Fleeing Persecution, Facing Deportation: The Protection Challenges of Newly Displaced Syrians in Lebanon.





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1. Introduction: Context and Emerging Protection Concerns

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syrians started fleeing to Lebanon, fearing persecution in Syria. The subsequent attacks against minorities in the coastal region led to further displacement, particularly among members of the Alawite, Druze and Christian communities who were targeted or feared being targeted because of their religious affiliation.

Post-December 2024 Syrian Refugees faced a very different situation from Syrians who had already been in Lebanon for years. Some encountered hostility from established refugee communities, particularly where they were perceived as being pro-regime. At the same time, many struggled to find shelter and access basic services, as the humanitarian response was more limited than it had been in 2011. The situation was further compounded by the ongoing war and conflict in Lebanon and global cuts to humanitarian funding, leaving this newly displaced population facing significant vulnerabilities.

This community is also more sheltered, and, in many cases, afraid to travel to or stay in certain areas of Lebanon due to fears of religious persecution. Many fled Syria without documentation and entered Lebanon irregularly, fearing border controls and potential persecution by authorities affiliated with the new regime.

According to CLDH's field team, many are now facing protection concerns in Lebanon and living in fear of arrest and deportation to Syria. Beneficiaries reported receiving threats, including shortly before fleeing Syria, further contributing to their fear of return and their reluctance to approach authorities or seek assistance.

This report examines the situation of newly displaced Syrian refugees in Lebanon who are facing, or living under the fear of, arrest and deportation to Syria, despite the serious risks they may face upon return, including the risk of persecution, torture, disappearance, or death.

The report focuses on cases where individuals have fled Syria because they were targeted, threatened or in fear for their lives, but are now living in fear of being arrested and forcibly returned. It also documents the legal and human rights violations they may face in Lebanon, including arbitrary arrest and detention, lack of due process and access to legal

remedies, and deportation without an adequate assessment of their individual protection needs.

Drawing on cases and observations documented by CLDH's field team, the report seeks to highlight the protection gaps faced by this newly displaced population and the consequences of deportation practices for individuals who may be at serious risk if returned to Syria. It also examines the obligations of Lebanese authorities under national and international law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement and the safeguards that must be in place before any removal is carried out.

Executive Summary

CLDH's cases reveal four interconnected protection failures: newly displaced Syrians with credible fears of return are not systematically identified; criminal or immigration proceedings can lead to deportation without an individualized risk assessment; evidence of threats is not consistently collected or transmitted to decisionmakers; and access to legal assistance, documentation and humanitarian protection remains uneven. These failures are especially serious for people belonging to communities affected by recent violence in Syria, including Alawite and Druze communities. The cases therefore indicate a procedural protection gap rather than isolated errors.

2. Methodology

This report draws on cases and field observations documented through CLDH's legal assistance and protection work with Syrian nationals who arrived in Lebanon after December 2024 and expressed fear of arrest, detention or deportation to Syria. It examines two cases in detail, alongside observations from CLDH lawyers and field staff concerning access to legal assistance, civil documentation, humanitarian services and protection mechanisms. The report also draws on the findings of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to contextualise the human rights situation in Syria and assess the risks that individuals may face upon return. The analysis assesses these cases against Lebanon's international human rights obligations, particularly the principle of non-refoulement. Because the report is based on a limited set of cases handled by CLDH, it identifies protection risks and procedural failures but does not estimate their prevalence among newly displaced Syrians in Lebanon.

3. Findings from the Field

3.1 Case Stories

Case 1:

A CLDH lawyer represented a Syrian Druze man from Suwayda who fled after violence targeting Druze communities. He feared serious harm because of his religious identity, place of origin and perceived affiliation. He left Syria with the assistance of a smuggler, who provided false identity documents to facilitate passage through checkpoints. Although he did not use the documents, he retained them.

After arriving in Lebanon, he was approached by a Lebanese national who promised to sponsor him and establish a joint business. Relying on these promises, he sold land in Syria and transferred the proceeds to the Lebanese individual. When the promised sponsorship and business never materialized and he began questioning the arrangement, the Lebanese man accused him of theft before the Lebanese authorities.

During questioning, the Syrian national denied the allegations and voluntarily explained the circumstances of his escape from Syria and his possession of the false documents. Rather than assessing his protection needs, the authorities initiated proceedings against him for identity-related offences and detained him.

CLDH intervened extensively, submitting that he faced a foreseeable, real and personal risk of torture or death if returned to Syria and emphasizing Lebanon's obligations under the principle of non-refoulement. Despite this, the misdemeanour judge ordered his deportation without conducting a meaningful individualized assessment of his protection claim or the evidence concerning the threats he faced.

CLDH subsequently engaged several authorities to prevent his deportation. At the time, General Security had been operating under an instruction from the former Public Prosecutor at the Court of Cassation, Judge Jamal Al-Hajjar, that Syrian nationals should not be deported where officers determined that they faced a genuine and serious risk upon return. Following the end of his tenure, however, we were informed that such cases would instead be considered individually with the new Public Prosecutor. General Security officials subsequently indicated that Syrians were being deported regardless of protection claims, including where there were credible indications of a real risk of treatment. CLDH lawyers met with the Public Prosecutor at the Court of Cassation and presented evidence of serious threats against the individual, including death threats contained in voice messages on his seized mobile phone. The Public Prosecutor requested that General Security coordinate with the relevant prosecution office to retrieve and examine the phone and verify the threats.

To avoid delays associated with this process, CLDH identified a procedural irregularity in the notification of the judgment, allowing counsel to appeal after the ordinary deadline. During the appeal, counsel requested examination of the voice messages as evidence of the serious risks he would face upon return.

Following sustained legal advocacy and engagement with General Security and the Public Prosecutor, the authorities reconsidered the case. The existing judicial measure was changed, and the individual was released and allowed to remain in Lebanon pending the continuation of the proceedings, rather than being immediately deported.

Case 2:

CLDH also represented a Syrian national of Alawite origin and former member of the Syrian army who fled Syria following the fall of the Assad government. Owing to his background and religious affiliation, he feared persecution and serious harm if returned.

While residing irregularly in Lebanon, he became involved in a financial dispute with a Lebanese national relating to online betting applications. After disagreements regarding payments made into the application, the Lebanese individual accused him of fraud.

Although the dispute was essentially financial, the individual's irregular migration status became the determining factor in the judicial proceedings. The competent judge ordered his deportation without an individualized assessment of the risk arising from his Alawite identity, former military service, place of origin and perceived association with the former government. These factors are material because independent reporting has documented killings, torture, arbitrary detention, displacement and other serious violations affecting Alawite civilians and people perceived to have supported the former government.

During our interventions, General Security officials themselves expressed concern regarding the current decision-making process, noting that decisions issued by the Public Prosecutor's Office were not adequately taking into account. Lebanon's international obligations, UNHCR information concerning protection risks in Syria, or the individual's own testimony regarding the danger he faced upon return.

CLDH pursued available legal and diplomatic avenues to prevent or mitigate the consequences of the deportation, including engagement with relevant authorities and advocacy before the Ministry of Justice. Ultimately, he was deported to Syria, where CLDH engaged extensively with relevant stakeholders to advocate for his protection, helping ensure his safety.

3.2 Patterns and Observations: Changes in Treatment: Pre- and Post-December 2024

CLDH has been receiving almost daily requests for protection assistance from refugees who arrived in Lebanon after December 2024. Many of those seeking support do not have valid documentation, belong to minority communities, and report having received threats or having been threatened in Syria because of their perceived or actual affiliation.

CLDH provides the assistance it can and refers individuals to other organizations where appropriate, based on their specific needs and the services currently available. This is taking place in a context of significant funding cuts and the ongoing war in Lebanon, which have further limited the capacity of organizations to respond to the needs of this newly displaced population.

According to CLDH lawyers working in the Bekaa, organizations that previously provided support to Syrian refugees are not offering the same level of assistance to those who

arrived after December 2024. Access to civil documentation, including birth and marriage registration, also appears to be more difficult for this specific group.

The economic situation of these refugees also differs from that of many longer-established Syrian refugees. Many are working informally and discreetly across different sectors rather than in agriculture, where a significant number of longer-established Syrian refugees have traditionally found work. This leaves many particularly vulnerable to exploitation, arrest and other protection concerns.

Taken together, these observations suggest that refugees arriving after December 2024 may face different and, in some respects, more limited protection than Syrians who have lived in Lebanon for several years. CLDH's cases and field observations indicate barriers to civil documentation, humanitarian assistance and basic services, alongside heightened fear of arrest and deportation. Because the report's evidence is qualitative and drawn from CLDH's caseload, further monitoring is needed to determine how widespread these differences are and whether they reflect policy, uneven implementation or reduced institutional capacity.

3.3 UNHCR Response:

The situation of refugees arriving after December 2024 also differs from that of the Syrian refugee population that had been established in Lebanon for years. Before the recent displacement, Lebanon had an extensive humanitarian response structure for Syrian refugees, developed over more than a decade through UNHCR and its partner organisations. This included protection services, referrals, humanitarian assistance and support with civil documentation. However, UNHCR registration of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has been suspended since May 2015, meaning that access to formal registration and some related forms of protection was already limited.

The newly displaced population is arriving in a significantly different context. UNHCR estimates that more than 115,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon since December 2024, with many settling in areas such as the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel and North Lebanon. While UNHCR and its partners have developed a response to these arrivals, CLDH's field observations indicate that the number could be higher and that newly arrived refugees are not accessing assistance and protection mechanisms at the same level as longer-established refugee communities.

This gap is particularly concerning for those without documentation, members of minority communities, and individuals who fear arrest or deportation. For people who may face serious risks if returned to Syria, access to protection cannot be limited to humanitarian assistance. They also require access to legal information, individual protection assessments, legal representation and effective safeguards against forced return.

The difference therefore appears less to be the complete absence of a humanitarian response than a gap between the protection needs of newly displaced refugees and the assistance and protection mechanisms currently available to them. This raises concerns about whether existing systems are sufficiently adapted to the profile and protection needs of those who arrived after December 2024.

4. Legal and Human Rights Framework

Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. However, Lebanon is a State Party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). International conventions ratified by Lebanon form part of its domestic legal framework and, pursuant to Article 2 of the Code of Civil Procedure, prevail over conflicting provisions of ordinary domestic legislation.

The clearest treaty-based prohibition applicable to deportations from Lebanon is contained in Article 3(1) of the Convention against Torture. It provides that:" *No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture."*

This obligation is absolute. It applies to any person under the State's jurisdiction and is not dependent on the person's nationality, immigration status, refugee status or the legality of their presence in the territory.

The Committee against Torture[1] has expressly clarified that Article 3 protects individuals regardless of their nationality or legal, administrative or judicial status. It has further stated that the obligation applies where there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would face a personal and foreseeable risk of torture upon removal.

Accordingly, irregular entry, lack of valid residency or an identity-related offence does not permit the Lebanese authorities to return a person to Syria where the conditions under Article 3 are met. In the cases documented by CLDH, the individuals raised specific risk factors linked to religious identity, perceived political or military affiliation, place of origin and alleged threats. Those claims required a prompt, individualized assessment informed by reliable and current country information before any deportation could lawfully be carried out. If substantial grounds established a personal and foreseeable risk of torture, removal would be prohibited.

The obligation of non-refoulement is not limited to Article 3(1) of the Convention against Torture (UNCAT). It also arises under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Lebanon is likewise a State Party. Although the ICCPR does not expressly use the term “non-refoulement”, the Human Rights Committee[2] has interpreted the Covenant as imposing an obligation on States parties not to extradite, deport, expel or otherwise remove a person where there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of irreparable harm, such as that contemplated by Articles 6 and 7 of the Covenant. The Committee has further clarified that this obligation requires States to refrain from removing individuals where such a risk exists[3].

The Committee against Torture has also previously raised concerns regarding Lebanon’s implementation of the principle of non-refoulement, including in relation to Syrian, Iraqi and Sudanese nationals. The Committee called on Lebanon to ensure that procedural safeguards against refoulement are in place and that effective remedies are available, including review by an independent judicial body.

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[1] **CAT/C/GC/4: General comment No. 4 (2017) on the implementation of article 3 of the Convention in the context of article 22**

[2] Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 31 (2004), paragraph 12
[3] Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 (2018), paragraph 30,

The risk faced by Syrian newcomers in Lebanon if deported to Syria can be illustrated by the findings of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

In its report of 27 March 2026 on the July 2025 violence in Suwayda, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented three overlapping waves of violence between 14 and 19 July 2025 that killed more than 1,700 people according to its conservative assessment, the large majority of them Druze.[4] The first wave involved government forces, including the Internal Security Forces and the Syrian Arab Army, accompanied by tribal fighters. It included murder, direct and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, arbitrary arrests and abductions, torture and ill-treatment, pillage, sexual and gender-based violence, and attacks on religious buildings accompanied by discriminatory sectarian insults, primarily against the Druze community.[5] The Commission considered the tribal fighters accompanying government forces between 14 and 16 July to have acted under the effective control of those forces, with their acts imputable to the State[6] In the second wave, Suwayda-based organized armed groups attacked Bedouin civilians,[7] and in the third, thousands of tribal fighters mobilized from outside Suwayda killed and abducted civilians and systematically looted and burned nearly every home in 35 predominantly Druze and mixed villages.[8] The Commission found that the killings, accompanied by sectarian insults, indicated that Druze and Bedouin civilians were targeted on the basis of community affiliation,[9] and that certain murders appear to have been committed with discriminatory intent against persons because of their membership in an identifiable group.[10] It found that some of these acts may amount to crimes against humanity, including persecution on religious grounds, should further investigation establish the elements,[11] These findings show that

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[4] Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law violations committed during the July 2025 violence in Suwayda, Syria*, 61st Sess, UN Doc A/HRC/61/CRP.7 (27 March 2026) [*CoI Syria, CRP.7*], Summary at 1 and paras 48, 50.
[5] *Ibid*, Summary at 1; para 37.
[6] *Ibid*, paras 3, 63.
Ibid, Summary at 1–2; para 41.

[8] *Ibid*, Summary at 2; paras 42, 44.
[9] *Ibid*, paras 62, 102.

[10] *Ibid*, para 147.
[11] *Ibid*, para 162.

civilians faced serious violence from several actors, including State security forces, and that the risk was linked to religious and community affiliation. They concern a specific governorate and specific communities and do not address return or deportation, so the risk to any individual must be assessed on the basis of their own circumstances.

Between January and March 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented serious violations against civilians, primarily targeting Alawi communities, in Syria's coastal and western-central regions.[12] After the fall of the former government, killings, abductions, looting and arbitrary arrests affecting Alawis increased, and at checkpoints and during combing operations Alawis were questioned about their sectarian identity and addressed with derogatory terms[13] In March 2025, some 1,400 people, predominantly civilians and including approximately 100 women, were reported killed, most in massacres.[14] In most cases investigated, perpetrators asked civilians whether they were Sunni or Alawi, then took Alawi men and boys away and executed them, often after sectarian verbal abuse.[15] The Commission found that this pattern suggested sectarian targeting, alongside possible retaliatory motives linked to perceived political affiliation or prior military service,[16] and that certain factions of the interim government's security forces committed extrajudicial killings and torture or ill-treatment of civilians in Alawi-majority areas in a widespread and systematic manner.[17] Looting, property destruction and mass displacement followed,[18] and as of the report's finalization the Commission continued to receive reports of abductions, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, property violations, threats and sectarian slurs.[19] These findings are relevant country-of-origin information for assessing risk to Alawi individuals in Syria. The report does not address return or deportation and cautions against generalizing about the Alawi community, so each person's circumstances,

[12] Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Violations against civilians in the coastal and western-central regions of the Syrian Arab Republic (January–March 2025)*, 59th Sess, UN Doc A/HRC/59/CRP.4 (11 August 2025) [*CoI Syria, CRP.4*], Summary at 1 and para 1.
[13] *CoI Syria, CRP.4*, *supra* note 1, para 30.
[14] *Ibid*, Summary at 1.
[15] *Ibid*, paras 73–74.
[16] *Ibid*, para 74.
[17] *Ibid*, para 88.
[18] *Ibid*, paras 75, 79.
[19] *Ibid*, para 81.

including place of origin, perceived affiliation, personal history and prior threats, must be assessed individually.

For a newly arrived Syrian who expresses a fear of return, the relevant question is consequently not simply whether the person has valid residency or entered Lebanon through an authorized channel. The authorities must determine whether returning that individual to Syria would expose them to a risk prohibited under Lebanon's applicable international obligations.

The substantive prohibition of refoulement necessarily requires effective procedures capable of identifying persons who may be at risk before removal takes place. A person cannot meaningfully invoke protection against refoulement if a deportation decision is executed before their protection claim or fear of return has been examined.

The Committee against Torture has further clarified that effective implementation of Article 3 requires procedural safeguards capable of preventing removal where a person faces a risk of torture. These safeguards include an individual, impartial and independent assessment of the risk; access to a lawyer and legal aid where necessary; access to information and interpretation in a language the person understands; and the right to challenge a removal decision before an independent authority, with suspensive effect pending review.

For the cases examined in this report, relevant risk indicators include: membership in a religious or ethnic community affected by recent violence; residence in or origin from a locality where grave violations have been documented; actual or imputed political or military affiliation; prior arrest, detention, threats or attempted recruitment; family links to a party to the conflict; gender-specific risks; absence of civil documentation; and evidence contained in messages, recordings, medical records or witness statements. No single indicator should be treated as determinative. The assessment must consider the cumulative and personal effect of all available information.

At a minimum, protection-sensitive procedures should enable every person facing removal to communicate a fear of return in a language they understand; provide prompt access to a lawyer and, where necessary, an interpreter; require the authority ordering or executing removal to record the claim and its supporting evidence; assess the claim against current and reliable country-of-origin information; issue a written, reasoned

decision; and provide access to an independent review with automatic suspensive effect. Removal must not proceed until that review has been completed.

5. Recommendations:

In light of the cases and protection concerns documented in this report, CLDH calls for immediate measures that identify people at risk before removal, suspend deportation while protection claims are assessed, guarantee access to legal assistance and review, and create accountable referral and monitoring procedures. Each responsible institution should publish the steps it has taken and data on their implementation.

To the Lebanese authorities and judiciary

- The Lebanese government should make the declaration under Article 22(1) of the Convention against Torture, recognizing the competence of the Committee against Torture to receive and consider individual communications.
- The Higher Judicial Council should encourage judges to apply and respect the international conventions to which Lebanon is a party, including the principle of non-refoulement where applicable. This approach should also be reflected in judicial training and professional development through the Institute of Judicial Studies, with a view to strengthening judges' awareness and consistent application of Lebanon's international obligations. As regards the Public Prosecutor at the Court of Cassation, appropriate circulars could be issued to the judicial police and other law-enforcement authorities clarifying that no deportation or removal should be carried out where there are serious grounds to believe that the person concerned would be at risk of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment upon return to their country of origin.
- Judges and prosecutors should treat immigration status and criminal allegations separately from the non-refoulement inquiry. Before ordering deportation as a penalty or consequence, they should examine the person's stated fear of return, obtain and preserve relevant evidence, consult current country-of-origin information, and record why the available safeguards are sufficient to prevent prohibited harm.

To General Security

- General Security should introduce a mandatory protection-screening form for every Syrian national facing removal. Officers should ask whether the person fears

return; record identity, locality of origin, community affiliation, perceived political or military association, prior threats, detention history and available evidence; provide written information on legal assistance; and immediately refer positive screenings to a designated protection focal point. The removal file should contain the completed form and the written outcome of the referral before any transfer occurs.

To UNHCR and humanitarian actors

- UNHCR and protection partners should establish an emergency legal-protection pathway for newly displaced Syrians at risk of arrest or deportation. The pathway should include a public hotline, rapid referral to qualified counsel, interpretation, assistance to collect evidence of threats, and urgent liaison with General Security and judicial authorities. Partners should track the time between referral and legal intervention and review cases in which assistance arrived too late.

Implementation benchmarks should include: adoption of written judicial and General Security instructions within three months; designation of protection focal points and launch of the screening form within three months; an emergency legal-referral pathway operating in priority areas within six months; quarterly publication of anonymized data on deportation decisions, protection claims, suspensions and review outcomes; and an independent review after twelve months with participation from affected communities, Lebanese civil society, UNHCR and relevant authorities.

- UNHCR and humanitarian organizations should conduct confidential outreach through trusted local partners in Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, North Lebanon and other areas hosting new arrivals. Outreach should prioritize people without documentation, minority communities, and persons who avoid movement because they fear arrest or community hostility. Referral protocols should identify named legal and protection providers, secure informed consent before sharing personal data, and include a procedure for urgent cases outside normal working hours.

To international actors and donors

Donors should provide flexible, multi-year funding for emergency legal representation, protection screening, interpretation, civil-documentation

assistance and secure evidence management. Grants should support a shared referral protocol among legal and protection actors and require anonymized reporting on persons screened, legal interventions undertaken, removals suspended, outcomes of reviews and recurring procedural failures. Funding conditions should protect the independence and confidentiality of legal services.

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