Situational Update:
Syrian Refugees in Lebanon During the Ceasefire and Challenges Facing Returnees After the Fall of the Assad Regime

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

Lebanon: The situation of refugees during the ceasefire and following the fall of the Assad regime

The announcement of a ceasefire in Lebanon and the fall of the Assad regime have created a mix of optimism and uncertainty for Syrian refugees. Widespread Israeli hostilities devasted south Lebanon, the eastern Bekaa Valley, and the southern suburbs of Beirut, resulting in over **4,000** deaths, **16,520** injuries, and internal displacement of more than **899,725** individuals. **The 60-day ceasefire agreement took effect on November 27, 2024, remains extremely fragile, with over a hundred reported violations by Israel.** Syrian refugees residing in the south are unable to return to their houses due to destroyed infrastructure, lack of basic services, and limited access to employment. At the height of the Israeli hostilities in Lebanon, more than **620,000** individuals, both Lebanese and Syrians, fled to Syria. At this time, **Syrians forcibly returned faced grave security threats from the former Assad regime and related security entities** including the threat of detainment and forced disappearance with several cases monitored by ACHR. During this time of significant mass forced returns from Lebanon to Syria, Lebanese politicians used the significant numbers of Syrians returning as evidence of improved conditions in Syria, using this narrative to justify deportations and tightened measures.

4,000	**16,520**	more than **899,725**	**620K**
Killed	Injuries	Internal Displacement	Fled from Lebanon to Syria

Meanwhile, **Lebanese authorities have also escalated violent security raids on informal settlements**, harassing refugees and destroying properties, as a strategy to coerce more refugees to return to Syria. On 6 December, the Lebanese army raided "Camp 046" in Bar Elias, where they entered the informal settlement destroying at least one tent and a concrete structure built for children with special needs, leaving the family homeless in freezing conditions. Similar raids were reported in other refugee camps with residents facing verbal abuse, physical violence, and the destruction of personal property, including water tanks and internet devices. These actions constitute clear violations of refugee rights and seem to be a coordinated effort by the Lebanese authorities to coerce Syrians into leaving Lebanon.

Following the fall of the Assad's regime on December 8, Lebanese politicians escalated anti-refugee rhetoric. On 10 December, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil claimed that "the reason for the (Syrian) displacement in Lebanon has completely ended" and urged for their swift deportation. On 26 December, the general coordinator for the National Campaign for the Return of Displaced Syrians, Maroun al-Khouli, claimed that "the excuses refugees made to remain in Lebanon no longer exist," stressing that their return should be mandatory. Further, Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati called on Syrian refugees to immediately leave and linked Lebanon's economic recovery to the return of Syrian refugees, urging the international community, particularly Europe, to assist in these returns.

Syria: challenges facing returnees after the fall of the former Assad regime

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than **195,000** Syrians have returned to Syria as of 15 January. However, the agency expects up to **1 million** refugees to return between January and June 2025. The interim government in Syria has asserted its commitment to protecting returnees and their properties to instill confidence among refugee populations. However, numerous challenges face Syrians. **ACHR monitored several cases of returnees reporting receiving threats of violence and arbitrary expulsion from civilians in their areas, accusing them of being supporters of the former Assad regime.** Other incidents of violence in various areas within Syria have also been reported and shared widely on social media, adding to fears of instability. On 12 January, protests erupted in the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib after the announcement of increased customs tariffs, leading to a rise of up to 500% in some basic commodities.
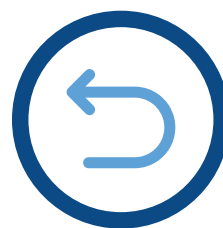
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While the new political environment in Syria offers a window of opportunity for political changes that could potentially lead to safety and durable conditions for Syrians, **Syria continues to be unsafe and future challenges are many.** According to ACHR's field team, many returnees expressed regret for leaving Lebanon and chose to reverse their decision. Despite expressing feelings of enhanced safety, Syrian returnees were faced with the reality of the destruction of their homes, neighborhoods, towns, and cities with essential infrastructure and basic services nonexistent. ACHR's field officers spoke with several returnees about their experiences upon returning to Syria, where the reality proved far more challenging than anticipated.

On 29 November, a Syrian refugee family returned to Saraqib, Idlib, only to face threats and violence from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), forcing them to flee. By 10 January, some members of the family sought refuge elsewhere, while others returned to Lebanon irregularly. The family now struggles with legal and humanitarian challenges to reunite. In another case, after years of displacement and being expelled from Baalbek, a Syrian refugee returned to Syria on 12 December, only to find his home destroyed and no employment opportunities, regretting his decision. On 17 January, he returned to Lebanon, hoping to secure a new home and bring his family back. Despite their initial hopefulness to return to Syria following the fall of Assad's regime, these refugees, like many others who opted to return to Syria, were ultimately compelled to return to Lebanon after confronting the harsh and dire conditions in Syria. **Challenges in Syria continue to make life nearly impossible for returnees.**

Syrians abroad continue to face legal and administrative barriers in their freedom of movement, combined by concerns about their legal status in the countries of asylum. Several EU member states have begun reassessing their refugee policies, arguing that toppling the former Assad regime invalidates the primary reason for asylum – the "fear of persecution." This, however, contradicts UNHCR's longstanding and rearticulated position, that Syria remains unsafe for returns. While there is a consensus that the situation in Syria remains precarious, many European nations are keen to promote refugee returns and freeze or suspended asylum cases. Austria, for example, has stopped processing asylum claims and announced plans for "orderly repatriation and deportation to Syria" offering monetary incentives to encourage Syrian refugees to leave. Similarly, several other EU governments have halted their asylum applications for Syrians and have begun promoting repatriation. This push for large-scale returns to Syria, given Syria's fragile and unstable state, undermines the protection of Syrians.

Recommendations

- Countries should uphold **the rights of refugees and asylum seekers** within their borders, with continued access to asylum procedures and access to protection and other human rights.

- Countries must **refrain from exploiting developments in Syria** to advance their domestic refugee agenda.

- For those considering return, countries should **ease procedures and provide flexible ways in which refugees can return to Syria** for short periods of time to assess conditions without jeopardizing their legal status.

- For those who choose to return to Syria, **the process must be safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified.**

- **Countries should continue their just and humane refugee policies until the entirety of Syria is safe,** ensuring a comprehensive reassessment of conditions for returnees.