

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Forced to Sign Voluntary Return Forms; Risk of Serious Harm

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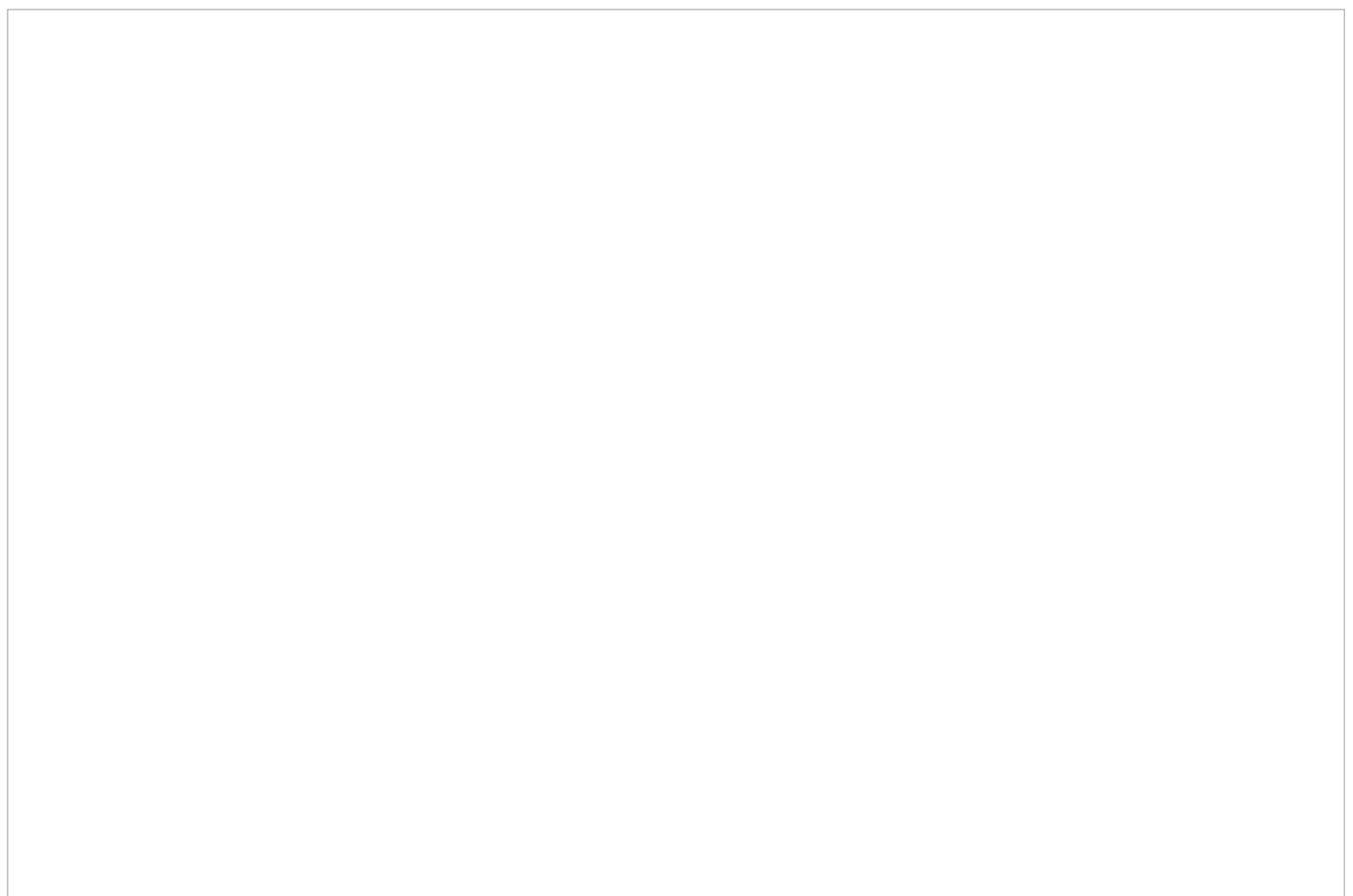
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Members of the Lebanese General Security Directorate oversee Syrian refugees boarding a bus to take them home to Syria, in the northern Beirut suburb of Burj Hammoud, Lebanon, Thursday, Jan. 24, 2019. 2019 AP Photo/Bilal Hussein

(Beirut) [Lebanon](#) summarily deported at least 16 Syrians, some of them registered refugees, on April 26, 2019 after they arrived at the Beirut airport, Human Rights Watch, the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), Legal Agenda, Frontiers Rights, and the Access Center for Human Rights said today.

At least 5 of the 16 had registered with the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), and at least 13 expressed their fears of torture or persecution if returned to Syria. Despite this, the Syrians were not given a meaningful chance to seek asylum or challenge their removal, and were forced to sign voluntary repatriation forms. Nongovernmental organizations working with refugees in Lebanon estimate that 30 Syrians have been deported from Hariri International Airport in Beirut this year by the General Security Directorate, the agency that

oversees the entry and exit of foreigners.

Lebanese authorities should not deport anyone to Syria without first allowing them a fair opportunity to argue their case for protection and ensuring that they don't face a real risk of persecution, torture, or other serious harm, said [Lama Fakih](#), acting Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. Despite heated rhetoric calling for Syrians to return home, and coerced voluntary returns, there continues to be significant risk of harm for refugees who do return to Syria.

Lebanese authorities have in the past [affirmed](#) their commitment not to forcibly return any Syrian to Syria but, increasingly, [officials](#) are calling on Syrians in Lebanon to return home.

As a party to the Convention Against Torture, Lebanon is obligated not to return or extradite anyone if there are substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of being subjected to torture. Lebanon is also bound by the customary international law principle of nonrefoulement not to return refugees to places where they would be persecuted or to expose anyone to a real risk of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or threat to their life. Human Rights Watch has for years documented widespread patterns of arbitrary [detention](#), [torture](#), and [deaths](#) in Syrian government custody.

One of the people deported, Khaled (a pseudonym), told Human Rights Watch he had been living in Lebanon for six years, but left the country on April 21 to seek asylum in Cyprus through Turkey. As he was departing from Beirut airport, General Security officers permanently banned him from re-entering Lebanon for failure to pay a fine of 1,200,000 Lebanese liras (US\$790) resulting from failing to renew his legal residency.

Lebanon's [residency policy](#) makes it difficult for Syrians to maintain legal status, heightening risks of exploitation and abuse and restricting refugees access to work, education, and health care. Seventy-four percent of Syrians in Lebanon [now lack legal residency](#) and risk detention for unlawful presence in the country.

Once he arrived in Northern Cyprus via Turkey, he said, Turkish authorities at the airport in Erkan did not let him and the 12 other Syrian men also attempting to enter Cyprus board the plane and instead returned them to Lebanon. The men were not allowed to return to Turkey under Turkey's 2016 [policy change that ended visa-free travel](#) for Syrians entering the country by air or sea.

When the men arrived at Beirut Airport, Khaled said, General Security officers pressured him and the other Syrians to sign documents stating that they were voluntarily returning to Syria. One of the other men in the group told Frontiers Rights that he was also coerced into signing a voluntary return document even though he had paid the fine for his illegal entry and was not notified that he was banned from entering Lebanon.

Khaled told Human Rights Watch that after he unsuccessfully tried to negotiate with the General Security officers, explaining his fears of conscription and arrest in Syria, he felt he had no choice but to sign the paper. One of the other Syrian men in the group gave Frontiers Rights a similar account and said that even though he expressed his fear of torture in Syria, he was forced to sign the paper indicating his voluntary return.

That evening, General Security officers put the men on a bus, along with three Syrian women who had arrived at the airport and took them to the Lebanon-Syria Masnaa border crossing, where they were told they were not allowed to come back to Lebanon. Khaled said that UNHCR was not notified of the deportation until after the group had already left the airport. Once the Syrians arrived at the border, he said, UNHCR attempted to negotiate with General Security on their behalf, but that they were unsuccessful in stopping the deportation.

Lebanon has hosted more than an [estimated 1.5 million](#) Syrian refugees since 2011. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly called for other countries [to increase their assistance](#) to Lebanon and to resettle greater numbers of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon.

Since 2017, leading politicians in Lebanon have [increasingly called](#) for the return of refugees to Syria, and the authorities have put pressure on UNHCR to organize returns despite the ongoing conflict in Syria. UNHCR has said that it [cannot promote or facilitate returns](#) of refugees before it has determined that conditions in Syria are safe. General Security has been facilitating returns for refugees since May 2018.

General Security estimates that over [170,000 Syrian refugees returned](#) to their country from Lebanon between December 2017 and March 2019. Nongovernmental organizations working in Lebanon estimate that the number of refugees returning to Syria is much lower. Refugees have said they are returning because of [harsh policies and deteriorating conditions](#) in Lebanon, not because they think Syria is safe.

My biggest fears returning to Syria are that I would be conscripted and have to fight, or that I would be arrested because the regime has me on a wanted list or because of a case of mistaken identity, Khaled told Human Rights Watch. If I wasn't scared of arrest, I wouldn't have left Syria in the first place.

Lebanon should give anyone at risk of deportation to Syria the opportunity to obtain legal representation and to meet with a UNHCR representative. The government should provide a publicly accessible, regular statistical accounting of deportations, including reasons for removal.

The Lebanese authorities should abide by their legal obligations, said Ghida Frangieh, a lawyer with Legal Agenda and Frontiers Rights. Other states should also abide by the principle of responsibility sharing and step up their resettlement programs, given that Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita.

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Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan

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