



# CHALLENGES TO FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY IN LEBANON

Examining Experiences of Refugees Participating  
in Sit-Ins Outside the UNHCR's Offices



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## ● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**UNHCR figures of registered refugees are estimated at around 800 thousand**

As a border-sharing neighbor, Lebanon was the first or only option for many Syrians escaping violence in Syria. The Government of Lebanon (GoL) estimates that there are 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Although a precise figure does not exist, official United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures of registered refugees are estimated at around 800 thousand.<sup>1</sup> The population makes up the world's highest number of refugees per capita.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, UNHCR suspended the registration of Syrian refugees in line with the GoL's request leading to a lack of accuracy regarding the true figure of refugees in the country and confusion surrounding their categorization. **The refugee population is alienated, violated, and deprived of numerous basic rights.** In response, Syrian refugees have increasingly resorted to peaceful means of activism to express their grievances and defend their human rights. For instance, Syrian activists have on many occasions organized and participated in peaceful assemblies outside UNHCR offices in Zahle, Tripoli, and Beirut.

Recent weeks have witnessed unprecedented levels of human rights violations against Syrian refugees in Lebanon. **The UNHCR has continuously ignored growing grievances and recent cases of hostility, violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and forced deportation against Syrian refugees.** This report highlights the status quo situation of Syrian refugees and the harsh circumstances they are conditioned to in Lebanon. Further, the report focuses on the grievances articulated by Syrian refugees in a series of peaceful sit ins and other forms of protest outside the UNHCR office, and how in a number of cases, the right to peaceful assembly was violated by security forces who harassed, verbally assaulted and arrested Syrian refugees. In doing so, the report aims to highlight these violations and how other communication channels like UNHCR's complaint resolution mechanisms have failed. The report concludes by offering a legal analysis of the right to peaceful protest in Lebanon and stresses recommendations to ensure the protection of refugees and their human rights.

<sup>1</sup>Around 779,645 are recognized by the UNHCR as of March 2024, but the Government of Lebanon estimates the actual number of Syrian refugees to be over 1.5 million.

<sup>2</sup>France24, "I'd Rather Die: Syrians in Lebanon Fear Deportation", April 28, 2023, [www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230428-i-d-rather-die-syrians-in-lebanon-fear-deportation](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230428-i-d-rather-die-syrians-in-lebanon-fear-deportation).

## ● METHODOLOGY



Interviews conducted  
with syrian activists



**The interviewees are participants of the peaceful sit-ins outside the UNHCR's buildings with varied prior experience in advocacy and human rights**

This report is based on first-hand documentation carried out by the Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR). On several occasions, ACHR team members were present during the peaceful assemblies, and the report relies on data gathered from the testimonies of participants. This data is extracted from 16 extensive interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024 with Syrian activists, which highlight the multifaced experiences and issues Syrian protestors in Lebanon face. The testimonies are examined through a cross-referencing process, integrating data from numerous accounts, and drawing on consistent and common experiences. The report ensures the reliability and accuracy of the data through thorough evaluation and ensures the credibility of the findings through multiple sources of corroborated evidence. **ACHR's team conducted interviews with participants from different regions and diverse backgrounds, in person and over the phone.** Arabic was the main language used during the interviews. The interviewees are participants of the peaceful sit-ins outside the UNHCR's buildings with varied prior experience in advocacy and human rights and who decided to participate in these sit-ins in the hope of a positive societal impact.

Secondary data consists of policy statements, legal documents, and reports regarding FoPA and the UNHCR's activities in Lebanon. ACHR adheres to human rights advocacy principles, which include reliability, objectivity, and confidentiality. Before publishing, the report undergoes a process that verifies the findings' validity by triangulating information from multiple sources. **The report maintains a neutral stance towards all parties involved in the violations committed.** It also ethically considers the sensitivity of some of the information and observes measures that respect and protect autonomy and value informed consent. The report is published to notify the public, policymakers, and stakeholders about the resilient efforts of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and to unite and defend their rights through peaceful sit-ins. ACHR urges transparency, accountability, and action regarding the current situation. Moreover, ACHR has established mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the situation by following up with the relevant parties to note progress and identify the areas that require improvement.

## ● BACKGROUND



**Living conditions for Syrians in Lebanon are extremely challenging as they continue to be treated as second-class citizens.**

### ● 2014

The Lebanese Council of Ministers announced the first comprehensive policy for the Syrian refugee crisis.

### ● 2015

The General Directorate of General Security revised the refugee entry and residency policy.

### ● 2019

The Supreme Defence Council : Refugees who entered the country irregularly would be deported.

OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) defines the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association (FoPA) as the right that individuals hold to organize strikes, meetings, sit-ins, protests, and events.<sup>3</sup> This right is protected under Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. FoPA functions as a tool that allows individuals to exercise their rights while guaranteeing the protection of those rights under international law. It serves as a tool that enables individuals to peacefully unite and express their ignored grievances. The report outlines how this right was not upheld and details the risks and dangerous consequences for the participants.

Living conditions for Syrians in Lebanon are extremely challenging as they continue to be treated as second-class citizens. **Most refugees are targeted, but those who come from low economic classes or lack legal documentation are especially vulnerable and face challenges obtaining and maintaining legal status.**<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese Council of Ministers announced the first comprehensive policy for the Syrian refugee crisis in 2014. **One of its clear agendas was to decrease the number of Syrians in Lebanon by imposing harsh restrictions that coerce them to return to Syria.**<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, the General Directorate of General Security revised the refugee entry and residency policy in line with the 2014 strategy. However, this strategy did not reduce the number of refugees and instead led to an unreasonable set of complex and expensive restrictions that led to additional burdens of renewal and in other cases the loss of their legal status as refugees. In adopting these cruel and illegal policies, the GoL aimed to exert pressure on refugees to coerce them into leaving Lebanon “voluntarily” to circumvent their obligation under the principle of non-refoulement.

<sup>3</sup>The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Freedom of Assembly and Association”, April 15, 2024, [www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-assembly-and-association](http://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-assembly-and-association).

<sup>4</sup>Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD), “Under The Microscope of Humanity: The Challenges of the Syrians in Lebanon, Cyprus, and Europe, and a Call for Justice and Humanity”, May 2, 2024, <https://syacd.org/under-the-microscope-of-humanity-the-challenges-of-the-syrians-in-lebanon-cyprus-and-europe-and-a-call-for-justice-and-humanity/>.

<sup>5</sup>Janmyr, Maja, “Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35, 2016, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48503296>.



**Lebanese politicians and political parties, who rarely agree, reached a consensus to actively use refugees as scapegoats and blame them for the country's economic burdens.**

As stated, these policies often did not decrease the overall number of refugees but impacted their status. In 2015, for instance, the number of refugees without legal status was 9 percent and the following year in 2016, that number increased to 80 percent.<sup>6</sup> Although the policies enacted in 2015 were officially invalidated by the State Council, they continued to be enforced on an informal basis leaving refugees with no choice but to enter and remain in Lebanon irregularly.<sup>7</sup> In April 2019, the Supreme Defence Council<sup>8</sup> stated that refugees who entered the country irregularly would be deported.

This decision marked a turning point for refugees, making Lebanon – once a haven for those who fled violence and persecution – a living hell for refugees.

**These policies left refugees with two choices:**



**Return to Syria and face unsafe living conditions**



**Remain in Lebanon and face the risk of forced deportation**

These illegal policies revealed that the GoL had no, and still does not, have true intentions of regulating refugee affairs from a humanitarian and legal standpoint. Instead, the Syrian refugee issue is politicized and used by Lebanon as leverage to receive aid packages from international institutions in exchange for curbing Syrian refugees' migration to Europe. For instance, a representative of Lebanon's Progress Party claimed that the EU's \$1.07 billion aid for Lebanon is<sup>9</sup> bribe the government at the expense of Lebanon's refugee population.<sup>10</sup>

Lebanese politicians and political parties, who rarely agree, reached a consensus to actively use refugees as scapegoats and blame them for the country's economic burdens.<sup>11</sup> These anti-refugee attitudes have trickled down to the community-level and significantly influenced the spread of violence and negative perceptions towards refugees that have on many occasions resulted in aggression towards them. These measures have normalized discriminatory policies and further fosters mistrust, fear, and hateful practices among the Lebanese and contributes to a weakening of the rule of law in Lebanon with little to no accountability.

<sup>6</sup>Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum, "The Impact of Residency Regulations on the Situation for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum, n.d.), [http://lhif.org/files/5/Residency\\_Regulations%20Final%20%5Bupdated%5D.pdf](http://lhif.org/files/5/Residency_Regulations%20Final%20%5Bupdated%5D.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>ACHR, "In Response the General Security Statement Regarding the Call for Refugees to Renew Their Residency in Lebanon - ACHR," "لوموسو" - ACHR - Together for Rights (blog), June 30, 2020, <https://www.achr-rights.org/en/2020/03/12/10569/>.

<sup>8</sup>ACHR, "In Response the General Security Statement Regarding the Call for Refugees to Renew Their Residency in Lebanon - ACHR"

<sup>9</sup>Najia Housari, "\$1.07bn EU 'Bribe' Over Syrian Refugees Stirs Anger In Lebanon," Arab News, May 4, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2504236/middle-east>.

<sup>11</sup>Amnesty International, "Human Rights in Lebanon," Accessed May 13, 2024, [www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/lebanon/report-lebanon/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/lebanon/report-lebanon/)





of refugees lacking legal status



**Syrian refugees living in Lebanon were compelled to organize and participate in numerous peaceful assemblies to draw attention to their treatment and demand their protection rights**

Today, refugees in Lebanon continue to live in legal limbo due to their lack of proper documentation and growing difficulties renewing their residency permits,<sup>12</sup> with 90% lacking legal status. **This leaves them vulnerable to security risks such as arbitrary harassment, exploitation, detention, and deportation and limits their already poor access to mobility, employment, healthcare, and education.**

The situation is further aggravated by the increased raids by Lebanese Armed Forces that result in the arrest and torture or deportation of Syrian refugees. These individuals face an alarming risk of having their human rights violated in Syria,<sup>13</sup> and Syria continues to rank as one of the highest State's recording violent deaths, despite the decrease in large-scale armed conflict.<sup>14</sup> Human rights violations under the current Syrian regime include arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, targeted attacks and disappearances, torture, and death.<sup>15</sup> While the situation in Lebanon presents serious dangers for refugees, the situation in Syria is far more perilous.

To highlight these risks and impossible choices, Syrian refugees living in Lebanon were compelled to organize and participate in numerous peaceful assemblies to draw attention to their treatment and demand their protection rights. The activists gathered outside the UNHCR's offices to express their fears of forced deportation, urge for better living conditions, and requests for resettlement. Not only did the UNHCR completely ignore their requests, but through cooperation with the local authorities; they remain responsible for multiple human rights violations including the suppression and violently dispersing the crowd on numerous occasions by summoning local security forces.

<sup>12</sup> Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR), "What Happens After The Deportation of Refugees From Lebanon?", January 29, 2024, <https://www.achrightrights.org/en/2024/01/29/13392/>.

<sup>13</sup> Refugee Protection Watch (RPW), "Halt Summary Deportations of Syrian Refugees", Accessed May 14, 2024, <https://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/halt-summary-deportations-of-syrian-refugees/>.

<sup>14</sup> The World Bank, "Syria Economic Monitor Winter 2022/2023", March 17, 2023, [www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/syria-economic-monitor-winter-2022-2023](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/syria-economic-monitor-winter-2022-2023).

<sup>15</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "SNHR's 13th Annual Report: Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2023", January 23, 2024, <https://snhr.org/blog/2024/01/23/snhrs-13th-annual-report-most-notable-human-rights-violations-in-syria-in-2023/>.

## ● WHY ARE REFUGEES DEMONSTRATING?



there are numerous challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon which prompted them to organize the peaceful sit-ins despite the risks it carried.

According to our interviewees, there are numerous challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon which prompted them to organize the peaceful sit-ins despite the risks it carried.

**Firstly**, protection against discrimination, violence, and harassment. In addition to systematic discrimination from authorities, they are subjected to ill-treatment and exploitation by some Lebanese citizens with the absence of the rule of law.<sup>16</sup>

**Secondly**, the right to basic services and consistent aid programs such as healthcare and education. The prevalence of untreated health issues is high among the refugee population because many medical conditions are not covered and poor access to medical services, made worse by their lack of financial means.

**Thirdly**, resettlement opportunities and the demand for UNHCR to expediate resettlement cases. Given their dire circumstances in Lebanon, relocating to a third country remains the only option for Syrian refugees.

**Fourthly**, to gain legal status in Lebanon. It has become increasingly difficult for refugees to obtain residency permits and even renew their existing ones.<sup>17</sup> The rate of legal residency permits among Syrians has reached its lowest level in years putting them in a very vulnerable position with a higher risk of deportation especially following the recent crackdown on refugees by the Lebanese Armed authorities.

**Fifthly**, UNHCR's systematic unresponsiveness<sup>18</sup> and the lack of an efficient channel for refugees to convey their issues and complaints. 12 out of 16 activists ACHR spoke with highlighted the severity of the agency's unresponsive communication systems. They peacefully assembled to make their issues heard and demanded solutions. Had the agency put in place an adequate system to promptly receive and address the challenges expressed by refugees, the sit-ins would most likely not have occurred.

<sup>17</sup> William Christou, "Lebanese Government Puts New Restrictions on Syrian Refugees", The New Arab, May 3, 2023, [www.newarab.com/news/lebanese-government-puts-new-restrictions-syrian-refugees](http://www.newarab.com/news/lebanese-government-puts-new-restrictions-syrian-refugees).

<sup>18</sup> Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) and Stand with Syria Japan (SSJ), "The Lebanese Army Should Immediately Stop Arbitrary Arrests and Forced Deportations of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", January 19, 2024, <https://www.achr-rights.org/en/2023/07/06/13199/>.





## Discrimination and Hostility



**Syrian activists protested discriminative policies, practices, and hostile treatment due to their nationality as Syrians and due to their refugee status**

In examining the data extracted from interviewees, a consistent pattern of discrimination towards Syrians in Lebanon was a dominant theme. Instances of discrimination include both hostile treatment from citizens and discriminatory policies imposed by Lebanon's municipalities. Syrian activists protested discriminative policies, practices, and hostile treatment due to their nationality as Syrians and due to their refugee status. Numerous testimonies reported racism or ill-treatment by UNHCR employees as well in the context of the sit-in as well as in the daily interaction with the agency. Refugee children are not unique to discriminatory and violent practices either. **In 2022, more than half of Syrian refugee children experienced some form of violence, such as physical and psychological aggression.**<sup>19</sup> A reoccurring theme of mistreatment at school, either by Lebanese pupils or school authorities, was highlighted by many activists who are also parents.



**Mr. Saleem**

One of the activists who assembled shared his experience of discrimination. Mr. Saleem is a Human Rights Defender who is married with children. He and his family were attacked in their home after reporting to the UNHCR that a local community leader was selling humanitarian aid. One of the agency's employees deliberately leaked the identity of the Syrian whistleblower to the reported local, who subsequently dispatched armed militants to the whistleblower's residence. The militants beat him and his wife in front of his kids. After reporting this to the Lebanese General Security, he was then arrested, detained, and forced to withdraw his complaint in fear of violent reprisals directed at his wife and children. Many refugees who are targets of hate crimes and violence are unable to report such incidents as they cannot successfully file complaints against citizens due to the restrictions imposed on them.

<sup>19</sup>The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", May 23, 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/100844>.

The UNHCR does not support them and does not provide such legal assistance options. During detention, a Lebanese guard and his attacker, who was being investigated, both mocked the activists and pointed out the power imbalance between them by saying:



*(Mr. Saleem, 13 March, 2024)*

**“You are Syrian, and you expect to punish him! (a Lebanese)” ... “You see what happens when a refugee tries to sue a citizen?”**



**Mr. Ahmed**

Another activist, Mr. Ahmed, a father in his mid-50s, spoke with us and explained his circumstances in Lebanon. Numerous family members of his require medical treatment but are unable to afford it. His children are unable to complete their education and have resorted to working to afford food. He went through complications when attempting to renew his residency permit and eventually managed to have a citizen sponsor him in exchange for \$200. But that individual exploited him and his children by forcing them to work for him. He explains that he attempted to contact the agency to seek assistance but was unable to communicate with them due to their prolonged lack of response. This led Mr. Ahmed to join the sit-ins in the hopes of making his voice heard. Once there, he was discriminated against by the agency's security personnel who humiliated and physically assaulted him.



*(Mr. Ahmed, 21 March, 2024)*

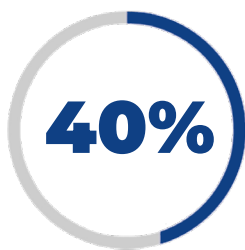
**“My family and I left Syria following the revolts in fear of my children's safety... We came to Lebanon in search of protection but did not find it.”**



## Health and Economic Inequalities



**Lebanon's health sector is fragile and unable to meet the demands of the existing refugee population, leaving many with little to no access to healthcare.**



**Percentage payable by patients of the total bill**

Adequate access to medical facilities and care was one of the primary rights the activists united to demand. Every single activist ACHR spoke with reported health issues – either their own, their spouse's, or their children's. Lebanon's health sector is fragile and unable to meet the demands of the existing refugee population, leaving many with little to no access to healthcare. When they somehow can afford it, either through debt or assistance from relatives, they risk facing administrative barriers and the threat of deportation.<sup>20</sup> Healthcare in Lebanon is predominantly private, requiring the payments of excessive costs for Lebanese, but especially for refugees.<sup>21</sup> The lack of adequate and accessible health services compounds the existing medical issues they have. Despite UNHCR providing some access to primary healthcare, chronic diseases and illnesses needing extensive and long-term support are usually not covered.

**Over the last six months, the UNHCR has announced numerous reductions in health care coverage for refugees due to limited funding, and priority will only be given to life-threatening conditions.** The latest update on care coverage, announced on 3 May 2024 will come into effect on 1 June 2024.<sup>22</sup> It includes an increase of the percentage payable by patients of the total bill to 40% in addition to an admission fee of USD 100. It also will only cover deliveries, neonatal, and pediatric care, and cases that pose an immediate threat to limbs or life. All other patients seeking treatment for chronic illnesses or elective treatment will no longer be supported. Additionally, support for high-cost medical care will be reduced. Lacking other options and unable to relocate on their own, refugees with medical conditions hope that UNHCR will prioritize their cases and nominate them for potential resettlement opportunities. With no clear criteria for resettlement, some interviewees assumed that this was the only way to get their voices heard by the agency.

<sup>20</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "Syrians in Lebanon Avoid Healthcare in Fear of Deportations", May 17, 2023, [www.msf.org/syrians-lebanon-avoid-healthcare-fear-deportations](https://www.msf.org/syrians-lebanon-avoid-healthcare-fear-deportations).

<sup>21</sup> Ibrahim et al., "Syrian Refugees Seeking Hospital Care in Beirut: A Cross-Sectional Study of Reasons for Hospital Admissions", Cureus, July 21, 2023, [www.cureus.com/articles/164406-syrian-refugees-seeking-hospital-care-in-beirut-a-cross-sectional-study-of-reasons-for-hospital-admissions#](https://www.cureus.com/articles/164406-syrian-refugees-seeking-hospital-care-in-beirut-a-cross-sectional-study-of-reasons-for-hospital-admissions#/).

<sup>22</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Changes to Healthcare Coverage for Persons Known to UNHCR Beginning 1 June 2024", May 3, 2024, <https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/2024/05/03/changes-to-healthcare-coverage-for-persons-known-to-unhcr-beginning-1-june-2024/>.



**Most Syrian refugees are in dire need of medical care and lack adequate access to food, which exacerbates their health issues.**



**Mr. Omar**

Mr. Ahmed told ACHR that his newborn was born with many complications and required extensive medical care and surgery. However, due to his limited capabilities, he was not able to provide his child with the medical attention he required. He tried to contact the UNHCR for support, but his efforts were unsuccessful. His child's deteriorating health was one of the reasons that prompted him to join the sit-ins.



*(Mr. Ahmed, 21 March 2024)*

**“My child was born with medical complications. I wish he were not born in Lebanon so he would not have to suffer.”**

Most Syrian refugees are in dire need of medical care and lack adequate access to food, which exacerbates their health issues. This issue is particularly severe among young children and the elderly, who make up a part of the refugee population that is most vulnerable. The lack of sanitation in their environments and acute food insecurity expose them to immune diseases and malnutrition. An elderly refugee in a terrible health condition shared his harrowing experience with us. Mr. Omar is a Syrian man in his 80s who lost his entire family to the conflict before fleeing to Lebanon in search of safety. Alone, sick, and hungry, he pleaded to UNHCR for assistance and was met with nothing but empty promises. Mr. Omar is unable to walk without his cane and is in a fragile medical state but despite his condition, he continuously visited the UNHCR's office in Beirut to request assistance. The agency promised him aid but did not provide aid, leaving him with persistent hunger, a worsening health condition, and homeless. Mr. Omar's story is one of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who are left to fend for themselves.



**Mr. Ali**



**One of the barriers refugees face in accessing healthcare, physical or mental, is the lack of financial means to do so.**

Another noteworthy health concern is the prevalence of mental health issues among Syrians, as reported by numerous activists. One of the barriers refugees face in accessing healthcare, physical or mental, is the lack of financial means to do so. Due to poor employment opportunities and the widespread illegal status, many Syrians are forced to rely on financial assistance from the agency, which in most cases, is extremely inconsistent. Mr. Ali is a 40-year-old father of 8 who shared his experience with us. He suffered an injury at work that left him unable to use his hand, impacting his employment opportunities significantly. After countless attempts to contact the UNHCR for aid and after being cut off from food assistance programs, he decided to join the demonstrations. He struggles to feed his large family and is forced to rummage through garbage in the search for food.



*(Mr. Ali, 14 April 2024)*

**“We reached a point where we had to start eating from trash bins... I roam around the streets in search of bread for my children.”**

## ● EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE UNHCR'S COMPLAINT RESOLUTION MECHANISM



**The UNHCR must monitor their security and immediately intervene should refugees' rights be violated**

According to the testimonies, **the UNHCR's protection of Syrian activists and the agency's complaint mechanisms are both questionable.** Regrettably, the agency has repeatedly failed to uphold the fundamental principles of refugee protection in various instances. In many instances during the peaceful sit-ins outside the agency's office, the security personnel behaved incredibly hostile to the activists and even physically assaulted some of them. **One interviewee assured us that most UNHCR officers treated them with respect and invited some of them for a friendly discussion on more than one occasion.** However, their demands were not met and the security personnel who attacked them on other occasions remained stationed at the office. Further, the contract of the officer who breached confidentiality and disclosed the identity of Mr. Saleem, the Syrian whistleblower, was not terminated. Regardless of the way the UNHCR's staff and security personnel are contracted, the agency bears the responsibility for any mistreatment and abuse activists were subjected to.

The UNHCR must monitor their security and immediately intervene should refugees' rights be violated. The agency must uphold its mandate to protect all refugees from any mistreatment and excessive use of force, especially during demonstrations. On various occasions, the security guards summoned the police and the Armed Forces advising them to arrest activists, and they did. In May 2023, Lebanon's Minister of Interior and Municipalities issued letters to the governorates and municipalities, announcing the launch of a national survey campaign to enumerate and register all Syrian refugees in the country's database.<sup>23</sup> The letter urged against any sort of transaction with refugees, such as renting properties, before verifying that they possess valid legal residency and are registered with the municipality. This move was criticized by many observers who criticized the paradox of tallying Syrian refugees when the country has not issued a national census in more than 90 years.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>The Lebanese Ministry Of Interior and Municipalities, "Regarding the Impact of the Situation of Displaced Syrians".

<sup>24</sup>U.S Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Lebanon", December 7, 2023.





**Sharing refugees' data poses a substantial threat to them due to the possibility of misuse by the Lebanese authorities.**



**Refugees are extremely concerned that leaking sensitive information shared during their asylum interviews with the UNHCR could increase the possibility of being forcibly deported to Syria.**

**In November of 2023, the UNHCR released an update following an agreement with the Government of Lebanon to share personal data of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.**<sup>25</sup> According to the statement, the agency agreed to share the data with the General Directorate of General Security and emphasized that it would not be forwarded to the Government of Syria. This agreement highlights the UNHCR's failure to protect refugees, including their personal data, and undermines any trust in the agency. **There are no guarantees that the Lebanese authorities will refrain from unethically using this data in their crackdown on refugees and Human rights defenders are concerned about the potential sharing of this information with the Syrian regime.**<sup>26</sup> Sharing refugees' data poses a substantial threat to them due to the possibility of misuse by the Lebanese authorities. Certain individuals may be increasingly under surveillance for their political stances, prior activities in Syria, or even their participation in peaceful demonstrations. Refugees are extremely concerned that leaking sensitive information shared during their asylum interviews with the UNHCR could increase the possibility of being forcibly deported to Syria.

Interviewees believe that such a breach of confidentiality could endanger refugees, particularly Syrian military defectors, human rights defenders, and those openly opposing the Assad regime and its allies. **One of the most repeated and common demands by the activists was for an effective and responsive complaint system.** All testimonies by the activists point to a severely ineffective refugee support and complaint channel. With no support or adequate and formal means of communication with the agency, grievances were ignored by UNHCR on multiple occasions. The interviewees cite prolonged delays in response, no response at all, or dismissiveness such as "there is nothing we can do for you." Numerous activists we spoke with claimed that the UNHCR hotline is largely unresponsive, resulting in them losing money and faith in the only communication channel between them and the agency mandated with addressing their concerns.

<sup>25</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Lebanon, "Update on Data Sharing", November 24, 2023, <https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/2023/11/24/update-on-data-sharing/>.

<sup>26</sup> Enab Baladi, "Concerns Over Leakage of Syrian Refugees' Data in Lebanon After Being Delivered by United Nations", December 22, 2023, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/12/concerns-over-leakage-of-syrian-refugees-data-in-lebanon-after-being-delivered-by-united-nations/>.



**The lack of support and empathy from the agency compounds the refugees' sense of powerlessness and discourages them from reaching out to the agency for future issues and for support.**



**Mr. Yamen**

If the agency had established functional mechanisms to allow refugees to express their concerns and complaints, they would not have resorted to peacefully assembling outside the offices. Even if their issues were not entirely resolved, they would have at least been acknowledged publicly by the agency. The lack of support and empathy from the agency compounds the refugees' sense of powerlessness and discourages them from reaching out to the agency for future issues and for support. Mr. Yaman, an activist in his mid-30s, said that this deceased father tried to seek assistance at a time when the family's conditions were severe. After two failed attempts encountering unresponsiveness, he no longer tried voicing his complaints. Shortly after, his father took his own life in self-immolation after prolonged despair and helplessness. The UNHCR contacted the deceased's family a few days later and offered their condolences and asked what the family's requests were. The family was granted food assistance for only 6 months and was subsequently cut off. Mr. Yaman then contacted the agency and introduced himself as the son of the man who passed away by self-immolation. An employee of the agency then told him:



*(Mr. Yaman, 15 April 2024)*

**“Do we have to worry about everyone who sets themselves on fire?”**

Mr. Yaman was shaken up - grieving his father's loss and the representative's lack of kindness and empathy caught him off guard. He told ACHR that after that incident, he no longer contacted the agency because of how poorly he was treated. Another activist went through a similar experience of self-immolation. Financial struggles may lead to severe mental health issues, especially when that individual is a parent or a caregiver.



**Mrs. Fatima**

Mrs. Fatima is a Syrian mother of young children who struggled to make ends meet and provide for her family. She joined the demonstrations to request an update on the progress of her resettlement case as she no longer deemed the conditions in Lebanon to be safe for her family. She was overwhelmed, worried, and in a desperate situation. When she was informed that her resettlement case was frozen, she reached her breaking point and self-immolated outside the UNHCR office.

She was rushed to the hospital for her injuries and is in stable condition but in an awful mental state and refuses to meet anyone. Her brother, Mr. Kamal, told us:



**Mr. Kamal**



*(Mr. Kamal, 17 December 2023)*

**“What she did was a reaction to her precarious financial situation... Syrian refugees are increasingly seeking resettlement due to the dire conditions refugees face in Lebanon. Now she is outcasted by the community because attempting to take one’s life is a taboo, and here we are, still waiting for our resettlement file to progress”**



**Mrs. Ola**



**One day during sit-ins, intense verbal altercations occurred between activists and UNHCR's security personnel leading to the summoning of law enforcement.**

Mrs. Ola, a mother of 4 in her 30s, is another activist we spoke with who echoed similar sentiments. Her family was denied aid, despite her disability, her children's young age, and her husband's low wage – leaving the family food insecure. After two years of being cut off from aid programs, she attempted to contact the agency but was not successful. After feeling neglected, she and her family decided to join the peaceful demonstrations. One day during sit-ins, intense verbal altercations occurred between activists and UNHCR's security personnel leading to the summoning of law enforcement. Along with her husband, she was arrested and only released upon agreeing to sign a pledge to never demonstrate again outside the UNHCR's offices. As soon as they were released, the couple immediately returned to the demonstration.



*(Mrs. Ola, 25 March, 2024)*

**“My family and I started participating in the sit-ins regularly despite fearing the Lebanese Armed Forces and the agency's security personnel.”**

## ● REPRISALS AND CONSEQUENCES

There are psychological, legal, and security ramifications activists risk when deciding to participate in sit-ins. **Many experienced chronic stresses and obtained physical injuries** from the violent retaliation by the UNHCR's security guards, the Lebanese Armed Forces, or the Lebanese General Security. **They also faced security threats, such as intimidation, arrest, detention, and deportation to Syria.** These implications were risks they took that compounded their already dire conditions.

## ● LEGAL ANALYSIS



**The Lebanese government and the UNHCR have failed to uphold their legal obligations enshrined in international laws that protects the rights of refugees including the right to freedom of assembly.**

International law was created to uphold and protect human rights globally and to hold perpetrators of violations accountable - whether they be states, organizations, or individuals. By hindering and violating those freedoms, both the Lebanese government and the UNHCR have failed to uphold their legal obligations enshrined in international laws that protects the rights of refugees including the right to freedom of assembly.

Lebanon is a signatory of numerous international treaties that protect the right to freedom of assembly including **the Universal Declaration of Human rights (1948)**, Article 20 (1),<sup>27</sup> **The International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** in Articles 21 and 22,<sup>28</sup> and **the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** in Article 5.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that the Lebanese Constitution (1926) explicitly states that Lebanon is a "founding and active member of the United Nations Organization and abides by its covenants and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Government shall embody these principles in all fields and areas without exception."<sup>30</sup> As such, the UDHR and the rights it outlines are constitutionally protected.

**While all states, including Lebanon, are responsible for protecting, promoting, and implementing these freedoms, international law is often constrained by its dependence on States for enforcement**, despite these states often being the primary violators of these freedoms. Additionally, the non-binding nature of General Assembly (GA) resolutions – of which these international freedoms are stipulated – lead to numerous challenges including a lack of obligation and compliance by states. That said, customary international law which recognizes the right to freedom of assembly as a fundamental human right and does not derive from written treaties or conventions, but from state practice, is understood to be legally obligatory (opinio juris).

<sup>27</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations General Assembly, Paris, 1948: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

<sup>28</sup> Of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ccpr.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility on Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-and-responsibility-individuals-groups-and-organs-of-society-to-promote-and-protect-universally-recognized-human-rights-and-fundamental-freedoms>

<sup>30</sup> The Lebanese Constitution (1926): <https://www.lp.gov.lb/backoffice/uploads/files/Lebanese%20%20Constitution-%20En.pdf>



**The Convention also outlines several rights that should be provided by a host state to refugees including: the right to work, housing, education, public relief and assistance, freedom of religion, access the courts, freedom of movement within the territory and the right to be issued identity and travel documents.**

While The Refugee Convention does not explicitly outline the right to peaceful assembly for refugees, The ICCPR General comment No. 37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21) outlines state obligations to provide conditions of peaceful assembly including that “citizens and non-citizens alike” may exercise this right including “foreign nationals, migrants (documented or undocumented), asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons”.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the Convention also outlines several rights that should be provided by a host state to refugees including: the right to work, housing, education, public relief and assistance, freedom of religion, access the courts, freedom of movement within the territory and the right to be issued identity and travel documents.<sup>32</sup> In this way, States have both negative and positive duties to guarantee the right of peaceful assembly including not only refraining from imposing restrictive measures (e.g. unwarranted interference or disrupt or prevent peaceful assemblies without compelling justification, nor to sanction participants or organizers without legitimate cause) but equally positive duties such as to facilitate peaceful assemblies and to enable a peaceful environment **“without discrimination”** and to “protect participants from all forms of discriminatory abuse and attacks”.

The Convention and the Protocol have not been ratified by Lebanon, which has generally delayed any discussion about accession and instead has opted to engage in bilateral agreements with UNHCR that have worked to undermine their international commitments. Most noteworthy is the 2003 MOU between UNHCR and Lebanon’s Security Office which states that refugees and asylum-seekers will be tolerated, but only for a limited period, pending resettlement or voluntary repatriation. The agreement has been criticized for “adopting a Lebanese state perspective of refugees as security threats” and fails to mention key principles of protection including non-refoulement.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> OCHR, General Comments and Recommendations on the right to peaceful Assembly, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-37-article-21-right-peaceful>

<sup>32</sup> Geneva Convention (1951), UNHCR: [https://www.unhcr.org/hu/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2016/12/QA\\_1951-Convention.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/hu/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2016/12/QA_1951-Convention.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Faculty of law Blogs, University of Oxford, “Give Refugees Access to The Agreements That Govern Them”, April 2023: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2023/04/give-refugees-access-agreements-govern-them#:~:text=UNHCR's%202003%20agreement%20with%20Lebanon's,for%20adopting%20a%20Lebanese%20state>





**The Lebanese State's violation of the right for Syrian refugees to peacefully protest is therefore also intrinsically linked to their discriminatory treatment writ large in the country.**

As such and given the above, **Syrian refugees living in Lebanon have numerous rights protected by and enshrined in international law including the right to peaceful assembly.** However, the de facto reality of the situation is that these rights were jeopardized and heavily curtailed by the actions of Lebanese authorities directly through unlawful measures as well as through the infringement of other basic rights and freedoms. Given that the right to peaceful assembly is highly dependent and linked to the realization of other broader rights, Syrian refugees who have other personal freedoms violated may also be directly and/or indirectly limited in exercising the right to peaceful protest. Many examples of the infringement and violation of these rights are outlined in this report including hostile treatment and discriminatory policies following participation in peaceful assembly. In this context, crackdowns on Syrian refugees participating and articulating grievances in peaceful protests and sit-ins should be assessed within a broader environment of growing racism within Lebanon as well as an attempt by the Lebanese state and security forces to create a legal environment that undermines and even contradicts their duties under international law. This not only actively creates fear and uncertainty for Syrians but also strategically inhibits the very few legally protected avenues for Syrian refugees to rightly express grievances through peaceful protest. The Lebanese State's violation of the right for Syrian refugees to peacefully protest is therefore also intrinsically linked to their discriminatory treatment writ large in the country. As such, the fear of other violations of freedoms directed at Syrian refugees creates a deterrence effect on their ability to peacefully assemble.

In the case outlined in this report in which Syrian refugee protestors were physically assaulted, harassed and arrested outside the UNHCR office, both Lebanese and UNHCR authorities failed to protect protestors in their right to peacefully assemble. For the Lebanese state, this is a failure of their obligations to uphold the right to freedom of assembly outlined in international law as well as additional failures in the subsequent violations committed including unlawful tactics of harassment, coercion, and intimidation to deter protestors.



**Syrian refugee protestors were physically assaulted, harassed and arrested outside the UNHCR office, both Lebanese and UNHCR authorities failed to protect protestors in their right to peacefully assemble.**

These rights are stipulated in international law but are also upheld in multiple examples of case law within the context of regional human rights courts including the European Court of human rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. **While Lebanon is not party to these regional courts and their jurisdictions**, such cases set important precedents on issues such as the violation of the privacy of protesters with rulings on how surveillance and the use protestors' data is collected and shared should be aligned with the rights to privacy and freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. For instance, the decisions in the cases of 'R v. the Chief Constable of South Wales Police (2020)' and 'Banners Placed on Roadside in the City of Lucknow v. State of Uttar Pradesh' by courts underlined that measures taken by State authorities to collect information on protestors should meet requirements of 'legality', 'necessity' and 'proportionality' and never be aimed at intimidating participants or would-be participants in protests.<sup>34</sup> While not directly applicable to the State of Lebanon, the rulings outline how the principle of privacy is essential in the context of peaceful assembly. Given that the report outlines at least one case in which State authorities were able to obtain private personal information from UNCHR and use this information to harass and intimidate a Syrian refugee who then faced reprisals as a result, the right to privacy of personal information remains a key and linked personal freedom that should remain protected in the context of peaceful assembly. The breach of this rights is deemed as a serious offence by these courts and there are also cases in which individuals who have committed human rights abuses against protestors have been internationally sanctioned, which further underlines the significance of these violations.<sup>35</sup>

In the case outlined in this report in which Syrian refugee protestors were physically assaulted, harassed and arrested outside the UNHCR office, both Lebanese and UNHCR authorities failed to protect protestors in their right to peacefully assemble. For the Lebanese state, this is a failure of their obligations to uphold the right to freedom of assembly outlined in international law as well as additional failures in the subsequent violations committed including unlawful tactics of harassment, coercion, and intimidation to deter protestors.

<sup>34</sup>Global Freedom of Expression Columbia University, Collection of Case Law on Peaceful Protest: <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Case-law-on-peaceful-protests.pdf>

<sup>35</sup>See US treasury sanctions against Iranian officials linked to suppression of protestors. See: <https://www.state.gov/iran-sanctions/>



## UN offices in Lebanon hire private security companies but are also assigned State police

Further, given that the incident of the arrest and physical assault of Syrian protestors occurred outside the UNHCR office, and that UNHCR security likely were involved in the violations of harassment, physical assault and the arrest of one protestor, UNHCR bears direct and indirect responsibility for these violations. UN offices in Lebanon hire private security companies but are also assigned State police. **While UN agencies and UN staff are protected by diplomatic immunity as outlined by several conventions<sup>36</sup> private security companies have on many occasions been the subject of human rights violations.** The 2008 Montreux Document that sets out the governing practices and legal obligations incumbent on private companies to abide by international law also outlines responsibilities of States and International Organizations alike to ensure compliance. While Lebanon is not a signatory of the document, the UN and other international organizations have recognized the non-binding document as a crucial step in ensuring compliance for security and private companies.<sup>37</sup>

As such, private companies including private security companies can indeed be liable for their conduct if States are willing and able to ensure compliance in line with the Montreux Document. Further, the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) outlines the contractual requirements necessary for the UN to hire third party companies to provide security. UNDSS notes that companies are required to be signatories of the 'International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers'<sup>38</sup> and that the objective in hiring these companies' "is to provide a visible deterrent to potential attackers and an armed response to repel any attack in manner consistent with the United Nations "Use of Force Policy", the respective host country legislation and international law".<sup>39</sup> As such, the use of force displayed by the security company contracted by UNHCR in physically assaulting and arresting a Syrian refugee peacefully protesting outside the UNHCR premise is in breach of the 'International Code of Conduct' as the force used was not "strictly necessary" or "proportionate to the threat" and the UN's 'Use of Force Policy' as none of the essential criteria required to justify non-deadly use of force was met.

<sup>36</sup> Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, New York, 13 February 1946 and 'Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies, New York, 21 November 1947. <https://www.un.org/en/ethics/assets/pdfs/Convention%20of%20Privileges-Immunities%20of%20the%20UN.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies (2008): <https://www.montreuxdocument.org/about/montreux-document.html>

<sup>38</sup> International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers', 10 December 2021: [https://icoca.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/INTERNATIONAL-CODE-OF-CONDUCT\\_Amended\\_2021.pdf](https://icoca.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/INTERNATIONAL-CODE-OF-CONDUCT_Amended_2021.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> UN SMS, Security Policy Manual, Chapter IV, Security Management, Section H, 'Use of Force' (2017): [https://policy.un.org/sites/policy.un.org/files/files/documents/2020/Oct/spm\\_-\\_chapter\\_iv\\_-\\_section\\_h\\_-\\_use\\_of\\_force\\_1.pdf](https://policy.un.org/sites/policy.un.org/files/files/documents/2020/Oct/spm_-_chapter_iv_-_section_h_-_use_of_force_1.pdf)



## UN offices in Lebanon hire private security companies but are also assigned State police

UNHCR has an ethical duty of care to ensure that all categories of staff do not engage in behavior that directly undermines their protection mandate. **For instance, staff should be trained in protection norms, understand the agency’s code of conduct, and enact standard operating procedures to ensure that third party staff act in accordance with standards set by the agency.** This is outlined by UNHCR in their code of conduct which stipulates that the code applies not only to directly contracted UN staff but “other people working for - or otherwise associated with – UNHCR” with the obligation on UNHCR to ensure that they “better understand the obligations placed upon their conduct by the terms of their association with UNHCR”.<sup>40</sup>

The code of conduct also explicitly refers to companies “which, through their employees, work for UNHCR” as being required to “make the principles contained in the Code known to those persons in an appropriate manner”.<sup>41</sup> As such, UNHCR bears full responsibility for ensuring that contracted staff of third parties abide by the norms set out in their own code of conduct as well as the conduct outlined in other UN documents outlined about as per their own requirements hiring third party security companies.

Further, **when violations of this nature do occur, UNHCR should investigate those responsible and issue punitive measures when and if necessary to deter future violations of this nature including hiring a different third-party contractor to offer security services.** It should be noted that there remain examples in which UN agencies have ended contracts with third party security companies who have been deemed to be complicit in human rights abuses.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, as the UN agency mandated to protect refugees, UNHCR bears responsibility to openly report on such incidents, offer support both legal and otherwise to protestors arrested by security forces and transparently communicate the steps they have taken to advise State authorities on their obligations under international law. UNHCR’s mandate is a key instrument of legal protection to refugees including their right to peacefully protest without risk of detention or retributive attacks. This incident and the involvement of security personnel undermines UNHCR’s mandate and contributes to further distrust between Syrian refugees and the UN agency who is tasked with protecting them.

<sup>40</sup> UNHCR Code of Conduct, <https://www.acnur.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5b1969484.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> In Jordan, five UN agencies have not renewed contracts with G4S see: <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/un-women-becomes-5th-un-agency-jordan-drop-contracts-g4s>

## ● RECOMMENDATIONS



### To the UNHCR:

- Protect and promote refugees' rights and freedoms to organize and join peaceful assemblies. Ensure their utmost safety while practicing that freedom and hold any perpetrators of violations against that right accountable.
- Implement the necessary measures to enhance its complaint channels to ensure that the violations and challenges refugees report are thoroughly recorded, investigated, responded to, and solved.
- Develop responsive and constructive protection responses or programs that hold the perpetrators of violations accountable.
- Hold UNHCR's employees accountable for any breaches of the confidentiality guidelines and enforce consequences accordingly.
- Hold third party contracted companies, such as security companies and personnel, accountable to the agency's code of conduct and ethical standards.
- Monitor the resettlement program, examine pending cases, and grant priority to refugees who were or are at imminent risk of torture and detention, both in Syria and Lebanon.
- Grant refugees the opportunity to appeal their resettlement cases and provide transparent and prompt feedback on their processes by providing expected dates to maintain fairness and transparency.
- Establish toll-free numbers to ensure that refugees are not subject to any charges.



## To the Government of Lebanon:

- The government must cease its discriminatory policies and practices against refugees and develop robust measures that address the violations to ensure the justice and protection of refugee populations in Lebanon. Perpetrators of such abuses must be held accountable for adhering to international standards of human rights and ensuring a more equitable society.
- The government must abide by its state obligations under international law to ensure all peoples, including Syrian refugees, the right to peaceful assembly and to abide by the positive duties that provide a conducive environment for those rights and freedoms to be realized.



## To the International Community:

- Conditional funding for the Lebanese government is crucial and should be made contingent on protecting refugees by exerting the necessary pressure, governance is more effective, and humanitarian action is guaranteed.
- Call for an internal review on UNHCR's activities in Lebanon to ensure that UNHCR is abiding by its protection mandate and is not inadvertently supporting the violations being committed by the Lebanese State.
- Continue to advocate for Lebanon to uphold its commitments under international law and to sign and ratify agreements such as the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention.



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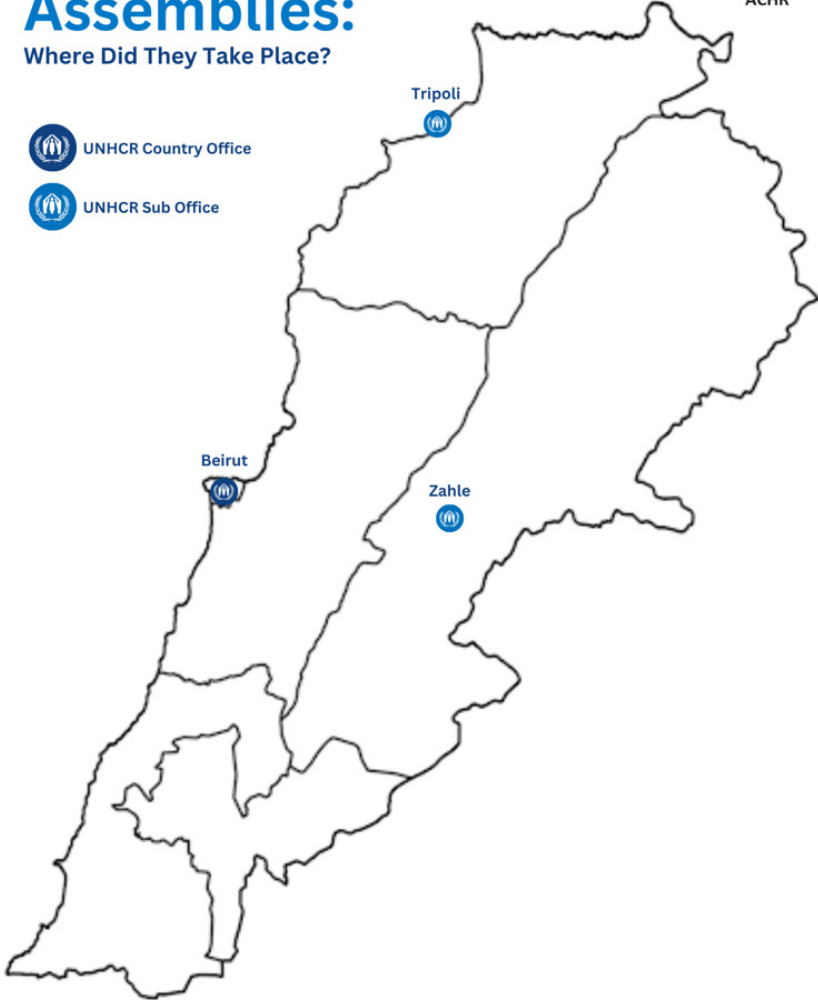
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# APPENDICES

## Peaceful Assemblies: Where Did They Take Place?



-  UNHCR Country Office
-  UNHCR Sub Office



**Appendix A: A Map of Lebanon that Highlights the Locations of the Peaceful Assemblies**



**ACHR**

**ACCESS CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (ACHR)**  
**Centre d'accès pour les droits de l'homme**

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