

After 8 December 2024: What lies ahead for Syrians in Lebanon?

from Anja Pilchowski, 7 April 2025

The following article is inspired by many conversations with Syrian people in the diasporas. It examines how both Lebanon's shifting policies and Syria's uncertain future shape their lives. Yet, the article does not claim to be exhaustive. Due to the compact nature of the article and the complexity of both Syria and Lebanon, only a few realities are portrayed.

[In May 2024, I wrote an article for *borderline-europe e. V.* about the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.](#) Numerous Syrians fled to neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, or Turkey, shortly after the brutal counter-insurgency of the Syrian uprising in 2011. Others took routes overland via the Balkans or across the eastern Mediterranean to reach Europe. In Lebanon, Syrians have been scapegoated for maldevelopments or accused of forcing a population exchange- right-wing narratives that are used all over the world to describe the unwanted refugee Others. And because of their precarious residency situation in Lebanon, some Syrians have also been kidnapped to extort ransom money from their relatives or exploited in work places. Their situation was exacerbating daily and peaking with the beginning of Israel's war of aggression against Lebanon on 1 October 2024. Like everyone else, they then had to flee within Lebanon or even move back involuntarily to regime-run Syria (The Loop, 2024).

Now, not only the Lebanese government had to transfer from a caretaker to an actual government to implement the ceasefire agreements that ended the Israeli war of aggression on 27 November 2024 (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2025), but also the Bashar al-Assad regime was ousted on 8 December 2024. Yet, for many Syrians in Lebanon, it did not bring the relief they had hoped for. After over a decade of fleeing war and persecution, Syrians in Lebanon now face renewed uncertainty. The new, still unstable interim government in Syria, the persistent violence and the economic hardships make rebuilding almost impossible. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, the new government is under growing pressure to push Syrians out. Shortly after 8 December 2024, not only in Lebanon voices were raised by right-wing or centre-right politicians that Syrians must once again be asked to return to Syria or, even worse, be deported to Syria (Klasse Gegen Klasse, 2025; L'Orient Today, 2025c; Pro Asyl, 2024; Zeit Online, 2024), but in Austria the first hasty decisions were issued by the authorities to revoke the asylum/refugee status of some Syrians, bringing uncertainty to their residence status (Diakonie Österreich, 2024).

Situation in Syria

The situation in Syria is complex and will remain complex for many years. The Syrian interim government is under pressure to reunite and stabilise Syria as quickly as possible. "[And] many Syrians view them with suspicion, given their jihadist origins and unknown ambitions" (Crisis Group, 2025). However, there are many actors at work that want to simplify this complexity. We are currently seeing this strategy also in many established governments around the world. The attempt to oversimplify carries the risk of homogenising society, making it too under-complex and bringing danger to marginalised and minority groups.

Since December 2024, the organisation Guardians of Equality Movement (GEM), Syria's first organisation for Queers, in partnership with human rights activists, has been documenting serious violations targeting Queer individuals in Syria. These violations

include entrapment via dating apps, home raids, abductions, arbitrary arrests, torture, humiliation, threats of physical violence and disfigurement, as well as other harmful practices such as forced filming and public shaming. These abuses have been carried out by both interim government-affiliated groups and non-state armed factions (GEM, 2025). In early March 2025, there were clashes between people referred to as 'Shabiha' and the new Syrian forces in Syria's Tartous, Latakia, Homs, and Hama Governorates. The term 'Shabiha' refers to people who are organised in militias that are loyal to the former al-Assad regime. Such clashes inevitably impact the civilian population as well. Hundreds of people were killed, and thousands were displaced to northern Lebanon (L'Orient Today, 2025a; UNHCR, 2025c). Others sought refuge by taking the maritime route from Syria to Cyprus. Yet, ~80 people who fled Syria by boat were pushed back from Cyprus into Lebanese/Syrian waters, without due asylum process (Dialogos, 2025; UNHCR, 2025b). Herewith, Cyprus willingly violated international law, exacerbating the already dire situation for those in need of protection. Perhaps an agreement similar to Lebanon's Taif Agreement of 1989, which ended the civil war in Lebanon and determined how the country's various sects, which had been fighting each other, should be represented in the government, can allow for the inclusion and representation of all minorities in Syria (Deutsche Welle, 2025)- not only religious minorities.

Another key question for the future of Syria will be how the interim and future government(s) deal with the actions and aftermath of the al-Assad regimes. For the survivors of the regimes, it is crucial that an effective justice system is established and that former regime loyalists are fully prosecuted. During the Bashar al-Assad regime in particular, people were abducted, tortured, killed, disappeared, and most people's livelihoods were permanently destroyed.

Whole neighbourhoods of different cities are left in ruins. And while many schools have reopened, 30-50% of the school buildings are still unusable due to war damage, destruction, or conversion for other purposes. Around 40-50% of children aged six to fifteen are still not attending school. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that the total cost of rebuilding Syria is 200 billion USD (Crisis Group, 2025). The humanitarian organisation *White Helmets* which was founded in 2013, helped communities prepare for, respond to and rebuild from attacks and "[n]ow, at this historic moment of rebuilding, [the White Helmets] are urgently scaling [their] efforts to provide emergency medical care, repair critical infrastructure, and help millions of families return home safely—while building a resilient civil defense system for all of Syria" (White Helmets, n.d.). Thus, the cut in foreign aid by the US Agency for International Development is a blow to the Syrian White Helmets organisation at this historic and crucial moment (CNN, 2025).

Alongside these realities, Turkey, Israel, and Iran continue to pursue their own agendas through ongoing interferences and interventions in Syria (Foreign Policy Magazine, 2025; Geopolitical Monitor, 2025; The Associated Press, 2025). According to Crisis Group (2025), any external interference driven by their own interests could lead to a long-term fragmentation and a return to civil war.

Situation in Lebanon

Recent research emphasises the significant role that European Union policies play in influencing migration and asylum practices in the West Asian region. As the number one donor, the EU recognised very early on that Lebanon plays a crucial role in keeping

refugees and migrants out of Europe. Therefore, the EU has provided significant funding since 2011 (Andreou, 2022). While this external factor is crucial in understanding how migrant and refugee movements are managed, it is equally important to consider the internal political dynamics within Lebanon. EU policies generally advocate for the integration of refugees into local societies, while governments in the region often prefer temporary measures that prevent long-term integration (Dorai & Amer, 2024). Lebanon applied a range of policies to push Syrians to leave, including criminalisation, marginalisation, illegalised residencies, and forced deportations to Syria for more than ten years. These strategies have left Syrian refugees with very few options. Most Syrians in Lebanon continue to resist these pressures until today. Surveys consistently show that they will not return unless conditions in Syria improve (UNHCR, 2025a). The ongoing conflicts in Lebanon and Syria, exacerbated by Israel's actions, only deepen displacement and make any return to Syria even less viable (The Loop, 2024).

Syrians mostly live in border cities like Trablus, also known as Tripoli, or in villages in the East or South of Lebanon, and in poorer neighbourhoods of the capital Beirut. Trablus is a city in northern Lebanon with a long shared Lebanese-Syrian history (Fair Observer, 2012; Trafig, 2021). However, also in Trablus, where Syrians and Lebanese have lived together in intertwined realities for a very long time, anti-Syrian sentiments are prevalent, sometimes solely based on an affiliation with a particular religious group (Inkstick, 2025). But there are continuous attempts on both sides to live together in peaceful and fruitful coexistence. Many Syrians have opened businesses or work together with Lebanese, which gives them more reasons to stay in Lebanon than to go back to Syria. And NGOs like Utopia Lebanon are offering a variety of activities in Trablus, encouraging interactions between different communities and fostering social cohesion (Utopia, n.d.).



Syrian and Lebanese people sit together in one of Trablus's Shisha cafés, enjoying each other's presence.

In Beirut, there are different neighbourhoods for different communities. There are Christian neighbourhoods, Shia Muslim neighbourhoods, and neighbourhoods where Syrian people live in significant numbers. One of the Syrian quarters is Bourj Hammoud. The situation for Syrian people in Beirut is volatile. Violent attacks by parts of the Lebanese civilian population and Lebanese forces happen regularly and include stalking, harassment, exploitation, arbitrary arrests, torture in prisons and expulsions to Syria (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2024; The Guardian, 2024; The New

Humanitarian, 2024). Although not a safe haven, Beirut is also known for being a haven for Queers in the West Asian region. Most non-governmental organisations working for Queer people are in Beirut and try to provide a safer environment and support. One of the organisations is Sawtonna, which was initiated by a Queer person fleeing from Syria to Lebanon (Instagram, n.d.). Sawtonna's founding member experiences marginalisation not only due to very violent attacks on Queer communities, but also because of her Syrian roots and the challenges she faces with her residency status in Lebanon.

In southern Lebanon, the experiences of Syrians differ from those in the north or in the capital, Beirut. Life here is even more challenging- not only for Syrians, but for all the residents. This is because the region has been a primary target of Israel, either in attacks against Hezbollah or due to its fabricated territorial claims south of the Litani River. But despite the adverse conditions, the Lebanese authorities manage to make life even more difficult for the Syrian people. By prohibiting aid organisations from visiting certain spots to provide their services, or by setting a curfew to ban Syrian people from going out after a certain time, or by prohibiting the usage of motor scooters because they are allegedly too noisy. However, motor scooters are often the only means of transport for marginalised people in these areas. Moreover, due to the lack of accommodation, Syrians often live in camps which are usually made up of tents on private land. In these camps, Syrians either pay rent or offer their labor power in exchange for housing.



A Syrian camp in a village south of Saida on Lebanon's coast.

According to the residents of the camp, the UNHCR has cut its financial support for Syrians as they are now considered migrants and no longer refugees. In reality, this means that the residents now have to live with even scarcer resources from day to day. Many try to earn an income in agriculture. But as in many other countries, the illegalised residence situation is also used here to exploit people in labour situations. Jinkang (2020) called this modern slavery in the analogue situation in southern Italy. Syrians often work long hours in the agricultural sector, earning just five USD per day as women and eight to ten USD per day as men. To ease the situation for Syrians in settlements in south Lebanon, NGOs like Cap Anamur e. V. are now also giving out food parcels, even though their main focus is on the provision of medical aid (Cap Anamur, n.d.).

And although the Lebanese government has repeatedly announced that it will not allow Syrian pupils to return to Lebanese schools, they continue to receive education from

UNHCR teachers during the second shift, after Lebanese children have finished their school day.

Return to Syria

In March 2025, the Lebanese government made its position on the return of Syrians clear during the 9th Brussels Conference "Supporting Syria: Addressing the Needs for a Successful Transition". The new Minister for Foreign Affairs, Youssef Rajji declared that "the return of Syrian refugees is now imperative" (L'Orient Today, 2025b). Lebanon already supports deportations from European countries to Syria via Beirut airport. Critical voices argue that the new directive of the Lebanese government could effectively make Lebanon a long-term refuge for Syrians expelled from Europe, as international pressure grows to block involuntary returns to Syria (The New Arab, 2025).

The current realities in Syria discourage people from returning to the country. Reports show that only a few Syrians from diasporas returned to Syria and that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) even warns of mass return to Syria since it can destabilise the current situation on-site rapidly (Middle East Monitor, 2024). The same reports indicate that there is a growing minority wanting to return to Syria but lacking the financial means. Returning would mean investing a lot of money and hoping for secure accommodation, food, income, and education. The return journey itself requires significant financial means, and many are left with the burden of either rebuilding their homes from scratch or renovating what remained, often adding costly upgrades like solar panels due to the lack of electricity. For most, the financial capacity to rebuild in their home country is simply non-existent (The Conversation, 2025).

For those with the financial means, the lack of construction materials and skilled labour poses a high-threshold challenge. Many young professionals fled the country during the Bashar al-Assad regime, while those who remained are now occupied with rebuilding their own homes. However, if there is no home to rebuild, then the need to rent a house appears. But renting has become expensive due to the limited availability of options. Under the regime, many properties were taken care of by house sitters, but now, those from the diasporas are reclaiming their homes, displacing current occupants. The situation is already difficult for those expelled house sitters to find rentals in Syria, let alone for those returning to the country. Syria is dealing with destruction from the war, a lack of money to pay government salaries, weakened ministries, divided security forces, growing sectarian tensions, years of regime grievances, Western sanctions limiting foreign aid, and harmful Israeli military interventions (The Conversation, 2025). As the country faces these serious challenges, outside countries should help the new leadership start rebuilding (Crisis Group, 2025)- instead of calling on all Syrians to return to Syria immediately after 8 December 2024.

Although life in Lebanon still requires a lot of resilience from Syrians, returning to Syria is often not an option. Most people rather deal with the known adversities in Lebanon than with unknown adversities in Syria. While some other Syrians still flee Lebanon by boats in the hope of secured livelihoods somewhere else. This hope was once more destroyed by Fortress Europe, when a shipwreck off Cyprus occurred on 17 March 2025 (Alarm Phone, 2025). It is believed that only two people survived, though it remains unclear whether the responsible authorities conducted timely rescue efforts.

Alternatives

The world certainly does not need another privileged white person like me, writing about countries in the Global South. The discussions about safe or unsafe countries in the Global South undermine essential aspects. Many, if not most, countries have been made unsafe by interventions or interference from countries of the Global North. People from the Global North are almost never confronted with thresholds or discussions about their movements. After all,

Freedom of movement and access to human and social rights must apply to everyone.

People fled Syria because of the brutal al-Assad regimes that lasted over five decades. It was forced migration from Syria, but can this not result in freedom of movement?

- Why should people return to Syria if they have to leave behind a livelihood that they have built up over the past years somewhere else?
- Why should people return to Syria if they cannot check the situation in Syria in advance and come back to their countries of residence, as countries like Lebanon or Germany do not allow such trips?
- Why should people return to Syria if they have no (monetary) means to move to or rebuild in Syria?
- Why should people return to Syria if they are still in need of stable, safe, and somewhat predictable perspectives outside of Syria?

Freedom of movement includes the right to stay. In Lebanon. And in Germany. Freedom of movement includes the right to go in circles. To go to Syria, but also to come back. To Lebanon. Or to Germany. And freedom of movement also includes that Syrians in Lebanon, who are living in very precarious conditions, can still be evacuated through programmes such as the *Humanitarian Corridors* (Mediterranean Hope, n.d.). It remains unclear why the programme has not been renewed when a significant number of Syrian people in Lebanon still urgently need to build more sustainable lives elsewhere and leave Lebanon via safe passage.

And with the adherence to human and social rights, every country, including Germany and Lebanon, would become a place for equal access to basics such as residence and work permits, education, food, basic income support, housing and medical care. Everyone would benefit from this- refugees and migrants as well as citizens.

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