



Syrian Refugees Face Arrest, Disappearance, and Torture During UN-Supported Return Plan

Joint Statement
2 October 2025

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) and Cedar Center for Legal Studies (CCLS) strongly condemn the human rights violations committed against Syrian returnees by Lebanese General Security (GSO) at the Syrian Lebanese border. In two separate cases, the returnees were subjected to human rights violations.

On 19 September 2025, a Syrian refugee was arrested by Lebanese General Security (GSO) ¹ at the Masnaa border crossing while attempting to return to Syria legally under the UN-supported Refugee Return Plan, accompanied by his wife and two children. He was stopped on the pretext of a “similarity of names,” and it was later revealed that a 2022 arrest warrant alleged his affiliation with a Syrian opposition faction. During his detention in different centres, he was subjected to repeated interrogations, beatings on his feet and degrading treatment. Despite his lawful participation in the return plan, he was detained without official notification to his family or legal representatives, and for several days his whereabouts were denied by both the Military Police and the General Directorate of General Security until 26 September 2025, when his family was informed that he had arrived to Syria.

On 8 August 2025, a Syrian refugee was arrested at the Qaa Jousieh border crossing (between Lebanon and Syria) by Lebanese General Security (GSO). He was arrested on the pretext that there was an outstanding arrest warrant in his name but was not provided with information on the charge. The arrest occurred while he was attempting to return legally and formally alongside his wife and six children through the UN supported refugee return plan (RP) which aims to facilitate and support Syrian refugees in Lebanon with their return to Syria. Following the arrest, he was subjected to torture, including electric shocks and beatings. During his detainment he was held under degrading conditions including a lack of ventilation and lighting, poor hygiene and a lack of other basic needs. Under unclear circumstances, the refugee was reportedly deported to Syria where he was immediately hospitalized due to his health condition, and he continues to suffer from severe pain and exhaustion.

Human rights violations: arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance and torture

The two cases highlight a series of violations and human rights abuses committed by the GSO; The refugees were both subject to arbitrary arrest and detention based on spurious terror related claims and not provided with proper judicial safeguards or proper due process and were detained for prolonged periods, held under degrading conditions and denied basic rights such as the right to contact family members and the right to legal representation. Both refugees were subjected to torture and ill-treatment including to electric shocks and, beatings while detained by GSO and as a result, one refugee required hospitalization immediately upon return to Syria.

These human rights violations are clearly outlawed in international conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), namely in Article 9(1) which prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention and Lebanese national laws including the Penal Code procedure. The Penal Code further stipulates various rights including the “right to know” for family members (Article 2) as well as the right to “equal treatment without discrimination” (Article 4). Further, the use of torture is considered a *jus cogens* norm indicating that it is a rule from which no derogation is permitted and as such is strictly outlawed in the Convention Against Torture (CAT) - to which Lebanon is a party and is obliged to prevent such practices in any detention facility – as well as Lebanon’s Penal Code² under which torture is criminalized under the Anti-Torture Law No. 65 of 2017.³

Prolonged detentions and indefinite pretrial detentions are especially evident in terrorism-related cases with Article 108 of Lebanon's Criminal Procedure Code setting limits on the detention time for different felonies but exempts "serious offenses" including state security and terrorism from any time limits.⁴ This provision endows military courts - staffed by officers appointed by the Ministry of Defense - with extensive powers to hold individuals indefinitely without fair trials or charges⁵. Courts have often relied on coerced confessions and in some instances, detainees have remained imprisoned despite having completed their sentences.⁶ In such cases, Syrian refugees accused under security or terrorism provisions are systematically denied access to legal counsel, medical care, and family visits and violations documented include mistreatment, physical abuse and deaths in custody.⁷ Of note, the Free Syrian Army has since been de-listed as a terrorist organization by the Lebanese government.⁸ The two cases,

In at least one of these cases, Lebanese authorities' denied custody and failed to disclose the location of the victim which constitutes a direct breach of Law 105/2018⁹, in addition to violations of obligations under international law. As such, the case is classified as enforced disappearance under both Lebanese and international law as it includes the absence of acknowledgment of detention and denial of custody¹⁰. In such cases the risk of torture – as was the case in at least one of the victims – increases given the lack of transparency surrounding the detention conditions of the victim.

Human rights violations that occur in the context of the UN-supported refugee return plan:

At the time of arrest and detainment, both returnees had been attempting to cross the border formally and legally through the UN-supported return plan. Both were in possession of the necessary Repatriation Form (RF) that functions as a one-time identification document that facilitates movement through security checkpoints and border crossings in Lebanon. The UN return process necessitates various steps by UNHCR including the closure of the refugees' UNHCR file in Lebanon which results in the cessation of refugee status of the individual.¹¹ As a result, the individuals refugee status is terminated and UNHCR's protection mandate is no longer applicable.¹² Once at the Lebanon border, the RF is validated and stamped by Lebanon's General Security (GSO), who also ensures that all waivers of administrative or legal penalties related to residency violations or overstay are applied. Security checks are also carried out with Lebanese security entities to verify the refugee's eligibility before departure.¹³ Once the RF is stamped by GSO, families can proceed to the designated border crossing and manage their own transportation to reach their intended area of return in Syria¹⁴.

The arrests of the two Syrian refugees during their engagement in the UN Return Plan (RP) undermines key protection principles of dignity and safety during the return process. The arrests of the victims occurred at border crossings in front of their family members, causing significant trauma and fear at a time when the family had intended to return to their country of origin in a dignified and formal manner. The arrests also occurred following the closure of the refugees' UNHCR file in Lebanon meaning that the individuals and family members were no longer under the protection mandate that UNHCR refugee status affords them, leaving them vulnerable to protection risks. As such the arbitrary nature of the arrests and the abuses during detainment, raise serious concerns about the protection of refugees and highlights a lack of genuine protection guarantees during the return process. Without real and credible security guarantees in the process of return, refugees will remain fearful and uncertain that the return to Syria will be safe. Refugees have often expressed significant push factors that shape their decision to return (including coercive pressure from security actors) and have remained uncertain and fearful about their security in Lebanon and in Syria. The human rights abuses committed during the return process thereby undermines the credibility of the RP as a safe mechanism, will engender distrust in the program and likely lead to a deeper trust gap between refugees and the UN, and refugees and Lebanese security entities.

ACHR and CCLS call for:

- Ensuring protection in line with Lebanon's binding obligations under international human rights treaties.
- Prevent and prohibit enforced disappearance by fully implementing Law 105/2018 and Lebanon's international obligations, ensuring no individual is held incommunicado or outside the protection of the law, and by penalizing any acts that obstruct investigations or exert pressure on disclosure processes.
- Guarantee the rights enshrined in Article 47 of the Lebanese Code of Criminal Procedure, including access to a lawyer, communication with family members, and medical examination, particularly for persons detained under security or terrorism-related provisions.
- Prohibit and prevent torture and ill-treatment, ensure accountability for perpetrators, and implement the Anti-Torture Law No. 65 of 2017 in line with Lebanon's obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT).
- Enable independent monitoring of all places of detention to prevent torture, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance.
- Ensure that refugee returns are voluntary, safe, and dignified, in line with international protection principles, and strengthen safeguards for refugees engaging in the UN-supported return plan.
- Guarantee that the United Nations maintains an active and visible presence at official border crossings used in the return program, with monitoring and documentation to ensure compliance with international standards.

1-General Security Office (GSO) is the Lebanese authority responsible for overseeing the entry, stay, and exit of foreigners, including refugees, and for implementing security-related policies.

2-Lebanon Penal Code, 1943. UNODC. See: https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/document/lbn/1943/lebanon_penal_code.html

3-Amnesty International, Lebanon: Seven years of enacting a torture law without effective implementation, 26 June 2025. See:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/MDE1895392025ENGLISH.pdf>

4-Badil, policy paper – Breaking the chains: time for justice in Lebanon's prison system, 17 May 2021. See:

<https://thebadil.com/policy/policy-papers/breaking-the-chains-time-for-justice-in-lebanons-prison-system/>

5-Human Rights Watch – Lebanon: Civilians tried in military courts, 26 January 2017. See:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/26/lebanon-civilians-tried-military-courts#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt%20has%20become%20abundantly%20clear,%E2%80%9D>

6-Amnesty International - Lebanon: 'I Wished I Would Die'- Syrian refugees arbitrarily detained on terrorism-related charges and tortured in Lebanon, 23 March

2021. See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/3671/2021/en/>

7-Such practices are both illegal under international law and illegal under Lebanese national law (e.g. Article 47 of the Lebanese Criminal Procedure Code).

8-<https://isf.gov.lb/national-terrorism-financial-list/>

9-Law 105/2018 on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons. See: <https://cfkdl.org/definition-of-law-105>

10-Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006). See:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced>

11-The 1951 Convention sets out circumstances under which refugee status that was properly granted by UNHCR under its mandate may be terminated because the individual who was recognized as a refugee is no longer in need of refugee protection. Cessation clauses include two broad categories 1-those relating to a change in the personal circumstances brought about by the voluntary acts of the refugee and; 2- those related to a change in the objective situation that were the basis of the recognition of the refugee status.

12-UNHCR, Unit 11, Procedures for Cessation of Refugee Status, See: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/43170ff61f.pdf>

13-The General Directorate of General Security (GDGS) in Lebanon 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 or overstay. This was extended in September 2025 until December 2025 with a small addition related "legal impediments".

14-ACHR report - The Lebanon Return Refugee Plan: From the Perspective of Syrian Returnees Engaging in the Return Program, September 2025. See:

<https://achrights.org/en/2025/09/24/15951/>