



STATEMENT

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEBANON'S REFUGEE RETURN PLAN COINCIDES WITH MOUNTING PRESSURES ON SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

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An increase of violations against Syrian refugees in Lebanon has occurred alongside the announcement and implementation of an official refugee return plan. While many details of the plan have yet to be made public, the plan is seemingly in cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and is being implemented in a context of significant legal, social, and economic pressures exerted by the Government of Lebanon (GoL) and affiliated security authorities on Syrian refugees. While conditions in Syria have fundamentally changed after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria continues to remain unsafe and unsuitable for large-scale return programs.



AVAILABLE INFORMATION ON THE REFUGEE RETURN PLAN:

While few details of the plan are public, the plan is confirmed to be within the framework of the Lebanese Response Plan (LRP) and is described as a “Return Plan” (RP) involving “the Government of Lebanon and the international community”. Recently UNHCR – the UN agency mandated with refugee issues - launched a \$370.9 million appeal for its new ‘Operational Framework for the Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons’¹. The framework signals a strategic shift to one of active support and facilitation of returns, citing both growing numbers of spontaneous returns and refugee requests for support. UNHCR states that two “voluntary return programs for a limited period of three months, beginning on 1 July 2025”² will be implemented: The first is the “Self-Organized Voluntary Return Program”, which allows refugees to manage the logistics of their return independently and each returning family member is eligible to receive a one-time cash grant of \$100 to support their return via official land border crossings. The second program is the “Organized Voluntary Return Program”, which provides the same financial assistance with additional transportation support and the program is reportedly being implemented in coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Lebanese authorities.

This information is in line with details shared by Lebanese officials and authorities including The General Directorate of General Security (GDGS) which announced that from July 1 to September 30, 2025, Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria can leave Lebanon via land borders without fees, penalties, or re-entry bans, regardless of legal entry.³ According to a recent UPINION survey, the understanding of the decision varied and “reactions were mixed”: some respondents “appreciated financial/legal exemptions (11 responses), but many expressed fear/anxiety about forced repatriation (13 responses) or found it irrelevant due to practical barriers (15 responses).”⁴ According to the RP, the plan involves structured engagement with the GoL, particularly the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), the Inter-Ministerial Return Committee and security entities such as the GSO, “which plays a central role in processing return applications and formalizing the safe and dignified exit” as well as the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

1-<https://www.unhcr.org/media/2025-operational-framework-voluntary-return-syrian-refugees-and-idps>

2-UNHCR Return Page: <https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/welcome/return-to-syria/>

3-<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1465408/syria-announces-new-steps-to-facilitate-return-of-citizens-from-lebanon.html>



LEBANON'S UN-BACKED REFUGEE RETURN PLAN OCCURS ALONGSIDE SIGNIFICANT VIOLATIONS AND COERCIVE PRESSURE ON REFUGEES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON:

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees have long been systematically pressured to return through different formal and informal pressure campaigns that include, discriminatory policies, ongoing human rights violations - including forced deportations⁵, evictions⁶, restrictive residency regulations⁷, widescale arrest and eviction campaigns⁸, violent security raids⁹, the targeting of refugee settlements, legal and bureaucracy restrictions, and growing anti-refugee rhetoric¹⁰. These pressures create a hostile and discriminatory environment and make it increasingly impossible for Syrian refugees to live a dignified life inside Lebanon. The suspension of UNHCR registrations since 2015 deprives refugees of their refugee status in Lebanon and therefore any meaningful form of protection under internationally recognized status as a refugee. As such, their presence is not legally recognized (and therefore their rights cannot be protected) and their choice to return is likely to be in response to the accumulated pressures and restrictions they face in Lebanon.

In recent weeks and alongside the implementation of the return plan which began on July 1, 2025, Lebanese authorities have intensified pressure on Syrian refugees through a series of coordinated actions, including raids, arrests, and eviction orders. For instance, on 10 June 2025, the Litani River Authority (LRA) issued 34 eviction notices targeting Syrian refugee settlements along the Litani River. According to ACHR field sources, these evictions orders threaten to displace approximately 2,500 people, most of whom are women and children. As a result, several Syrian refugees - facing the threat of eviction and facing pressure from landowners to leave - have opted to remove several tents. From a recent UPINION report, most refugee respondents who received eviction notices had already been evicted, and 7 out of these 8 lacked safe alternative shelter, and a further "3 respondents were not given a clear deadline, and 2 were given less than 15 days"¹¹. Further, key concerns for affected individuals included financial support for rent/housing, securing a safe place to stay, and support for children (5 respondents).

The eviction notices targeting refugee camps also coincide with intensified security raids on refugee homes. The LAF claims to have conducted at least 13 raids across multiple areas between 1 and 15 July, resulting in the arrest of over 666 Syrian refugees¹², on the alleged justification of illegal entry and/or lack of legal documentation. These operations took place in homes and informal shelters, often at dawn and without prior notice. According to ACHR field sources, a raid conducted on 14 July in the Bhamdoun area, involved approximately 50 to 60 armed officers and witnesses report violations of privacy and dignity, including the use of physical force to carry out arrests and the refusal to allow women time to dress. Of note, according to ACHR field sources, refugees who have registered to return to Syria and are therefore part of the return plan, have also been arrested and been targeted in raids. The intensification of eviction pressures and security raids occurring alongside the implementation of the return plan raises serious concerns about whether the GoL is escalating pressures to encourage refugees to pursue their return through the RP.

4-UPINION, July 2025, Report: The impact of return policy in Lebanon: Syrian refugee intentions and return prospects. Page 3.

5-<https://achrights.org/en/2023/05/11/13137/>

6-Including most recently on 10 June 2025, when the Litani River Authority (LRA) issued 34 eviction notices targeting refugee settlements located in various areas along the Litani river. While the evictions have not yet taken place, if they are to be implemented it will likely impact approximately 410 families (around 2,500 individuals), most of whom are women and children.

7-<https://achrights.org/en/2020/03/12/10569/>

8-<https://www.achrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Uprooting-the-Displaced-The-Forced-Evictions-of-Syrian-Refugees-in-Lebanon.pdf>

9-<https://www.achrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Security-raids-in-Lebanon-1.pdf>

10-<https://www.achrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Annual-impact-report.pdf>

11-UPINION, July 2025, "Report: The impact of return policy in Lebanon: Syrian refugee intentions and return prospects." Page 3.

12-<https://x.com/lebarmyofficial?s=11>

While many refugees have opted to return to Syria, their decision cannot be de-contextualized from the environment of coercion and the “push factors” that amount to state-sponsored campaigns and systematic policies designed to curtail refugees’ ability to remain in the country safely and lawfully. A recent UPINION report that surveyed 214 refugees, better clarifies return intentions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon indicating that only 12% of those interviewed planned to return to Syria and 50% expressed “no desire to return to Syria”¹³. The report also notes the pressure to return and the fear of forced deportation with many respondents expressing significant anxiety about being forced to return to Syria through pressure by the Lebanese government and the general environment of “security campaigns, raids, and quick decisions regarding the evacuation of Syrians.”¹⁴ As such, these pressures are major drivers for those to return but does not de facto assume that all returns are voluntary and does not ensure that those who do return are met with the conditions necessary to ensure that their return is durable¹⁵.



CONDITIONS IN SYRIA ARE NOT CONDUCTIVE TO WIDESCALE REFUGEE RETURNS:

While the Assad regime was a key security issue for millions of Syrian refugees and a main obstacle to their safe return, a myriad of other security and safety risks continue to shape the way refugees assess their safety and their willingness to return to Syria. Massacres and sectarian violence in the Sahel targeting Alawites¹⁶, and the Druze community¹⁷, a terror bombing in a church near Damascus¹⁹, and ongoing Israeli airstrikes and encroachment in the south²⁰ all pose grave security risks to Syrians and threaten further destabilization. Following the massacres in the Sahel for instance, an estimated 40,000 new refugees fled into Lebanon in March 2025²¹. Such conditions seriously challenge the notion that safety and security in Syria is of a durable nature and that refugees returning can do so in conditions that ensure their continual safety and protection.

In addition to direct security threats, Syria continues to face significant challenges that undermine safety conditions including a large-scale internal displacement crisis, significant and widescale destruction and damage to homes, critical infrastructure and agricultural lands, contamination of explosive remnants of war, housing land and property violations, a weak economy and a large-scale humanitarian crisis that is ongoing – all of which undermine safe and durable conditions within Syria and pose significant protection risks²².



KEY QUESTIONS: SAFE, VOLUNTARY, DIGNIFIED AND INFORMED?

In UNHCR’s statement on 16 December 2024, the agency reiterated a long-standing position that “for the time being UNHCR is not promoting large-scale voluntary repatriation to Syria”. In the same statement, UNHCR also called for support to create “favourable conditions” for refugees and displaced people to return home whilst also underlining that States should not “forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria, including Palestinians previously residing in Syria, to any part of Syria”²³. Despite this position, UNHCR is seemingly implementing a RP in coordination with the GoL, undermining its initial position and dedicating its limited resources to its ‘Operational Framework for the Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons’ at the expense of scaling up aid in other sectors in Lebanon.

13-UPINION, July 2025, Report: The impact of return policy in Lebanon: Syrian refugee intentions and return prospects. Page 2.

14-Ibid. Page 10.

15-<https://achrights.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/RPW-annual-report-2024-EN-v05.pdf>

16-<https://apnews.com/article/syria-alawites-latakia-tartous-assad-hts-1c6ec79a752ac0fe3da454b5a774a4df>

17-<https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/syrias-druze-are-wary-in-the-wake-of-attacks/>

18-BBC. 19 July. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0m87d4p9gvo>

19-<https://apnews.com/article/syria-church-attack-damascus-mass-da2ed505d6625fce1fc9de9e88c200a3>

20-<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/4/mapping-israels-expanding-air-attacks-across-syria>

21-<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/06/04/syrian-alawites-flee-lebanon-little-aid-meet-them>

22-<https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/Homs%20RCP.pdf>

23-https://www.refworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/unhcr_position_on_returns_to_syria_-_16_dec_2024.pdf

As noted above, few details are available about the plan and it therefore difficult to assess whether it abides by basic protection principles and how it ensures that returns are indeed voluntary, dignified, informed and safe. The LRP emphasized that the RP will “support safe, dignified, informed, and sustainable returns, while upholding the international principles and safeguarding the rights and dignity of returnees” and that “international support for the implementation of the RP is premised on adherence to international standards on return” referencing ‘Conclusion No. 18 (XXXI): Voluntary Repatriation - Adopted by the Executive Committee (1980)’ as the guiding document for the aforementioned international standards²⁴. However, the Conclusion and the standards indicated do not specifically define or identify how the “voluntary character of repatriation” can be genuinely assessed. “Voluntary” – a term associated with agency and choice as well as free will - is a deeply normative term and is difficult to assess and de-link from political push factors in Lebanon.

Further, the Conclusion does recognize “the importance of refugees being provided with the necessary information regarding conditions in their country of origin in order to facilitate their decision to repatriate” and the LRP references the need to provide refugees with updated information on conditions in the intended area of return²⁵ to ensure an informed decision. However, the ongoing fluidity of the governance and security situation in different areas in Syria and ongoing insecurity in different areas (as mentioned in previous sections) raises serious questions about the durable nature of the security situation. Further, it remains unclear what information UNHCR uses to determine the safety status of refugees returning and how it intends to follow up on the safety and protection of refugees following return (beyond humanitarian assistance). These remain key questions to ensure that returns are indeed voluntary, safe, informed and dignified.

Without assessing returns in the context of significant pressures within Lebanon, the plan runs the risk of legitimizing the Lebanese states’ discriminatory and coercive practices used against refugees and facilitating de facto forced returns under the guise of a humanitarian framework. Further, support for a widescale return plan at a moment when Syria continues to be unsafe and conditions not durable increase the likelihood of protection risks faced by returnees.



CONCLUSION:

The refugee RP in Lebanon is unfolding amid substantial legal, social, and economic pressures placed on Syrian refugees by Lebanese authorities which have been intensified since the implementation of the plan. Many details of the plan have yet to be made public and ACHR calls on the GoL, UN agencies and LRP donors to provide additional information on how they assure that returns occur in a way that is voluntary, safe, dignified, and informed. Further, the plan is being implemented in a context of pressure against refugees in Lebanon and at a time when conditions in Syria continue to remain unsafe and unsuitable for large-scale return programs. Moving forward, all stakeholders—including the Lebanese government, UNHCR, and the international community—must prioritize creating safe, sustainable conditions in Syria, upholding the rights of refugees, and ensuring that any returns are truly voluntary, safe, and conducted with dignity.

24-‘Conclusions on International Protection’, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom), October 1980, See: <https://www.refworld.org/policy/exconc/excom/1980/en/41894>

25-UNHCR Return Page: <https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/2025/07/02/launch-of-the-self-organized-voluntary-return-program/>



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