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World Report 2024



Lebanon

Events of 2023

A demonstrator holds a Lebanese flag as he stands near smoke rising from tear gas during a protest over the deteriorating economic situation, at Riad al-Solh square in Beirut, Lebanon.

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Lebanon continued to grapple with an acute economic and financial crisis that has [impoverished most of the population](#) since 2019. Human rights conditions in the country deteriorated in 2023, with a noticeable uptick in prosecutions for critical speech, growing restrictions against refugees and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and continued impunity for previous abuses.

Tensions have increased along the Lebanon-Israel border, where armed clashes between the Israeli army and various Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups have been ongoing since October 8. As of November 23, Israeli attacks in Lebanon have reportedly killed at least [14 civilians](#), in addition to at least [85 Hezbollah fighters](#). Rocket strikes and other attacks into Israel by Hezbollah and Palestinian groups have reportedly killed at least [three civilians](#) and six soldiers.

No official has been held accountable for the [catastrophic Beirut port explosion](#) in August 2020, and implicated officials have successfully obstructed the domestic investigation since December 2021. The authorities failed to implement crucial economic and financial reforms needed to alleviate the consequences and address the root causes of the economic crisis while they stepped up harassment of [lawyers](#), activists, journalists, and [comedians](#) in response to their public criticisms of

the government and public officials. In April and May, the Lebanese army [summarily deported thousands of Syrians](#) back to Syria.

In February 2023, a United Kingdom court [ruled in favor](#) of three families whose relatives were victims of the 2020 port explosion in a lawsuit brought against the company that owned the 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that was stored in hazardous conditions in port and is believed to have led to the explosion. In March, 38 countries expressed concern about obstruction of and interference with the domestic investigation into the explosion while the UN expert on judicial independence, Margaret Satterthwaite, criticized obstruction of the investigation by implicated actors. On March 28, nine members of parliament introduced two draft laws that would strengthen [the independence of judicial investigations](#) and prevent political interference with the judiciary, but all legislation remained stalled at time of writing because of the ongoing presidential vacuum. Parliament has repeatedly failed to elect a president since October 2022 or put in motion legislative reforms demanded by International Monetary Fund (IMF) that would unlock billions of dollars in aid. Thousands of prisoners, many held in pretrial detention, continued to languish in [overcrowded detention centers](#) across the country without adequate access to health care, medicine, or food.

Accountability and Justice

August 4, 2023 marked [three years](#) since the Beirut port explosion that killed at least 220 people, wounded over 7,000, and caused extensive property damage. The domestic investigation into the blast remained frozen and politicians continued to interfere to disrupt the lead investigator, Judge Tarek Bitar. On January 23, Judge Bitar took steps to [overcome legal barriers](#) preventing him from resuming his work, ordered the release of five suspects, and charged and summoned others for interrogation, including the top public prosecutor, Ghassan Oueidat. In response, Oueidat ordered law enforcement agencies not to execute Bitar's "null" orders, charged Bitar with several crimes, including "usurping power," and ordered the [release](#) of all the detainees in the case.

Families of the victims and several local and international [rights groups](#) continued to call for an international, independent, and impartial investigation into the blast, including a fact-finding mission to be established by the United Nations Human Rights Council. On March 7, 2023, 38 countries expressed concern about the systemic obstruction and interference with the domestic investigation in a [joint statement](#) delivered by Australia before the UN Human Rights Council. During the September 2023 Human Rights Council session, the UN high commissioner for human rights called for an international fact-finding mission into the blast.

Economic Crisis and Rights

Most people in Lebanon were unable to secure their economic and social rights amid the deepening economic crisis, with low-income households bearing the brunt of the crisis. [Existing social assistance programs](#), funded in part by the World Bank, extended minimal coverage and very narrowly targeted households in extreme poverty, leaving large segments of the population who did not qualify vulnerable to hunger, unable to obtain medicines, and subject to other deprivations that undermine their rights.

By mismanaging the electricity sector for decades, Lebanese authorities massively failed to uphold [the right to electricity](#), which Human Rights Watch found is essential to the right to an adequate standard of living. Lebanon's failure to provide electricity beyond a few hours per day left people in the dark and dramatically reduced their [access to critical rights](#), such as food, water, education, and health care.

The economic crisis also threatened the [education sector](#), leaving public school students at [risk of losing another year of school](#) due to a [budget shortfall](#) and years of mismanagement at the Ministry of Education.

Prison conditions [dangerously deteriorated](#) amid the economic crisis, with a majority of prisoners, some held in pretrial detention, subjected to unprecedented overcrowding, subpar health care, disruptions in food supply, and a drop in food quality.

In April 2022, the Lebanese government and the IMF reached a [staff-level agreement](#) that would unlock US\$3 billion over 46 months, provided the adoption of key reforms, including the adoption of a bank secrecy and capital controls law and the restructuring of the Lebanese banking sector. More than 1.5 years later, the reform process remained stalled, and in September 2023, the IMF [criticized](#) the government's "lack of action on urgently needed reforms." Caretaker Economy Minister Amin Salam [stated](#) in August that "a growing number" of officials in the country believed that an IMF loan agreement with Lebanon was no longer needed.

Freedom of Expression

Lebanese authorities increasingly instrumentalized [criminal defamation laws](#) to intimidate and harass critics of the government and public officials amid the economic crisis.

In April, the Beirut Bar Association summoned [Nizar Saghie](#), a prominent lawyer and head of the research and advocacy organization [Legal Agenda](#), to appear before the Bar Association for publicly protesting amendments to the Bar's Legal Code of Ethics that limit the ability of lawyers to make public statements without prior approval. In March 2023, State Security [summoned](#) Jean Kassir, co-founder of the independent media outlet [Megaphone](#), after it published online posts stating that "Lebanon [is] ruled by fugitives from justice." Lara Bitar, editor-in-chief of the [Public Source](#) site, was also summoned for interrogation on March 31 by the Cybercrimes Bureau of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for an article she had written about a local political party. In July, a Lebanese court [sentenced](#) journalist Dima Saddek to one year in prison following a defamation claim filed against her by Gebran Bassil, a member of parliament and the head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), after she criticized the actions of FPM supporters. In August, Lebanese authorities, including the Lebanese military prosecution and the ISF's Criminal Investigations Division, [summoned](#) for investigation and subsequently arrested prominent comedian Nour Hajjar in retaliation for jokes he had made on stage. In September, journalist [Majdoline Lahham](#) was also summoned for investigation by the ISF's Criminal Investigations Division following a defamation claim filed against her in response to a post she shared on social media highlighting corrupt practices by the head of the Sunni Sharia Court of Beirut, Judge Mohammad Ahmad Assaf.

Women's Rights

Various religion-based [personal status laws](#) are discriminatory against women and allow religious courts to control matters related to marriage, divorce, and children. Under all personal status laws, a woman can be found legally recalcitrant ([disobedient](#)) if she leaves the marital home and refuses to cohabit with her husband without a reason that the religious courts consider legitimate. A woman found to be legally recalcitrant is not entitled to spousal maintenance (financial support) from her husband.

Lebanon's nationality law bars Lebanese women, but not men, from passing citizenship to their children and foreign spouses. Cases of domestic violence, including killings, are [on the rise](#).

In September 2022, the General Directorate of Personal Status [stopped recognizing foreign civil marriages](#) and began to deregister ones it had previously recognized, including for some married couples expecting children.

Migrant Workers

The legal status of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, including workers from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, was regulated by a restrictive and abusive regime of laws, regulations, and customary practices known as the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.

Recruitment agencies [were accused](#) of subjecting workers to abuse, labor violations, and human trafficking and in 2020, they [successfully lobbied](#) to block a new standard unified contract adopted by the Ministry of Labor that would have introduced vital safeguards for workers. Lebanon's top administrative court [blocked](#) the implementation of the contract, just a little over a month after its adoption, on the basis that it dealt "severe damage" to the interests of recruitment agencies.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

LGBT people continue to face systemic discrimination in Lebanon. Article 534 of the penal code punishes "any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one year in prison, despite [a series of court rulings between 2007 and 2018 that consensual same-sex relations are not illegal](#).

In August, Caretaker Minister of Culture Mohammed Mortada and member of parliament Ashraf Rifi [introduced](#) separate bills that would explicitly criminalize same-sex relations between consenting adults and punish anyone who "promotes homosexuality" with up to three years in prison.

Also in August, men belonging to the "Soldiers of God," a group openly hostile to LGBT people, [attacked](#) a bar where a drag event was being held in Beirut and assaulted attendees. Agents of the ISF who arrived at the site [failed to intervene](#) and protect the bar's attendees.

In July, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, [incited violence](#) against gay and lesbian people by calling for their killing, sparking terror among LGBT people, with many receiving death threats and online harassment.

A 2023 Human Rights Watch [report](#) described the far-reaching offline consequences of online targeting of LGBT people, including blackmail and being outed, family violence, and arbitrary arrests by Lebanon's ISF.

Refugees

Lebanese authorities continued to pursue policies and deploy tactics designed to coerce Syrian refugees to return to Syria.

Between April and May 2023, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) [arbitrarily arrested and summarily deported thousands of Syrians](#), including unaccompanied children, to Syria, and it intensified raids on houses of refugees in neighborhoods across the country, including Mount Lebanon, Jounieh, Qob Elias, and Bourj Hammoud. Many of those forcibly returned were registered or known to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

According to the UN, there were [nearly 520,000 Palestinian refugees, including over 31,000 from Syria](#), living in Lebanon, where they continued to face restrictions, including on their right to work and own property.

In July, armed clashes erupted in the Ain El Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp near Saida after militants ambushed and killed a Fatah commander alongside his bodyguards. About 20,000 people, including 12,000 children, were [displaced](#) as a result of the deadly fighting, according to Save the Children. More than 30 people, including civilians, were killed in the clashes.

Legacy of Past Wars and Conflicts

An estimated 17,000 Lebanese were kidnapped or “disappeared” during the 1975-1990 civil war and authorities took no recent steps to uncover their fate.

In January, the UN [extended](#) the mandate of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon until the end of December to allow it to finalize its work. The tribunal had convicted Hezbollah agents in absentia in 2022 for planning and executing the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafik El Hariri in 2005.

Key International Actors

France, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional powers exert their influence in Lebanon through their local political allies.

[Human Rights Watched](#) [verified the use of white phosphorous](#) in south Lebanon by Israeli forces, in addition to indiscriminate [attacks on civilians](#) and the [apparent deliberate targeting of journalists](#), amounting to possible war crimes.

In July, the European Union [extended](#) its targeted sanctions framework for Lebanon for another year, which allows for targeted sanctions against individuals or entities for undermining democracy and the rule of law, but the EU has yet to target any individual or entity.

Also in July, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on Lebanon calling for targeted sanctions against those obstructing justice for the 2020 Beirut blast and urging the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent investigation to ascertain responsibility for the blast. At the council, the EU repeatedly [called](#) for a swift, transparent, and credible investigation.

In July, the United States, the UK, and Canada imposed [coordinated targeted sanctions](#) on Lebanon’s former Central Bank governor, Riad Salameh, and his associates, after the end of his 30-year tenure, for their alleged role in an extensive corruption and money laundering scheme. In May, France issued an arrest warrant against Salameh and [Interpol](#) issued a red notice in his name. Salameh’s first deputy, Wassim Mansouri, assumed the role of acting governor in August.