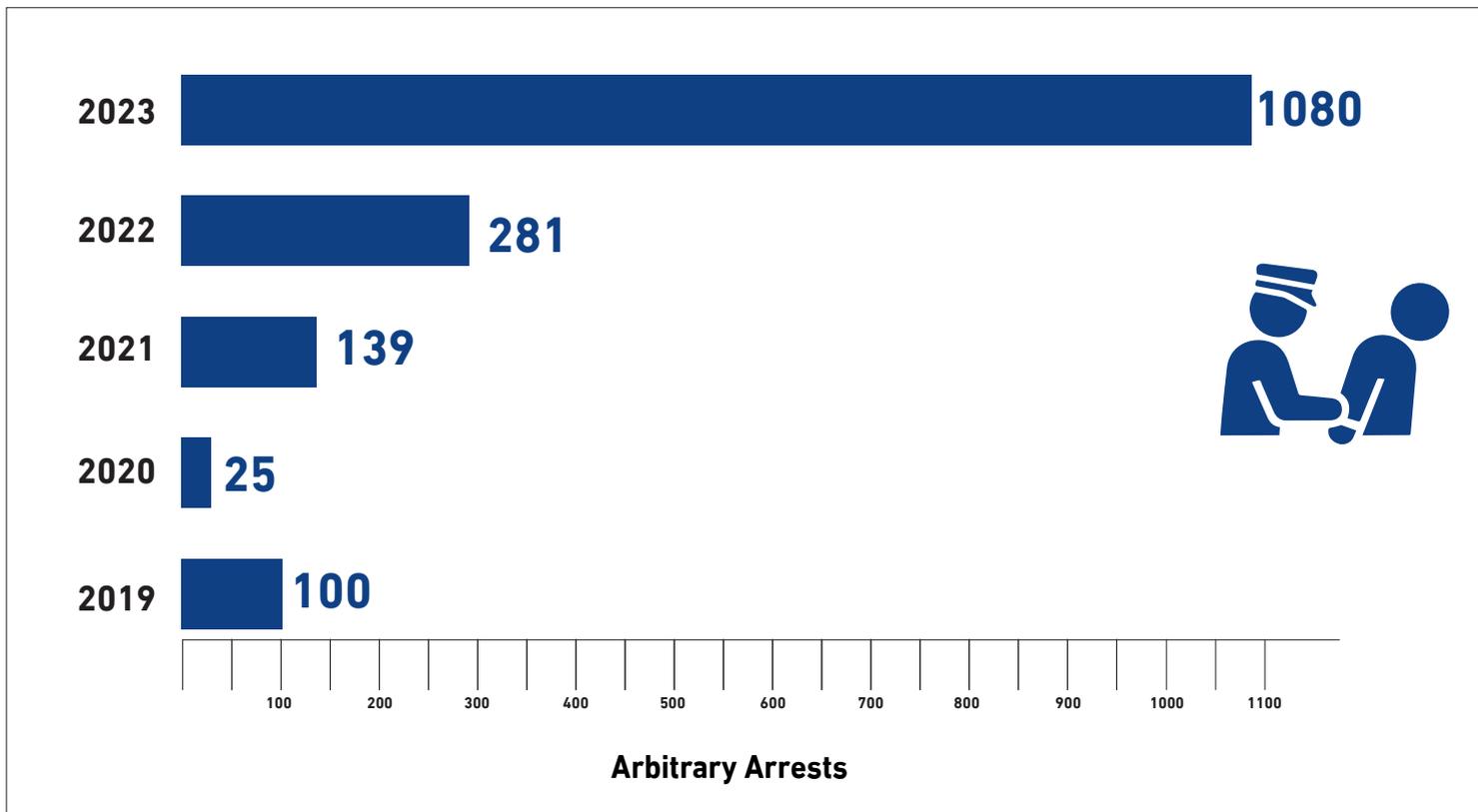


A map showing the areas where Forced Deportation occurred

The responsible authorities	Lebanese Army Intelligence	Lebanese Army	General Security	Military Police
The number of victims	202	437	10	114

A map showing the authorities responsible regarding arbitrary arrests

Arbitrary arrests and forced deportations documented by ACHR between 2019 and 2023



Legal analysis of Lebanon's obligations

Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that everyone has the right to liberty and safety, and it is illegal to arbitrarily arrest or detain an individual or deprive him of his liberty except for reasons provided by law and in accordance with due process. This article also addresses some of the rights of the arrested person, which the failure to respect makes the arrest or detention process arbitrary, including the right to know the arrest's motives and the charges, to be presented to a judge or employee legally authorized to exercise judicial functions, to be tried within a reasonable time, and the right to compensation if the arrest or the arrest was illegal. According to the working group on arbitrary detention, deprivation of liberty is arbitrary or unlawful if it falls within one of the following categories:

1. *The absence of a clear legal basis that justifies deprivation of liberty, such as keeping a person in detention even after the end of their sentence.*
2. *If the deprivation of liberty results from the exercise of the rights or freedoms guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.*
3. *When it results from failure to observe some of or all international rules relating to the right to a fair trial.*

It also includes a special category for refugees and migrants, according to the working group on arbitrary detention, within categories (4) and (5):

4. *If asylum seekers, migrants or refugees are subjected to administrative detention for a long period without the possibility of administrative or judicial review or grievance*
5. *If the deprivation of liberty constitutes a violation of international law due to discrimination based on birth; or national, ethnic or social origin; or language; or religion; or economic situation; or political or other opinion; or gender; or sexual orientation; disability or other condition, in a manner that aims or may lead to disregarding equal human rights*

The Lebanese Constitution is keen on protecting personal freedoms, hence Article 8 of it stipulates that: "Personal freedom is secured and under the protection of the law. No one may be arrested, imprisoned, or detained except in accordance with the provisions of the law, and no crime may be determined, or a penalty prescribed except in accordance with the law." The Lebanese Penal Code, specifically Article 327, punishes prison directors and guards, disciplinary and correctional institutes, and employees with temporary hard labor if they arrest or imprison people in cases other than those stipulated by law, and Article 328 punishes them if they accept a person without a judicial warrant or judicial decision, or detain him for more than what is specified by law. In this context, Article 47 of the Code of Criminal Procedure stipulates the rights of the individual upon arrest, which are:



The period of detention does not exceed 48 hours, renewable for a similar period based on the approval of the Public Prosecution.



The right to contact a family member, employer, lawyer of his choice, or an acquaintance.



The right to meet with a lawyer appointed by him with a statement written on the record.



The right to seek the assistance of a sworn translator if he is not fluent in the Arabic language.



The right to refer to a doctor for examination.

Arbitrary arrests and detention impede the movement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as cases of arbitrary detention occurred in 2022, mainly during arbitrary security raids carried out by the authorities on camps and residential gatherings, or while the refugee was visiting official departments for various reasons. The security checkpoints spread throughout Lebanese territory also constitute another reason for limiting the movements of refugees, taking into account that the majority of them do not have valid residencies within Lebanese territory due to the impossible conditions imposed by the Lebanese government to obtain valid residencies or renew them for those who possess them.

Arbitrary arrests and forced deportation may amount to a crime against humanity targeting refugees and violating the most basic principles of human rights, as refugees are forced to face these harsh conditions. In addition, it increases the violations they are exposed to when handed over to the Syrian authorities and smuggling gangs through border crossings. These practices are in stark contrast to international human rights standards and produce dangerous humanitarian, social, and psychological consequences on the lives of refugees.

From the beginning of 2023 until December 30, 2023, ACHR documented 1,080 arbitrary arrests of refugees. This is considered a violation of domestic and international laws that prohibit arbitrary detention and guarantee individual rights. At the international level, Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights include an explicit prohibition of arbitrary arrest and stress that the arrest or detention must be legitimate, orderly, and lawful.

The forced deportation of Syrian refugees also violates Lebanon's obligations under local laws and international treaties not to deport any refugee residing in its territory to a country where he or she may be exposed to the risk of death, torture, or persecution. From the beginning of 2023 until December, Access Center for Human Rights documented 763 cases of forced deportation.

In addition, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that forced deportation is criminalized, stating that “an alien residing lawfully in the territory of a state party to the present Covenant may not be deported except in implementation of a decision taken in accordance with the law, and after enabling them, unless reasons of national security necessitate otherwise, to present the reasons supporting their non-deportation, and to present their case to the specialized authority or to person or persons specifically appointed for that purpose, and appointing someone to represent them before it or before them.” Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture (1984) stipulates that “no state party may expel, return, or extradite any person to another state if it has real grounds to believe that he or she is in danger of being subjected to torture.” While Article 31 of the law regulating entry into, residence in, and exit from Lebanon (1962) affirms the prohibition of deporting a political refugee to the territory of a country where he fears for his life or freedom.

With reference to the provisions regarding deportation or refoulement in international law, Article 3 of the Torture Convention stipulates: “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.”

The UN Committee against Torture stated in General Comment No. 4 on Article 3 of the Convention stated:

“The principle of non-refoulement (non-refoulement) of refugees is well established under international law and amounts to international custom. This principle prohibits the return of individuals to a state where there are substantial grounds for believing that they will be subjected to persecution or torture. The state is obligated to apply the principle of non-refoulement of refugees. Forced return of all persons in its territory and under its jurisdiction and in need of international protection, without any discrimination and regardless of the nationality or statelessness of the person concerned, or his legal, administrative or judicial status under ordinary or emergency law. Collective expulsion without an objective examination of the cases is considered Individuals with regard to personal risk, in violation of the principle of refoulement.

The principle of refoulement imposes on the Lebanese government an obligation to provide a number of procedural guarantees, including, but not limited to, a) ensuring that each person receives an impartial and independent examination of his case individually and not collectively by judicial or administrative authorities, b) ensuring that the person concerned receives legal assistance and access to a lawyer, c) ensuring that the person concerned is able to appeal the deportation decision before an independent judicial or administrative body and to stop the implementation of deportation due to the appeal held.

Report methodology

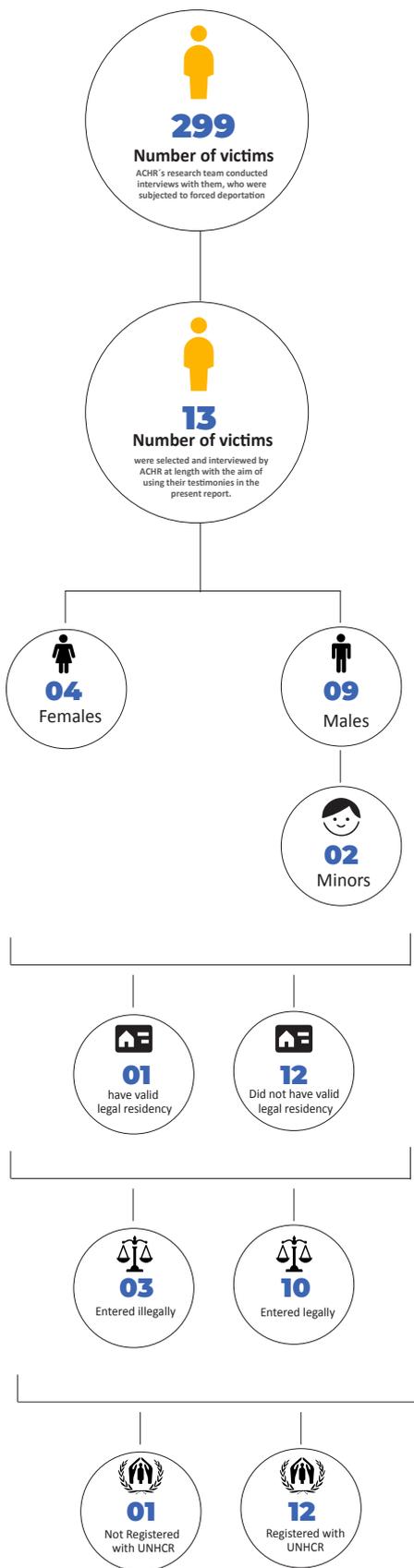
The methodology of the present report represents a comprehensive and interconnected research process that includes several steps, which began with the data collection phase and follow-up of victims and survivors after their forcible deportation from Lebanon, as ACHR’s research team conducted direct interviews with victims and survivors who represent a diverse group of women and men, and met with children after the interviews with their families. Interviews were conducted with caution and sensitivity to ensure the comfort of victims and survivors and their cooperation during the interviews. ACHR’s research team conducted 299 interviews with refugees who were subjected to forced deportation (227 individuals in group cases, 72 individual interviews), and documented 761 people who were subjected to forcible deportation from the beginning of the year 2023 until November 30, 2023. Thirteen refugees were selected and interviewed at length with the aim of using their testimonies in the present report. (Several testimonies were used within the sections of the report belonging to the same victim/survivor, registered under a pseudonym).

All 13 interviewees entered Lebanon before 2019, nine of them were males, including two minors, and four of them were females. 12 of them did not have valid legal residency papers. One person had legal residency and was not able to present it during the security raids. Ten of the group entered legally, while only three people entered illegally, also 12 of them are registered with the (UNHCR) as refugees.

Testimonials were analyzed individually and comprehensively, as key information and common patterns were extracted. The focus was on recurring details such as conditions of arrest and deportation, treatment in detention, handover to Syrian authorities, treatment by Syrian authorities, handover to smugglers, and decisions to return to Lebanon. The goal of this analysis is to identify possible causes and contributing factors to provide a comprehensive view of the conditions experienced by refugees. A legal analysis was conducted based on testimonies and relevant legal information from Lebanese and international laws related to the protection of human rights. The extent to which the measures taken against Syrian refugees comply with existing laws and international standards was evaluated.

Documentation and research methodology was respected, and a prior consent was obtained from all victims who were interviewed and from whom data were collected, ensuring their awareness of the purpose of the report and potential implications. The victims' identities and personal information were strictly protected, and the investigation was conducted with the utmost sensitivity to the victims' experiences and emotions. Finally, numerous revisions were made to the report to achieve as accurate a statement of facts as possible.

The research team at ACHR was able to collect many testimonies. There was difficulty in extracting the most important events due to the cruelty of the events that the victims and survivors went through. It was difficult to summarize all the testimonies or summarize a testimony by itself, while the testimonies were re-read and heard many times by different people within the work team, to ensure the compliance between the events narrated and the information received from the field team, so the information as it came in the interviews was conveyed in a separate sequence. To protect identities and prevent reprisals, pseudonyms were used throughout the report.





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