



# Statement on the Lebanese Council of Ministers' Proposed "Voluntary Return" Plan for Syrian Refugees

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Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

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Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) expresses its grave concern and strong opposition to the Lebanese Council of Ministers' recent deliberations on the so called "voluntary return" plan for Syrian refugees. The proposal, declared on August 14, mandates ministries and administrative bodies provide suggestions to the plan within one week before coordinating with the Syrian State to operationalize the Forced return plan. The plan stands as a continuation of unlawful coercive measures and is part of a longstanding pressure campaign that aims to forcibly return Syrian refugees to Syria in violation of Lebanon's non-refoulement obligations.

## **A pattern of failed initiatives**

The latest plan stands as the most recent attempt by Lebanese authorities to adopt policies aimed at the forcible return of Syrian refugees to Syria. The list below outlines previous official attempts to adopt similar policies.

- **2015:** Lebanese authorities successfully pressured UNHCR to halt the registration of new refugees, leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees in legal limbo, unable to access their basic rights. This policy has failed in preventing refugees from entering Lebanon through irregular routes.
- **2017-2018:** Hezbollah-mediated attempts to organize the so-called "voluntary returns" These are areas Hezbollah had previously displaced inhabitants through military operations.
- **2018:** The Russian initiative encouraging refugees to return to the so-called "de-escalation zones" in Syria. This remains largely unsuccessful due to the continued unsafe conditions in Syria.
- **2019:** The Lebanese Higher Defense Council's decision to deport refugees who entered Lebanon "illegally" after April 2019. The Lebanese army began to officially implement it in April 2023, which has only heightening their sense of insecurity and led to immense violations of human rights.
- **2022-2023:** Forced deportation campaigns that led to severe human rights violations both in Lebanon and in Syria. The vast majority of Syrian refugees continue to reject repatriation due to the dangers that await them upon return.

## **Lebanese policy – leading to further insecurity and human rights violations:**

As outlined above, the Lebanese government's longstanding position of adopting initiatives with the aim of returning Syrian refugees en masse to Syria have generally failed to accomplish their intended aims. Instead, each of these initiatives has created further insecurities for Syrians in Lebanon and ongoing deportations have been marked by gross human rights violations, including mistreatment, discrimination, forced disappearances, and even torture. By continuing to pursue these illegal policies through these actions, Lebanon is not only ignoring the imminent dangers that deportees face upon return to Syria, but is also systematically contributing to these abuses during these deportations.

ACHR and other human rights organizations have documented numerous cases where deportees were tortured to death in Syrian prisons, specifically those who were activists or defectors from the Syrian Army. Despite these clearly documented risks and the presence of well-founded fears of persecution for many Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Lebanese authorities continue to violate international law by deporting individuals who have explicitly expressed fear for their lives if deported.

Further, without addressing the root causes of displacement, including how the armed actor Hezbollah – which is also a political actor and party in the Lebanese government – continues to play an active and direct role in armed conflict that has led to mass displacement in Syria, these ad hoc policies adopted by the Lebanese government will only feed uncertainty and increase the suffering Syrians in Lebanon. The lack of comprehensive or evidence-based planning in executing these plans will also likely increase the likelihood of human rights abuses and feed future insecurity in the region.

### **ACHR's urgent call to action**

In light of the above, ACHR urgently calls on the Lebanese authorities to:

- 1-** Immediately halt all unlawful forced deportations and suspend any further steps toward implementing any plan that stands against international obligations of non-refoulement and will lead to gross violations of human rights.
- 2-** Abide by well-established international legal conclusions from multiple human rights organizations and the United Nations, that Syria remains unsafe for returns and support a process that could lead to proper conditions of voluntary dignified returns and abide by the Convention Against Torture (in particular Article 3).
- 3-** Coordinate with third countries, whether directly or through UNHCR, for potential resettlement programs for refugees.
- 4-** End restrictive measures and discriminatory practices against Syrians in Lebanon and respect their human rights in accordance with both Lebanese and international laws.
- 5-** Actively and genuinely consult refugee populations and assess ways they can be included in plans that relate to their future. Without the active involvement of refugees in decision-making processes, any return plan will inevitably fail to address the concerns and needs of refugees- of which are crucial to consider if and when conditions for their voluntary and dignified return are reached.

ACHR reaffirms its commitment to advocating for the rights and safety of Syrian refugees in Lebanon assuring that refugees deserve a safe dignified return to their country when their lives are not threatened.