

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# LEBANON: RESPECT INTERNATIONAL LAW IN EU-LEBANON MIGRATION DEAL

Lebanese authorities and the European Union must respect their obligations under international law and not forcibly return refugees to Syria as long as the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified returns are not met, eight civil society organizations said today ahead of European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen's visit to Beirut.

In recent months, the Lebanese government has advocated for an EU-Lebanon migration deal under which the EU, according to media reports, would provide additional financial support to Lebanese security agencies to prevent people, including Syrian refugees, Lebanese individuals and other nationals living in Lebanon, from trying to reach European states. The deal would also expand return assistance programming to so-called "safe areas" inside Syria to incentivize refugee returns.

This is the latest in a series of migration cooperation deals negotiated by the EU that seeks to enlist third countries' assistance on border control and that are premised on the abdication of responsibility for people seeking safety. These deals expose individuals to human rights risks, erode asylum protection and undermine the international protection system as a whole. These agreements evade public, parliamentary, and judicial oversight in the EU and partner countries and consistently lack adequate monitoring and oversight mechanisms to ensure the EU is not complicit in human rights violations.

No parts of Syria are safe for returns. The United Nations continues to maintain that conditions in Syria are "not conducive to safe and dignified return". In April 2024, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) found that high or substantive levels of indiscriminate violence continue to persist in most areas of Syria and that the risk of being persecuted remains widespread. In recent months, Syria has also experienced the worst escalation in violence since 2020. In the past two months alone, both the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have issued reports that reiterated that Syria remains unsafe for return and that returnees are specifically being targeted upon return. Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, continue to document how Syrian security forces and government-affiliated militias arbitrarily detain, torture, disappear and kill refugees who return. These violations are often a direct consequence of perceived affiliation with the opposition simply based on individuals' decisions to leave the country and seek refuge elsewhere.

Given these conditions, EU assistance geared to enabling or incentivizing returns to Syria risks resulting in forced returns of refugees, making Lebanon and the EU complicit in violations of the customary international law principle of non-refoulement, which obliges states not to forcibly return people to countries where they risk persecution or other serious human rights violations.

Further, since 2019, Lebanese authorities have been summarily deporting Syrian refugees back to Syria, including through forced returns at the border, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

As such, EU support to Lebanese security agencies with the aim of curbing migration movements to Europe could result in Syrians resorting to even longer and more dangerous routes to try to reach Europe's shores in order to avoid forced deportation to Syria, making them reliant on smuggling networks and vulnerable to trafficking.

Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita, with the government estimating that 1.5 million Syrian refugees currently live in the country. The country has struggled to assist refugees amid an acute economic crisis that has pushed over 80 percent of the population into poverty. Donor countries, including the EU, have dramatically reduced their funding for refugee programming. Further, in 2023, only 2,800 Syrians were resettled to the EU from Lebanon, which amounts to a mere 1% of the overall number of Syrians living in the country who were in need of

resettlement. Recent decisions by the United States and many EU member states to suspend funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) which provides assistance to 250,000 Palestinians in Lebanon – 80 per cent already living under the poverty line, have put even more strain on Lebanon's refugee population, while the future of the organization remains in question.

Stronger EU support to Lebanon in meeting the needs of refugees is long overdue. Well-managed cooperation with partner countries – based on human rights and the rule of law – could deliver inclusive growth, sustainable development, and advance strategic partnerships. Such partnerships must include human rights risks and impact assessments, independent monitoring, and clauses to suspend cooperation if abuses follow. Any EU-Lebanon migration partnership should be aimed at protecting Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including by halting summary deportations. Further, the EU should commit to providing additional funding to support refugee and Lebanese host communities, resettling a greater number of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon to Europe, and ending illegal pushbacks from EU countries to Lebanon. Finally, the EU and member states should ensure that they provide adequate support to UNRWA.

#### **SIGNATORIES:**

11.11.11

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR)

Amnesty International

Centre Libanais des Droits Humains (CLDH)

EuroMed Rights

Human Rights Watch

PAX

Syrian Network for Human Rights