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Syrian deportations leave behind hardship, fear in Lebanon

‘I swear, the whole night long I don’t sleep.’

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A Syrian refugee settlement in Lebanon's eastern Beqaa Valley, March 2017. (Hedinn Halldorsson/UNICEF)

Shortly before dawn in early May – the third day of Ramadan – soldiers knocked on Umm Nour’s tent in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley to take her husband away.

The family of six had lived in the informal refugee camp since fleeing Syria in 2011, when their home in Qusayr, south of Homs, came under heavy bombardment.

Umm Nour’s husband should have been safe from deportation. The family had registered as refugees with the UN well before the Lebanese government demanded an end to new registrations in 2015. However, like many Syrians in Lebanon, they were unable to afford the \$200 per person annual renewal fee required for residency permits. Their papers had lapsed.

Although Lebanon is a small country and hosts an estimated 1.5 million refugees – the largest number per capita in the world – it used to rarely force refugees, even those without valid residency papers like Umm Nour’s husband, to go home.

That all changed with a decision by the country’s Higher Defense Council – approved by another government agency in May – to forcibly deport all Syrians who entered the country illegally after 24 April, 2019.

More than 2,730 Syrians were sent back under the new rule between 21 May and 28 August, according to statistics released by General Security, a government intelligence agency that handles foreign residents.

But rights activists and the refugees themselves fear they are witnessing a wider government crackdown designed to put growing pressure on Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return home.

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As word of the deportations has spread, so has anxiety among the refugees who remain, many of whom have lost breadwinners, not to mention loved ones.

“These deportations have increased the fear among the Syrian community,” the Access Center for Human Rights, a Lebanon-based Syrian-run human rights group told The New Humanitarian in a written statement, adding that they are also compromising their freedom of movement. “[They are] feeling threatened and [are] scared of checkpoints or even just leaving their house to access basic services.”

This is the case for Umm Nour*, whose husband was arrested along with the other men in their informal camp. She borrowed money to pay \$400 for the fines her husband owed for his expired residency, expecting he would return home soon after she paid, as was the case with the other Syrian men arrested in the settlement.

Instead, about 40 days after his arrest, he called her.

“I asked him, ‘Where are you?’ He told me, ‘I’m in Syria,’” Umm Nour said. “I said to him, ‘What do you mean, Syria? Stop kidding!’ I thought he was joking – he jokes a lot. He told me, ‘I’m not kidding – by God, I’m in Syria.’”

‘Terrorists might enter’

Lebanese officials insist the deportations are lawful, and that people are only being sent back to parts of Syria that are safe.

Rafic Chelala, spokesman for President Michel Aoun, who heads the Higher Defense Council, said authorities decided to begin deportations because most Syrians now entering Lebanon are not fleeing conflict but smuggling goods, looking for work, or coming to “make problems”.

“The ones who are coming are not coming from areas where there is war,” he told TNH. “The war now is in Idlib and in areas in the north. We are talking about those who are entering from the eastern border in the Beqaa [Valley],” where he said there was no fighting.

Chelala maintained the measures were necessary for Lebanon’s security. “Terrorists might enter; people who are wanted [by the authorities] might enter,” he said. “We can’t continue allowing everyone to enter as before.”

In recent months, Lebanese authorities launched a crackdown on refugees working without legal authorisation, while stepping up enforcement of restrictions on permanent

construction in unofficial refugees camps, forcing residents to tear down concrete walls higher than one metre.

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Lebanon has also been organising “voluntary return” trips since last summer, signing up Syrians willing to go back and sending busloads across the border.

Chelala insisted the newest rule was not meant to target Syrians who were already in the country before the cut-off date. However, that is not always the case, according to testimonies of people like Umm Nour and reports from watchdog groups.

In the past month, both Human Rights Watch and the Access Center for Human Rights have said people have been deported who were in Lebanon long before 24 April, including some who were registered refugees.

In several cases, the reports said, deportees were arrested upon their return to Syria, and some said they had been interrogated and tortured. In other cases, they were reportedly released after paying bribes. The family of at least one man – accused of previous affiliation with the rebel Free Syrian Army – said they had not been able to communicate with him since his arrest in May 2019.

General Security officials denied a request to be interviewed. The agency has previously, in an official statement, referred to allegations of deportees being arrested and tortured upon their return as “false”.

Sent back to life on the street

Umm Nour’s husband told her he was forced to sign papers agreeing to return to Syria, after which he was handed over to the Syrian military. A judge there found he had committed no crime and he was released, but she hasn’t heard from him in weeks.

The last time she spoke to her husband, said Umm Nour, he told her he had been living “on the streets, with this person or that person”. The family’s house in Qusayr is destroyed, and their surviving relatives still in Syria have fled to Idlib, a part of northwest Syria where shelling and airstrikes since May have killed hundreds of civilians and forced hundreds of thousands more to flee.

Back in Lebanon, she is struggling to take care of her four children, aged eight to 17. Even though her husband had health issues, he took on occasional construction work to support the family. That income is now gone, and seven or eight months ago the family stopped receiving food aid from the UN. Umm Nour said she wasn't sure why they were no longer deemed eligible.

She relies on borrowing money from neighbours and scavenging for discarded food from the shops nearby.

"I wait until the vegetable shop closes and I see the vegetables they didn't want that they threw outside, and I take them at night," she said. "That's how I'm living."

Living in fear

Other Syrians, fearing the fate of Umm Nour's husband, have chosen to go underground.

Before the war, Abu Mohammed was a young farmer in Homs, raising cattle; he fled to Lebanon in 2013 and is registered with the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR. Now, the only animals he has are two canaries in a cage in the tent he shares with his wife and three small children in northern Lebanon.





Abu Mohammed has not left the tent to go any further than to the market down the street since May, when General Security threatened him with arrest, fines, and deportation because his residency papers weren't up to date.

Previously, he worked construction to supplement the aid the family gets from the World Food Programme, \$27 per person per month. Now, he's not working, and they're barely scraping by.

Refugees and human rights monitors say both the deportations themselves and the fear of them are having serious effects on the lives of Syrian families.

According to the Access Center, "families have lost breadwinners and main providers, exposing them to risks of exploitation, child labour and early marriage, exacerbating an already precarious situation [and] making them even more vulnerable."

On Monday, a group of international NGOs working in Lebanon said in a statement that most of the deportees were men, and they were "deeply concerned about the safety of those refugees who have been deported, and the impact such measures have on children separated from their parents."

Abu Mohammed chafes at staying home, and while he admitted his residency was expired, he said he had not been in the country for as long as officials claim, and he was trying to sort out his papers. But fear prevents him from leaving the tent.

"I swear, the whole night long I don't sleep," he said. "I've gotten sick from this thing. Now I'm taking medicine for my heart."

If sent back to Syria, Abu Mohammed believes he would meet the same fate as his brother, an army defector who was caught trying to flee the country in 2014. The family hasn't heard from him since.

Complicated cases

UNHCR officials say they have been in discussions with the Lebanese authorities on the issue of deportation. “We intervene with the authorities in all cases we are aware of and follow up with their families,” UNHCR spokeswoman Lisa Abou Khaled told TNH, suggesting Lebanon should improve “access to legal residency” for refugees.

“We are trying to speed up the renewal of residency for refugees, which would give them the required documents that would protect them from being arrested and/or deported.”

UNHCR is also pushing for Lebanese authorities to put judicial or administrative processes in place to allow Syrians to appeal deportation orders, she said.

But not all the current legal procedures are clear-cut, and observers say criminal charges or security concerns are sometimes put forward as a justification for deportations.

Omar, a Syrian computer engineer, told TNH he was deported from Lebanon in 2017 after a local competitor accused him of hacking and piracy.

Now, he fears for his brother, who fled Raqqa in 2016 and then spent nine months in Lebanon’s notorious Roumieh prison, accused – falsely, Omar insists, of membership of so-called Islamic State.

When his brother was released – without standing trial or being convicted of any crime – he was given deportation orders. But now, he and his Lebanese lawyer, Diala Chehade, fear what will happen if he is sent back to Syria. So he has gone underground, moving around sporadically to avoid detection.

Chehade said the Higher Defense Council’s recent decision, and the uptick in deportations, violate the principle of non-refoulement – the requirement not to return people to a country where they could face death or persecution.

“Why did they make the decision now and not before?” she questioned. “It’s the political climate.”

*(*Like other Syrians interviewed for this piece, Umm Nour asked to be identified only by her nickname, which means “Mother of Nour”, out of fear of reprisals.)*

(TOP PHOTO: A Syrian refugee settlement in Lebanon’s eastern Beqaa Valley, March 2017.)

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