

## The risk of return: As Israel bombs Lebanon, Syrian deportees face detention, conscription, or worse

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Syrian refugees deported from Lebanon say they suffered abuses by security forces on both sides of the border, including beatings by Lebanese authorities and forced conscription into the Syrian army. Some have died in detention or disappeared.

Their experiences raise concerns about the fate awaiting the 276,000 people who have fled Lebanon to Syria since the intensification of Israel's airstrikes on the country last month, 70% of whom are Syrians, according to UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency.

Israel's attacks have killed more than 2,300 people, according to Lebanon's health ministry, and displaced an estimated 1.2 million – most since late September.

Prior to the current escalation, Lebanon was hosting an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees, who now face an impossible decision: return to Syria and face potential arrest, conscription, and abuse; or remain in Lebanon and risk death or injury from Israeli bombardment while suffering the humanitarian fallout of the expanding war.

The risks of returning to Syria have been made clear in recent years, as Lebanese authorities ramped up removals of Syrian refugees. The military forced at least 13,700 people over the border into Syria in deportation or pushback operations in 2023, according to UNHCR.

The campaign marked “a dramatic increase compared to approximately 1,500 cases in 2022”, according to Lisa Abou Khaled, a Beirut-based spokesperson for the agency.

This year so far, the military has removed at least 4,800 Syrians in pushback operations, Abou Khaled said.

Lebanon's General Directorate of General Security, an intelligence agency responsible for monitoring foreign residents, deported an additional 1,300 Syrians in 2023 and 900 this year so far, according to UNHCR.

*“We never imagined that one day we would find ourselves in the same danger we fled from.”*

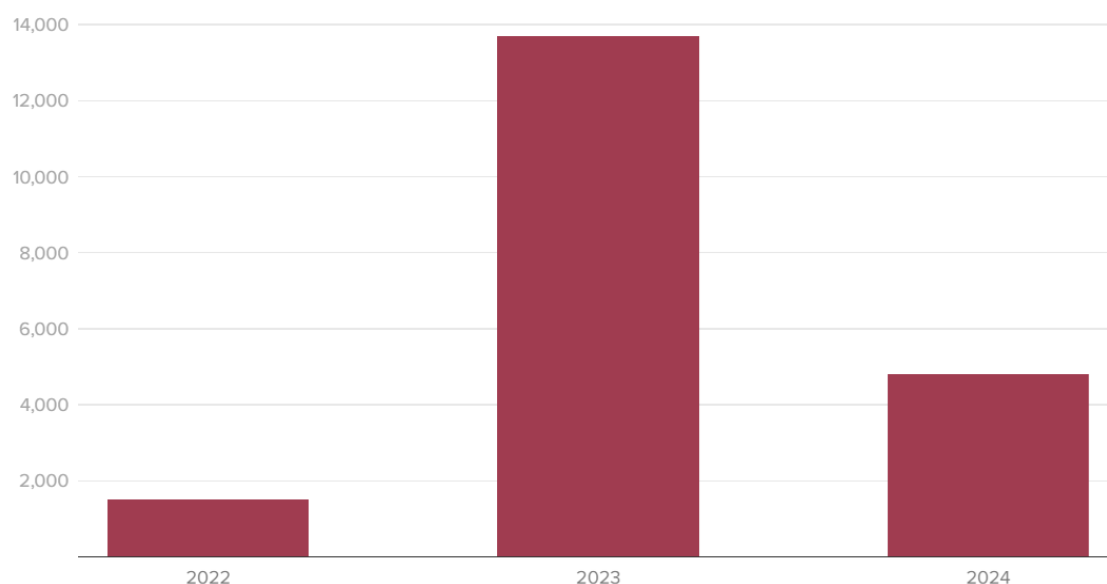
Out of 760 deportations [documented last year](#) by the Syrian human rights group Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR), around 120 people have not been heard from since.

Over the last three months, the Syrian Investigative Journalism Unit (SIRAJ) and The New Humanitarian secured rare interviews with recent deportees who remain trapped in Syria, as well as relatives of deportees who died or went missing after being handed over to Syrian authorities. They described sudden, violent raids by Lebanese police and intelligence officials, mass deportations by truck, long marches across the barren border zone between the two countries, and prolonged, arbitrary detention by Syrian authorities.

“We thought we would be living under better security conditions in Lebanon,” one forced recruit in the Syrian army told SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian in July, three months after being deported from Lebanon.

“We never imagined that one day we would find ourselves in the same danger we fled from,” he said on condition of anonymity.

### Deportations and pushbacks of Syrian refugees by the Lebanese military



Source: UNHCR

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Syrian authorities have arrested 23 refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria fleeing Israeli airstrikes since 23 September, according to Fadel Abdulghany, executive director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). Three have been released, while the rest were conscripted into the Syrian army, he said.

“This pattern of arrests highlights the Syrian regime’s continued targeting of returning refugees, exacerbating their already precarious circumstances as they attempt to escape conflict zones,” Abdulghany told SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian.

He added that he expects Syrian authorities under President Bashar al-Assad to continue arresting returnees.

“The arrests, the disappearances, the conscriptions will continue for months,” Abdulghany said. “He is beyond any accountability. He can do whatever he wants to those who have opposed him and returned to Syria.”

## **Beaten and insulted**

Around half of Lebanon’s 1.5 million Syrian refugees [hold UN refugee status](#). Many have lived and worked in Lebanon for years, despite growing xenophobia, [discrimination](#), and limited employment options.

UNHCR has documented more than 98,000 voluntary returns to Syria by refugees since 2016, including more than 8,000 this year, not including those displaced by Israeli bombings, Abou Khaled said.

However, the agency [warned in July](#) that conditions in Syria are too unsafe to encourage large-scale voluntary returns. Surveys conducted by UNHCR among Syrian refugees in several countries documented widespread fear of detention, forced conscription, and a lack of safety and security.

These fates are often what awaits those deported from Lebanon.

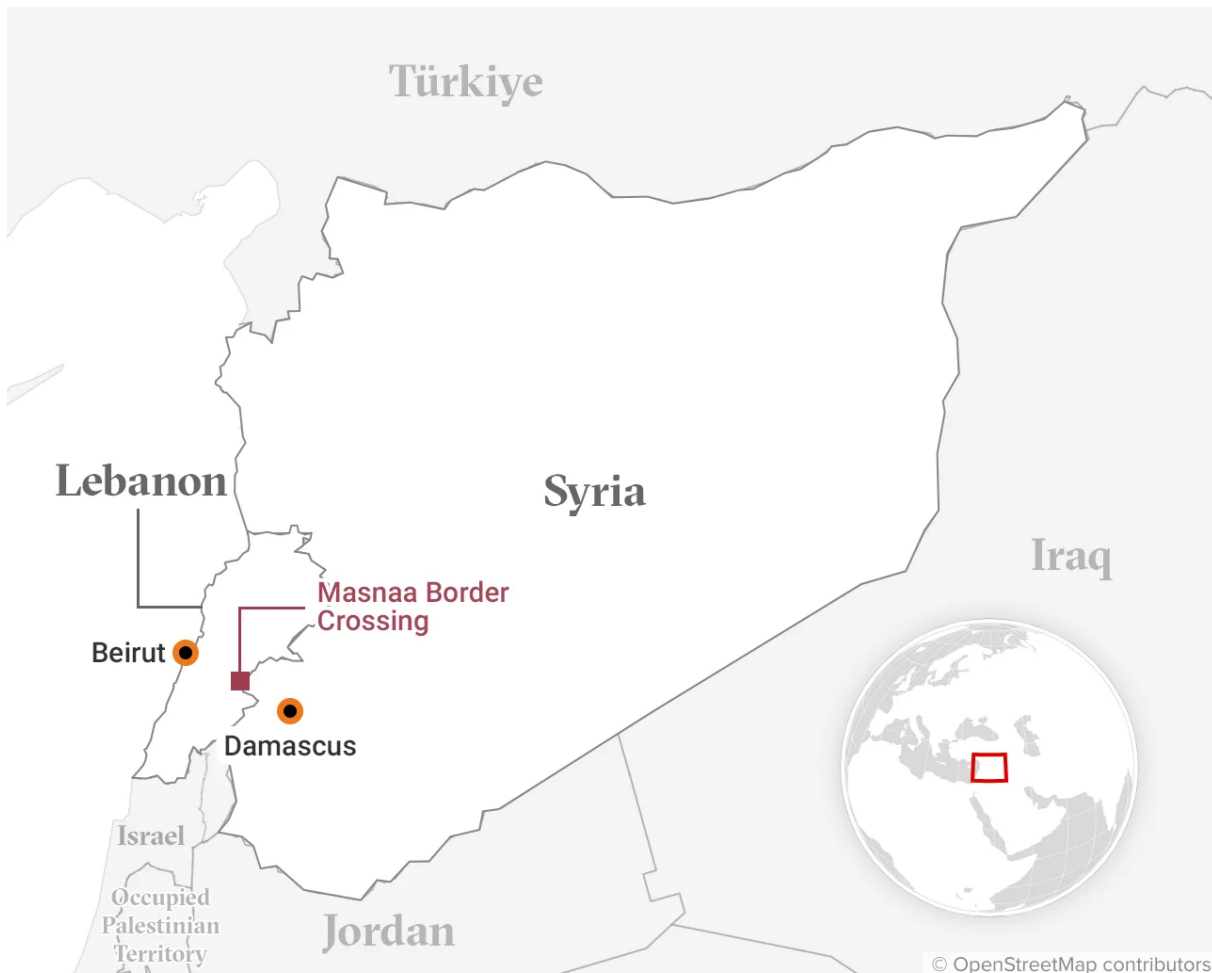
“Most deportees are in the age of compulsory and reserve military service,” said Mohammed Hasan, executive director of ACHR. “We’ve observed a pattern where deportees who pass the security check are given two-week notice to join military service, while those who don’t pass simply get arrested or disappear.”

In one raid in April, a Lebanese army patrol in the coastal city of Jounieh rounded up several Syrian refugees, including a 30-year-old man named Kareem. SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian spoke to his brother Ziad in July.

“Many of them were severely beaten and insulted during the raids, and they were not allowed to take their personal belongings, as was the case with my brother,” Ziad said. Most of the Syrian refugees in this article are being referred to by their first names, or their names are being withheld, to protect their identities.

Kareem had fled his hometown of Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, in late 2013, following an infamous chemical attack in the area. He had worked as a baker in Lebanon and lived with his wife and two children, who were not caught in the raid.

The soldiers placed Kareem and his neighbours onto white buses with army plates, along with dozens of other refugees detained earlier. They totalled around 40, including women and children.



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The buses deposited the deportees in the neutral zone between the Lebanese and Syrian sides of the Masnaa border crossing on the Beirut-Damascus highway. They were forced to walk several kilometres to the Syrian checkpoint, controlled by the Syrian 4th Armoured Division, Ziad said.

“Deportees in the age of compulsory and reserve military service are often assigned to new units, such as the 4th Division, and are subsequently deployed to front lines,” said Hasan, adding that the

division is led by Major General Maher al-Assad, the younger brother of the Syrian president. Maher is [wanted in France](#) on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

“My brother was able to call his wife on the same night they were deported, saying that they were detained by the 4th Division and would be transferred to the military police in the Qaboun area to join military service,” Ziad said.

After that call, Kareem’s phone was confiscated. “We have not heard from him since that night,” he said.

“UNHCR fully recognizes the impact of hosting large numbers of refugees on Lebanon, especially given the country’s numerous challenges,” Abou Khaled said. “We continue, however, to advocate for the respect of principles of international law and to ensure that refugees in Lebanon are protected from refoulement.”

### [Signs of torture](#)

Ahmad Adnan Shamsi al-Haydar, 19, was also deported to Syria in April. He had fled escalating violence in his hometown of Al-Bukamal, in eastern Syria, in 2022 and found construction work in Lebanon.

“Ahmad was detained by the 4th Division of the Syrian regime’s forces without any legal arrest warrant,” a relative told SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian in July. “He was not given the opportunity to contact his family or a lawyer, and his whereabouts were unknown for two months.”

[\*“We documented several cases of defected soldiers who were tortured to death after their deportation.”\*](#)

In late June, a Syrian military official contacted the family, saying Ahmad had died of a heart attack while detained by the Military Intelligence Directorate. The relative said Ahmad had been in good health when he was arrested, and his family believe he [died as a result of torture](#).

“We were asked to collect his body from the military hospital in Deir Ezzor,” the relative said. “When we received the body, we observed clear signs of torture and mistreatment. We were later told that Ahmad had been arrested due to a case of mistaken identity, and that he was not the person originally wanted by the authorities.”

Syrian military defectors, activists, journalists, and anyone perceived to oppose al-Assad’s rule are likely to face torture after being deported to Syria, Hasan said.

“We documented several cases of defected soldiers who were tortured to death after their deportation,” he said.

Syria’s Interior ministry did not respond to a request for comment about al-Haydar’s death.

## [Wanted for military service](#)

Also handed over to the 4th Armoured Division were two Syrian brothers who were deported from Lebanon in April 2023. SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian contacted one of the brothers in July, while he was trapped in military service.

“Lebanese army intelligence raided the places where Syrians lived... [and] arrested about 23 Syrians from their homes,” he recounted. “We were detained for hours. Then the Lebanese army intelligence left us all inside Syrian territory near the checkpoint of the 4th Division at the Masnaa crossing.”

A security check revealed that the two brothers, along with five other deportees, were wanted for compulsory service or were flagged for other security issues. They were sent to the Military Security Branch 248 in Damascus, where they were investigated for nine days, before being handed over to military police, and then assigned to separate military units for service.

“We are still in reserve military service,” the deportee said. “The security conditions are very bad, and I cannot go into more details.”

While Lebanon and Syria are thought to be collaborating on the deportations, ACHR does not believe the motivation is to address a shortage of conscripts in Syria. Rather, the group believes the Syrian army is permitting the deportations to [raise funds from deportees](#) seeking to flee back across the porous border into Lebanon.

“We observed that the 4th Division is coordinating with the human trafficking gangs and smugglers to extort money from deportees to allow them to escape Syria through irregular routes,” Hasan said. “The 4th Division has an economic office whose mission is to collect money and finance the division,” said Jihad Yazigi, editor of the online economic bulletin [The Syria Report](#). The division collects funds from people passing through various checkpoints, especially along roads between different areas of control, he said.

Financial concerns also motivate Lebanon’s role in the deportations, according to Hasan. Lebanon accelerated removals of refugees last year “as a strategic tool to pressure the international community for increased aid”, he told SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian.

Lebanon has struggled with an economic and political crisis for years, with poverty [tripling over the past decade](#).

European governments are concerned about mass migration to their countries if Lebanon cannot care for its large refugee population, Abdulghany said.

In May, the EU pledged a [billion-euro aid package](#) to Lebanon to be distributed over several years. Part of the package will be spent on facilitating “[voluntary returns](#)” to Syria.

The EU's humanitarian aid arm, ECHO, did not respond to requests for comment about its response to Lebanon's deportation campaign or the risk of EU funds being used to forcibly return refugees to Syria.

Neither Syria's interior ministry nor Lebanon's General Directorate of General Security responded to questions about their alleged roles in deporting Syrian refugees.

## [Lasting scars](#)

Most deportees survive the process and are released into Syria, but some with lasting trauma.

One woman who was deported in April 2023 said Lebanese authorities came to her door at 9:30am and rounded up any Syrians they could find in their town square in Jbeil district. She and her two stepdaughters were forced onto trucks and taken to a military compound in the city of Aley, where there were around 200 other Syrians awaiting interrogation.

"One of the officers, who was from intelligence, took my handbag, searched it, found registration papers from UNHCR, tore them up, and started cursing us and the UN, accusing us of coming here to beg in Lebanon," she told ACHR. SIRAJ and The New Humanitarian reviewed a transcript of her account.

"He also found makeup in my bag and told me that after the investigation, I should come to him and entertain him at his office," she said, adding that she felt the officer was sexually harassing her. That afternoon, the Syrians were forced back onto the trucks to be taken to the Syrian border. "The men were all tied with plastic ties," she said.

After walking across the neutral zone at the Masnaa crossing for more than an hour, they were detained by a Syrian border guard unit for six days before being released and making their way to Damascus.

Once they arrived, the woman immediately contacted her husband and asked him to arrange for them to be smuggled back to Lebanon. "We could never stay there," she said.

Even though she made it back to Lebanon with her stepdaughters, the experience had a prolonged impact. "Throughout this period, our children lived in a state of fear and terror, and they even experienced involuntary urination for more than a month," the woman said. "They constantly woke up at night due to nightmares."

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*With additional reporting by Urwah Iftikhar. Edited by Eric Reidy and Andrew Gully.*

Source: [the new humanitarian](#).