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“I Just Wanted to be Treated Like a Person”

How Lebanon’s Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees

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Refugees

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62313-3122

Cover design by Rafael Jimenez

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Summary

I just want to live here in peace and contribute to Lebanese society until I can return to Syria. I just wanted to be treated like a person.

—Yusra, a Syrian refugee, northern Lebanon, August 2015

In January 2015, Lebanon ended its previously open-door policy for Syrians, which had allowed them to generally enter the country without a visa and to renew their residencies virtually free of charge.

The new border entry regulations that came into force on January 5, 2015, denied entry to many Syrians fleeing armed conflict and persecution. The same day, General Security, the agency that oversees the entry and exit of foreigners into the country, implemented restrictive and costly residency renewal regulations.

These new regulations sort Syrians seeking to renew residency permits into two categories: those registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations refugee agency; and those who are not, who must find a Lebanese sponsor to remain legally in the country. All must pay a \$200 annual fee for renewals, and provide identification papers and documentation about their lodging. Children under 15 can renew for free but their application is tied to the legal status of the head of household.

This report finds that the new regulations impose onerous burdens on both groups of Syrians that bar most from renewing required residency permits. According to UNHCR, there are nearly 1.2 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in Lebanon. Lebanese authorities have not published statistics on the number of Syrian refugees without legal status.

But international and local aid workers assisting refugees told Human Rights Watch that the new rules have resulted in most losing their legal standing in the last year; only two out of forty refugees living in Lebanon whom Human Rights Watch interviewed between February and November 2015 had been able to renew their residencies with their UNHCR certificates. Two others successfully renewed their residencies through their sponsors after being denied renewal with their UNHCR certificates.

This loss of legal status puts refugees at risk of arrest, and, if detained, of ill-treatment in detention. Security raids on refugee settlements and arrests of refugees without legal status at checkpoints have occurred frequently since August 2014 clashes between the Lebanese Army and the extremist groups Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Human Rights Watch research has found that it also makes them vulnerable to labor and sexual exploitation by employers, without the ability to turn to authorities for protection. Even those who do find sponsors do not benefit from protection under Lebanon's labor laws and are vulnerable to those to whom they owe their legal status. Five Syrian women told Human Rights Watch that sponsors or employers sexually harassed or tried to sexually exploit them but that they could not confront them for fear of losing residency. Four international aid workers said they have received dozens of reports of abuse by sponsors. One refugee called the sponsorship system "a form of slavery."

All those who had lost their status reported restricting their movement due to fear of arrest, and almost all said they could not pay the \$200 annual fee—a prohibitively large sum for most given that UNHCR reports that 70 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon fall below the poverty line and rely on aid to survive. Nearly 90 percent are trapped in a vicious cycle of debt, according to a recent United Nations assessment.

This dire economic situation is fueled by the inability of most Syrian refugees to access the formal labor market: those registered with UNHCR are prohibited from working in Lebanon and must sign a no-work agreement when they renew their residency, violation of which puts them at risk of arrest and deportation. Children and women are especially vulnerable to workplace abuse, refugee and humanitarian workers told Human Rights Watch.

Lack of legal status for many Syrians over 15 and the corresponding reduction in their ability to move around and work has led to a rise in child labor. Many Syrian refugee children—favored by employers because they are cheap labor—end up working to support families. "If he doesn't work, my family will sleep in the streets," Mahmoud said of his 12-year-old son, Ali, who for the past two years has worked 11 hour days fixing damaged vehicles for \$15 a week. An International Labor Organization (ILO) report in 2015 claimed that many Syrian refugee children are engaged in the worst forms of child labor, such as

bonded labor in agriculture or street-based work in urban centers, to support their families.

New residency restrictions also increase the risk of Syrian children recently born in Lebanon becoming stateless due to the fact that their parents cannot register their births in the country if they do not have legal status. Already in 2014, before the current restrictions, a UNHCR survey found that 72 percent of children born to Syrian refugees in Lebanon did not have an official birth certificate due to the registration system requiring documents that their parents could not provide.

Lack of legal status may prevent children from accessing education. While the Ministry of Education issued a memorandum to schools in 2012 to enroll Syrian students regardless of their legal status, which later reaffirmed by the Ministry of Education before the start of the 2015-2016 school year, Human Rights Watch research found that some school directors continue to deny children without legal status enrollment in public schools. Long distances to schools also prevented some parents who do not have legal status from sending children across checkpoints that they themselves cannot cross, especially when there is no transportation.

The renewal process is itself abusive and arbitrary. For instance, many who are registered with UNHCR said that General Security asked them to provide a work sponsor, even though regulations do not require it. Refugees and aid workers also said that some General Security employees and local officials use the renewal process to interrogate Syrians about security issues, and to even elicit sexual or financial favors.

Cuts in food aid last July to \$13.50 a month per person compound the stress that refugees face, and may increase their vulnerability to extremist groups. Executive Director of the World Food Program Ertharin Cousin warned that a drop in food assistance is making young men “prime targets for Islamist extremist groups who are paying money for service.”

At the end of October 2015, food vouchers for extremely vulnerable Syrian refugees increased to \$21 a month although continued funding shortages means the program’s future remains unclear. One international humanitarian worker in Akkar and a local humanitarian worker in the Bekaa separately confirmed to Human Rights Watch that they

had received at least one report of armed groups exploiting the economic vulnerability of Syrian refugees to recruit followers.

The 2015 restrictions on border access and renewals were imposed by decree from the Ministry of the Interior following a decision by Lebanon's Council of Ministers in October 2014 to reduce the number of Syrians in the country. However, all refugees who spoke to Human Rights Watch reported they could not go back to Syria out of fear of persecution and generally lack money and other means to leave Lebanon and have little chance of being resettled in a third country. UNHCR noted during an interagency meeting for aid providers on October 2 that the majority of Syrian onward movement from Lebanon to Europe is transit directly from Syria.

A recent International Crisis Group report on Lebanon described the situation as a "pressure cooker" and that the interest of the political class in using Syrian refugees "as a scapegoat virtually guarantees they will become a growing problem." On the one-year anniversary of the adoption of the restrictive renewal regulations, Human Rights Watch calls on Lebanese authorities to do all it can to ensure this is not the case.

Authorities should reform these regulations by cancelling the sponsorship system, waiving renewal fees, ensuring that all Syrian births in Lebanon are registered, and ending the practice of detaining refugees on the basis that their residency documents have expired. Such changes will not only protect refugees' rights but will promote greater stability in Lebanon by ensuring that Syrian refugees are not driven to destitution.

At the same time, the international community needs to urgently step up its support. Lebanon has the highest per capita number of refugees in the world. Yet as of November, the 2015 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) was only 45 percent funded. According to UNHCR, as of the beginning of December 2015, only 5,032 Syrian refugees departed from Lebanon under resettlement and humanitarian programs. The international community also needs to continue to expand and expedite the resettlement process to lessen the systematic delays that exacerbate the vulnerability of refugees to many types of abuses.

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Interior and General Security

With respect to renewal regulations for Syrians:

- Waive residency renewal fees for all Syrians
- Waive the pledge not to work for Syrians registered with UNHCR
- Cancel the sponsorship pledge for Syrians not registered with UNHCR
- Publish clear information about procedures needed for Syrians to renew their legal status in Lebanon
- Allow Syrians who do not currently have legal residency to regularize their status
- End the practice of detaining refugees merely because their residency documents have expired or because they don't have legal status
- Hold all security force members to account who ill-treat or torture Syrian refugees during raids, at the point of arrest, in detention, and during interrogations

To Lebanese Authorities

- Ensure that no one fleeing Syria is forcibly returned to Syria
- Ensure that all Syrian births in Lebanon are registered regardless of the parents' residency status in accordance with Lebanon's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Lift the ban imposed on UNHCR registration for all Syrian refugees who arrived after January 2015
- Ensure that school directors are not requiring residency for school enrollment of Syrian refugees and ensure adequate communication between the Ministry of Education in Beirut and school directors throughout Lebanon to ensure proper enrollment procedures are followed

To the Ministry of Defense

- Instruct the army to end the practice of detaining refugees merely because their residency documents have expired or because they don't have legal status
- Hold all security force members to account who ill-treat or torture Syrian refugees during raids, at the point of arrest, in detention, and during interrogations

To Donor and Resettlement Countries

- Donors funding education programs for Syrian refugee children should press the Lebanese government to ensure residency requirements are not being imposed on Syrian refugees as a condition for school enrollment
- Provide humanitarian support to help meet the needs of all refugees and asylum seekers from Syria.
- Expedite the resettlement process noting that systematic delays preclude protection for refugees who wait for months in Lebanon with no legal status and at risk of abuse
- Continue to increase the number of slots for Syrian refugees in resettlement countries, including by prioritizing the most vulnerable refugees

Methodology

This report is based on more than 60 interviews that a Human Rights Watch researcher carried out from February to December 2015 with more than 40 Syrian refugees and 20 lawyers, local and international humanitarian workers, and civil society activists.

Human Rights Watch conducted most of the interviews in person in the areas of Tripoli, Akkar, Bekaa, the South, and Beirut. Human Rights Watch interviewed the rest by telephone or Skype.

This report does not attempt to present a comprehensive picture of violations and abuses suffered by Syrian refugees without legal status in Lebanon, but instead seeks to highlight the nature of such abuses.

It only briefly addresses the situation of Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) as residency renewal regulations differ from those of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon. Nonetheless, PRS living in Lebanon suffer from similar forms of abuse and exploitation due to lack of legal status. Local and international aid workers assisting PRS told Human Rights Watch that almost all PRS currently lack legal status in Lebanon.

Human Rights Watch utilized its extensive network of activists, refugees, and humanitarian workers in Lebanon to identify refugees who suffered abuse and exploitation due to lack of legal status to contact them for interviews. Similarly, Human Rights Watch used its networks to identify refugees who successfully obtained legal status, of which we only identified two.

Most interviews were conducted in private settings in Arabic and some were conducted in English. Interviewees included Syrian men, women, and children between the ages of 12 and 60.

Human Rights Watch did not offer or provide incentives to interviewees and took care to avoid re-traumatization. Where needed, researchers referred individuals to other resources. All participants provided oral informed consent to participate and were assured

of anonymity. Due to concerns of reprisals, Human Rights Watch has withheld names of all interviewees and in some cases used pseudonyms instead.

Where possible, we corroborated witness accounts with other accounts and sources, although this was not always possible. In every case, Human Rights Watch asked detailed questions to establish as thoroughly as possible the background and credibility of both the information and its source.

I. Background: Restrictive Renewal Regulations

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol.

Consequently, it does not assign refugee status to individuals who would otherwise qualify for it under international law, and all entry and stay procedures are usually implemented in accordance with local law and additional regulations imposed by General Security. It is still bound by customary international law on the treatment of refugees, as well as international human rights law that prohibits non-refoulement.

On October 23, 2014, the Lebanese Cabinet adopted a policy paper to halt the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon and reduce the number of refugees already in country, although it stopped short of specifying the exact measures to be taken to implement this new policy.¹ The Interior Ministry later issued a decree requiring entry permits for all Syrians entering Lebanon, which General Security then started implementing on January 5.²

Under the new regulations imposed on January 5, 2015, Syrians applying to renew their residency permits are sorted by General Security into two categories: those registered with UNHCR and those who are not.³ Syrians in both categories are required to pay an annual \$200 renewal fee per person, present valid ID and an entry slip obtained upon entry into Lebanon at the border, submit a housing pledge confirming their place of residence,⁴ and provide two photographs stamped by a Lebanese local official, known as the mukhtar.

Although children under 15 can renew for free, their application is tied to the head of household's legal status. This means, for example, if the child's father does not have the

¹ "Lebanon Cabinet votes to stop accepting Syrian refugees," Daily Star, October 23, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-23/275075-refugee-crisis-tops-lebanon-cabinet-agenda.ashx> (accessed December 3, 2015).

² "Entry measures for Syrians to go on despite criticism: General Security Chief," Daily Star, January 12, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jan-12/283799-entry-measures-for-syrians-to-go-on-despite-criticism-general-security-chief.ashx> (accessed December 3, 2015).

³ General Security website, <http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news-2.aspx>, (accessed December 14, 2015).

⁴ Those refugees living in informal tented settlements are required to provide a residency statement from the local municipality instead.

required documentation and cannot pay the \$200 for renewal, the child cannot renew either.

Those registered with UNHCR are also required to present their UNHCR registration certificate and a notarized pledge not to work. In May 2015, the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded that UNHCR stop registering Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Syrians not registered with UNHCR have to provide a “pledge of responsibility” signed by a Lebanese national or registered entity to either obtain a work permit or sponsor an individual or family of Syrian refugees. Sponsors exert a significant amount of control over the Syrians they sponsor; for example, sponsors can retract their sponsorship at any time, leading to a loss of legal status and risk of arrest.

In addition to the \$200 renewal fee, applicants also incur additional prohibitive costs for transportation, photocopying documents, and public notary services, which, according to The Norwegian Refugee Council, amounts to an estimated \$75 per person per application.⁵

Even when able to present the necessary documentation and pay the required fees, more than half of the Syrians interviewed—23 out of 40—who had registered with UNHCR said that General Security denied them renewal and told them to find a work sponsor, despite presenting their UNHCR certificates.

While Lebanese authorities have not published any statistics on the number of Syrian refugees without legal status, international aid workers estimated that most refugees in Lebanon no longer have legal residency in the country.

A lawyer working for the Norwegian Refugee Council in the Bekaa recently told media that most refugees she assists do not have legal status.⁶ Another organization monitoring the protection of refugees in informal settlements and collective shelters in Akkar, Tripoli, and

⁵ Norwegian Refugee Council, “Legal Status of Refugees from Syria – Overview of the New Entry and Renewal Regulations, April 16, 2015.

⁶ Samya Kullab, “Lebanese law forces Syrian refugees underground,” IRIN, November 2, 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/102181/lebanese-law-forces-syrian-refugees-underground> (accessed November 30, 2015).

the Bekaa told Human Rights Watch that recent field research conducted in August and September found that 90 percent of interviewees are without legal status.⁷

Despite authorities' attempts to decrease the number of refugees in Lebanon, reports indicate that such efforts have not been successful. During an Interagency Meeting hosted at the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs in Beirut on October 2, UNHCR noted that the majority of Syrian onward movement from Lebanon to Europe is transit directly from Syria.⁸

One international humanitarian worker monitoring the entry and exit of refugees from Lebanon separately told Human Rights Watch that all findings to date indicate that most refugees living in Lebanon, especially those who have been in country for several years, cannot afford to travel outside Lebanon.⁹

With limited resettlement options and fear of persecution preventing a return home,¹⁰ it is likely most refugees will remain in Lebanon without legal status, resulting in a large undocumented population at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse.

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with aid worker, Beirut, November 9, 2015.

⁸ UNHCR, Minutes of Inter-Agency Meeting, Beirut, October 2, 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=9587> (accessed October 5, 2015).

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with aid worker, Beirut, October 19, 2015.

¹⁰ UNHCR, Resettlement and Other Forms of Legal Admission for Syrian Refugees, December 11, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/52b2febafc5.pdf> (accessed December 13, 2015).

Palestinian Refugees from Syria

The General Security Office residency renewal procedures for Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) differ from the regulations regulating Syrian refugees' residency renewal. Two international humanitarian workers working with PRS separately told Human Rights Watch in July 2015 that it is comparatively more difficult for PRS to renew their legal stay in Lebanon.¹¹

One international humanitarian worker said that internal General Security memoranda for PRS only allow one-off renewal for three months, at the cost of \$200 per person. She said that, in practice, many PRS have not been able to renew at all and are turned away from GSO offices, even if they can pay.¹²

Another humanitarian worker told Human Rights Watch last summer that more than 90 percent of PRS do not have legal status. Like Syrian refugees PRS are vulnerable to a range of exploitation and abuses. On an exceptional basis, in September 2014 and again in November 2015, PRS were allowed to renew their residency for three months free of charge.

Approximately 42,000 PRS benefit from UNRWA services in Lebanon, joining the estimated 270,000 Palestinian refugees already in country.¹³ In May 2014, the government put in place stricter entry requirements effectively closing the border to all Palestinian refugees from Syria, with the exception of few individuals allowed in for specific appointments with embassies in Lebanon, for those with a visa and flight ticket to a third country and for additional exceptional cases.¹⁴

Longstanding, united domestic opposition to the naturalization of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon and concerns that Palestinians do not have their own country to freely return to and will permanently settle in Lebanon, has only been exacerbated with arrival of additional Palestinian Refugees from Syria.

It is in this context that Lebanese authorities seek to limit the presence of Palestinian refugees from Syria's presence in Lebanon, nine aid workers separately told Human Rights Watch.¹⁵

II. Arbitrary Application of Regulations

Even when able to present the necessary documentation and pay the required fees, more than half of the Syrians interviewed—23 out of 40—who had registered with UNHCR said that General Security denied them renewal in 2015 and told them to find a work sponsor, despite presenting their UNHCR certificates.

All local and international organizations interviewed by Human Rights Watch agreed that most Syrian men considered to be of working age, specifically between 18 and 59 years old, were denied renewal in 2015 unless they produced proof of having a Lebanese sponsor—even if they were registered with UNHCR.

Several international aid workers alleged that by not allowing Syrians registered with UNHCR to renew unless they have a sponsor¹⁶ Lebanese authorities are trying to pave the way to treating refugees like “economic migrants.”¹⁷ One international aid worker told Human Rights Watch:

It is more acceptable to force migrants back to Syria than refugees fleeing persecution. Humanitarian workers assisting Syrian refugees are afraid that authorities are re-categorizing refugees as migrants to facilitate their return to Syria in the future.¹⁸

For example, one male refugee said that when he tried to renew his residency with his UNHCR certificate in the northern town of Halba, the General Security officer “...called me a liar, ripped my UNHCR certificate in half, and told me to come back with my sponsor.”¹⁹ One international humanitarian organization told Human Rights Watch in June 2015 that it had documented nearly two dozen General Security offices across Lebanon that had

16 The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, “Asylum Crisis or Migrant Labor Crisis?,” May 2015, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=42> (accessed December 3, 2015).

17 The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, “Asylum Crisis or Migrant Labor Crisis?,” May 2015, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=42> (accessed December 3, 2015).

18 Human Rights Watch interview with international aid worker, Beirut, November 3, 2015

19 Human Rights Watch interview with male refugee, Halba, July 14, 2015.

denied renewal to refugees with UNHCR certificates and only approved those with a sponsor.²⁰

In March 2015, General Security issued an internal circular requiring that Syrian refugees show proof of financial support as a requirement to renew. The circular was not made public but organizations assisting refugees confirmed its existence.

One male refugee told Human Rights Watch that a General Security officer detained him at General Security's offices in the Sodeco neighborhood of Beirut when he produced proof of financial assistance.

The officer detained me and started slapping me, asking where I'd got my money. He asked if I was receiving money from armed groups. Can you believe it? I follow the rules and then get accused of being a terrorist. I was released four days later but I still haven't got my passport back.²¹

One international humanitarian worker told Human Rights Watch in July 2015 that a refugee accessing services at her NGO reported that a General Security officer refused to renew his residency permit until he brought back a list of every "illegal" person living with expired papers in his camp, which the government and humanitarian actors in Lebanon refer to as an "informal tented settlement."²²

²⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with international humanitarian organization, Beirut, June 19, 2015.

²¹ Human Rights Watch interview with male refugee, Beirut, May 2015.

²² Human Rights Watch interview with humanitarian worker, Beirut, July 13, 2015.

III. Abuses Related to Lack of Status

The following documentation and statements illustrate the effects of the extremely prohibitive residency-renewals system that has stripped many refugees of their fundamental rights, facilitating their exploitation.

Risk of Arrest, Detention, Ill-Treatment

Illegal presence in Lebanon is considered a minor criminal offense and those without legal status are subject to arrest.

Raids on refugee settlements, arrests of refugees without legal status, and the establishment of checkpoints by Lebanese security forces have become commonplace since the August 2014 clashes between the Lebanese Army and the extremist group Islamic State (also known as ISIS), and Jabhat al-Nusra, and the subsequent executions of Lebanese soldiers by armed groups.²³

Of the 40 refugees interviewed, 11 had been arrested for lack of legal status. Most were arrested during raids on informal tented settlements, while others were arrested at checkpoints. All were released within several days and never charged.

Out of 11 detained, more than half alleged ill-treatment at time of arrest and while in detention. Types of reported ill-treatment include beatings by security officers with their hands and feet and also with instruments, such as hoses and plastic tubes. Interviewed refugees claimed that the stated reason of arrest was lack of legal status but that they were later subjected to physical abuse in efforts to extract security-related information.

Most refugees, especially men and older children, told Human Rights Watch that they are afraid to leave their homes. One refugee living in the northern town of Halba told Human Rights Watch in July that Syrians in the area experienced daily raids by security forces, leaving them afraid to venture far from home.²⁴

²³ "Lebanon/IS: Soldier Beheading a War Crime if Confirmed," Human Rights Watch news release, September 1, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/01/lebanon/soldier-beheading-war-crime-if-confirmed>

²⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with male refugee, Halba, July 24, 2015.

Both regular and ad hoc checkpoints manned by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Security Office (GSO), Internal Security Forces (ISF) and other security forces, including political parties, act to limit movement in certain areas and check the legal status of Syrian refugees passing through.

Five refugee men told Human Rights Watch that they tried multiple times to renew their residencies by presenting all required documentation and fees to General Security but were denied, only to later be arrested for lacking legal status.

Salman, a refugee detained during the raid on a camp in February 2015 in Akkar, told Human Rights Watch that he tried to renew his residency at General Security in Akkar 15 days prior to the raid but was never able to. He said:

There were long lines and only people with wasta (connections) could successfully renew. And now the army comes to arrest me for not having regularized papers? This is unbelievable.²⁵

One Syrian activist working in Central Bekaa said in May that raids on refugee camps usually happened between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. and that he believed all camps in the area had been raided at least once.

In the past few months, sometimes security officials will keep raiding the same camp every month. Dozens of refugees told me that the Lebanese Army, often the military intelligence, threatens people with guns and physically beats men in front of their families.²⁶

One aid worker in the West Bekaa town of Jib Janeen told Human Rights Watch that his NGO and its partner organizations knew of at least four or five raids in the area in March and April 2015 alone.²⁷

²⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Salman, Akkar, March 16, 2015.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Syrian activist, Central Bekaa, May 17, 2015.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with aid worker, Jib Janeen, May 15, 2015.

Abdullah, a Syrian refugee living in a village near Halba, said that he was arrested in mid-May by the Lebanese Armed Forces for not having a residency permit when more than 300 soldiers raided the informal tented settlement in which he was living.

Despite not resisting arrest, he said, soldiers slapped his face with their hands and kicked him with their boots after he was handcuffed. Abdullah says he was then transported to a military intelligence branch in Ibay where he was interrogated about the alleged presence of armed groups around his village. When Abdullah asked the soldiers about renewing his residency permit and handed them his UNHCR certificate, he said one replied, “Go pay a sponsor some money or return to your country. We are the state, you obey our laws. The UN means nothing.”

Abdullah said that he spent the next two days in a shared cell with no food or water. “I only drank out of the hose connected to the toilet in the ground, the same toilet everyone else in the cell would use to go to the bathroom.”

Abdullah said that, since his release, he cannot sit in a room by himself and gets very anxious and needs to leave. “I am scared I will be arrested again,” he said.²⁸

Jabbar is a Syrian refugee living in an informal tented settlement for Syrian refugees in the Bekaa town of Marj. Masked soldiers raided the camp in February 2015 looking for security suspects and refugees without legal papers, he said.

One soldier pushed me on the ground and then grabbed my head ... when I lifted my head up, he slammed my face into the ground.... One of the soldiers stole my laptop and cell phone. The items were never returned.²⁹

Soldiers then transferred Jabbar to the Ableh military intelligence center in the Bekaa. Interrogators from military intelligence beat him with green plastic rods (borey), demanding that he give information about armed groups in the area, Jabbar said. That

²⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Abdullah, Akkar, August 14, 2015.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Jabbar, Marj, March 16, 2015.

night he was transferred to the military police in Ableh and then transferred to a nearby police station and released the next day.

Ihab, a Syrian refugee living in the Central Bekaa, was stopped last March at an army checkpoint in Dahr al Baydar, a transitory point on the main highway from the Bekaa to Beirut, for not having papers.

Ihab said he showed the soldiers his papers, telling them that he tried to renew his papers at General Security in Zahle at least four times but that he was never able to do so, despite the fact that he had gathered all the necessary documentation and paid the fees.

The soldiers called him a liar and dragged him to a wooden hut next to the army checkpoint. Inside were four army soldiers and one officer who handcuffed him. The soldiers beat Ihab with a hose and threatened to forcibly return him to Syria.

Several hours later they released him and told him to go to General Security. “If you come back to this checkpoint and you don’t have papers, what we did today is nothing compared to what we will do to you then,” another soldier threatened him.

Ihab was confined to bed for three days due to his injuries before he was able to walk again.³⁰

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Lebanon is a party, prohibits arbitrary detention. The UN Human Rights Committee, which interprets the covenant, has said that “detention in the course of proceedings for the control of immigration is not per se arbitrary, but the detention must be justified as reasonable,

³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Ihab, Central Bekaa, March 16 2015.

necessary and proportionate in light of the circumstances and reassessed as it extends in time.”³¹

Sponsorship-Related Abuses

According to General Security regulations, sponsorship of Syrians can take one of several forms: sponsorship for an individual work permit by a Lebanese national, sponsorship for Syrian nationals by a registered entity, or a family pledge of responsibility for one Syrian family.

Sponsors are responsible, for example, for the healthcare and accommodation of the people they sponsor. According to a lawyer who coordinates closely with General Security to assist Syrian refugees, only under exceptional circumstances can a sponsor cancel their sponsorship prior to its date of expiration.³²

Sponsors exert considerable control over the Syrians as withdrawal of sponsorship leaves Syrians vulnerable to abuse. Several Syrians interviewed by Human Rights Watch that their sponsors threatened to cancel their sponsorship if they refused any tasks at work.

Human Rights Watch’s research indicates that the sponsorship system increases Syrians’ exposure to harassment, exploitation and abuse, and facilitates corruption. One refugee living in Zahle called it “a form of slavery.”³³

A refugee living outside Beirut said in July “sponsors are making a business out of it. They sell sponsorships for up to \$1,000 a person. Potential sponsors wait on the Syrian border or at the airport to sell sponsorships to new arrivals.”³⁴

A refugee living in Bourj Hammoud told Human Rights Watch that his neighbor told him that he is currently sponsoring six different Syrian individuals. “The sponsorship is just a

³¹ UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Human Rights Committee, Revised Draft Prepared by the Rapporteur for General Comment No. 35, Gerald L. Neuman, CCPR/C/GC/R.35/Rev. 3, April 10, 2014, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=oahUKEwjyp6PR39vJAhXFhQ8KHYIBD44QFgfgfMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2FDocuments%2FHRBodies%2FCCPR%2FGConArticle9%2FDGC_Article9_RighttoLiberty.doc&usg=AFQjCNHaIN-c5oNFYAOFvhseaEoFrwyVUQ&cad=rja (accessed December 1, 2015).

³² Human Rights Watch interview with Lebanese lawyer, December 3, 2015.

³³ Human Rights Watch interview with male Syrian refugee, Zahle, March 23, 2015.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with refugee, Beirut, July 20, 2015.

new way for Lebanese to make money, cheat the Lebanese government, and exploit Syrians,” he said.³⁵

Sherif, a Syrian man working for a construction company in Jounieh, said:

I’ve witnessed some managers selling sponsorships to Syrians under the guise that they are working at the construction company, but they are not.... This system is only facilitating corruption and fraud and the government won’t actually know who is actually working where. As for me, they haven’t given me sponsorship yet. They told me that I need to work another six months before they consider it. Meanwhile, someone who has money but doesn’t actually work with us can obtain sponsorship right away.³⁶

Amr, a Syrian refugee living outside the southern city of Saida, told Human Rights Watch that the fact that his sponsor is his employer has locked him into an endless cycle of abuse and exploitation. “My boss makes me work more than 12 hours a day at his shop. Sometimes I complain but then he threatens to cancel my sponsorship. What can I do? I have to do whatever he says. I feel like his slave,” Amr said.³⁷

When Hawa was unable to renew her residency with her UNHCR certificate she was forced to find a sponsor. Hawa said that she paid only \$600 for her family’s sponsorship because the sponsor took pity on her as a single mother.

I thought he was trying to help but then he started calling me and demanding that I go on outings with him and eat chocolate with him. He sends me threatening text messages and says, ‘I am your sponsor, you owe me your time.’ Whenever I have to meet with him to sign papers, I always bring a friend. I am worried that if I go alone, he will hurt me.³⁸

³⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with refugee, Beirut, June 12, 2015.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Sherif, Beirut, August 21, 2015.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Amr, April 16, 2015.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Hawa, Beirut, July 22, 2015.

Lack of Legal Redress

Since legal status is checked before any complaint is filed, refugees without it cannot seek legal redress without fearing arrest themselves.

In 2014, Human Rights Watch documented violent attacks against unarmed Syrians by private Lebanese citizens, including attacks with guns and knives.³⁹ Without legal status, refugees may face detention or arrest when reporting such attacks to the authorities.

Two Syrian refugees living in a village in the northern region of Akkar told Human Rights Watch that unknown perpetrators stormed their home one evening in August 2015. The masked men beat them with iron rods, rifle butts, and their fists, threatening to kill them if they did not return to Syria.

The refugees told Human Rights Watch they cannot report the incident to police because they fear being arrested for lack of legal status. The men said that General Security denied them residency renewal based on their UNHCR documentation and were told that they can only renew if they have a sponsor. One refugee said:

We have not left the house since the attack. The men are still out there. Who will be their next victim? Maybe Lebanese or Syrian? Without legal status I can't report this incident and others are left vulnerable to their attack.⁴⁰

Refugees without legal status are therefore, in practice, often denied their right to legal redress. An international aid worker confirmed that the organization she works at received several similar reports of attacks against refugees by unknown armed men in the same area but that the refugees declined to go to police because they lack legal status.⁴¹

Women can be especially vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation by officials, but without legal status they cannot turn to authorities for protection.

³⁹ "Lebanon: Rising Violence Targets Syrian Refugees," Human Rights Watch news release, September 30, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/30/lebanon-rising-violence-targets-syrian-refugees>

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with refugees, Akkar, August 14, 2015.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch Skype correspondence with aid worker, August 18, 2015.

Hawa, a Syrian refugee living in Beirut with her two small children, told Human Rights Watch that the local official's son sexually harassed her and tried to sexually exploit her in return for preparing documents. She said that she didn't seek protection from the police because she would have been arrested herself for not having legal status:

When I went to the local mukhtar to get my papers stamped, the mukhtar's son who works with him quietly recorded my phone number. He started calling me at all hours of the night and demanded that I have sex with him in exchange for my stamped residency papers and sponsorship. When I said no, he threatened to burn me with fire. I wanted to call the police to protect myself, but what could I do? I have no residency permit. If I called the police, I could be arrested.⁴²

Abuses at Work

Syrians have worked in Lebanon for many years, mostly in the informal job market.⁴³ Before the Syrian crisis, Syrian workers, in accordance with bilateral agreements between the two countries, could obtain temporary residence upon entry for a period of six months. While this did not in theory exempt them from the obligation to obtain a work permit if they wished to work in Lebanon, in practice neither Lebanese employers nor Syrian laborers adhered to the proper procedures because the relevant authorities, the Ministry of Labor and General Security, among others, turned a blind eye.⁴⁴

The lack of work permit meant that Syrians—even before the crisis—did not benefit from labor protection and were often left with very little recourse if they suffered abuse by employers.⁴⁵ However, at least Syrians had legal status, and could travel back to their country if things did not work out with their employers.

⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Hawa, Beirut, July 22, 2015.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with Lebanese lawyer working with Syrian refugees, Beirut, December 3, 2015.

⁴⁴ The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, "Asylum Crisis or Migrant Labor Crisis?," May, 2015, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=42> (accessed December 3, 2015).

⁴⁵ The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, "Asylum Crisis or Migrant Labor Crisis?," May 2015, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=42> (accessed December 14, 2015).

The situation for Syrians working in Lebanon has worsened since the Syrian conflict. Syrians are still largely unable to access the formal Lebanese labor market. Although theoretically able to obtain a work permit from the Ministry of Labor, authorities have increasingly restricted Syrians' access to formal work⁴⁶ and, according to the ILO, most Syrians work in the informal economy, with unregistered enterprises or without a Ministry of Labor permit.⁴⁷ According to the ministry's annual report, in 2014 1,814 work permit applications were submitted by Syrians, of which only 758 were granted.⁴⁸

Labor Minister Sejaan Azzi confirmed earlier this year that the granting of sponsorship to Syrians from General Security does not imply the right to work.⁴⁹

General Security issued a statement in April claiming that the pledge of responsibility states that the employer must be "actively seeking to secure a work permit" for the worker and that they are legally bound to secure a work visa from the Ministry of Labor.⁵⁰

One General Security officer told Human Rights Watch that, in practice, a Ministry of Labor work visa is not required because the ministry is not currently granting Syrians work permits.⁵¹ This was similarly confirmed by a Lebanese lawyer assisting Syrians.

Despite sometimes contradictory reports about the correct steps to obtain legal permission to work in Lebanon, Syrian refugees and aid workers alike said that in practice

46 "Lebanon interior minister defends new Syria visa rules," Daily Star, January 5, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jan-05/283105-lebanon-interior-minister-defends-new-syria-visa-rules.ashx> (accessed December 3, 2015).

47 International Labour Organization, "Assessment of the impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile," April 1, 2014, http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_240134/lang--en/index.htm (accessed December 3, 2015).

48 General Directorate of the Ministry of Labor, "Annual Report on the accomplishments realized between January 2014 and December 2014," http://www.labor.gov.lb/_layouts/MOL_Application/Cur/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D9%8A%20%202014.pdf, (accessed December 14, 2015).

49 "The labor visa entries for Syrians do not exempt from a Labor residency," Lebanese Ministry of Labor, http://www.labor.gov.lb/_layouts/MOL_Application/LatestNewsDetails.aspx?lang=ar&newsid=122, (accessed December 14, 2015).

50 "Lebanese General Security clarifies the procedures regarding work for Syrians. New centers in the following weeks," April 3, 2015, video clip, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cllg8pq3j2l>, (accessed December 14, 2015).

51 Human Rights Watch correspondence with General Security, December 3, 2015.

it is those working without legal residency who are most at risk—vulnerable to arrest by security agencies at any time.⁵²

Refugees told Human Rights Watch that this leaves them susceptible to exploitation by employers who may threaten to report them to authorities at any time for not having legal status. Furthermore, refugees and aid workers said that employers can get away with paying lower wages, harassing employees in the workplace, or forcing employees to work in unsafe conditions because they lack legal redress.

Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, meanwhile, must sign a pledge not to work when renewing their residencies at General Security. Violating that pledge puts refugees at risk of arrest and deportation.⁵³

Working refugees frequently do not receive regular payment,⁵⁴ work long hours for low wages without benefits,⁵⁵ lack decent working conditions, and may encounter sexual harassment, exploitation, and other abuse at work.

With limited access to the formal and informal labor markets, refugees resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive. “Some refugees purposely burned their tents down a few months ago in the town of Marj in order to get emergency cash assistance. It has got to the point where people are burning their own belongings just to survive,” a local humanitarian worker in Zahle said.

52 Reine Moussa, “غير شرعية” لبنان لا تزال “غير شرعية” ... العمالة السورية في لبنان الجديدة... Annahar, May 1, 2015, <http://www.annahar.com/article/233559-%D8%B1%D8%BA%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9> (accessed December 3, 2015).

53 Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Pushed to the edge: Syrian refugees face increased restrictions in Lebanon,” AI Index: MDE 24/1785/2015, June 15, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1785/2015/en/> (accessed December 3, 2015).

54 International Labour Organization, “Assessment of the impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile,” April 1, 2014, http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_240134/lang--en/index.htm (accessed December 3, 2015).

55 Bassam Al-Kantar, “حالة حقوق الإنسان في لبنان تزداد سوءاً,” Al-Akhbar, June 27, 2015, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/236598> (accessed November 30, 2015).

Women and children may work instead of men as they are less likely to be arrested for lack of legal status, but they suffer some of the worst forms of abuse, refugees told Human Rights Watch during separate interviews. Twelve refugees, mostly men, lacking legal status, told Human Rights Watch they are afraid to leave the house in case of arrest, even when sick.

International organizations confirmed this to Human Rights Watch and attributed it to the perception by security forces that women and children pose a reduced security risk compared to men, and therefore are less likely to be stopped.

Abuse of Working Children

Employers prefer to hire children because they are easier to exploit and can be paid lower wages, several refugees told Human Rights Watch. One international aid worker monitoring child protection in the north said that children's wages are so low that some "basically work for free."⁵⁶ Another international aid worker said that sometimes landlords demand that renters' children work for them for free if they are late paying rent.

According to an ILO study, children reportedly work for long hours in conditions not suitable for their physical and mental development or skill levels.⁵⁷ Some of the worst forms of child labor can cause severe psychological damage.

According to a 2013 report on child labor in Lebanon, dropping out of school to support their families and work puts children at "a life-long disadvantage, hindering their chances of getting decent work and escaping the cycle of poverty and exploitation."⁵⁸

Five Syrians boys told Human Rights Watch that Lebanese employers made them work long hours for low wages. Human Rights Watch interviewed children and parents of children who are working full-time in vehicle repair shops, aluminum factories, in grocery and coffee shops, and as delivery workers. International organizations also reported to Human

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch Skype correspondence with aid worker, August 18, 2015.

⁵⁷ International Labour Organization, "National Action Plan to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Lebanon by 2016," November 7, 2013, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_229103.pdf (accessed November 30, 2015).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Rights Watch cases of male and female children working in agriculture,⁵⁹ begging,⁶⁰ or cleaning or subjected to commercial sexual exploitation.

Ali is a 12-year-old Syrian refugee living in the northern Akkar region who, for the past two years has been working every day from 8 a.m. until 7p.m. in a repair shop fixing cars damaged in accidents. His job requires him to operate dangerous machinery, such as flame torches. Ali makes \$15 a week.

One day, an iron rod fell on his head and hit his ear, Ali told Human Rights Watch. Ali said that the only hospital contracted with UNHCR in the areas is in the town of Qubayyat across a checkpoint. “I almost fainted but I didn’t seek medical care. There is a permanent checkpoint on the road and I couldn’t travel there because I don’t have a residency permit. I wish I could go to school instead but I have to help my family,” he said.⁶¹

Ali’s father, Mahmoud, told Human Rights Watch that for months he walked miles, looking for work but was denied because he does not have legal status. Desperate to find a source of income for his family, he sent his son to look for work instead.

“My 12-year-old son secured a job within two weeks. I know that they hired my son instead of me because they can pay a child less and he is easier to exploit. What can I do? Rent is my biggest concern. If he doesn’t work, my family will sleep on the streets.”⁶²

59 Kareem Shaheen, “Adults before their time, Syria’s refugee children toil in the fields of Lebanon,” Guardian, July 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/26/children-syria-bekaa-isis> (accessed November 30, 2015).

60 Kareem Shaheen, “Syrian children forced to work on streets of Beirut face severe exploitation,” Guardian, February 16, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/syrian-children-forced-to-work-on-streets-of-beirut-face-severe-exploitation> (accessed November 30, 2015).

61 Human Rights Watch interview with Ali, Akkar, August 1, 2015

62 Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammed, Akkar, August 1, 2015.

Racha lives in the Nabaa neighborhood of Beirut with her four children. Racha's husband stays at home and does not work. "He looked everywhere for a job but no employer would hire him without legal status," she said.

Her youngest, a 10-year-old boy, works 9 hours a day as a deliveryman for a local supermarket. He makes less than \$5 a day. Her 17-year-old son works in a nearby sewing factory. "Neither of them have residency permits. Unsurprisingly employers are willing to pay children without legal status low wages but are not willing to pay adults normal wages without legal status," Racha said.⁶³

Lama also lives in the Nabaa neighborhood of Beirut with her four children. She said she cannot afford to renew residency papers for her family. Lama's son is 16 and does not have a residency permit but works every day in a coffee shop to provide for her family, risking arrest as he goes to and from work. "My heart breaks whenever he leaves the house for work because I never know if he's coming back," she said.⁶⁴

Lebanon has ratified key international conventions concerning child labor, including the International Labour Organization Minimum Age Convention (ILO C.138), the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (ILO C. 182), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These conventions acknowledge that a child engaged in labor is less likely to access a proper education. Furthermore, they require governments to protect "children and young persons ... from economic and social exploitation" and "any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education."

Women

Women are vulnerable to harassment, exploitation, and abuse by employers. In 2013, Human Rights Watch documented the sexual assault, harassment, or attempted sexual exploitation of 12 Syrian refugee women by employers and others in Lebanon. The women said that they did not report incidents to local authorities due to lack of confidence that authorities would take action and fear of reprisals by the abusers or arrest for not having a

⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with Racha, Beirut, July 29, 2015.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Lama, Beirut, June 29, 2015.

valid residency permit.⁶⁵ The situation is further exacerbated by the new residency regulations in place for Syrian refugees.

Women, particularly those whose households depend on them for support, may withstand employment situations despite sexual exploitation, assault, and harassment. Lebanese labor law falls short of protecting Lebanese women even at work; for example, there is no legal text in the Lebanese labor law explicitly prohibiting sexual harassment at work.

Eight refugee men and women told Human Rights Watch that Lebanese employers preferred to hire female refugees over men when possible because they will work for lower wages and are easier to control through exploitation and harassment.

Five local and international aid workers separately confirmed to Human Rights Watch that refugees had also reported to them that Lebanese employers preferred to hire female refugees because they will work for lower wages and are easier to exploit.

Human Rights Watch interviewed three refugee women in northern Lebanon who claimed exploitation and abuse by Lebanese employers. One was sexually assaulted by her boss. All reported leaving their jobs to avoid exploitation or other abuse. None of them said they had filed a complaint with authorities out of fear of arrest for not having legal status.

Sima is a Syrian refugee living in a village east of Tripoli. Her employer agreed to hire her despite not having a work permit. She left her job at a mobile-phone shop in Tripoli in June after her employer grabbed her at work. “If you don’t accept your boss’s advances you will get fired,” she said. “For me, I prefer to stay at home to avoid sexual exploitation, even if my family barely has enough food.”⁶⁶

Yusra, a Syrian refugee living in a village north of Tripoli, was fired from her job in July when her boss kept demanding to see her after work and go on outings with her. “It is often an unspoken understanding that a woman is offered work without her residency permit in exchange for some concessions to her boss ... sexual concessions,” she said.

⁶⁵ “Lebanon: Women Refugees From Syria Harassed, Exploited,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 26, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/26/lebanon-women-refugees-syria-harassed-exploited>

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Sima, Northern Lebanon, August 1, 2015.

“After I refused several times to go out with him, he kicked me out of his shop. I just want to live here in peace and contribute to Lebanese society until I can return to Syria. I just wanted to be treated like a person.”⁶⁷

Sham is a refugee woman living in a village north of Tripoli. She used to work at a local organization assisting victims of sexual exploitation, and said:

I assisted many women who were exploited by their employers. Women whose husbands were dead, missing or in prison are especially vulnerable to abuse because they do not have a male protector.

What type of redress does a female victim of sexual exploitation have? She can't go to the police because she has no legal status and even her informal networks can't support her due to community shaming.... Few women dare to talk about it.⁶⁸

Barriers Accessing Education

All children have a right to access education without discrimination. Lebanon is party to a number of international treaties that outline this right, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

On September 21, 2015, Lebanese Minister of Education Elias Abu Saab launched a back-to-school campaign to enroll Lebanese and up to 200,000 Syrian refugee children (or less than half of the Syrian school age population present in Lebanon) in formal, free, and accredited education.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Yusa, Northern Lebanon, August 1, 2015.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Sham, Northern Lebanon, August 1, 2015.

⁶⁹ UNHCR, GoL, “UN Children’s Fund, Free Education for all children in public schools: Ministry of Education and Higher Education joins efforts with UN and donors to support every child’s right to education,” September 21, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/free-education-all-children-public-schools-ministry-education-and-higher-education> (accessed November 30, 2015).

According to the ministry's regulations, neither Syrian refugee children nor their parents are required to have a legal residency permit to enroll Syrian refugee children in Lebanese public schools.

During the 2014-2015 school year, legal residency was not required for school registration. In practice however, many students without residency reported being denied for this reason anyway.

In separate interviews, 13 families in June said that school officials denied their children access to public schools during the 2014-2015 school year for not having legal status. By October, most of the same families reported that their children were now successfully enrolled, despite lacking legal status.

However, two families said that two school directors had again rejected their children due to lack of residency. "The school director told my child she was not welcome because she lacked legal status," said one Syrian woman in relation to her child's experience at a school in Bourj Hammoud. "It wasn't until I spoke with a friend who has good connections to put pressure on the head of the school that my children were finally allowed to enroll."⁷⁰

Three international aid workers confirmed to Human Rights Watch in November that some school directors continued to deny children without legal status enrollment in public schools.

One said that she and her colleagues have come across dozens of cases of children denied enrollment in school for lack of status, and that it remained unclear as to whether all were later successfully registered in schools, despite the existence of a mechanism to refer such cases to the Ministry of Education for follow up.⁷¹

Some aid workers attributed the school directors' denial to enroll children in school to a lack of sufficient communication between the Ministry of Education in Beirut and school directors outside Beirut.⁷²

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Syrian woman, Beirut, October 14 2015.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview with aid worker, October 30, 2015.

⁷² Human Rights Watch interview with aid workers, November 4, 2015.

Long distances to schools prevented some parents who do not have legal status from sending children across checkpoints that they themselves cannot cross—especially when there is no affordable transportation. Several parents told Human Rights Watch more schools with increased capacity are needed closer to home. Older male children are at heightened risk of being arrested at checkpoints if they do not have legal status, aid workers said.

Some refugee fathers regretted that they had no choice but to take their children out of school and make them work because they could not get jobs themselves without legal status.

Other families cited fear of harassment and physical attacks against their children along school routes as preventing their enrollment in public school. Without residency, children and families are unable to seek legal recourse in the case of a violent attack.

Haneen, a Syrian mother living in the Bekaa town of Marj, told Human Rights Watch in October that she refuses to send her sons to school because they were physically attacked twice when they left the camp. She said:

I can't protect my sons when they go outside the camp. What can I do?
None of us have legal status so we can't rely on the police for help. The only safe option is for them to study at informal Syrian schools in our camp.⁷³

Risk of Statelessness

Obtaining civil documentation in Lebanon requires proof of valid legal status. While most refugees reportedly expressed a desire to register the births of their children, they are unable to do so without valid legal status.⁷⁴

Lack of birth registration or the absence of documents does not itself render someone stateless but rather creates a high risk that someone will not be considered a national by

⁷³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Haneen, October 13, 2015.

⁷⁴ Norwegian Refugee Council, "The Challenges of Birth Registration in Lebanon for Refugees from Syria," January 2015, http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9195218.pdf (accessed November 30, 2015).

any state. Thousands of unregistered Syrian refugee children are consequently at risk of statelessness.

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, 92 percent of refugees are unable to fulfill the required legal and administrative steps to register the births of their children born in Lebanon.⁷⁵ A 2014 survey previously conducted by UNHCR found that 72 percent of Syrian babies born in Lebanon do not have birth certificates.⁷⁶

Despite such high numbers, some Lebanese officials refuse to take adequate steps to address this problem. Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Basil in July 2015 reportedly came out against measures taken by Lebanese agencies to register Syrian births in Lebanon warning that doing so was one of the “first indications of sustainable integration for more than 2 million foreigners on our land...which threatens the existence of our country and is also a threat to our identity.”⁷⁷

Such policies not only violate Syrian refugee children’s rights, but also prevent the exit of refugees from the country, which ironically runs counter to the Lebanese government’s aim of reducing the number of Syrian refugees in country.

Human Rights Watch interviewed two Syrian refugee women who were unable to register the birth of their newborn children, which prevented them from leaving Lebanon because they lacked identification documents for travel.

Amira told Human Rights Watch in September that due to increasing pressures and stress on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, her family decided to leave for Turkey. Amira’s husband and two sons successfully boarded the plane but Amira and her daughter were stopped because her baby lacked identifying papers. She said:

75 Ibid.

76 UNHCR, Monthly Updates, “Statelessness Update,” June 2014, <file:///C:/Users/hassanl/Downloads/UNHCRMonthlyUpdates-June.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2015).

77 “بأسيل يرفض تسجيل أبناء السوريين: هذا توطين” Assafir, July 14, 2015, <http://assafir.com/Article/8/430892/SameChannel> (accessed November 30, 2015).

I tried to register my daughter's birth in Lebanon but was unable to because I didn't have any money to renew my residency at that time and was prevented from obtaining a birth certificate. Lebanese officials tell us Syrians to leave Lebanon but then they won't even allow me to register my daughter's birth. The result is that my family is now separated with my husband and sons in Turkey and my daughter and I are still in Lebanon looking for a solution to this problem.⁷⁸

Another refugee family told Human Rights Watch that their family was granted resettlement abroad but was unable to leave Lebanon because they were unable to register their youngest child's birth in Lebanon. At the time of the interview in October, the family had yet to obtain the necessary documentation required to travel.⁷⁹

The situation for Syrian children born in Lebanon therefore contravenes Lebanon's international obligations under the Convention of the Rights of Child, which it ratified in 1991. Article 7 of the convention states that "the child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."

Two international aid workers told Human Rights Watch that some refugees are resorting to dangerous coping mechanisms to obtain birth certificates for their children, such as smuggling themselves back into war torn areas of Syria to obtain birth certificates or paying others to get the documents for them.⁸⁰

In addition to being at risk of statelessness, persons without birth registration documentation or who have not been registered may routinely be denied access to services or be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

For example, children reportedly may be denied education, face the risk of early marriages, military recruitment, child labor, and trafficking.⁸¹ These risks will remain as long as Syrian

78 Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Amira, September 28 2015.

79 Human Rights Watch telephone interview, Beirut, October 5, 2015.

80 Human Rights Watch interview with aid workers, Beirut, April 17, 2015.

81 Norwegian Refugee Council, "The Challenges of Birth Registration in Lebanon for Refugees from Syria," January X, 2015, http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9195218.pdf (accessed November 30, 2015).

families in Lebanon are unable to access legal residency and therefore cannot register births.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Haley Bobseine, Lebanon researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division. Nadim Houry, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa Division, edited the report. Janet Walsh, deputy director of the Women's Rights Division; Rothna Begum, researcher in the Women's Rights Division; Bill Van Esveld, senior researcher in the Children's Rights Division; Stephanie Gee, fellow in the Refugees Division; and Bassam Khawaja, fellow in the Children's Rights Division, all reviewed the report. Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor, provided legal review, and Danielle Haas, senior program editor, provided Program review. Charbel Salloum, a Human Rights Watch intern based in Beirut, contributed with background research and analysis. Jessie Graham, Senior Multimedia Producer, and Janna Kyllastinen, Multimedia Producer, edited and produced the video content. The report was prepared for publication by Sandy Elkhoury and Sarkis Balkhian, Middle East and North Africa Associates, and Fitzroy Hepkins, administrative manager.

We would like to thank the Syrian men, women, and children refugees who agreed to speak with us about abuses and violations they suffered in hopes of bringing about change for fellow refugees living in Lebanon.



“I Just Wanted to be Treated Like a Person”

How Lebanon’s Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees

This report documents the impact of Lebanon’s new residency renewal requirements for Syrian refugees. In January 2015, Lebanon ended its previous policy for Syrians, an “open-door” which had allowed them to generally enter the country without a visa and to renew their residencies at the border virtually free of charge, replacing it with restrictive and costly residency renewal regulations. Based on interviews with dozens of refugees, humanitarian workers, and others, the report finds that the regulations impose onerous burdens on Syrian refugees that bar most from renewing required residency permits. This loss of legal status in turn heightens refugees’ risk of arrest, detention, ill-treatment, and sexual and labor exploitation by employers and authorities, to whom they are unable to turn for protection. Children risk becoming stateless due to the fact that their parents cannot register their births in Lebanon without legal status. Lack of legal status may prevent children from accessing education.

(above) Syrian women hang clothing on their balconies inside a compound for Syrian Refugees in Sidon, south Lebanon April 17, 2015.

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(front cover) Tripoli, Lebanon. Syrian refugees line up to register or renew their registration at the UNHCR compound in Tripoli, in North Lebanon, March 2014.

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