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Lebanon: Stepped-Up Repression of Syrians

Unlawful Deportations, Detention, Mistreatment



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Syrian children gather between tents at a refugee camp in Saadnayel in eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, June 13, 2023. © 2023 Anwar Amro/AFP via Getty Images

(Beirut) – [Lebanese](#) authorities have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly returned Syrians to Syria in recent months, including opposition activists and army defectors, Human Rights Watch said today.

Between January and March 2024, Human Rights Watch documented the forcible return of a [Syrian army defector](#) and an [opposition activist](#) by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the General Directorate of General Security, the Lebanese security agency that controls entry and residency status for foreigners. In a separate case, the Lebanese military's intelligence unit briefly held and allegedly tortured a Syrian man who had participated in a solidarity protest for women in Gaza. Other Syrian refugees are fighting to remain in Lebanon despite deportation orders and an increasingly [hostile environment](#) exacerbated by officials' [scapegoating](#) of the refugee population.

“Lebanese officials have for years imposed discriminatory practices against Syrians in the country as a way of coercing them to return to Syria, which remains unsafe,” said [Ramzi Kaiss](#), Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Arbitrarily arresting, torturing, or deporting Syrians who face a well-founded risk of persecution if returned are additional blights on Lebanon’s refugee record.”

In March, a [United Nations report](#) indicated that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is aware of “13,772 individuals deported from Lebanon or pushed back at the border with the Syrian Arab Republic in approximately 300 incidents in 2023,” including 600 people in one day on November 8. It further stated that “local authorities in 27 municipalities took measures limiting the ability of Syrian refugees displaced in south Lebanon from finding alternative shelter.” The reference was in relation to the displacement of tens of thousands of residents in South

Lebanon following the cross-border hostilities between Israel and Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups that have been ongoing since October 2023.

Since the killing of a local political party official on April 7, 2024, which the Lebanese army [alleged](#) was carried out by a group of Syrian nationals, Lebanese ministers and political officials have reiterated calls for the [return of Syrians](#) in Lebanon, [fueling ongoing violence](#) against Syrians. In April, Syrians in Lebanon were reportedly [beaten](#) and [faced demands across Lebanon to leave](#) their homes, with [governorates](#) and [municipalities](#) imposing discriminatory curfews, [unlawfully restricting](#) Syrians' right to freedom of movement.

Human Rights Watch spoke to Mohammed Sablough, the head of the legal support program at the [Cedar Centre for Legal Studies](#) and a lawyer representing three Syrian men, and reviewed correspondence between Sablough and Lebanese judicial authorities. Two of his clients, Rafaat al-Faleh and Muaz al-Waer, were deported to Syria between January and March, while [Yassin al-Atr](#), a Syrian opposition activist, currently faces a deportation order from the General Security Directorate. Human Rights Watch also spoke to people close to both al-Atr and al-Faleh, who requested to remain anonymous for security reasons, and to another lawyer, Diala Chehadeh, who is representing a Syrian man arrested by Lebanese military intelligence and reportedly tortured.

On April 9, Human Rights Watch sent letters with research findings and questions to the LAF and the General Security Directorate but has not received responses.

The military [deported](#) al-Faleh, a Syrian army defector, in January after detaining him at a military checkpoint near Tripoli on January 10, Sablough said. Originally from Daraa, al-Faleh had fled to Lebanon in 2021, said an individual familiar with his case. A Lebanese driver who was with al-Faleh at the time of his arrest later informed al-Faleh's family that the army had arrested him because he was not carrying legal residency papers.

In late January, a family member in Syria received a call from an official who identified himself as a member of Syria's military intelligence, said people close to al-Faleh. The official said he was seeking information about al-Faleh and his political affiliations and informed al-Faleh's relative that he would soon be handed over by Lebanon to the Syrian authorities.

An official who identified himself as a member of the Syrian government-allied Syrian Social Nationalist Party, tasked with investigating Syrian army defectors in Lebanon, called al-Faleh's family a few days later and told them that Lebanon had deported al-Faleh to Syria and that he was being held at the infamous [Branch 235 of Syrian Military Intelligence](#), better known as the Palestine Branch, in Damascus. His family has not been able to find out anything about him since.

In March, the General Security Directorate deported al-Waer, who had been serving a prison sentence in Lebanon, shortly after he completed his sentence, his lawyer said. The deportation prompted four other Syrian inmates in [Roumieh prison](#), including two of his brothers, to attempt to hang themselves, apparently out of fear of being deported. Videos of the hanging attempts were widely shared on social media. Sablough said that family members only found out about al-Waer's deportation when he was permitted to call his mother at the Masnaa border crossing with Syria.

The General Security Directorate in January ordered the deportation of al-Atr, a Syrian opposition activist jailed in Lebanon since 2017, who faces trial in Lebanon on charges of terrorism, said his lawyer and an individual familiar with his case. The deportation order was issued despite a separate military court decision, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, that ordered his release from prison on bail and barred him from leaving the country.

Originally from al-Qusayr, al-Atr fled to Lebanon in 2012 after taking part in anti-government protests. In 2011, Syrian authorities arrested his father, whose situation and [whereabouts remain unknown](#). The day after Lebanon issued the deportation order, people in al-Qusayr told al-Atr's family that officials from Syria's State Security and Political Security apparatuses were asking around about him. "The officer told our contact in Qusayr that 'Yassin's time is finished in

Lebanon. They didn't know how to discipline him [...] But we know how to," a person close to al-Atr told Human Rights Watch.

Although Lebanese authorities halted his deportation due to public pressure, his lawyer said he remains in detention and faces the threat of deportation. The Lebanese Army had detained al-Waer in 2015 and al-Atr in 2016, accusing them of taking part in hostilities by armed groups in Aarsal, near Lebanon's border with Syria, against the army. Their families deny that they took up arms or took part in the armed hostilities. Al-Atr is set to appear again before Lebanon's military court on May 23.

[Chehadeh](#) told Human Rights Watch that members of the Lebanese Military Intelligence, dressed in civilian clothing, arrested her client while he was participating in a solidarity protest with women in Gaza in the Sin el-Fil area, near Beirut. Chehadeh said that the agents approached her client, whose name is withheld at the lawyer's request, and demanded his residency papers.

She said they held him for several hours at the military intelligence directorate and allegedly tortured him, including beating him with an electric cable. She said that her client confessed under torture to belonging to a terrorist organization. He was released later that day. A forensic medical exam conducted on the same day, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, shows that he had bruises and marks on his neck, shoulder, arms, chest, and hands, resulting from "being beaten or hit ... with a hard, cable-shaped object."

In a separate case, Lebanese authorities in March ordered a Syrian opposition activist, [Jumaa Lehib](#), to leave Lebanon within 21 days when he went to renew his residency papers with General Security. Lehib, who is from Idlib, fled to Lebanon in 2011 after Syrian authorities detained him over his participation in protests. General Security issued the deportation order even though Lehib is registered with the UNHCR and faces a serious risk of persecution if returned.

Sablouh said that General Security officials have repeatedly attempted to intimidate him because he defends refugees at risk of deportation.

Human Rights Watch and other [rights groups](#) previously reported that the army [summarily deported](#) thousands of Syrians, including unaccompanied children, to Syria in 2023, in violation of Lebanese law and Lebanon's international human rights obligations. Deportations of Syrian opposition activists and army defectors violate Lebanon's obligations as a party to the UN Convention Against Torture and under the customary international law principle of nonrefoulement—that is, not to forcibly return people to countries where they face a clear risk of torture or other persecution.

Other governments providing funding to the LAF and General Security Directorate should press them to end unlawful deportations and other violations of Syrians' rights, Human Rights Watch said. Donor governments should also develop a public human rights impact assessment of their funding and press Lebanon to allow an independent reporting mechanism to ensure that funding does not contribute to or perpetuate human rights violations.

"The Lebanese army and General Security are targeting people who have already suffered far too much and could face even worse punishments by Syrian authorities if returned," Kaiss said. "Donor countries providing funds and other assistance to Lebanon's security and military services should ensure that any funds or equipment provided to Lebanon are not being used to commit rights violations."