

A Dreadful Homecoming: Widespread Human Rights Violations Against Syrian Refugees Returning from Lebanon

At least **26 returning refugees** arrested by regime forces between September 23 and October 25, 2024, including one woman and one man who died due to torture in regime detention centers



Tuesday 29 October 2024

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

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I. A DEADLY DUAL CHALLENGE FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON: TORN BETWEEN UNSAFE ASYLUM OR THE UNCERTAIN FATE OF REFOULMENT TO SYRIA

Since September 23, 2024, Lebanon has been ravaged by a major military escalation by Israeli forces who have been carrying out relentless airstrikes across the country. These attacks, along with the rapidly worsening humanitarian and security situation, have driven thousands of people to flee, including Syrian refugees who originally sought asylum in Lebanon while fleeing the widespread human rights violations in Syria that began with the start of the popular uprising in March 2011 and are still going on to this day. Waves of displacement among Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been concentrated in camps and the southern parts of the country, which have seen the brunt of the Israeli offensive. To date, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has documented the killing of 101 Syrian refugees in Lebanon during the latest Israeli offensive, including 36 children and 19 women.

In the midst of this nightmarish situation, the already-vulnerable Syrian refugees have been struggling even more to secure their basic needs, such as food, housing, and access to health-care. Indeed, finding a safe place or alternative refuge in Lebanon has been increasingly difficult, with many feeling they have no choice but to accept the inevitability of return to Syria despite the uncertain, volatile and dangerous security and living conditions in Syria. Faced with this extremely precarious dilemma, Syrian refugees are forced to decide which of these life-threatening fates is less intolerable – remaining in Lebanon despite the lack of security and the struggle to secure basic needs or returning to Syria with no guarantees of safety or protection. Understandably, many have been forced to make complicated decisions that have only exacerbated their suffering and intensified the awfulness of the long-term humanitarian catastrophe which they and their families are enduring.

Since September 23, successive waves of Syrian refugees have been arriving at Lebanon-Syria border crossings, including those at Jdeidat Babous/al-Masna, Jousiya, al-Dabbousiya, Jesr Qmar, and al-Arida. There was an initial large-scale influx of returnees up to the end of September, though this subsided somewhat through the month of October. Since the start of hostilities, an estimated 283,000 people have crossed into Syria from Lebanon, with Syrians making up about 70 percent of this total, while the remainder consist of other nationalities, including Lebanese and Palestinians, in addition to other Syrians who returned to Syria via irregular crossings. According to estimates by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), about 1.5 million Syrian refugees have been living in Lebanon as of 2023, with this figure including both those registered and un-registered with the UNHCR.

Despite the fact that some Syrians have returned, whether voluntarily or forcibly, to Syria, the country remains a wholly unsafe environment, as the Syrian regime continues to enforce its oppressive policies, including arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and torture. In fact, since the start of this year alone, SNHR has documented Syrian regime forces' arrest of 208 deported Syrian refugees, including two children and six women. Among these 208 were six who are known to have subsequently died due to torture in detention centers. Moreover, the regime continues to introduce legislative articles and laws that aim to legalize the seizure of properties owned by refugees and forcibly displaced persons, as part of the regime's systematic and calculated policy of consolidating its control over the lands and properties left by their owners.



As Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR Executive Director, says:

“ In light of the lack of any procedures put in place to guarantee the protection of returnees' rights and safety, Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon have been facing security and legal challenges. These challenges underline the need to establish real and effective mechanisms to ensure the protection of returnees' rights and the prevention of violations, especially by the regime's security agencies. Deportations with no adequate guarantees will only exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which behooves the international community to take immediate action to improve the situation of returnees and ensure their basic rights. ”

II. REPORT METHODOLOGY

This report by SNHR outlines the most prominent challenges and difficulties faced by Syrian refugees who have returned from Syria to Lebanon between September 23, and October 25, 2024. The violations documented here range from arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance to torture and military conscription at the hands of regime forces, in addition to financial extortion and discrimination regarding aid distribution. The report also covers some abusive measures adopted by the parties to the conflict in relation to their treatment of refugees arriving in areas under their control, including opening and closing crossings, conducting security background checks, and requesting a sponsor, as well as the difficult humanitarian conditions endured by refugees at the crossings separating the different areas of control.

This report draws upon the monitoring and documentation endeavors of the SNHR team, who have been monitoring the situation of returnees on the ground across the country. The report also draws upon accounts by victims' families and survivors, in addition to information provided by humanitarian workers who assisted in providing support for returning refugees. The interviews have been conducted either directly or via secure communication channels, in accordance with SNHR's customary protocols. This report contains five accounts, some of them from people who used an alias to protect their anonymity and personal safety.

All the figures included in this report are taken from SNHR's database, with all of the documented data having been painstakingly reviewed and analyzed according to various metrics, including the location of violations, the perpetrator party, and the nature and background of the violations in question, all in order to provide an accurate and comprehensive picture, insofar as is possible, of the reality of violations faced by returning Syrians.

The team responsible for compiling this report have faced significant challenges in accessing regime-held areas. Additionally, the massive number of returnees alone has made it difficult to monitor their situation in a comprehensive way. Moreover, most of the returnees are dealing with traumatic issues like homelessness and instability, leaving them in a dire psychological state, creating another challenge in the process of documenting violations against them. Further complicating matters, the families of those detained while returning were, in most cases, unaware of the details of their loved ones' arrest, with some families revealing that they'd learnt of the arrests through people accompanying their relatives on the journey back home, or through fixers who were supposed to secure their return routes. All of these challenges added to the complexities of documenting the situation.

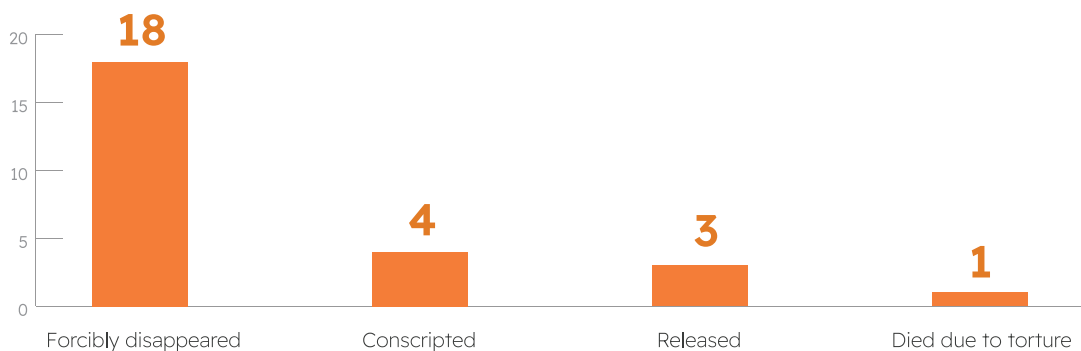
The violations included in this report represent the bare minimum of those which we have been able to document in accordance with [SNHR's methodology](#). This report also does not provide any details of the psychological, economic, and social hardships that victims face.

III. VIOLATIONS AGAINST RETURNING REFUGEES: ARBITRARY ARRESTS, ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE, AND TORTURE

The Syrian regime enforces general policies against Syrians refugees returning from Lebanon. In accordance with these policies, returning refugees are required to share their personal information in order to undergo a security background check before re-entering Syrian territory. Depending on the outcome of these checks, refugees are either required to agree to a status settlement at the crossing or are summoned for questioning by a certain security branch. Male refugees of military service age must also submit a document acknowledging that they are required to visit a regime military recruitment office to settle their service status, after which they are required to enlist for military service within between 15 days and three months of the date of their return. SNHR has noticed that these lengthy procedures are still being enforced at crossings, which has led to crossings being heavily overcrowded with large backlogs of refugees. Despite the worsening humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, the Syrian regime has not made any fundamental adjustments to facilitate the return of refugees, except for temporarily lifting the requirement of exchanging \$100 USD for each adult returnee, with other procedures remaining completely unchanged, even after the recent military escalation in Lebanon.

Between September 23 and October 25, 2024, SNHR documented Syrian regime forces' arrest of at least 26 refugees, including one woman, who were returning from Lebanon due to the ongoing hostilities between Israel and Lebanon. Four of those detained have been called up for conscription or reserve forces, while one is known to have died due to torture in a regime detention center, with the victim's body later returned to his family.

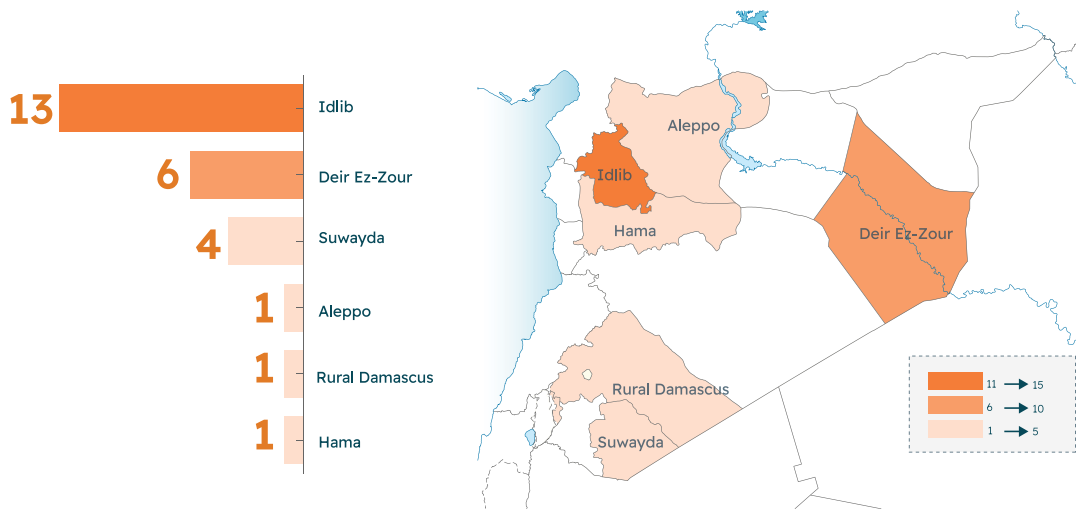
Breakdown of arbitrary arrests of Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon:



As shown on the graph, 69 percent of those who have been arbitrarily arrested and detained in regime detention centers have subsequently been classified as forcibly disappeared persons. As usual with the Syrian regime, detainees' families are denied any opportunity to obtain any information about the fate or whereabouts of their loved ones. Also, about 15 percent of detainees were conscripted or forced into service with the regime's reserve military forces shortly after their arrest, even though they had submitted documents that gave them a certain amount of time before they needed to visit recruitment offices.

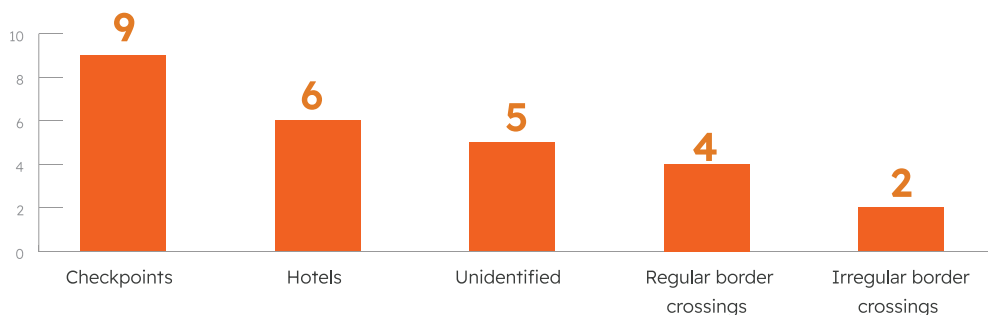
These figures reflect the unchanged nature of the regime’s oppressive methods against returnees and underline the utter meaninglessness of the nominal protective procedures adopted by the regime that offer no protection whatsoever for Syrian refugees. In other words, the violations that originally drove those refugees now compelled to return, to flee and seek asylum abroad in the first place, are greatly similar as the violations now being perpetrated against returnees, with arrests, persecution, conscription, and enforced disappearance continuing to plague and devastate the lives of the long-suffering Syrian people.

The 26 arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria are distributed by the refugees’ governorate of origin as follows:



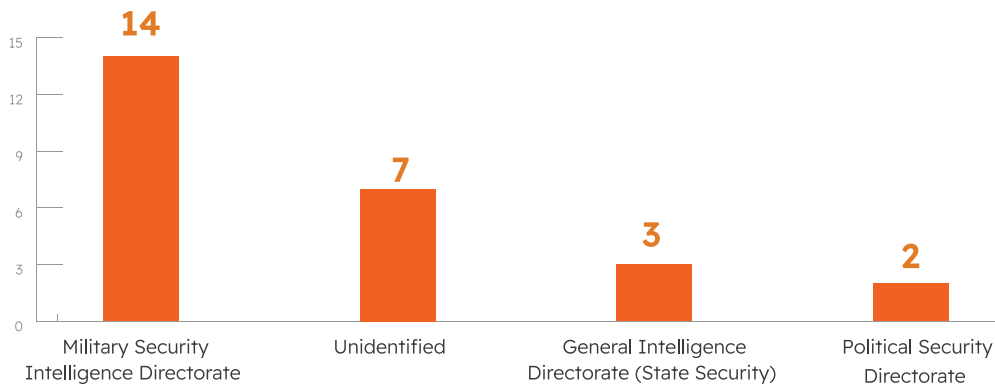
As shown on the map, the largest proportion of returnees arbitrarily arrested originally came from Idlib governorate, followed by Deir Ez-Zour, and then Suwayda, all areas that are still not fully under regime control. This distribution reflects a pattern of increasing target of returnees originally from areas free of regime control or which were previously not under its control. Victims’ geographic origin is a primary factor in arrests. This issue complicates the suffering of returnees originally from these areas and compounds the security risks they may face.

The 26 arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria are distributed by location of arrest as follows:



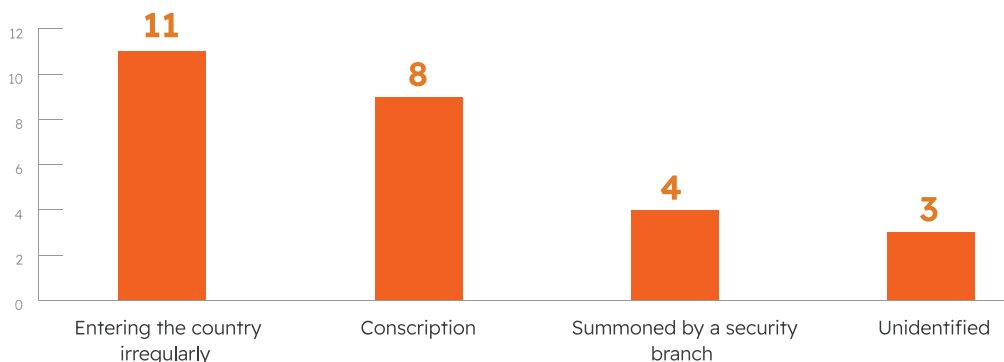
As shown on the graph, the majority of these arrests, accounting for 53.8 percent in total, took place at checkpoints and in hotels, which reflects a clear strategy on the regime’s part to track and hunt down returnees at checkpoints or in temporary places of residence. In addition, about 23.1 percent of these arrests took place at checkpoints, whether regular or irregular, which suggests that returnees are subject to arrest even at the entrance to their homeland. Even attempting to cross into Syria via irregular crossings cannot spare them this danger. It should be noted that these figures include only those who were arrested directly at the irregular crossing point, but not those who were arrested later on charges of illegally entering the country after having passed through these crossings, with those cases outlined in other charts in this report.

The 26 arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria are distributed according to the arresting agency as follows:



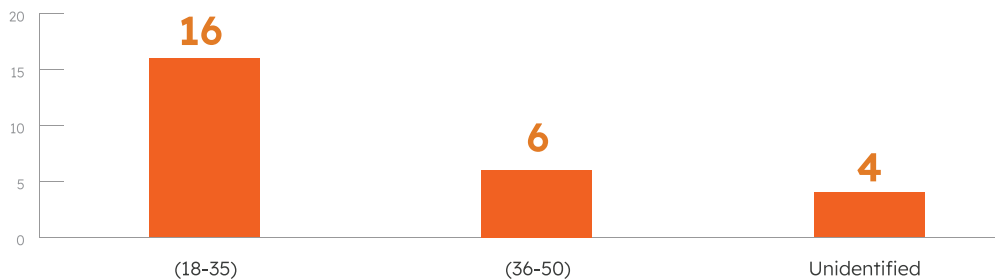
As shown on the graph, 53.8 percent of arrests were carried out by personnel from the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate, underscoring this agency’s central role in targeting returnees. In fact, the Military Security Intelligence Directorate is responsible for the largest number of checkpoints and detention centers across the country. Meanwhile, other security agencies are responsible for some of the other arrests, with the General Intelligence Directorate (State Security) being responsible for 11.5 percent and the Political Security Directorate bearing responsibility for 7.7 percent.

The 26 arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria are distributed by reason for arrest as follows:



As shown on the graph, 42.3 percent of arrests were carried out on the grounds of entering the country irregularly, giving a sense of the daunting challenges faced by returnees, many of whom are forced to enter their own country irregularly simply to escape the security restrictions and the dangers of passing through regular crossings. Another 34.6 percent of these arrests were carried out on the ground of evading military service, which suggests that conscription is a significant risk facing male returnees of military service age, while returnees being summoned to security branches for questioning accounted for 15.4 percent reflecting the mindset of the regime’s policymakers in continuously monitoring and summoning returnees for interrogation.

The 26 arbitrary arrests targeting Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon to Syria are distributed according to age group as follows:



As shown on the graph, 61.5 percent of all those arrested were in the 18-35 age group, reflecting the regime’s clear focus on arresting young men and women under various pretexts. Meanwhile, individuals in the 35-50 age group accounted for 23.1 percent of all arrests, indicating that those in this category are also targeted by the regime, albeit less intensively.

Sample cases of returning refugees who experienced violations:

Mohammad Saeed Jaber from al-Bara town in southern rural Idlib governorate, was arrested on Wednesday, October 9, 2024, by personnel from the Syrian regime’s Military Intelligence Directorate in Aleppo city’s al-Zaydiya neighborhood while returning from Lebanon to Syria via irregular means to flee the escalating hostilities between Lebanon and Israel. He was then taken to an undisclosed location.

SNHR spoke with Saeed,¹ Mohammad’s father, who told us:

“Mohammad had lived in Lebanon since 2012. He works in construction. After the Israeli airstrikes started on the southern areas in Lebanon, Mohammad felt forced to return to Syria. He decided to travel to Idlib through smuggling because he cannot pass through the regular borders on account of being wanted for mandatory military service. He made a deal with someone to secure him a safe passage from Lebanon to Idlib governorate. On October 8, 2024, he entered Syria via Homs governorate with a group of people that included women and children. They then headed for Aleppo city and were temporarily kept in a house in al-Zaydiya neighborhood [in Aleppo] until their passage to Idlib was made secure. The next day, regime forces stormed the house and arrested everyone there, including Mohammad. We have not had any news about him since the moment of his arrest.”

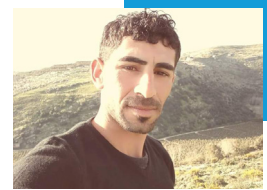
1. Via phone on October 15, 2024.

Hussein al-Jarad al-Suleiman and Mohammad Ahmad al-Met'eb from Theyban town in rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate were arrested on September 25, 2024, by personnel from the Syrian regime's Political Security Directorate who raided their place of residence in a hotel in Damascus city after they returned from Lebanon to Syria, fleeing the Israeli airstrikes on the country. They were then released and called up for mandatory military service.

SNHR spoke to Loay al-Khalaf,² a friend of the two detainees Hussein and Mohammad, who was with them at the time of their arrest. He told us:

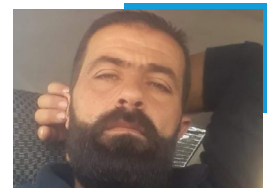
“As the airstrikes on southern Lebanon intensified, Hussein, Mohammad, and I headed for the Syrian Lebanese borders to travel back to Syria via the al-Masna border crossing. Mohammad and Hussein had yet to complete their military service. When we passed through the Syrian borders, no one did anything to us, and they were not told to visit a recruitment office. So, we headed for Damascus city and stayed in a hotel there, as we were planning to complete our trip to Deir Ez-Zour governorate on the next day. When we arrived at the hotel, they wrote down our names and personal information and kept our ID cards at reception. We were surprised by a number of regime troops storming our hotel room in the middle of the night. They arrested Mohammad and Hussein after asking for our names. We did not know anything about them until three days later, when Mohammad called us and told us they'd been arrested and taken for military service.”

[Ammar Abdul Qader Sha'ban](#), a 26-year-old man from Jalma village, administratively a part of Afrin city in northern rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Saturday, September 28, 2024, by personnel from the Syrian regime's State Security Directorate at a checkpoint in Aleppo city's al-Ashrafiya neighborhood after he returned from Lebanon to Syria fleeing the escalating hostilities between Lebanon and Israel. We documented that he was released on September 30, 2024.



↑ Ammar Abdul Qader Sha'ban

[Shadi Mohammad al-Shartah](#) from al-Bara town in southern rural Idlib governorate, born in 1990, was arrested on Monday, October 7, 2024, by personnel from the Syrian regime's State Security Directorate at al-Dabbousiya border crossing in Homs governorate while travelling back from Lebanon to Syria to escape the escalating hostilities between Lebanon and Israel. He was then taken to an undisclosed location.



↑ Shadi Mohammad al-Shartah

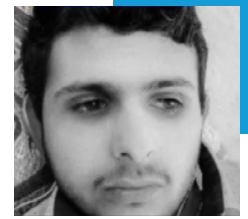
SNHR spoke with Ammar Shartah,³ Shadi's brother, who told us:


“My brother Shadi lived with his family in Lebanon for several years. A month ago, he sent his family to Idlib governorate in light of the worsening living conditions there. When the Israeli bombing started in Lebanon, Shadi decided to travel back to Syria with some of his friends since they could no longer stay there. They headed for al-Dabbousiya border crossing in Hom's governorate. When they arrived at the crossing, they were asked to show their ID cards for a security check. Then, the regime officers returned the ID cards to Shadi's friends, and asked Shadi to get out of the car. He was wanted by security branches, and he was arrested after they allowed him to leave his personal belongings with his friends. Since then, we have not been able to obtain any information about him or the reason for his arrest.”

2. Via phone on October 15, 2024.

3. Via phone on October 14, 2024.

[Mahmoud Khaled al-Iliwi](#) from Tal Karsyan village in eastern rural Idlib governorate, born in 2005, was arrested along with his father, Khaled, on Friday, October 11, 2024, in Khan Sheikhoun city in southern rural Idlib governorate. The two men were then taken to the Hama city branch of the Syrian regime's Military Security Intelligence Directorate.



↑  Mahmoud Khaled al-Iliwi

According to intelligence received by SNHR from local activists in Idlib governorate, Mahmoud and his father Khaled had been living as refugees in Lebanon since 2013, working as agricultural laborers there. Due to the intensifying Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon since September 23, 2024, the two decided to flee back to Syria via the irregular crossings in Homs city and return to their hometown in Idlib in North Syria, in an area free of regime control. The father and son were arrested by regime forces on the grounds of entering the country irregularly, and of Mahmoud's evasion of mandatory military service.

On Tuesday, October 22, 2024, the Military Security Directorate branch released Khaled, then returned his son's body to him after Mahmoud died in the same facility. SNHR can confirm that Mahmoud was in good health at the time of his arrest, indicating a strong probability that he died due to torture and medical negligence in the Military Security Intelligence Directorate branch in Hama city.

IV. DISCRIMINATION AND FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION IN AID DISTRIBUTION FOR REFUGEES RETURNING FROM LEBANON TO SYRIA

Adding to the already immense suffering of a traumatic double displacement, Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon have faced additional discrimination and Orwellian bureaucracy from the very first moments of their arrival at the Syrian border crossings. Adding insult to injury, while Lebanese refugees have been granted facilitated entry into Syria, Syrian refugees were required to exchange \$100 USD for every returning adult according to the official exchange rate simply to be granted entry to their homeland. This is an exceptionally large amount, especially for large families who can already barely find the means of survival. Even though this requirement was temporarily lifted on September 29, 2024, its enforcement over this extended period drove many Syrian families to avoid regular crossings and to instead seek irregular, alternative routes, putting them at risk of being extorted or falling prey to smuggling and abduction rings.

In addition, reception centers have been established for Lebanese refugees, with a total of 30 centers set up across the governorates of Rural Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. By contrast, meanwhile, most Syrian refugees, particularly those whose houses have been destroyed, remain homeless, without any official shelter. Many of them were forced to rely on relatives or establish informal encampments, while many others have simply been left with no home at all. While Syrian refugees have also supposedly received UNHCR aid through the agency's regime partners, this has been grossly inadequate and insufficient to meet their basic needs.

Accounts of discrimination in aid distribution

We spoke with Sanaa al-Bakr,⁴ a volunteer with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)'s Homs branch, who helped deliver humanitarian assistance to refugees returning from Lebanon. She told us:

“There were many cases of Syrian families who needed immediate assistance, such as transportation to public hospitals or free transportation buses to take them to their original areas, yet these people have had to wait for long period of time, or would call their relatives for help, or receive much smaller aid portions than these designated for Lebanese refugees.”

Refugees extorted by smugglers and checkpoints

Furthermore, many returnees spoke to SNHR about their experience with smugglers who would charge them extra amounts of money on the pretext of supposedly providing protection or safety during their return to their original areas. Hundreds have fallen victims to extortion by individuals or gangs who collaborate or work in coordination with regime personnel at checkpoints and security agencies' staff. The amounts that witnesses reported paying varied widely, depending on their destination and the security conditions for returnees. These payments ranged from \$350 USD to \$2,000 USD, to cover the trip from their entry into Syria until reaching the crossings between areas outside regime control and other parties to the conflict, or even between regime-held areas. These circumstances have added to the returnees' suffering, not only due to the high costs but also because of the anxiety and fear of detention or potential abuses during their journeys.

Account by returnee Mohammad from al-Tabaqa town in rural Raqqa governorate

Mohammad,⁵ a Syrian from al-Tabaqa town in rural Raqqa governorate who had been living in Lebanon as a refugee since 2012, told us:

“I struggled to reach Hama city from al-Masna border crossing along with my family of 11. At the station in Hama city, we came across a group of people who first offered us their services. They told me they could get me to Raqqa for \$350 USD. Even though I could not easily afford to pay that price, I had no other option, especially because I was wanted for military service. I asked my family in Raqqa to borrow the money and send it to me. When I arrived at the first Military Security Intelligence checkpoint, I was surprised by the driver who asked me to pay more to ensure safe passage through these areas. I was in a compromised position, and I was afraid of getting arrested, so I paid. At each checkpoint we passed through, the driver would demand even more money.” Mohammad said that he arrived at his family' house in Raqqa exhausted financially and psychologically, adding that he will have to struggle for a long time to repay his loans.

4. Via a communication software on October 1, 2024.

5. Via a communication software on October 8, 2024.

V. ABOUT A QUARTER OF RETURNING REFUGEES HEADED FOR AREAS NOT UNDER SYRIAN REGIME CONTROL: DIRE CHALLENGES AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

According to the latest estimates, around 23,409 of the Syrian refugees who returned from Lebanon, or one-quarter of the total number of Syrian returnees, have headed for areas outside regime control. This is either because they are originally from these areas, or because they were attempting to avoid the security risks they may have faced in regime-held areas. These refugees entered non-regime areas via al-Tabaqa crossing in the vicinity of Raqqa or al-Tayha crossing near Manbij in rural Aleppo, to access the northeastern parts of Syria that are under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the governorates of Hasaka, Raqqa, and Deir Ez-Zour. Others, meanwhile, crossed into northeastern Syria via Awn al-Dadat crossing near Manbij to access the areas under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Access challenges and humanitarian suffering at crossings

These crossings have seen frequent shutdowns by the controlling parties, the most recent of which took place on Saturday, October 26, 2024, when all crossings separating SDF-held and SNA-held areas were shut down by the SDF in the midst of reciprocal attacks by the two sides, which forced refugees to live in the open air for days in harsh weather conditions and with a total lack of basic facilities, further exacerbating their already intense psychological and physical suffering. Refugees coming into these areas, who are often trying to escape the risk of being arrested and hunted down in regime areas, still face worsening humanitarian conditions in the non-regime areas they escape to, including a lack of infrastructure and minimal access to basic assistance. Furthermore, returnees heading for these areas have to go through strict security measures that include repeated screening of their political activities, while some are financially extorted by the local groups that control these crossings, where returnees have to pay large amounts of money to ensure safe passage.

SDF-held areas

Families returning from Lebanon began arriving in SDF-held areas on September 29, 2024, via al-Tayha crossing in the Manbij region in eastern rural Aleppo, which separates regime-held areas and SDF-held areas. The SDF's Autonomous Administration formed a 'crisis cell' to assist arrivals and establish reception centers in Raqqa governorate. Families are allowed to enter in batches, meaning that people have to wait in the open air for hours until their personal information is registered. Thereafter, families are split into two groups: those wishing to remain in SDF-controlled areas, who are required to have a local sponsor, and those wishing to move to SDF-held areas, who are escorted by a military detachment to the Awn al-Dadat area to ensure they arrive safely.

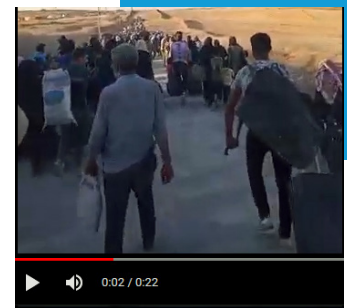


↑ Civilians who returned from Lebanon to SDF-held areas waiting at Abu Kahf/al-Tahya crossing in the Manbij region in eastern rural Aleppo governorate in early-October 2024 | Photo credit: the official website of the SDF's Autonomous Administration

SNA-held areas

After arriving at the Awn al-Dadat crossing in eastern rural Aleppo governorate from SDF-controlled areas, families returning from Lebanon are gathered in an area known as al-Awn or Sahat Zakkouri which is on the dividing lines between SDF-held areas and SNA-held areas. This area is under the control of a local armed group that handles coordination between the two sides. There have been reports of families being subjected to verbal harassment and financial extortion in these areas in order to be allowed passage, which drove the SNA's Military Police to issue a statement on October 7 stating that the Awn al-Dadat crossing would be shut down temporarily.


When families enter SNA-held areas, they are subjected to strict measures to check their identities and ensure that they are indeed originally from these areas and have some form of official documentation confirming their connection to these areas. They are also required to have a local sponsor and to state their final destination. Because of these strict measures, families have to wait for many hours for these procedures to be completed, leading to protests and disputes between returnees and Military Police personnel. Following their arrival, returnees are given a 'personal statement' document that can be later used to obtain an ID card.



↑ Video showing hundreds of families at Awn al-Dadat crossing in eastern rural Aleppo governorate heading for SNA-held areas

Aid distribution: Many community-based groups and local humanitarian organizations have worked to provide assistance, including transferring the injured to hospitals, providing first-aid, and distributing water and meals to returnees.



↑  First-aid being provided by the Civil Defense teams to people who returned from Lebanon after entering the SNA-held areas in October 2024 | Photo credit: Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets)

HTS-held areas

After passing through SNA-held areas, families arrive at HTS-held areas through al-Gazzawiya area in western rural Aleppo and Atma area in northern rural Idlib. Families are transferred via buses to one of two HTS-run centers, both known as Branch No. 106, one of them located in Darat Ezza in western rural Aleppo, and the other in Qah in rural Idlib. At these centers, after the returnees' security information is registered in full, and their sponsor relatives are verified, they are then designated to the areas where they will live.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- **Ongoing human rights violations by the Syrian regime**

Data, verified by SNHR, confirms that the Syrian regime continues to practice arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and torture. This behavior constitutes a blatant violation of Syria's obligations under international human rights laws, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Such practices underscore the lack of adequate safeguards to protect returning refugees and create an unsafe environment for their return.

- **Deliberate discrimination against returning Syrian refugees**

Accounts suggest that returning Syrian refugees face systematic discrimination including in aid distribution, shelter provision, and financial extortion. This contravenes the principles of equality and non-discrimination stipulated in Article 3 of the Refugee Convention. This discrimination reflects an intentional political approach that marginalizes returnees and exacerbates their suffering.

- **Worsening refugee crisis and continued Syrian displacement**

Severe violations against returning refugees make voluntary return an unfeasible option, pushing hundreds to sell their belongings and seek asylum in other countries, fleeing an environment that threatens their rights and human dignity. Such violations perpetuate the Syrian displacement crisis at both the regional and international levels.

- **Widespread financial extortion and exploitation of returning refugees**

Data shows that returning refugees are subjected to repeated financial extortion by security agencies and some local groups, particularly at checkpoints and irregular crossings. This exploitation negatively impacts their economic and psychological well-being, reflecting a lack of effective legal oversight.

- **Lack of infrastructure and basic aid in return areas**

Available information shows that non-regime areas, to which a proportion of returnees turn, lack basic services such as water, food, and healthcare. The absence of infrastructure and humanitarian assistance poses an additional challenge, as returnees live under harsh conditions that lack the essential elements of stability.

- **Syrian regime's failure to provide legal guarantees for returnees**

Data indicates that the Syrian regime has not provided any legal framework or rights guarantees to ensure the safety of returnees or to protect them from detention or retaliation. This failure discourages refugees from voluntary return and highlights the regime's inability to provide a safe environment that is compliant with international standards.

- **Misuse of forced return as a political pressure tool**

Evidence suggests that the Syrian regime and other parties exploit the issue of refugee return as a political tool to pressure the international community for additional funding. This international extortion undermines humanitarian efforts and harms the principle of international protection for refugees.

Recommendations

UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

- **Provide ongoing guidance on the risks of return**

UNHCR should regularly provide clear information to refugees about the risks associated with returning to Syria, including consistent alerts on security and humanitarian conditions, and emphasize their right to make independent and voluntary decisions about return without pressure.

- **Maintain neutrality regarding Syrian regime procedures**

UNHCR should refrain from endorsing any procedures the Syrian regime claims will ensure the safety of returnees and should closely monitor their implementation on the ground. UNHCR must also keep track of the reports issued by UN committees and align itself with their recommendations regarding the human rights situation in Syria.

- **Monitor returnee cases and document violations**

UNHCR must collect and document testimonies about violations faced by returnees and provide regular reports to the international community on their conditions. Additionally, it must strengthen collaboration with human rights organizations, including SNHR, to share data on reported violations.

- **Conduct extensive awareness campaigns**

UNHCR should launch awareness campaigns on the rights of returning refugees, including their rights to protection from arbitrary detention and extortion, access to humanitarian aid, and protection against refoulement.

UN Security Council and UN

- **Address the Syrian refugee crisis as an urgent international priority**

The Syrian refugee crisis represents both a humanitarian and security challenge, demanding that the Security Council takes concrete steps toward a comprehensive political solution, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254, to ensure stability, respect for human rights, and a safe environment for voluntary return.

- **Intensify international efforts to hold the Syrian regime accountable**

The UN must increase efforts to expose the practices of the Syrian regime, which include arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and torture, and work toward justice for victims by forming an independent international committee to monitor and document these violations.

- **Expand international sanctions against involved individuals and entities**

Targeted sanctions should be imposed on those responsible for violations against returning refugees, including security officials and entities involved in detention and extortion, which would increase pressure on the regime to cease these practices.

International community

- **Establish an international alliance outside the scope of the UN Security Council to support the Syrian people**

Given the UN Security Council's failure to implement effective solutions, human rights-supporting countries must establish coalitions outside the UN Security Council to take concrete steps to support the Syrian people, including humanitarian aid and essential services for displaced persons and refugees.

- **Enhance financial support for host countries and expand resettlement programs**

Donor countries must meet their financial commitments to nations hosting Syrian refugees, improve resettlement programs for refugees in neighboring countries, and increase financial aid to help these countries meet refugee needs and prevent refoulement.

- **Provide psychological and social support for affected refugees**

The international community must offer psychological and social support programs for refugees affected by displacement and refoulement, facilitated through humanitarian organizations and civil society groups.

UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR)

- **Prepare a special report on violations against returnees**

The OHCHR must prepare a detailed report documenting the violations suffered by refugees after returning to Syria in light of the escalating hostilities between Lebanon and Israel and submit this report to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to ensure that urgent action is taken.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)

- **Investigation violations against returnees**

The COI must conduct a thorough investigation into the violations being committed against returnees by the Syrian regime, including arbitrary arrest, torture, and extortion, as well as expose the articles of legislations and policies that aim to seize the properties of returnees and deprive them of their rights.

Syrian regime

- **Cease persecution of returnees and ensure their safety**

The Syrian regime must end its security-related persecution of returnees and foster a safe environment that ensures their dignity and basic rights, ensuring that they are not arrested or retaliated against by its security agencies.

- **Distribution aid in a transparent and fair manner**

The Syrian regime must commit to distribute humanitarian aid in a fair and transparent manner and stop using the refugee issue as a tool to pressure the international community for political or economic gains.

- **Repeal legislation that restricts returnees' rights**

The Syrian regime must repeal the laws that restrict returnees and legalize the seizure of their properties. Returnees' right to rebuild a safe and stable life for themselves must also be protected.

Acknowledgment and Solidarity

SNHR wishes to thank all the victims' families and eyewitnesses who share their account and supplied basic information. Their assistance has been of invaluable help in exposing the violations faced by refugees returning to Syria. SNHR stands in solidarity with refugees amid their ongoing suffering and plight. We hope that this report can be a platform that helps to ensure that their voices reach the international community, and a step forward towards ensuring that their rights, dignity, and humanity are protected and respected.



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No justice without accountability

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