

Position Paper:

Lebanon continues to engage in forced deportations of Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria, against its non-refoulment obligations under international law.

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

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The Lebanese state has continually engaged in the forced deportation of Syria refugees from Lebanon to Syria against international law. Although Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it is bound by the principle of non-refoulement which outlaws States' engaging in the forced or involuntary returns of refugees or asylum-seekers to territories where there is a serious threat or risk to their life or freedom, and it is also bound by the Convention against Torture. Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) condemns the Lebanese State's actions and upholds the internationally guaranteed rights of refugees as stipulated by international law. The paper draws on three cases of forcible deportation recorded by ACHR in March and April 2025.

Background Forced Deportation: _____

ACHR has documented 681 cases of forcible deportation in 2024. These numbers reflect a stark reality facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon and illustrates how their legal vulnerability, the disproportionate risk of arrest and the broad anti-refugee sentiment in Lebanon have fed into and justified political narratives of mass refugee returns.¹

Arbitrary arrests and forced deportations are not new and various waves have been documented in Lebanon including a significant crackdown in April 2023.² However these crackdowns have become more severe as the Lebanese Government has progressively intensified political calls for mass refugee returns and has submitted official “voluntary return” plans.³ While such plans have not been actioned in any formalized manner, Lebanese officials have consistently claimed that Syria is “safe” and have signalled publicly their intentions to return refugees. These statements were made during widescale Israeli attacks on Lebanon which saw hundreds of thousands of Syrians involuntarily returning to Syria and have been re-stated following the fall of the former Assad regime despite ongoing sectarian violence in coastal areas of Syria, encroaching Israeli expansionism and occupation in the south, ongoing conflict in areas of the northeast of Syria and a deteriorating economic situation.

Forced Deportation after the fall of the Assad regime: _____

Since the fall of the former Assad regime at the end of 2024, ACHR has documented 59 cases of forced deportation of Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria. ACHR collected three in depth cases, interviewing the victims and recording their testimonies. In all cases the Syrians were male, subjected to arbitrary arrest from their homes in the early hours of the morning in areas of the Bekaa with the use of coercion by security forces. In all cases during the arbitrary arrest, they were physically assaulted, interrogated, beaten, and denied access to the bathroom for hours. They were transferred to different security branches in Lebanon and then loaded into military vehicles and transported in batches to an undisclosed location inside Syrian territory. The cases highlight how Lebanese security entities continues to engage in illegal forced returns and in the process engage in committing a series of other human rights violations.

While the fall of the former Assad regime has marked a critical juncture and the landscape for millions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and other host countries has been significantly reshaped, Syria continues to remain unsafe. A recent RPW report sheds light on the current conditions, perceptions, challenges, and needs experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, particularly in the context of evolving circumstances following the fall of the Assad regime.⁴ The report finds consistently low rates of actual and intended returns with refugees pointing to ongoing security threats and severe economic instability inside Syria as major deterrents of mass return. Forced deportations from Lebanon to Syria continue to be illegal and in direct contradiction of Lebanon's non-refoulement obligations even with a change in Syrian's political context.

In addition to ongoing conflict, Syria remains economically weak with devastated infrastructure without basic goods and services such as water, health, education and electricity. Despite the fall of the former Assad regime, Syria will likely continue to remain unsafe for the foreseeable future given political instability, deep social divisions, the repercussions of more than a decade of violence and destruction. Moreover, meaningful safety that is genuine and allows for voluntary and dignified returns is dependent on the establishment of accountable systems of governance, rule of law, and protections for civil and human rights including mechanisms for justice, accountability and reconciliation. Without these key forms of safety and security genuine and voluntary refugee returns will likely remain ad hoc and limited. In all cases of forcible deportation recorded by ACHR, the three individuals returned to Lebanon from Syria through irregular routes highlighting how the practice of forced deportation is not only illegal but strategically ineffective.

Legal Analysis:

The actions by Lebanese authorities to forcibly deport refugees or compel them to return to Syria directly or indirectly violates Lebanon's commitment to the principle of non-refoulement. UNHCR as well as a number of international human rights organizations have underlined that Syria is not safe for returns and "call on States not to forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria, including Palestinians previously residing in Syria, to any part of Syria".⁵ Because Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are treated as irregular migrants under Lebanese law, with no legal pathway to seek asylum or obtain long-term refugee protection under their internationally guaranteed status as a refugee. This allows authorities to arrest, detain, fine, or forcibly deport Syrian refugees without due process, or adequate processes to legally challenge their removal. The only national asylum law, found in Chapter 8 of the 1962 Law of Foreigners, Articles 26 to 31 is the only legislation that guarantees the rights and obligations of foreigners in the country. Article 31 of the law clearly states that "if the expulsion of a political refugee is decided, he may not be deported to the territory of a State where his life or freedom could be threatened." National legislation does not fully safeguard or guarantee the rights of refugees, migrants or political asylum seekers and it does not distinguish between refugees and other categories of "foreigners".

The deportations also violate Lebanon's legal obligations under the Convention Against Torture as forcibly deported individuals have reportedly been handed directly to Syrian authorities.⁶ The former Assad regime engaged in gross human rights violations including mass arbitrary detention, forced conscription, torture, and enforced disappearances upon return to Syria. Lebanon, as a signatory to the Convention Against Torture, is bound by Article 3 of the Convention to ensure that individuals at risk of torture are not returned or extradited. Too, under Lebanese law, deportation orders can only be issued by judicial authority, or, in exceptional circumstances and on an individual assessment basis, by the Director of General Security. As such, Lebanon has violated this principle by repeatedly failing to ensure that individuals at risk of torture are not returned or extradited to Syria and by not providing adequate legal pretexts for arrests as required under national law.

Forced deportations have been accompanied by a series of other human rights violations⁷ including forced evictions of Syrian refugees from their respective homes, mass arbitrary arrests with the use of force, the use of torture and humiliation during detention, widespread kidnapping for ransom⁸, and the denial of basic human rights such as the right to a bathroom, water and the ability to contact family members or a lawyer.

Conclusion:

The Government of Lebanon's actions in the three cases of forced deportation outlined above are illegal under international law and in violation of the principle of non-refoulement as law as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. ACHR calls for the Lebanese Government to immediately halt forced deportations of Syrian refugees to Syria, uphold the principle of non-refoulement and uphold their protection obligations to refugees in Lebanon.

1- <https://www.achrights.org/en/2023/03/16/13078/>

2 <https://www.achrights.org/en/2024/01/29/13392/>

3- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/06/forced-return-syrians-lebanon-unsafe-and-unlawful>

4- Refugee Protection Watch Coalition (RPW) report. To be released May 2025.

5- <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/115903>

6-<https://www.achrights.org/en/2023/05/19/13160/>

7-<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/25/lebanon-stepped-repression-syrians>

8-<https://www.achrights.org/en/2023/06/19/13180/>