New Waves of Refugees Following the Fall of the Assad Regime :

Experiences, Settlement Patterns, and Perceptions of Return

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Access Centre for Human Rights (ACHR)

Executive Summary

This report examines displacement patterns among Syrian refugees who arrived in Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime, drawing on both desk review findings and qualitative interviews conducted with Syrian refugees, also known as 'newcomers', from Druze, Christian, Shia, Alawite, Murshidiyya, and other religious backgrounds. This report draws on in-depth interviews with Syrian newcomers from diverse religious minority backgrounds who arrived in Lebanon after December 2024. It examines how identity—including religion, geographic origin, gender, and prior exposure to violence—shapes displacement experiences, perceptions of safety, and future decision-making. In doing so, it challenges assumptions of homogeneity among refugee populations and highlights the importance of identity-sensitive approaches to humanitarian programming, protection, and return planning.

The findings demonstrate that recent displacement trends that occurred following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 are predominantly protection-driven and closely linked to identity-based fears, rather than solely economic factors. This report finds fear of persecution, retaliation, detention, and property seizure as primary reasons for refugee's leaving Syria with many describing sudden and unplanned departures, often through irregular border crossings due to reasons of urgency and lack of documentation. Additional vulnerabilities include legal precarity in Lebanon, limited access to residency pathways.

The analysis highlights how displacement experiences and perceptions of safety vary significantly across communities. While some newcomers report relative safety in Lebanon, others experience insecurity linked to legal status, economic hardship, and inter-community tensions. Settlement patterns show a strong tendency toward co-religious clustering, reflecting both protection needs and strategies for social cohesion. Importantly, the findings indicate that most respondents do not intend to return to Syria in the near term, citing ongoing fears for their safety. Perceptions of risk are shaped by religious identity, geographic origin, and past experiences of violence. These differentiated risks challenge policy narratives that frame Syria as uniformly safe and underscore the need for nuanced, evidence-based approaches. The report concludes that return frameworks and humanitarian responses must be sensitive to differentiated risks and grounded in the realities faced by minority communities. Further, return frameworks and humanitarian responses must ensure that any future return is voluntary, safe, and dignified which requires addressing legal, protection, and social cohesion challenges in Lebanon whilst recognizing the complex and unequal risk landscape within Syria.

Methodology

This qualitative report is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 Syrian refugees, also known as 'newcomers' who arrived in Lebanon between December 2024 and early 2026. The sample was purposively designed to reflect religious diversity among minority groups including two participants identifying as Druze, two as Christian, four as Alawite, and two as adherents of the Murshidiyya faith, in addition to one Sunni Muslim participant. The interviews encompassed both male and female participants across all represented groups. The findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of individuals from these minority groups; however, they should not be interpreted as representing the views of the entire religious communities. Rather, they provide insights drawn from a small and specific sample of participants.

Participants were asked to recount their conditions in Syria prior to displacement and the reason for leaving, experiences after arriving in Lebanon, coping strategies, and perceptions regarding the possibility of return. Interviews were conducted remotely in Arabic and confidentially through secure communication channels to ensure the protection of participants' identities and personal information.

Introduction

The fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 marked a major political rupture in Syria after more than fourteen years of conflict. While large-scale refugee returns have followed this transition, developments throughout 2025 demonstrated that there remain ongoing challenges that have not resulted in an improved safety or stability conditions for all of Syrians. Instead, localized insecurity, shifting power dynamics, and recurring sectarian violence continued to drive displacement, including new refugee movements into Lebanon. Public and policy discourse often treats Syrian refugees as a homogeneous group, particularly in discussions about return. However, evidence from a recent Upinion report indicates that insecurity, sectarian violence, and targeted threats remain key drivers of movement[1] with a majority of newcomers reported leaving Syria due to violence or retaliation connected to sectarian identity, alongside fears of detention, persecution, and property seizure. Complementary humanitarian assessments conducted across Lebanon during the same period confirm that insecurity, persecution, and targeted threats remain primary drivers of movement, particularly among those fleeing tensions in Sahel and other minority-populated areas.[2] Additionally, protection actors in Lebanon, through internal meetings, have documented increasing needs related to legal residency pathways, reflecting the vulnerability of newcomers who entered irregularly and now face legal precarity. Reports

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[1] Upinion , Syrian refugees arriving before and after the fall of the Assad regime: Prospects and local governance in Syria and Lebanon ,6 jan 2026 , Syrian refugees arriving before and after the fall of the Assad regime: Prospects and local governance in Syria and Lebanon – Upinion

[2] SPEAC QUARTERLY PROTECTION MONITORING REPORT LEBANON ,February-April 2025

also document cases of unaccompanied children arriving in Lebanon while other family members remain in Syria to safeguard property from looting or occupation, highlighting the complex survival strategies adopted under conditions of insecurity.[3] The ACHR report further contextualizes the situation of newcomers by presenting it through the perspectives of different minority groups, emphasizing how displacement experiences and vulnerabilities vary across identities.

Throughout 2025, significant security incidents have intensified and compounded fears among religious minority communities. In the coastal Sahel region, retaliatory violence linked to changing control dynamics contributed to widespread displacement in March 2025.[4] According to some reports, this surge in violence resulted in the displacement of approximately 51,000 civilians.[5] In July 2025, armed clashes in Sweida, a predominantly Druze governorate, resulted in civilian casualties, reports of extrajudicial killings, and looting. This violence triggered a massive wave of forced displacement, where some humanitarian reports indicated that at least 176,000 people had been displaced from their homes,[6] kidnappings and attacks on religious sites and reports of targeted abductions, disappearances, and gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls, particularly within the Alawite community, where reports documented the abduction of at least 38 Alawite women and girls across the governorates of Latakia, Tartous, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo.[7] All these developments impacted displacement trends and the perception of risks of return.

Across all interviewed groups, including Druze, Christian, Shia, Alawite, and Murshidiyya respondents, displacement was consistently described as protection-driven and closely tied to real and perceived identity-based threats. Many reported sudden departures, irregular border crossings, and the abandonment of property and livelihoods. Shia and Alawite respondents emphasized fears linked to identity and perceived affiliations, while Christian participants highlighted concerns about attacks on religious sites. Recent arrivals have settled in Akkar, Baalbek-Hermel, and other mount Lebanon areas, often seeking communities that share their religious identity. These settlement patterns reflect both a search for safety – as religious groups refugees identify with are perceived to be safer that other communities - and a strategy for social cohesion, as newcomers rely on communal networks to access trust, protection, and a sense of belonging.

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[3] Ibid 2

[4] OHCHR, Syria: Distressing scale of violence in coastal areas, 11 March 2025 ,Syria: Distressing scale of violence in coastal areas | OHCHR

[5] UNFPA, *Flash Update #1: Syria – Coastal Area Violence* (14 March 2025), https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Flash%20Update%20%231-%20SCO-%20Coastal%20Violence.pdf, Last access 30/03/2026.

[6] The united nations office at Geneva , Syria: UN Commission documents grave violations in July 2025 escalation in Sweida ,Syria: UN Commission documents grave violations in July 2025 escalation in Sweida | The United Nations Office at Geneva

[7] OHCHR, *Syria: UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions and disappearances of Alawite women and girls,* https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/syria-un-experts-alarmed-targeted-abductions-and-disappearances-alawite, Last access 30/03/2026.

Drivers of Displacement in the Post-Assad Context

Violence and Persecution

Findings from interviews indicate that, in the post-Assad regime context, patterns of displacement among religious minority newcomers are shaped by a combination of large-scale sectarian violence, localized retaliation, and perceptions of collective blame with fears of retributive violence. These dynamics vary across communities but consistently point to structural challenges of the fragmented security environment and identity-based risks as central drivers of displacement.

At the local level, tensions linked to return movements have contributed to new forms of insecurity. One interviewee from a Christian village in the Homs Governorate countryside described how the return of displaced populations to areas such as Al-Qusayr generated hostility toward those who had remained. Returnees, confronted with widespread destruction and lack of services, reportedly blamed residents for their perceived neutrality or lack of participation in opposition activities. As the interviewee explained: "We began hearing accusations such as 'you are regime loyalists… you did not fight with us… you are traitors". This stigmatization contributed to social exclusion, threats, and fear of retaliation, particularly for minority communities perceived as aligned with the former regime. Beyond these localized dynamics, large-scale violence has been a major driver of displacement, particularly for Druze communities. In Sweida Governorate, clashes in July 2025 between Druze armed groups, Bedouin fighters, and government forces escalated into widespread abuses against civilians. Reports documented summary killings, kidnappings, destruction of property, and mass displacement, with at least 86 unlawful killings recorded and an estimated 187,000 people displaced within weeks.[8] Interviewees emphasized that these events reinforced fears of sectarian targeting and the absence of reliable protection. As one respondent stated: *"We could no longer go to the university; anyone from Sweida who tried risked being beaten or even shot… The people around us treated us as if we were criminals just for being Druze and standing against the new regime that we don't trust*." In addition to direct violence, Druze respondents described restricted mobility and risks along travel routes, particularly between Sweida and neighboring areas such as Daraa, further limiting access to education and livelihoods.

In Syria's coastal region, particularly in Latakia and Tartous, Alawite communities reported experiencing large-scale violence characterized by mass killings, reprisals, and forced displacement. Incidents in early 2025 were described as involving "sectarian cleansing

[8] UK PARLIAMENT,Syria one year after Assad: Religious minorities,11 Dec 2025 [Syria one year after Assad: Religious minorities - House of Commons Library]

massacres," with approximately 1,400 deaths reported, mostly among civilians.[9] Interviewees highlighted that Alawites were frequently targeted based on perceived affiliation with the former regime, regardless of individual involvement. As one respondent explained: *"We were not safe anywhere. Some areas targeted Alawites specifically; even leaving home could be dangerous. Families had to choose between risking their lives or abandoning everything."*

Individual testimonies further illustrate how sectarian identification and community-level dynamics directly shaped displacement decisions. An Alawite woman described a raid on her family home conducted by armed men wearing uniforms marked "security," accompanied by a civilian informant identifying residents' sectarian identities. According to her account, the group moved through the neighbourhood pointing out homes by sect, stating which were Christian, empty, or Alawite. During the raid, the family was questioned about their identity and warned to conceal it: *"If anyone asks you, say you are Sunni."* The incident involved threats, gunfire, and the removal of young men from the building. The interviewee recalled: *"We heard armed men dragging a young man and one saying to the other: 'You know what to do with him.'"* The attackers fired shots at the lock to enter the home, questioned the family repeatedly about their sect, one of the assailants explicitly threatened: *"I want an Alawite person to slaughter right now."* The presence of informants, combined with identity-based targeting and arbitrary violence, created an acute sense of danger and prompted the family to flee.

Similar patterns of insecurity were reported by smaller minority groups, including Murshadi communities in coastal areas near Qardaha. Interviewees described mass arrests, enforced disappearances, and collective detentions affecting both civilians and individuals with no involvement in the conflict. Arrests were often conducted in groups, with 20–30 people detained at a time, and some later found dead. The pervasive fear associated with these practices extended to family members, who risked detention simply by inquiring about missing relatives. This climate of uncertainty and insecurity led entire families to flee. One interviewee from the Murshadiye minority described that, although their family had no links to security or military institutions, they lived in constant fear due to raids conducted by the General Security, the army, and unidentified armed groups acting under state authority. The operations increasingly took on a sectarian character, particularly in Latakia and Tartous, targeting Alawites and Murshadi communities. They recalled: *"We felt extreme fear and decided to leave because we no longer felt safe, and there was no clarity about the future."* Initial physical harm to homes was often limited, but random acts of sectarian violence and targeted killings were common. The interviewee also emphasized the absence of institutional protection: *"We demand an end to arbitrary arrests, a clear mechanism to hold perpetrators accountable, and guarantees for security and safety. We also need economic life to return and*

[9] HRC fifty-ninth session, Violations against civilians in the coastal and western- central regions of the Syrian Arab Republic (January–March 2025) ,11 Aug 2025 a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf

people to resume their work, because livelihood stability is essential to feeling safe." Shia respondents reported comparable vulnerabilities linked to sectarian targeting and social exclusion. Many described being labelled as "fulul"—a term used to denote individuals associated with the former regime—which exposed them to threats from armed actors and local communities. In some cases, this label was applied broadly to civilians who were perceived to not accept the new political order, increasing fears of retaliation and limiting their ability to move freely or access services. In urban centres such as Damascus, Christian participants described rising sectarian tensions following the collapse of state structures. Experiences included workplace discrimination, social stigmatization, and psychological distress linked to targeted rhetoric. As one interviewee noted: *"Before the system fell, we never felt sectarian tension. Afterward, people would say things about Christians as if we were responsible for events."* High-profile attacks on religious sites further exacerbated these fears, including a major suicide attack on a church in June 2025 that resulted in dozens of casualties and reinforced perceptions of vulnerability among Christian communities.[10]

Across all groups, identity intersected with gender. Women, from minority communities such as Alawite and Christian groups, reported heightened fears of harassment, abduction, and forced marriage and documented cases of kidnapping and violence targeting women contributed to restrictions on mobility and increased pressure to leave.[11] These gendered risks compounded broader patterns of insecurity and played a significant role in displacement decisions. At the same time, broader structural factors compounded these risks. Interviewees described increased securitization along border areas, including movement restrictions, curfews, and surveillance by new security actors. While these measures were not always described as directly abusive, they contributed to a sense of confinement and limited options for safety. Crucially, the proliferation of arms and the emergence of self-appointed local authorities further destabilized communities. Individuals and groups often claimed to act "on behalf of the state," using accusations of disloyalty or sectarian identity to justify intimidation and violence. In some cases, targeted killings were reported, including incidents in which unidentified armed individuals carried out assassinations in public spaces before fleeing (UN Commission of Inquiry, 2025).[12] These patterns highlight how non-state actors and community-level dynamics play a central role in shaping displacement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that displacement among religious minority communities in Syria is driven by multiple and intersecting factors, including large-scale sectarian violence, localized retaliation, identity-based targeting, and gender-specific risks. While the forms of violence and vulnerability differ across groups, Druze facing mass displacement linked to

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[10] Ibid 4

[11] OHCHR, *Syria: UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions and disappearances of Alawite women and girls*, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/syria-un-experts-alarmed-targeted-abductions-and-disappearances-alawite, Last access 30/03/2026.

[12] OHCHR, UN Syria Commission finds March coastal violence was widespread and systematic: outlines urgent steps to prevent future violations and restore public confidence, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/un-syria-commission-finds-march-coastal-violence-was-widespread-and,

regional clashes - Alawites and Shia experiencing collective stigmatization and reprisals, Christians encountering rising urban sectarianism, and smaller minorities exposed to arbitrary detention - the underlying driver remains a shared perception of insecurity and lack of protection. These differentiated risk profiles are critical to understanding displacement patterns and to ensuring that any future return processes are voluntary, safe, and responsive to the specific vulnerabilities faced by minority communities.

Socioeconomic and Institutional Factors

In addition to direct violence and persecution, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and institutional weakness have played a critical role in driving displacement among religious minority communities. Interview findings indicate that economic hardship and insecurity are not isolated factors but are deeply intertwined with identity-based discrimination.

Across interviews, respondents consistently described a sharp decline in economic conditions following the fall of the Assad regime. Widespread unemployment, loss of stable income, and rising costs of living severely constrained households' ability to meet basic needs, including food, rent, and healthcare. For many, these pressures were not only the result of broader economic collapse but were also exacerbated by exclusionary practices linked to sectarian identity. Employment insecurity emerged as a key driver of displacement, particularly among Alawite respondents who were previously disproportionately represented in state institutions and so therefore felt the disproportional impact of targeted dismissal. Several interviewees described being removed from long-held positions without compensation, often replaced by individuals perceived to be aligned with dominant local actors or armed groups. As one respondent recounted: *"We were forced out of our jobs just because we were Alawites. My husband, who had worked for 21 years, was dismissed without any compensation, and our house and land were taken by others. There was no one to turn to, and no protection from armed groups or authorities."* Similarly, respondents in urban centers such as Damascus described increasing workplace discrimination and social exclusion, particularly among Christian and Alawite communities. These experiences included verbal harassment, unequal treatment, and implicit barriers to employment, contributing to a broader sense of marginalization. Therefore, socioeconomic and institutional factors are central to understanding displacement dynamics. These experiences reflect how economic marginalization is closely linked to broader patterns of collective punishment and exclusion and shape perceptions of safety.

Workplace insecurity was further compounded by the presence and interference of armed actors. One former bank employee described how armed groups entered his workplace demanding access to surveillance systems ostensibly for security investigations which created fear amongst the employees. Property-related violations also emerged as a significant factor influencing displacement decisions. Respondents from multiple communities including Alawite, Christian, and Shia groups—reported the confiscation, looting, or occupation of homes, land, and businesses by armed actors or local groups. In many cases, these actions

occurred without any formal legal process or possibility of restitution. The destruction of agricultural land and productive assets further eroded livelihoods, particularly in rural areas, leaving families without sustainable sources of income.

Weak institutional safeguards was a consistent theme across interviews with participants emphasizing the lack of effective governance, accountability, and access to justice. Complaints related to threats, harassment, or property seizure were frequently ignored, and in some cases, pursuing legal recourse was perceived as risky due to fear of retaliation feeding the perception that protection was neither available nor attainable for minority groups. In areas such as Sweida Governorate, socioeconomic pressures intersected with insecurity to restrict access to education and public services. University students reported being unable to attend classes due to threats, harassment, and risks along transportation routes, particularly toward nearby areas such as Daraa. This disruption of education not only affected immediate safety but also undermined long-term opportunities, reinforcing decisions to leave. Economic deprivation, loss of livelihoods, and property insecurity combined with weak governance, lack of legal protection, and discriminatory practices, have created conditions in which many minorities perceived remaining in Syria as no longer viable. These factors, when layered onto existing fears of violence and persecution, significantly accelerate decisions to flee and shape longer-term perceptions of return.

Challenges in Lebanon

Legal challenges and the humanitarian impact

The residency of foreign nationals in Lebanon is generally governed by the “Law Regulating Entry into, Residence in, and Exit from Lebanon Issued on July 10, 1962”, which established the broad parameters for legal stay. However, the practical application of this law remains subject to administrative discretion, exercised through the issuance of circulars by the General Security Office (GSO). Residency permits are typically category-based, predicated on employment under the Sponsorship (Kafala) system, registration as a student at a recognized educational institution, or registration with UNHCR (to receive official refugee status). A critical distinction exists here between Syrian refugees entering Lebanon from 2011 at the start of Syrian war and recent newcomers: while those who arrived early in the crisis were initially able to register with UNHCR, this process has been suspended since 2015 following the Lebanese government’s revision of residency procedures for Syrian refugees, policies shifted toward reducing the number of Syrians in Lebanon and limiting new arrivals. As a result, UNHCR was instructed to suspend the registration of new Syrian refugees.[13] Consequently, newcomers, including those arriving in the 2024–2026 wave, are completely deprived of such registration, leaving them without the "refugee" status or the identification

[13] UNHCR , Lebanon Refugees and asylum-seekers | UNHCR Lebanon

documents held by earlier arrivals. As one respondent noted, *"We contacted UNHCR, but there was no response for a long time. Later, we were told that the Lebanese government does not allow the registration of new refugees."* Furthermore, Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and the Government of Lebanon largely uses domestic legislation as the primary statutory framework governing the presence of any foreign national, regardless of their circumstance. Nevertheless, Lebanon remains bound by other international obligations: specifically, the principle of non-refoulement under Customary International Law, which prohibits the forcible return of individuals to a country where their lives are in danger; the Convention Against Torture (CAT), which prohibits deporting individuals to a country where they may face torture[14]; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which protects the 'right to life' and 'freedom from arbitrary arrest' for all persons on its territory, regardless of their legal status[15].

Consequently, the legal standing of many refugees including newcomers remains almost entirely dependent on Lebanese laws and administrative circulars issued by the GSO. As a result, maintaining a valid legal status requires compliance with increasingly stringent legal criteria. This legal precarity directly shapes everyday life, as reflected in testimonies: *"My civil rights here are extremely limited because my presence in Lebanon is illegal… I stay at home most of the time and avoid moving so I don't get into trouble."* Another respondent similarly explained, *"We are afraid of residency permits, arrests, and deportation… if a municipal or security patrol comes, we hide or leave work."*

What makes the current situation particularly severe is the further narrowing of legal residency pathways following recent policy changes adopted by the General Security Office in November 2025. Under this decision, Syrians working in Lebanon are now required to obtain legal residency exclusively through employer sponsorship or a formal work permit.[16] Crucially, the possibility to regularize status through these mechanisms is limited to those who originally entered Lebanon through official border crossings, effectively excluding a significant portion of refugees who entered irregularly. In addition, refugees who previously held residency based on registration with UNHCR are now required to transition to sponsorship or work permit-based residency if employed, which entails formally closing their UNHCR file. This carries serious consequences, as it results in the loss of access to humanitarian assistance and protection services, with no guarantee that residency applications will ultimately be approved. While, in principle, individuals without valid residency may apply for a work permit, this remains conditional on having entered through official channels and securing employment in the formal sector, requirements that are often difficult to meet in practice. Furthermore, the

[14] Convention against Torture (CAT), Article 3 for non-refoulement.
[15] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Articles 6 and 9.
[16] UNHCR, 12 November GSO and MoL Decisions on Work Permits/File Closure, 12 November GSO and MoL Decisions on Work Permits/File Closure - UNHCR Lebanon

financial costs associated with work permits, residency renewal, and accumulated overstay fees remain prohibitively high, and no financial support is provided to cover these expenses.

Interviews conducted with individuals from minority groups highlight how these policies produce differentiated impacts. Respondents from Druze backgrounds reported entering Lebanon legally through the Masnaa Border Crossing and receiving a one-month legal stay. However, after overstaying, they became unable to renew their residency due to high costs, even when a potential sponsor was available. In contrast, interviewees from other minority groups, including Alawite, Shia and Murshidi communities, reported entering Lebanon irregularly. Under the current regulatory framework, this mode of entry effectively prevents them from accessing available regularization pathways, even when financial means or sponsorship opportunities exist. As a result, they are left with no viable options to obtain legal residency, as current policies do not provide exemptions for irregular entrants, except in cases of return to Syria.

Barriers to Education

Historically, from the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Lebanese state and its international partners provided educational access to Syrian children in afternoon schools without the prerequisite of legal residency for the students or their parents. However, as the displaced population grew relative to the host community, the burden on Lebanon's infrastructure intensified. This strain was not limited to fiscal issues and funding requirements but extended to logistical capacity, as the sheer volume of students eventually overwhelmed the public education sector. This crisis reached a critical inflection point in 2024 and 2025. The collapse of the previous Syrian regime led to a new wave of displacement, particularly among confessional minorities such as the Alawites from the coast and the Druze from Suwayda, who fled persecution by the emerging authorities.[17] Instead of facilitating access to education as a response to these shifting dynamics and an already struggling educational infrastructure, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) issued Circular No. 67/2025. This directive established stringent new conditions for enrolling non-Lebanese students in 'second-shift' public schools for the 2025/2026 academic year.[18]

Under this mandate, Syrian students are only permitted to register if they possess a valid, unexpired residency permit from the General Security Office (GSO) or a valid UNHCR identification card. Students lacking the mentioned specific documents may still register; however, they risk having their personal information shared with the Lebanese General Directorate of General Security (GSO) after the registration process. This measure has

[17] ACHR, *Briefing Paper* (2025), p:2, Available at: https://achrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Briefing.pdf, last access 27/03/2026.
[18] UNHCR, Important update for parents with school-aged children, https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/2025/10/16/extension-important-update-for-parents-with-school-aged-children/

effectively paralyzed access to the formal education system for a vast number of children arriving after the fall of the Assad regime, whose families fear deportation due to the sharing of legal residency information with the General Security Office (GSO), This was reflected ACHR interviews where families stated: *“We don’t have any papers, neither for us nor for our children. Our children have not entered school.”* Another respondent emphasized the broader deprivation, stating, *“Our needs are everything… including education for our children.”*

Barriers to Healthcare

Accessing healthcare has become increasingly difficult for newly arrived refugees. One of the main challenges is the lack of required documents. Hospitals and primary healthcare centers often ask for a UNHCR registration certificate or a valid residency permit in order to provide treatment at reduced costs[19]. Since many newcomers are unable to register with UNHCR due to the ongoing suspension of registration, they are considered undocumented as is the case with other Syrian refugees. As a result, they are forced to pay the full cost of medical care, and given significant funding cuts, those registered may still not benefit with full coverage given that UNHCR is no longer providing hospitalization support for refugees residing in Lebanon since 1 December 2025[20], which is extremely difficult given the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon. As one interviewee told ACHR “*My husband became ill, but we could not go to the hospital because we have no residency papers or medical coverage*”. At the same time, private hospitals and clinics are often reluctant to admit undocumented patients mainly due to fears of legal consequences or scrutiny from the General Security Office. Because of this, many newcomers, especially those from minority groups such as Alawite and Druze communities, are left with very limited options. Some rely on small, poorly equipped clinics, while others avoid seeking medical help altogether until their condition becomes very serious. An ACHR interviewee explained that when he first came to Lebanon with his brother, his brother was badly injured in a motorcycle accident. However, due to the lack of legal papers, they were afraid to go to hospitals outside their area of residence for fear of arrest. Instead, they went to a nearby pharmacy and requested some painkillers, which left his brother suffering from pain for weeks.

Restrictions on Movement and the Risk of Deportation

The lack of legal residency has significant impacts on the freedom of movement of refugees in Lebanon. With the recent intensification of law enforcement measures, movement is often seen as risky with fears of arrest and summary deportation. Across Lebanon, security is maintained through a dense network of checkpoints operated by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the Internal Security Forces (ISF), and the General Security Office (GSO). While the GSO

[19] Doctors Without Borders, Syrians in Lebanon avoid healthcare in fear of deportations, 17 may 2023, Available at: https://www.msf.org/syrians-lebanon-avoid-healthcare-fear-deportations,

[20] UNHCR, Access to Healthcare, https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/welcome/access-to-healthcare/

maintains a smaller physical footprint at these points compared to other branches, its presence represents the most acute threat to refugees due to their direct authority over residency and deportation. Some of these checkpoints are fixed, with well-known, avoidable locations, while others are mobile, appearing unpredictably and making them more difficult to predict. The tangible impact of this "geographic confinement" is felt in every aspect of daily life. As one respondent expressed, *“We’re afraid of residency permits, arrests, and deportation. We don’t go out much because of the checkpoints, and if a municipal or security patrol comes, we hide or leave work.”* This fear is not hypothetical but grounded in lived experience. One recently arrived interviewee recounted that while taking his daughter for a blood test, he was stopped at a checkpoint, arrested, and detained for 24 hours and then released. Reflecting on the incident, he stated: “*This experience made me afraid to leave the house. They told me it’s a routine procedure, they treated me disrespectfully and did not take into consideration that I am an elderly man. Now, I only move within the village and try to meet my needs close to home.”* Such incidents reinforce what can be described as “frozen mobility,” whereby newcomers confine themselves to narrow perceived “safe zones,” avoiding movement even for essential needs. This enforced immobility deepens their isolation and limits access to healthcare, social networks, and livelihood opportunities that are critical for their survival. Lebanese authorities have increasingly adopted a significantly more stringent posture that is felt by the majority of refugees in Lebanon. One newcomer described fleeing Syria with his family after the fall of the regime due to fear of retaliation by armed groups affiliated with the new authorities. As he explained, “*We were subjected to abuse, beatings, and violence… simply because we had lived in areas previously controlled by the regime,” adding that “they burned our homes, destroyed them, and looted everything.”* Having entered Lebanon irregularly, he was unable to regularize his status or register with UNHCR, leaving him without legal protection. Shortly after the interview was conducted, he was apprehended and deported back to Syria. Since then, there has been no information regarding his whereabouts or safety.

Gaps in Humanitarian Assistance

The humanitarian response in Lebanon for 2025–2026 is facing a severe funding crisis, significantly limiting the support available to refugees.[21] As a result, most refugees as well as many newcomers have limited access to assistance. This challenge is compounded by the structure of aid delivery in Lebanon, where cash assistance is distributed through coordinated targeting systems that rely heavily on registration data to identify vulnerable households. Consequently, individuals who are not registered or captured within these systems (especially those that entered Lebanon through irregular routes) face substantial barriers to accessing assistance, especially in a context of reduced funding and strict prioritization criteria. For

[21] ACHR, The impact of U.S Aid cuts on syrian refugees in Lebanon , Nov 2025 ,The Impact of U.S Aid Cuts on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon | "وصول" - ACHR

families arriving with no financial resources, this results in immediate and severe difficulties in meeting basic needs, including access to food.

Findings from ACHR interviews confirm these gaps with the majority of interviewees reported not receiving any assistance from either local or international organizations. One Alawite family living in northern Lebanon stated: *"We live in an informal settlement with 14 other Alawite families; only one family receives food assistance, while the rest of us are left without any support."* Despite the severity of their needs, many newcomers remain effectively excluded from the formal humanitarian system. Due to the continued suspension of UNHCR registration, refugees including newcomers are often not included in cash assistance or winterization support provided by agencies including the World Food Program. As several interviewees reported, "*Even when we contact humanitarian hotlines, no one answers. And when they do, they tell us that nothing can be done".* This exclusion is further exacerbated by ongoing funding constraints affecting humanitarian actors, reducing their overall capacity to respond. As one interviewee summarized, *"There is no work and no income. Aid is very scarce; some days we don't know what we will eat."*

In the absence of formal humanitarian support, newcomers are often forced to rely on informal community networks. Many depend on individuals from similar social or religious backgrounds to secure basic support like shelter or employment. While these networks may provide temporary relief, they remain insufficient to meet sustained needs. Moreover, this reliance increases exposes them to exploitation, as refugees may feel compelled to accept low wages or unfair working conditions in order to survive. As a result, the recent wave of arrivals has become almost entirely dependent on overstretched community-based support, which is increasingly unable to meet growing needs, leaving many families at heightened risk of eviction and food insecurity.

At the same time, recent directives issued by the General Security Office in 2024 and 2025 have tightened control over Syrians' legal status[22], effectively restricting access to formal employment for those without valid residency permits. Lebanese municipalities have consequently intensified inspections of businesses, with employers facing fines or closure if found hiring undocumented Syrians. While these measures aim to regulate the labor market, in practice they push refugees out of formal employment opportunities and into highly precarious informal labor. These restrictions do not eliminate the need to work, rather they force newcomers into exploitative conditions. Many, in particular those confined to "safe" communal areas, are compelled to accept extremely low wages that often fail to cover even basic daily expenses. In such informal settings, workers lack legal protection and are exposed to risks including wage theft, abuse, and arbitrary dismissal.

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[22] GSO Official website ,Lebanese General Security - posts

Social Cohesion and Local Dynamics

Syrian newcomers' settlement patterns in Lebanon are closely linked to perceptions of safety, religious identity, and access to communal support networks. Interviewees across minority groups described intentionally relocating to areas where host communities shared similar religious or cultural affiliations. For instance, Murshadiye respondents reported settling in predominantly Christian or minority-majority neighbourhoods, describing these areas as more welcoming: *"We sought refuge in Christian areas because they would host us, though there are still difficulties. Municipalities sometimes overlook us, but checkpoints and security forces do not, which keeps us in a constant state of fear and instability."*

Druze interviewees described a similar strategy where upon arrival from Syria, many chose to reside in the Mount Lebanon area, where the population shared their religious identity. This alignment facilitated access to local support networks and created opportunities for informal employment, even in the absence of legal documentation. One respondent noted that residents of the area "*felt like they needed to support us,"* allowing newcomers to find work and integrate into local economic life more easily.

Murshadi respondents further emphasized generally respectful relations with the Lebanese host community in neighbourhoods such as Mar Mikhael in Beirut. One interviewee stated that neighbours treated the family respectfully, and being perceived as belonging to a minority group contributed to acceptance in some interactions. There were no direct conflicts with local residents: *"Neighbours have treated us respectfully. Being seen as part of a minority seems to help. We haven't faced any problems with the locals."* However, despite positive social interactions, structural insecurity persisted with the family deliberately avoiding contact with Lebanese security forces and official institutions due to fears of detention or deportation to Syria.

Interactions with the broader Lebanese host population are varied, ranging from supportive to discriminatory or suspicious. Some interviewees noted that residents treated them with understanding once their minority status was known, while others reported stigma or stereotyping linked simply to being Syrian. A Christian respondent highlighted this tension: *"There is no problem with some Lebanese, but some see you only as Syrian. There is a bad perception of new Syrian girls, assuming they came for prostitution. It is true for some, but not everyone. This caused me problems with housing."* Similarly, other newcomers reported that being recognized as a religious minority sometimes facilitated protection or tolerance from neighbours: *"People in the area where we live respect us, especially when they know we belong to minorities. We have not faced direct problems from neighbours or local residents."*

Despite generally positive interpersonal interactions, the presence of state or municipal authorities is often a source of fear and insecurity. Many respondents described avoiding contact with official bodies or security forces due to concerns over detention, deportation, or forced return to Syria: *"We try to avoid official or security authorities because we fear arrest*

or deportation. We stay away from any friction with them." Instances of local campaigns or municipal enforcement against Syrians—such as evictions in neighbourhoods like Sin el-Fil—underscore the precarity of newcomers' living conditions and the uneven application of rights.

Religious identity plays a dual role in shaping social cohesion. On one hand, shared minority status can provide protection, mutual recognition, and access to supportive networks, helping newcomers navigate local systems and build trust with host communities. On the other hand, identity also exposes individuals to discrimination, stereotyping, and targeted harassment when broader societal biases intersect with insecurity or resource competition. For example, Christian Syrian newcomers reported that their faith sometimes shielded them from eviction or social hostility, while other Syrians, regardless of gender or religion, encountered prejudice based solely on nationality. Druze respondents' experiences in Mount Lebanon illustrate the positive side of shared religious identity, where community solidarity enabled access to employment and informal protection, mitigating some risks associated with legal precarity. Murshadi experiences in Beirut similarly show that minority status can contribute to respectful neighbourhood interactions, though structural insecurities—particularly regarding authorities—persist.

From a human rights perspective, these dynamics highlight several critical issues. First, the uneven treatment of Syrian newcomers' underscores vulnerabilities related to discrimination, arbitrary enforcement of local regulations, and unequal access to basic services. Second, fear of engagement with authorities—whether municipal or security-related—limits the ability of newcomers to exercise legal rights, seek protection, or report abuses. Third, the intersection of gender, nationality, and religion creates specific risks, particularly for women, including harassment, social stigmatization, and restricted mobility. These settlement experiences of Syrian minority newcomers in Lebanon illustrate a complex interplay between religious identity, host community attitudes, and structural governance gaps. While shared identity can foster pockets of social cohesion, informal support, access to employment, and insecure legal status perpetuate vulnerability, highlighting the need for policies and humanitarian programs that strengthen both protection and inclusive integration.

Perceptions of Return

Perceptions of return among Syrian minority newcomers in Lebanon are shaped by a complex interplay of security concerns, identity-based targeting, governance deficits, and socioeconomic instability. Across Druze, Alawite, Christian, Shia, and Murshadi communities, respondents consistently emphasized that Syria remains unsafe, socially exclusionary, and economically unstable, making voluntary return largely untenable under current conditions.

Druze respondents highlighted persistent threats in Sweida and other Druze-majority areas, describing ongoing attacks, harassment, and a pervasive sense of exclusion. One Druze woman stated: *"I came to Lebanon fearing for my children and myself. We are still targeted by*

armed groups, and Sweida feels isolated. They treat us like we don't belong and we aren't Syrians. Attacks are still happening, but the media isn't covering them anymore. I will never go back until I feel safe and welcomed in our own country without religious discrimination." Women in particular feared sexual harassment, abduction, and other gendered forms of violence. Another Druze respondent echoed these concerns: *"Sometimes I think about going back, but there is no security. I don't want my children to live with this fear or be asked about their sect. I see no improvement in the situation."* These testimonies illustrate how targeted violence, social exclusion, and gendered threats converge to make return unviable in the near term.

Alawite respondents emphasized political and sectarian vulnerabilities linked to perceived affiliation with the former regime. One explained: *"We have no intention of returning to Syria ever. Even if everything here in Lebanon were difficult, we would never go back because our fate would be death. As Alawites, people are being dismissed from jobs, there is no work, and we cannot move freely. Many Alawite youth have been detained, whether or not they committed any crime. We have heard many sectarian threats—people say things like 'Alawites, Nusairis, pigs.' Those who leave home disappear; those who return are killed. Many young men and women were kidnapped. These elements are definitely affiliated with the state, masked armed factions. After all this, how can we live there?* Beyond immediate threats to life, loss of property, destruction of homes, and economic marginalization, reinforce the perception that return is not feasible. One respondent summarized: *"I don't own anything now. My house was burned and stolen, and I lost my job. All I want is security for my family."*

Christian respondents expressed concerns over both physical insecurity and institutional instability, particularly in urban areas like Damascus. One stated: *"Looking at Syria from afar, the situation is slowly improving. As Christians, we were not involved in the war. In our villages, the state needed to maintain security, and while individual incidents occurred—arrests, killings—the authorities generally enforced order. Improvements are slow, and fear persists. We hear about explosions or attacks on churches and fear for our communities. That is why we prefer to stay in Lebanon for now until the Syrian state restores security."* Women emphasized risks related to harassment, reputational targeting, and restrictions on social freedoms, including limitations on clothing, public behaviour, and participation in cultural life. Economic constraints, such as rising prices, monopolized resources, and limited employment opportunities, were additional barriers to return.

Shia respondents expressed more conditional attitudes toward return. While they face vulnerabilities linked to sectarian targeting and social exclusion, some indicated that return could be considered if security, governance, and economic conditions were reliably restored.

Murshadi respondents highlighted persistent structural insecurity. Even though large-scale arrests and violence have reportedly decreased, ongoing threats remain, including unresolved disappearances, curfews, limited economic activity, and lack of functioning services. Reporting abuses is risky, as civilians could be accused of association with the former regime ("fuloul"),

exposing them to persecution. One interviewee explained: *“While I hope to return one day, I can only consider it if security, legal protections, and normal life conditions are restored. Otherwise, going back is impossible.”*

Across all groups, several intersecting factors shape perceptions of return: security and violence, including past killings, abductions, arbitrary arrests, and ongoing attacks, which deter return. While patterns of targeting differ by community, all respondents perceive life-threatening risks including identity-based threats, such as sectarian affiliation, minority status, and perceived political ties, further influence risk perception and experiences of violence. Gendered vulnerabilities are also a crosscutting theme across groups, with women facing additional risks including sexual harassment, abduction, reputational attacks, and restrictions on mobility and social participation. Institutional deficits, such as weak governance, selective amnesties, the absence of impartial legal mechanisms, and unreliable law enforcement, reinforce insecurity and injustice and lead to weak security guarantees. Finally, economic and social precarity, including lost property, limited employment opportunities, disrupted services, and inflationary pressures, lead to perceptions that reintegration is impossible, even if physical safety conditions were restored.

Importantly, these perspectives demonstrate that return decisions are not driven by economic need alone but are deeply rooted in perceptions of threat, prior exposure to violence, and ongoing systemic insecurity. Druze and Alawite communities, in particular, perceive that targeted violence and social exclusion would continue upon return, while Christian and Shia respondents highlight institutional fragility and societal instability as major obstacles. Murshadi families face a combination of structural insecurity and fear of reprisal for reporting abuses, reinforcing the need for strong protective mechanisms.

Despite these constraints, some respondents maintain conditional hope for return. Christian interviewees, for example, emphasized that improved governance, restoration of security, functioning services, and economic recovery would be prerequisites for considering return: *“We hope Syria can return to security, normalcy, and economic activity. People should be able to work, access education and health, and live without fear. Only then could return be possible.”*

All ACHR interviews underscore the critical need for any future return initiatives to be voluntary, safe, and responsive to differentiated risks across communities. The findings also highlight implications for human rights, including the necessity of protection from identity-based violence, enforcement of gender equality, restoration of legal and institutional safeguards, and support for the social and economic reintegration of minority populations. Return cannot be separated from broader governance, security, and social cohesion concerns; without addressing these underlying conditions, premature or forced return would exacerbate vulnerabilities and threaten both individual safety and broader stability in Syria

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that Syrian newcomers from minority communities in Lebanon are not a homogeneous population. Their displacement experiences, perceptions of safety, social cohesion, and willingness to return are deeply shaped by religious identity, gender, geographic origin, socioeconomic status, and prior exposure to violence. Recognizing these differences is essential for humanitarian and policy actors seeking to design interventions that are responsive to the realities on the ground.

Humanitarian and policy responses must be identity-sensitive, taking into account the specific vulnerabilities and past experiences of persecution faced by different communities. They must also be protection-focused, ensuring legal security, safe housing, and reliable access to assistance. At the same time, approaches need to support social cohesion by fostering peaceful coexistence with host communities while leveraging communal networks that contribute to safety and stability. Any plans for return must be risk-informed, avoiding assumptions that Syria is universally safe, and ensuring that returns are voluntary, dignified, and grounded in the differentiated realities faced by minority groups.

The analysis highlights that displacement experiences are shaped by intersecting factors including identity, exposure to violence, and structural insecurity, making one-size-fits-all responses inadequate. Tailored, evidence-based strategies are therefore critical to protecting the rights of minority newcomers, supporting their livelihoods, and sustaining social cohesion in host communities. By centering the lived experiences of Syrian newcomers, this report underscores the importance of nuanced, contextually informed approaches that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term protection and stability concerns

Recommendations

1. For Lebanese Authorities

1. Expand and ensure unhindered access to humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including support to newly arrived Syrians and their needs.
2. Establish exceptional regularization measures for newcomers, including those who entered irregularly, by introducing temporary protection schemes not tied to employer sponsorship. Further, facilitate and guarantee continued access to legal documentation, through clear and accessible procedure to obtain or renew residency permits by reducing or waiving residency fees and overstay penalties to limit exploitation, enable mobility, and decrease reliance on informal labor.
3. Decouple access to education and primary healthcare from residency requirements by revising restrictive policies (including school enrollment conditions) and ensuring safe access to services without risk of arrest or data-sharing with security authorities.
4. Lebanon should urgently ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol and adopt a comprehensive national asylum framework aligned with international refugee protection standards.
5. Lebanese authorities must strictly abide by the international legal principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of individuals to countries where they face a real risk of persecution, violence or other serious harm.
6. Lebanese authorities including border management and security agents should abide by international and national laws that obligate these parties to uphold legal human rights safeguards for those arrested and detained, and those deported, including Article 47 of Lebanese Code of Criminal Procedure, the ICCPR and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). At the local level, support municipalities with resources to manage population pressures while preventing discriminatory practices and promoting social cohesion initiatives in high-density areas.

2. For International Organizations

1. Expand inclusive, protection-centered humanitarian assistance and adapt targeting and delivery mechanisms to include unregistered and irregularly arrived newcomers by developing alternative vulnerability assessments beyond UNHCR registration.
2. Increase funding for cash assistance, healthcare, and education, including restoring critical services such as hospitalization support. Ensure assistance is accessible without exposing beneficiaries to legal or security risks.
3. Scale up integrated protection, legal aid, and rights monitoring by expanding legal assistance, protection services, and GBV programming, ensuring safe and confidential access for undocumented refugees.

4. Strengthen systematic monitoring and documentation of refoulement, detention, deportation, and labor exploitation, and use this evidence to support coordinated advocacy with Lebanese authorities and international stakeholders.
5. Ensure that humanitarian and development programming and policy engagement is conflict sensitive and is in line with HDP nexus approaches, to address gender specific risks and to mitigate and prevent community tensions based on religious identity, gender, and prior exposure to violence.
6. Recognize that Syria remains unsafe and unstable, and that returns must be in line with international protection standards including that returns are voluntary, safe, informed and dignified. Sustainable refugee return is contingent upon meaningful improvements in security, human rights and long-term stability and peace in Syria, especially around safety, housing, employment and livelihood conditions.
7. Support longer-term efforts addressing accountability, housing, land and property restitution and compensation, and inclusive governance to tackle the root causes of displacement.
8. Enable safe and legal pathways for Syrian refugees towards durable solutions, particularly on resettlement to third countries and complementary pathways.
9. Strengthen support for refugee-led and refugee rights organizations, which are uniquely positioned to understand refugee needs, identify protection risks, fill critical gaps and ensure that humanitarian responses are informed by refugees lived experiences.

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