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Syrian Refugees Remain Acutely Vulnerable During Times of Crisis

Access Centre for Human Rights (ACHR)

Paris France

March 2026



Paris, France

30 March 2026

Since the escalation of Israeli attacks on Lebanon in early March 2026, airstrikes have intensified across southern Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut, and the Bekaa region. In recent days, strikes have expanded to cover large parts of southern Lebanon, including areas surrounding the Litani River. According to the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, at least 1,094 people have been killed, including 121 children and 31 healthcare workers, and 3,119 others injured as of 25 March.¹ These attacks have been accompanied by repeated evacuation orders (often with little notice) issued by the Israeli military, targeting vast areas of southern Lebanon, including regions south of the Litani River and parts of southern Beirut.² Israeli evacuation orders have frequently proven inadequate and, in some cases, misleading and do not absolve them of their obligations under international humanitarian law to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians as the orders are neither realistic nor safe to implement and risk undermining civilian protection, particularly for the most vulnerable populations, including refugees and migrants, persons with disabilities, children, and dependents.

Most recently, on 23 March, Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for the effective annexation of southern Lebanon and stated that "the Litani River must become our new border with the State of Lebanon - just like the buffer line in Gaza"³. The evacuation zone spans a significant portion of southern Lebanon (amounting to nearly a tenth of Lebanese territory) and represents one of the largest civilian displacements in the country since the ceasefire agreement.⁴ Within two weeks of the escalation, over one million people that amounts to more than 20 percent of the country's population, have been forcibly displaced in Lebanon as a result.⁵ Israel has since destroyed key civilian infrastructure including bridges and demolished residential areas near the border. It has also recently announced plans to accelerate the destruction of bridges and homes in southern villages⁶. Under international humanitarian law, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including the intentional targeting of

¹ OCHA Lebanon, 21 March 2026. See: [Liban : Mise à jour rapide #10 - Escalade des hostilités au Liban, au 19 mars 2026 - Liban | ReliefWeb](#)

² Human Rights Watch – Israeli Military calls for evacuating Southern Lebanon, 5 March 2026. See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/05/israeli-military-calls-for-evacuating-southern-lebanon>

³ Israeli MP Smotrich urges Israel to annex Southern Lebanon, 23 March 2026: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/23/smotrich-urges-israel-to-annex-southern-lebanon-as-assault-intensifies>

⁴ Amnesty International – Press release: Israeli military's overly broad mass evacuation orders, 6 March 2026. See: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/lebanon-israeli-militarys-overly-broad-mass-evacuation-orders-are-sowing-panic-and-fueling-humanitarian-suffering/>

⁵ UN News – Lebanon displacement tops one million, 18 March 2026. See: <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2026/03/116886/middle-east-live-18-march-lebanon-displacement-tops-one-million>

⁶ Ashraq Alawsat - Israeli military instructed to accelerate demolition of more bridges, Lebanese homes and villages, 22 March 2026. See: <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5253952-israeli-military-instructed-accelerate-demolition-more-bridges-lebanese-homes>

housing used by civilians, may constitute war crimes under the Fourth Geneva Convention.⁷ Further, the use of wide-area effect weapons in densely populated areas, including the use of white phosphorus in South Lebanon,⁸ and evacuation orders suggesting permanent displacement may amount to unlawful forcible transfer and collective punishment and are all prohibited under international law.⁹ Israeli attacks have also directly impacted United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) forces and positions: On March 6, an Israeli tank strike wounded Ghanaian peacekeepers.¹⁰ Since the beginning of the war, the United Nations have also publicly condemned the ongoing US-Israel military assaults on Lebanon and Iran qualified as “flagrant violations of international law”¹¹.

Deadly airstrikes on refugees

Israeli airstrikes have targeted densely populated areas where refugees live and work. ACHR field team documented several incidents involving Syrian refugees throughout March. On 24 March, an Israeli strike hit a petrol station in southern Lebanon near the Rashidieh camp for Palestinian refugees, triggering a large explosion and a fire. On 26 February, two Syrian refugees were killed in airstrikes in the Bekaa Valley. On 28 February, six Syrian refugees were killed in southern Lebanon and Beirut. On 8 March, eleven Syrian agricultural workers were injured when a drone strike targeted them while working on a farm in Yahmar al-Shaqif and the day after, fifteen Syrians were injured in an airstrike in Kawthariyat al-Ruz, while another incident in Bint Jbeil resulted in one death and one injury. On 11 March, ten people were killed and eighteen injured when a building housing a Syrian family was struck in Tamnin al-Tahta in the Bekaa Valley. On the same day, two Syrians were injured in Barashit, and four Syrian nationals were later killed in an airstrike in Jebchit, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Health. Most recently, on 22 March, an entire Syrian family of five was killed in an airstrike targeting the city of Sidon, Lebanon. Overall, at least 28 Syrian refugees have been killed and 46 injured as a result of Israeli airstrikes and this number is expected to rise significantly.

Consequences of Israeli attacks on refugees

According to the most recent data from UNHCR, approximately 1,049,000 people are internally displaced within Lebanon, including 350,000 children.¹² As part of the emergency

⁷ Article 147 and violations of Additional Protocol I, including articles 51, 57 and 85.

⁸ Human Rights Watch - Israel unlawfully using white phosphorus, 9 March 2026. See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/09/lebanon-israel-unlawfully-using-white-phosphorus>

⁹ ICRC - Article 49 - Deportations, transfers, evacuations. See: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-49>

¹⁰ Israel acknowledges tank fire hit UNIFIL base in Lebanon: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israel-acknowledges-tank-fire-mistakenly-hit-unifil-base-in-lebanon-apologizes/ar-AA1YT4ha>

¹¹ OHCHR - Press release, 12 March 2026: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/un-experts-denounce-aggression-iran-and-lebanon-warn-devastating-regional>

¹² UN – Urgent humanitarian appeal amidst massive displacement, 27 March 2026. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/urgent-humanitarian-appeal-amidst-massive-displacement-and-rapid-escalation-catastrophic-situation-lebanon-march-26-2026>

response, Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs, in coordination with UNHCR, IOM, and other international and national organizations, have currently opened¹³.² However, as of 24 March, these shelters accommodate only around 134,000 internally displaced persons, including 45,750 children, a significant gap between needs and available capacity.

As Israeli attacks have targeted areas with high concentrations of Syrian refugees, particularly south of the Litani River and in the Bekaa Valley, UNHCR has activated its refugee tracking tool to identify geographically refugees and those in need of assistance and shelter. Many refugees have been forced to relocate to other governorates, often under urgent conditions and with heightened vulnerabilities, including serious medical conditions, disabilities, single caregivers, and pregnant women. At the same time, a significant number have remained in place despite Israeli evacuation orders, largely due to the absence of viable alternatives, including access to safe housing and shelter.

Access to shelter remains particularly limited for refugee populations. Syrian refugees have reported being excluded from collective shelters and facing discrimination based on their nationality or perceived affiliation with the conflict. As a result, many have been left without adequate accommodation, forcing some to sleep in public spaces, including streets and parks, or to rely on already overstretched informal networks of relatives and acquaintances. Displacement has often been recurring and unstable, with families moving multiple times in search of safety. As one displaced Syrian family described:

"We left with only our children. We looked for a safe shelter but couldn't find one. They expelled us from Martyrs' Square after we slept in the open for two days. They directed us to a shelter in the Sports City, but when we arrived, they refused to receive us and turned us away. We went down to the Bekaa Valley to a relative's house in the camp in Riyaaq. The camp was bombed. Where are we supposed to go now?"

Shelter capacity remains extremely limited overall. For example, only four shelters have been established in the Bekaa Valley (in Bar Elias and Ghazze) by Syrian-Lebanese organizations in partnership with UNHCR, and capacity is limited with no more than 500 people in each shelter. At the same time, Israeli evacuation orders directing civilians toward northern areas are placing significant pressure on already overcrowded shelters. Mount Lebanon, for instance, currently has only around ten shelters available,¹⁴ despite hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals heading to the north of Lebanon. ACHR field team has further documented that less than 10 percent of displaced Syrian refugees in the Deir al-Ahmar area of Baalbek District (Bekaa Valley) reported receiving financial assistance¹⁵. A significant proportion also indicated that they had not received adequate food aid or shelter support.

¹³ See UNHCR dashboard: [Shelter Monitoring](#).

¹⁴ See UNHCR dashboard: [Shelter Monitoring](#).

¹⁵ Data from ACHR field team monitoring

Israeli airstrikes also targeted agricultural lands, including farms owned by Syrian refugees and has led to a widespread disruption of economic activities, including agricultural and commercial businesses, which direct impact to refugees' sources of income. Consequently, many have lost their jobs or had their wages suspended, with some employers refusing to pay or resume work due to concerns related to the evolving attacks. In addition, the cost of living, including food and heating prices increased, especially in the Bekaa Valley, leading to higher poverty rates and leaving many vulnerable refugees unable to meet their basic needs and even decisions to return to Syria under significant pressure have become more challenging. As one Syrian refugee stated:

“The exploitation of Syrians in Lebanon has reached a shameful level of greed. The fare to Damascus or Homs has reached \$150... A family of four needs \$500 to \$600 just to reach their country. People are fasting, exhausted, and some Syrians broke their fast in the streets, parks, and on sidewalks, waiting for a way to return home.”

Movement restrictions, municipal directives and checkpoints are limiting safe relocation and access to services, making refugees exposed to unsafe conditions and further protection risks. Municipalities in the Bekaa Valley, Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and the North have stated that they will not receive displaced persons without prior security vetting. In some cases, local checkpoints were erected at the entrances to towns, preventing the entry of Syrian refugees, as occurred in the town of Deir al-Ahmar (Baalbek District), where displaced Syrian refugees were prevented from entering.

Regarding the medical response, delays in evacuating injured people were documented in a few incidents. At least three cases of refugees with minor injuries who were not admitted to hospitals, including two in the bombing of a camp in Tamnin al-Tahta (Riyah – Bekaa) and one in the southern suburbs of Beirut. These refugees were forced to seek treatment at their own expense without institutional support. Data indicates that difficulties in accessing healthcare are linked to several factors, including the strain on hospitals, the prioritization of services for Lebanese citizens, and the limited ability of refugees to afford treatment.

Movement and return

Regarding movement and return, UNHCR data indicates that more than 177,353 individuals have arrived in Syria from Lebanon including 155,713 Syrian refugees and more than 21,640 Lebanese through official border crossings between 02 to 24 March¹⁶, in addition to other undocumented numbers who crossed via unofficial routes.

Importantly, several cases of Syrian refugees being detained while attempting to cross, either into Syria or upon returning to Lebanon, have been documented. More than three documented cases and more than five observed cases have been recorded involving the arrest

¹⁶ Data from UN Protection Working Group during the emergency response meeting, Lebanon, 24 March 2026.

of refugees due to expired residency permits, name similarities, or security considerations. Following arrest, Syrian refugees were either detained, sometimes for several weeks, later transferred from border crossing (such as Masnaa and Jousseh) to Lebanese General Security centres in Beirut, or being imposed fines. While current conflict dynamics suggests that many perceive Syria to be safer than Lebanon, conditions in Syria continue to be fluid and dynamic lacking basic conditions necessary for safe, dignified and voluntary return.



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