

# Lebanon

## *Transit for Syrians and Palestinians from Syria (PRS)*



Ministry of Immigration  
and Integration

The Danish  
Immigration Service

This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The report is a synthesis of information gathered from different sources, and it brings together condensed information in a relevant manner for the reader's COI needs and it organises information together thematically to form a coherent whole of the topic in question, instead of listing or quoting information source by source.

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## Executive summary

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According to the Lebanese authorities, Syrians can obtain a transit visa at Beirut International airport for onwards travel to Syria if they fulfil certain criteria. The transit visa permits travel from Beirut International airport to official land border-crossing points between Lebanon and Syria.

Implementation of these rules however vary depending on a number of factors, including the officer at the departing and arriving airport or border control as well as the possibility of using bribery. Entry into Lebanon is often addressed on a case-by-case basis with the Lebanese General Security office (GSO) being the decisive authority.

The rules pertaining to transit visas differ for Syrians and Palestinians from Syria (PRS). PRS cannot apply for a transit visa at Beirut International airport and generally, PRS have fewer options with regard to entering Lebanon.

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## Introduction and methodology

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Lebanon is used as a transit country by many Syrians in order to return to Syria, particularly through land-border crossings.<sup>1</sup> This report focuses on the rules, procedures and implementation thereof regarding transit visas for Syrians and Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) transiting via Lebanon, when traveling from Europe to Syria.

The report only addresses the issue of voluntary return to Syria. Thus, when referring to ‘return to Syria’ or ‘travel back to Syria’, this implies that the return is of a voluntary nature.

The purpose of the report was to collect updated information on the issues relevant for the processing of immigration cases, including asylum cases. The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the report were drawn up by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in consultation with the Secretariat of the Danish Refugee Appeals Board, the Danish Return Agency as well as an advisory group on COI (Referencegruppen).<sup>2</sup> The ToR are included in the end of the report (Annex II).

The report is written in accordance with the EASO (now EUAA) COI Report Methodology.<sup>3</sup>

The report is a synthesis of the information obtained from oral and written sources and does not include all details and nuances provided by the sources. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The individual sources should not be held accountable for the content of the report.

Interviews for the report were conducted in June 2022. The situation regarding transit of Syrians and PRS from Europe through Lebanon has been monitored continuously during the subsequent writing process in order to avoid the inclusion of outdated information.

One of the sources, UNHCR, responded to DIS in writing.<sup>4</sup> In its written response, UNHCR stated the information provided should not be treated as official information. For official information, the Government of Lebanon should be consulted directly.<sup>5</sup>

All consulted sources have been selected by virtue of their expertise on the topics of this report. Meeting minutes have been drafted from each meeting. These were forwarded to four of the sources for approval, providing the source an opportunity to amend, comment or correct statements to ensure that the minutes reflect the shared information most accurately. The Lebanese General Security Office (GSO) did not find it necessary to approve the minutes. All other sources approved their statements.

The minutes are attached as an annex to this report (Annex I).

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<sup>1</sup> Denmark (DIS), *Syria: Issues regarding return*, 29 October 2021, [url](#), pp-6-7

<sup>2</sup> The group consists of the Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives a Christian organisation (Danish European Mission) and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers).

<sup>3</sup> EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR stated that the information should not be used, provided, or interpreted without reference or a link to UNHCR’s full response in its entirety. The information is valid as of 24 June 2022.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR: 5

For the sake of transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes.

The consulted sources were informed about the purpose of the meetings and the fact that their statements would be included in a public report. Four out of six sources requested anonymity.

During the meetings, sources also touched upon topics that are not addressed in the ToR. While not included in the report, the information is available in the minutes as some topics may be relevant for asylum cases.

Attention should be called to the changeable and unstable situation in Lebanon and the fact that the information provided in this report may become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this report should be monitored periodically and brought up to date accordingly.

This report does not address the rules for entry into Syria nor regulations and processes relating to status settlement (*taswiyat al-wada'*) and security clearance (*muwafaka amniya*) with the Syrian authorities. For information relating to these topics, please see the following brief reports by DIS: '[Syria: Treatment upon return](#)' from May 2022 and '[Syria: Issues regarding return](#)' from October 2021, as well as the EASO report '[Syria: Situation of returnees from abroad](#)' from June 2021.

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 12 September 2022.

The report can be accessed from the website of DIS, [www.us.dk](http://www.us.dk), and is available to all stakeholders working within the field of refugee status determination as well as to the public.

## Abbreviations

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<b>DIS</b>	Danish Immigration Service
<b>EASO</b>	European Asylum Support Office
<b>GSO</b>	General Security Office
<b>INTERPOL</b>	The International Criminal Police Organization
<b>MEA</b>	Middle East Airlines
<b>MFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>NGO</b>	Non Governmental Organisation
<b>PRS</b>	Palestinian Refugee from Syria
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNRWA</b>	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

# 1. Transit rules and implementation

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## 1.1. Issuance of a transit visa

This section will address rules and regulations pertaining to the issuance of transit visas for Syrians traveling to Lebanon for onwards travel to Syria by land.

The Lebanese General Security Office (GSO) is responsible for rules and regulations pertaining to exit and entry of Lebanon. As such, the GSO official website has information on rules and procedures for persons wishing to travel to Lebanon, including persons who wish to obtain a transit visa.<sup>6</sup> On 21 March 2022, GSO issued an additional memo that imposed new entry regulations. This memo is available on the official website of GSO.<sup>7</sup> The required documents to obtain a transit visa are:

- A valid passport
- A non-refundable plane ticket
- A visa to the destination country<sup>8</sup>

The rules on the website, however, address travel from Syria into Lebanon and onwards and not travel from a third country into Lebanon and onwards to Syria.

Generally, in Lebanon it is difficult to obtain information on specific rules and procedures. In addition, a Western embassy (B) interviewed by DIS emphasised that implementation of rules and procedures often varies. This is also the case with regard to the rules and procedures for transit visas, where implementation very often deviates from the rules and even varies from border crossing to border crossing. In this regard, GSO often addresses entry into Lebanon on a case-by-case basis.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.1.1. Transit visa for travelling via Lebanon into Syria

According to one source there are no formal written requirements for obtaining transit visas to Lebanon for the purpose of travelling back to Syria. Another source elaborated that laws are often implemented by the issuance of internal memos by the GSO,<sup>10</sup> i.e. that the public does not have access to these.

According to the information shared with the delegation during the meeting with the GSO, a Syrian citizen can only obtain a transit visa for travelling by land through Lebanon into Syria if the following criteria are met:

- A valid passport
- Proof of legal exit from Syria and legal entry into Europe
- No entry ban issued on the traveller<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lebanese General Security Office (GSO), تنظيم دخول وإقامة السوريين [Regulating entry and residence of Syrians], 21 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> Lebanese General Security Office (GSO), تنظيم دخول وإقامة السوريين [Regulating entry and residence of Syrians], 21 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> Lebanese General Security Office (GSO), تنظيم دخول وإقامة السوريين [Regulating entry and residence of Syrians], 21 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>9</sup> Western Embassy (B): 5-6, 15

<sup>10</sup> Western Embassy (C): 5; International NGO: 4

<sup>11</sup> GSO: 1-2, 6, 11



The GSO explained that whilst a Syrian has the right to apply for a transit visa at a Lebanese embassy in Europe prior to travelling, this is a very rare scenario and the GSO was not aware of any previous cases of this. The decision of issuance of a transit visa applied for at a Lebanese representation abroad would be made by the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>12</sup>

According to the GSO, it is not of relevance for the decision of issuing a transit visa whether the person has obtained asylum in a European country or if s/he is a rejected asylum seeker but solely whether the person meets the above-listed criteria.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS), GSO informed DIS that PRS cannot obtain a transit visa at Beirut International Airport to travel onwards to Syria, as they follow a special procedure (see chapter 3 for information regarding PRS).<sup>14</sup>

### Valid passport

One Western embassy (A) stated that the only document needed to return to Syria is a valid passport. However, another Western Embassy (C) informed DIS that while a valid passport is the main requirement, Syrians are also requested to show a national ID card at the airport upon boarding a flight to Lebanon. The national number on the ID card will be crosschecked against the passport. In cases where the traveller does not hold his/her national ID Card it often depends on the airline staff at the boarding counter if s/he is allowed to board the plane to Lebanon. The Western Embassy (C) also explained that the more documents a person can provide, the more flexibility will be given by the Lebanese authorities.<sup>15</sup>

### Proof of legal exit and entry

Proof of legal exit from Syria as well as legal entry into Europe must be documented in form of original exit and entry stamps in the passport. The GSO informed DIS that it is not possible to present a copy of the exit and entry stamps in cases where individuals are travelling on newly issued passports. In such cases, the traveller must also present the old passport that contains the original stamps.<sup>16</sup>

The Western Embassy (C) confirmed that legal exit from Syria as well as legal entry into Europe is a requirement for obtaining a transit visa, while the Western Embassy (B) opined that only legal entry into Europe was required and this must be proven by presenting an entry stamp from a European country. The Western Embassy (C) knew of several cases in which Syrians having left Syria illegally were subsequently denied a transit visa into Lebanon.<sup>17</sup>

In its written reply to DIS, UNHCR does not refer to the criteria of legal exit from Syria and legal entry into Europe. To UNHCR's understanding, Syrians arriving at Beirut International Airport for the purpose of onward travel to Syria through Lebanon by land can be granted a transit visa by GSO upon arrival provided that they: (i) hold a valid Syrian passport, (ii) do not have a current "re-entry ban" to Lebanon, and (iii) declare that the

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<sup>12</sup> GSO: 5

<sup>13</sup> GSO: 2

<sup>14</sup> GSO: 3

<sup>15</sup> Western Embassy (A): 3; Western Embassy (C): 2

<sup>16</sup> GSO: 1, 4

<sup>17</sup> Western Embassy (B): 2; Western Embassy (C): 5

purpose of their entry into Lebanon is transit to Syria. According to UNHCR, Syrians are able to obtain a transit visa if these criteria are met.<sup>18</sup>

### Issuance of an entry ban

The GSO conducts an individual search by checking the database in the so-called Smart Border Management System to see the traveller has been issued a re-entry ban. A person registered in the system will not be allowed entry. This database cooperates with the database of Interpol. It is not possible for Syrians to check with the Lebanese authorities in advance of travelling, if they have an entry ban, unless they use a *wasta* (a contact within the authorities) or pay a bribe. As such no formal process of inquiry of having a travel ban issued exists.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst UNHCR noted that it does not have systematic access to Beirut International Airport for monitoring purposes, it has been observed in some cases that Syrians may be denied admission on account of re-entry bans that were previously issued without their knowledge when they were departing Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> UNHCR added that Syrians who have entered Lebanon and overstayed their visas are routinely issued a re-entry ban when they leave Lebanon through official border crossing points. As long as such a re-entry ban remains in force Syrians who seek re-admission to Lebanon for transit purposes are not permitted entry and not issued a transit visa. It is possible to obtain a transit visa after the re-entry ban expires if the general criteria are met. Syrians attempting to re-enter Lebanon from third countries in spite (or without the knowledge) of a re-entry ban will be subjected to deportation to Syria.<sup>21</sup>

Syrians resettled to a third country by UNHCR are automatically issued an entry ban and will not be able to obtain a transit visa. The Western Embassy (C) was not certain of the period of the entry ban but explained that it could be up to five years.<sup>22</sup>

#### 1.1.2. Use of European issued travel documents for refugees

The Western Embassy (C) explained that the Lebanese authorities do not accept a travel document for refugees (i.e. a passport issued to refugees in accordance with the Geneva Convention). Persons traveling on this document will not be allowed to board the airplane at the airport from which they are departing for Lebanon. Obtaining a transit visa by using travel documents for refugees is only possible in two specific cases: 1) a person has residency in Lebanon and thus does not need to have a visa, or 2) if a Lebanese citizen acts as a guarantor. If granted, the traveller will be issued a confirmation note from the Lebanese embassy, which s/he can present to the authorities upon arrival. The confirmation note is a small piece of paper that will have a code/number that the embassy has received from the GSO. The GSO at the passport control will issue the transit visa in the travel document.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> UNHCR: 6

<sup>19</sup> Western Embassy (B): 4; Western Embassy (C): 10

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR: 8

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR: 4, 7

<sup>22</sup> Western Embassy (C): 9; UNHCR: 6

<sup>23</sup> Western Embassy (C): 14

## 1.2. Transit procedures for Syrians travelling via Lebanon into Syria

The following section addresses the transit procedures for Syrians travelling over land to Syria via Lebanon. The section covers procedures upon departure from a European airport and upon arrival to Beirut International Airport as well as procedures at the official Lebanon-Syria land border crossings on the Lebanese side.

### 1.2.1. Pre-departure procedures in European airports

Prior to departure to Lebanon from a European airport, it is the responsibility of airline companies and/or the handling companies<sup>24</sup> to ensure that rules and regulations pertaining to entry into Lebanon are met. Companies risk a fine and shutdown of travel routes if they do not adhere to the rules.<sup>25</sup> According to the GSO, the airline companies are well aware of the rules with regard to issuing of transit visas and it is the responsibility of the airline company to return Syrians to their departure destinations if they are rejected entry by the GSO upon arrival in Beirut International Airport.<sup>26</sup>

The Western Embassy (A) explained to DIS that Syrians travelling with Middle East Airlines (MEA) to Beirut have to fill out a form prior to departure. MEA forwards the form to GSO for approval of each individual traveller. Persons who do not obtain approval are not allowed to board the plane.<sup>27</sup> The two other Western Embassies (B and C) interviewed by DIS stated that coordination and a pre-departure screening is conducted by airlines in coordination with GSO.<sup>28</sup> The consulted Western Embassies were mostly familiar with the procedures of MEA, which is owned by the Lebanese Central Bank.<sup>29</sup>

### 1.2.2. Procedures upon entry in Beirut International Airport

Arrival procedures in the airport for Syrians are the same as for any other traveller entering Lebanon. The first encounter with the Lebanese authorities is at the border control, which is under the responsibility of GSO. Syrian travellers that fulfil the criteria for a transit visa can obtain it free of charge at the border control counter.<sup>30</sup> To have a transit visa issued, Syrians must inform GSO that they wish to transit over land to Syria.<sup>31</sup> During the visa issuance procedure, the GSO will check the database in the so-called Smart Border Management System. A person registered in the system will not be allowed entry.<sup>32</sup>

The transit visa is a stamp inserted in the passport with date of entry.<sup>33</sup> Contrary to other sources, the Western Embassy (A) stated that the transit visa issued by GSO is a sticker, inserted into the passport and costs 30 USD.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Western Embassy (B): Footnote to section 9.

<sup>25</sup> Western Embassy (B): 9-12

<sup>26</sup> GSO: 12

<sup>27</sup> Western Embassy (A): 6

<sup>28</sup> Western Embassy (B): 9; Western Embassy (C): 2-3

<sup>29</sup> Western Embassy (A): 6; Western Embassy (C): 2-3

<sup>30</sup> GSO: 9, 11; Western Embassy (B): 1, 4; Western Embassy (C): 5-6; UNHCR: 6-7

<sup>31</sup> UNHCR: 7

<sup>32</sup> GSO: 6; Western Embassy (B): 1; Western Embassy (C): 6; UNHCR: 6

<sup>33</sup> GSO: 6; Western Embassy (B): 1; Western Embassy (C): 6; UNHCR: 6

<sup>34</sup> Western Embassy (A): 12

The GSO officer at the border control will write the purpose of the visa across the stamp. For example for the transit visa, the officer will stamp the passport with the date of entry and write ‘*murur*’, meaning transit. In cases of families travelling together, each family member must present their passport and will be issued a transit visa stamp in each passport. The stamp of the child, will state ‘*accompanying mother or father on transit visa*’. In case of a mother travelling alone with her children, she must prove guardianship of the children. Her stamp will then have ‘*accompanying x number of children*’ written across the stamp.<sup>35</sup>

GSO informed DIS that the duration of the transit visa is 24 hours. However, in practice its validity may last for 36 hours without possibility of extension.<sup>36</sup> Other sources stated other validity periods, varying between 24 and 72 hours.<sup>37</sup>

In case the transit visa is issued, the passenger will head to the baggage claim area. After having collected the baggage, the person will need to head to the customs point for inspection. After customs checks, the passenger can leave the airport.<sup>38</sup>

### 1.2.3. Airport transit in Beirut International Airport

Syrians are not required to obtain a transit visa if they are transiting in Beirut international Airport and continue to Syria by air. Lebanese authorities do not consider such passengers as having entered Lebanese territory, as they do not pass through the passport control.<sup>39</sup>

#### Airport transit procedures

Once the plane lands at Beirut International Airport, Syrian passengers who are continuing their travel by air to Syria will head from the arrivals area to the departure hall and then onto the gate for take-off. It is the responsibility of the airline company to guide travellers to the gate of their connecting flight in Beirut international Airport.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Western Embassy (C): 6-7; UNHCR: 6

<sup>36</sup> GSO: 7

<sup>37</sup> Western Embassy (A): 12; UNHCR: 6; Western Embassy (C): 4; International NGO: 6

<sup>38</sup> UNHCR: 7

<sup>39</sup> Western Embassy (A): 9; GSO: 17; Western Embassy (B): 18; UNHCR: 11

<sup>40</sup> GSO: 17; UNHCR: 11

## 2. Official land border crossings in Lebanon

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The following section will provide information on the various official land border crossings in Lebanon as well as information on rules and procedures regarding transit visas and implementation of these at the land borders.

### 2.1. Official land borders and locations

According to GSO, as of June 2022, five official border crossings are in operation between Lebanon and Syria. It is possible to exit Lebanon from all five border crossings.

Three are located in the Bekaa region of Lebanon:

- *Masnaa* border crossing point, the largest and most commonly used, connecting Lebanon to Damascus.
- *Matraba* border crossing point, which is newly opened.
- *Qaa* border crossing point.

The two remaining official border crossings are:

- *Al Arida* border crossing point, which connects Lebanon to Tartous governorate in Syria.
- *Al Aboudiye* border crossing point, which connects Lebanon to Homs governorate.

The GSO stated that all official border crossings are open 24 hours a day, with its officers operating the border crossings at all times. Border staff are well informed of procedures relating to transit visas.<sup>41</sup>

Two other sources stated that there are six official border crossings between Lebanon and Syria, with the sixth border crossing point being *Bukaya*. UNHCR reported that *Bukaya* opened in May 2022. All border crossing points could be used for individual personal travel, with *Masnaa* being the most commonly used.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, a Syrian news outlet Enab Baladi reported of six border-crossing points from Lebanon in to Syria.<sup>43</sup>

### 2.2. Procedures at land border crossings

Upon arrival at the official land border crossing point, the traveller will go to the departure counter. The GSO checks the passport and the transit visa stamps to verify how long the individual has stayed in Lebanon and if the individual is allowed to exit by the Lebanese authorities.<sup>44</sup>

If the individual is allowed to leave Lebanon, the GSO staff at the departure counter will put an exit stamp in the passport. Hereafter, the person will pass through the customs control terminal and finally cross the border into Syria.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> GSO: 13-14

<sup>42</sup> UNHCR: 9; Western Embassy (B): 16

<sup>43</sup> Enab Baladi, *Syria, Lebanon agree new crossing to control border chaos*, 26 April 2022, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> GSO: 15; UNHCR: 10; Western Embassy (B): 13; Western Embassy (C): 15

<sup>45</sup> GSO: 15; UNHCR: 10

### 2.2.1. *Overstay of transit visa*

The GSO does not have a control mechanism nor the resources to control whether travellers leave Lebanon within the validity period of the transit visa. The GSO does not inquire about the mode of transportation from the airport to the land border. However overstay will be registered in the GSO database.<sup>46</sup> In case of overstay, the person will be allowed to exit Lebanon and enter Syria, but will receive a one-year entry ban and a fine.<sup>47</sup> For further information pertaining to rules regarding entry bans see p. 10 ‘issuance of entry bans’.

### 2.2.2. *Implementation of the procedures at land border crossings*

The GSO explained to DIS that it has never rejected exit of Syrians holding a valid transit visa from Lebanon. UNHCR was unaware of cases in which Syrians transiting from Lebanon into Syria had been denied exit from Lebanon. However, UNHCR did not exclude the possibility of Syrians being rejected Lebanese authorities at the border in exceptional cases not related to immigration controls.<sup>48</sup>

According to the Western Embassy (C), a person may fulfil the visa requirements, but could be wanted by the Lebanese authorities for security reasons and breaches of Lebanese law. The GSO at the airport may not have checked if the individual has a case with the Lebanese authorities. At the land border crossing, the GSO will check if the individual is wanted by the Lebanese authorities. A wanted individual will not be allowed to exit Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>

The Western Embassy (B) explained that it is very often the case that the authorities do not consistently share information and updates on rules to the public. Adding to this, implementation of the procedures may deviate from the rules and varies between border crossings. Corruption is also prevalent at the border crossings, as salaries are low and the cost of living increases. Syrians with sufficient financial means are able to bribe their way into Lebanon and onto Syria, according to the Western Embassy (B).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> GSO: 8, 15; Western Embassy (A): 8

<sup>47</sup> GSO: 15; UNHCR: 10; Western Embassy (B): 13

<sup>48</sup> GSO: 16; UNHCR: 8

<sup>49</sup> Western Embassy (C): 15

<sup>50</sup> Western Embassy (B): 6-7, 17

### 3. Palestinian Refugees from Syria

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The following section addresses the possibility of Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) travelling to Lebanon for transit purposes, including the rules and procedures regarding transit visas for PRS.<sup>51</sup>

#### 3.1. Rules and procedures for Palestinian Refugees from Syria

The GSO informed DIS of that PRS do not fall under the procedure of Memo 99. Instead, they follow a special procedure and cannot obtain a transit visa at the Beirut International Airport to travel over land into Syria.<sup>52</sup> This information was corroborated by two other consulted sources.<sup>53</sup>

One of the consulted sources had previous practical experience of cases where PRS sought transit in Lebanon.<sup>54</sup> Other sources opined however that in their experiences dealing with PRS in Lebanon, PRS are generally subject to more scrutiny by the GSO. Many rules differ between Syrians and PRS and even if the same rules apply, they are often implemented differently. According to these sources, PRS have in general fewer options with regard to entering and staying in Lebanon.<sup>55</sup>

To the knowledge of the Western Embassy (A), it is also not possible for PRS to travel to Beirut International Airport and continue on a connecting flight. Four years ago, the embassy had been engaged in cases involving two PRS families travelling on valid Syrian travel documents for Palestinians, who were not permitted to return to Syria by using a connecting flight from Beirut International Airport.<sup>56</sup>

The Western Embassy (A) explained that travellers with MEA have to fill out an information form, which includes information on ethnicity. A PRS will not be allowed to travel, even in cases where the person holds Syrian citizenship. The source was aware of two cases, where Palestinians with Syrian nationality and thus Syrian passports were not allowed to travel, which the embassy assessed to be a Lebanese policy of not allowing PRS to enter Lebanon.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This chapter only concerns PRS who are registered with the Syrian General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR), as non-GAPAR-registered PRS have fewer rights and cannot have Syrian travel documents issued (Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Palestinians in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates*, October 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-14)

<sup>52</sup> GSO: 3

<sup>53</sup> International NGO: 10; Western Embassy (A): 7, 10

<sup>54</sup> Western Embassy (A):11

<sup>55</sup> International NGO: 10; Western Embassy (A): 7; Western Embassy (C): 16-17

<sup>56</sup> Western Embassy (A): 10-11

<sup>57</sup> Western Embassy (A): 7

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## Annex 1: Meeting minutes

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### Meeting with Western Embassy (A), 13 June 2022, Beirut, Lebanon

#### Background

1. The western embassy started by emphasizing that all returns from the country were voluntary returns of Syrians that had previously been granted protection status in the country.
2. As such, all individuals that returned had given up their protection status to return to Syria. The people who wish to return to Syria belong to different age groups, with a majority being elderly people. Since the beginning of the war in Syria there have been about 10-20 voluntary returns to Syria per year from the country of the western embassy.

#### Rules and documentation

3. The western embassy informed that it is only possible to travel through Lebanon if the traveller has a valid passport and as such, the only document needed to return to Syria is a valid passport.
4. In cases in which individuals do not have a valid passport, they can apply for one through a Syrian General consulate or Embassy by presenting either: old original passport or identity card. The cost is approximately 325 USD. The issuance of a new passport takes up to three months. It is possible to apply for an urgent passport, which is issued in 3-4 weeks at the cost of approximately 800 USD. All applications are sent from the consulate or embassy to Damascus for issuance.
5. The decision of issuance is made in Damascus not at the individual consulate or embassy. If a person has only a birth certificate, they may initiate a process that will ultimately lead to a passport. However, this may take a while. The western embassy did not have any cases of Syrian nationals that were not in possession of any personal documents and wanted to return to Syria and thus had no knowledge on Syrians wishing to return but that were not able to verify their identity to obtain a new passport.

#### Transiting in Lebanon

6. With regard to using Lebanon as transit country, the representative informed that Syrians residing in the country of the Embassy primarily use Middle East Airlines (MEA) to Beirut, as these are direct flights. Prior to departure, the Syrian traveller has to fill out a form. On the basis of this form MEA forwards the information on all travellers to the Lebanese General Security to provide the approval for each individual. Persons that do not obtain an approval will not be allowed to board the plane and travel to Lebanon.
7. The western embassy explained that on the form persons have to fill out their ethnicity. If the person is Palestinian, s/he will not be allowed to travel, even in cases where the Palestinian may hold Syrian citizenship. The representative was aware of two such cases, where Palestinians with Syrian nationality and thus Syrian passports were not allowed to travel, which the western embassy assessed to be a Lebanese policy of not allowing Palestinians from Syria to enter Lebanon.
8. As for the transit in Lebanon, the western embassy was of the understanding, that the Lebanese authorities do not conduct systematic follow up on Syrians transiting by land through Lebanon to Syria. It costs about 30-50 USD to travel by a shared taxi from Beirut int. airport to the border. The

Government of the Western embassy conducts a follow up phone call with the returning Syrian upon arrival to Syria. To the knowledge of the representative, Syrians are required to exchange 100 USD into Syrian pounds at the Syrian side of the border upon entering Syria.

#### **Transit in Lebanon by plane to Syria**

9. In cases where Syrian nationals are traveling to Lebanon and continuing to Syria by air, there is no requirement of a transit visa, as these are cases in which the travellers continue on a connecting flight to Syria and thus do not leave the airport transit area.
10. To the knowledge of the representative, it is not possible for Palestinians from Syria to travel to Beirut int. airport and continue on a connecting flight.
11. Four years ago, the Embassy was engaged in a case of two PRS families travelling on valid Syrian Palestinian travel documents. The families were not permitted to return to Syria by using the connecting flight from Beirut. In these instances, the families returned through another Middle Eastern country with directed flights between that nation's capital and Damascus. The representative noted, that these cases were old and thus there may be different regulations and procedures in place at this current time.
12. According to the embassy, the transit visa is a sticker, which is inserted into the passport at the airport to enable the person to travel by land in to Syria. The duration of the visa is 24-72 hours and costs 30 USD.
13. With regards to Syrians obtaining approval from Lebanese General Security if have exited Lebanon illegally, the embassy informed that GS used to inquire in the past if someone had exited Lebanon illegally. However, they no longer inquire. However, the embassy stated that this information would be best to confirm with GS.

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### **Meeting with General Security Office, 15 June 2022, Lebanon**

1. According to General Security, a Syrian can only obtain a transit visa (for the purpose of travelling to Syria by land via Lebanon) in Beirut airport if s/he exited Syria legally and entered Europe legally. This must be proven by showing an exit stamp from Syria in the passport as well as documentation for entering Europe legally.
2. It is not of relevance whether the person has obtained asylum in a European country or if they are rejected asylum seekers. It is whether a person has exited Syria legally and entered Europe legally that allows for a Syrian to obtain a transit visa at the Beirut airport.
3. General Security informed that PRS do not fall under the procedure of decree 99. PRS thus follows a special procedure and cannot obtain a transit visa at the Beirut airport to travel to Syria by land.
4. In cases where the Syrian travel on a newly issued passport and has proof of legal exit from Syria and legal entry into a European country, this will only be valid if in its original form (i.e. old passport). A copy of exit visa will not suffice.
5. When asked if it is possible to apply for a transit visa from abroad, GS informed that persons have a right to apply for a transit visa with an embassy in Europe but that the decision will be made by the

MFA. To their knowledge, this is a very rare scenario and the GS representative was not aware of any such cases.

### **Documents**

6. Each traveler must have his/her own valid passport in which a transit visa will be stamped. The transit visa is not a visa sticker but a visa stamp with the date of authorisation.
7. The transit visa is valid for 24 hours and cannot be extended, however in practice its validity can last for 36 hours.
8. If a person overstays his transit visa, he will be allowed to enter Syria but the overstay will be registered with the Lebanese General Security and s/he will receive a one year entry ban. GS does not have a control mechanism to follow up on cases of persons overstaying the visa. The overstay is registered in the GS database but the GS does not have the resources to follow up on each individual case.
9. General Security informed, that the arrival procedure in the airport for Syrians entering Lebanon on a transit visa, are the same as for other travelers. The first encounter with the authorities is GS at the border control and this is where the transit visa in form of a stamp will be issued in the passport.

### **The step-by-step procedure at the airport**

10. Syrians will go through border control as the first encounter with the Lebanese authorities. Here the General Security will review their travel documents and issue a transit visa by stamping the passport with the transit visa if aforementioned requirements are fulfilled.
11. General Security informed that all persons fulfilling the requirements would be granted a transit visa and only persons that have an entry ban will be refused entry.
12. The airline companies are well aware of the rules and procedures with regard to issuing of transit visas and it is the responsibility of the airline company to return Syrians to their departure destinations if rejected entry by GS.

### **Land border crossings**

13. GS informed that there are currently five official border-crossing points between Lebanon and Syria.

Three of them are located in the Beqaa region:

- Matraba (newly opened)
- Masnaa (the largest and most commonly used, connecting to Damascus)
- Qaa

The other two borders are located in

- Al Arida (connecting to Tartous in Syria)
- Al Aboudieyeh (connecting to Homs)

14. General Security informed that borders are open 24/7 with GS presence at all times. All of the five land crossing points can be used for the passing of individuals. All GS staff manning the borders have knowledge of the transit visa.

### **The step by step procedure at the border**

15. Upon arrival at the border, the traveller will go to the building housing the departure counter. At the counter, the passport will be checked to see if a transit visa has been issued and if the person has overstayed the duration of the transit visa. An exit stamp will be issued in the passport and the traveler can move on to the customs terminal. In case of overstay the person will be allowed to exit Lebanon and enter Syria, but it will be recorded in the database that the person has overstayed and s/he will have a one year entry ban in to Lebanon.
16. The GS has never rejected a Syrian having obtained a transit visa at the land border.

#### **Transit via connecting flight in Beirut Int. Airport**

17. All Syrians travelling to Syria via connecting flight in Beirut int. airport can do so, without obtaining a visa as long as they do not leave the transit area and go through border control to enter Lebanon. They are technically in transit and it is the responsibility of the airline company to guide them to the gate of their connecting flight.

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## Meeting with Western Embassy (B), 16 June 2022, Beirut, Lebanon

#### **Rules and documentation: Transit visa at Beirut international Airport for Syrians**

1. Syrian citizens do not need a transit visa prior to arrival in Lebanon. Upon arrival at Beirut international airport Syrians will get a stamp with the date of entry in their passport that constitutes the transit visa.
2. Syrians that are able to prove legal entry into Europe are entitled to a transit visa in Lebanon. Syrians that have entered Europe illegally are not granted a transit visa into Lebanon.
3. Syrians that were either rejected asylum or granted asylum in a European country can obtain a transit visa. However, the determining factor in terms of obtaining a transit visa into Lebanon is whether a Syrian can prove legal entry into a European country. If one cannot do so, s/he does not fulfil the criteria for obtaining a transit visa.
4. At the passport control in Beirut international airport, General Security (GS) will check the documents of the Syrian wishing to obtain a transit visa. As such, GS will check stamps in the passport to prove legal entry into a European country. GS also conducts an individualized search by checking the database in the so-called Smart Border Management System. If a person is registered in the system, s/he will not be allowed entry. This database cooperates with the database of Interpol.

#### **Implementation**

5. Generally, in Lebanon it can often be quite hard to find the correct information on specific rules and procedures. Even if one does find out about the rules, the implementation of these rules and procedures often varies.
6. This is also the case with regard to the rules and procedures for transit visas, where implementation very often deviates from the rules. As for deviations from the rules when it comes to the implementation, the western embassy explained that implementation even varies from border crossing to border crossing.

7. Corruption exists at border crossings, and if Syrians have enough money, they can bribe their way into Lebanon and onwards to Syria. This should be seen in light of the low wages paid to GS personnel, who are paid 30-40 USD per month as well as Lebanon's deteriorating financial and socioeconomic situation. The low salaries and the increasing living cost opens the door to corruption and bribery. It is naïve to think that such practice does not occur in Lebanon.
8. The actual step-by-step procedure for Syrians transiting in Beirut international airport are the same as for all other arriving passengers to the airport. All arriving passengers must go through the border control at the airport where documents will be checked and entry will be permitted if requirements are fulfilled or the officer at the counter allows entry.
9. With regard to Syrians that have obtained legal stay in the country of the western embassy, the source explained that there are cases of Syrians travel back to visit Syria for different reasons, e.g. family visits, or hospital treatments. These visits are often conducted in a clandestine way, without informing the authorities in the country of the Western embassy. This comes to the knowledge of the western country's authorities, as the authorities receive calls from handling companies<sup>58</sup> at the airports to check if the travelers will be allowed entry into Lebanon by GS. The western embassy believed that the handling companies of airlines are liasoning with GS in Lebanon to determine who will be allowed to board planes in Europe bound for Lebanon.
10. Airlines are obliged to return passengers to their departure destination, if someone is denied entry into Lebanon.
11. European countries fine airlines which allow individuals to travel to their countries who are not allowed to enter, e.g. because they have fake documents, which can easily be recognised as fake.
12. Eventually, the authorities may force airline companies to close a route as a consequence of allowing persons to board that are not permitted entry in to Lebanon. Therefore, airline companies have to be well trained in order to avoid fines.
13. Asked if GS follow up on Syrians, to ensure that they do not overstay their transit visa, the Western embassy informed that at the Masnaa border crossing GS will check the transit visa issued at Beirut int. airport. In general, Syrians that have overstayed their legal stay in Lebanon will receive a fine. The Western embassy does not know if they will receive an entry ban.
14. The western embassy noted that in many cases, Syrians that are denied a transit visa at Beirut int. airport are registered in the authorities' Smart-border-management-system and thus wanted by the Lebanese authorities for different matters.
15. According to the source – despite the rules, regulations and the practical implementation – access to Lebanon is often adressed case-by-case where GS are the decisive authorities.

#### **Land border crossings**

16. The western embassy stated that there are five official border crossing points that can be used for transit by individuals:
  - Al Masnaa border crossing point in the East. This is the largest border crossing point.
  - Al Arida border crossing point in the North West
  - Aboudiya and Bukaya border crossing points in the North

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<sup>58</sup> Companies that handle and facilitate the check-in and boarding process at the European airports on behalf of the airline companies. These companies are also operating outside European airports, e.g. in Beirut

- Qaa border crossing point in the North East
  - In addition to these five border crossing points, the embassy had heard of a sixth border crossing point near Arsel. This could be the Matraba crossing point, but the embassy could not confirm this.
17. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic Syrians and Palestinians from Syria were only allowed to use certain border crossing points on certain days and certain times. But according to the western embassy these rules are no longer implemented in practice by Lebanese authorities, though officially not lifted. It is very often the case in this uncertain information environment that is Lebanon. Information and updates are not shared consistently and further more implementation is uncertain.

#### **Transiting by connecting flight in Beirut int. airport by airway**

18. As for Syrians catching a connecting flight from Beirut int. airport to Damascus int. airport, the Western embassy was not certain of the process but stated that since they are not technically entering Lebanon and stay in the transit area in the airport, the western embassy would be very surprised if the travelers needed a transit visa. According to the embassy, there are no certain procedures for persons catching a connecting flight as they are staying in transit and thus not entering Lebanon.

#### **Rules and procedures for Palestinians from Syria (PRS)**

19. The Western embassy was not aware of the rules and regulations concerning PRS and had no experience of such cases. The embassy therefore referred to the information present at the GS website, which was shared during the meeting. According to this information, the same rules apply to PRS.

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## **UNHCR response to request for information by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) on transit procedures in Lebanon for Syrians returning to Syria from Europe, 24 June 2022**

**The information contained herein should not be used, provided, or interpreted without reference or a link to UNHCR's full response in its entirety. The information is valid as of 24 June 2022.**

### **Background**

1. The following information has been provided in response to a request for information by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), dated 7 June 2022, on transit procedures in Lebanon for Syrians returning to Syria from Europe.

## UNHCR Position on Returns to Syria

2.

UNHCR would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate its position on returns to Syria, including via third countries. In light of continued conflict and insecurity; severe concerns about the rule of law and widespread human rights violations and abuses, including against returnees, amongst a range of other protection concerns, **UNHCR continues to call on states not to forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria, including Palestinians previously residing in Syria, to any part of Syria**, regardless of whether the area is under control of the Government or under control of another state or non-state entity.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, UNHCR also continues to consider that it would not be appropriate to forcibly return nationals or former habitual residents of Syria to neighbouring countries and non-neighbouring countries in the region, unless specific arrangements are in place that guarantee that the individual concerned will be readmitted to the country and can re-avail him/herself of international protection.<sup>60</sup>

## Entry and Residency Policies and Procedures for Syrians in Lebanon

3. Lebanon has adopted increasingly restrictive policies regarding entry and legal residency of Syrians, which impacts their ability to access protection and assistance in line with relevant international human rights standards. Based on the 2019 Higher Defense Council decision, all Syrians, who enter or re-enter Lebanon irregularly after 24 April 2019, will be deported and handed over to the Syrian immigration authorities. This applies both to Syrians arrested at the border and inside Lebanon.<sup>61</sup> Syrians who entered Lebanon in an unlawful manner will be issued a re-entry ban if they are deported.<sup>62</sup>
4. According to the 2021 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR), only 16% of Syrians aged 15 years and above hold legal residency, primarily as a result of increasingly restrictive measures for Syrians to enter and regularize their stay in Lebanon.<sup>63</sup> The consequence of this is an environment of heightened insecurity in which Syrian refugees without valid legal residency face increased risks of arrest, detention and deportation. Furthermore, their freedom of movement within Lebanon is

<sup>59</sup> UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, HCR/PC/SYR/2021/06, [www.refworld.org/docid/606427d97.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/606427d97.html), p. 213.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> UNHCR, *Q&A on Consequences of Irregular (re Lebanon) Entry Based on Recent Government Decisions*, July 2019, <https://bit.ly/3xR3Fpj>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. "These deportations are normally executed following only a verbal confirmation from the Public Prosecution, without the judicial review required by Article 88 of the Lebanese Penal Code. Consequently, Syrians in this process are not afforded the possibility to express and have independently assessed any fears of persecution, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment upon a deportation, as required pursuant to the CAT, ICCPR and CRC"; UNHCR, *Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report: Universal Periodic Review - 3rd Cycle, 37th Session: Lebanon*, July 2020, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=8045&file=EnglishTranslation>, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> "A continuous decline in the rate of Syrian refugees with legal residency was noted, with only 16% of individuals aged 15 years and above holding legal residency (compared to 20% in 2020, 22% in 2019, and 27% in 2018)"; UNHCR, *2021 Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR)*, 25 January 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90589>, p. 32.

significantly restricted, which in turn also hampers their access to essential services such as hospitals and schools. UNHCR has previously expressed concern at the implementation of deportation proceedings against Syrians without application of the relevant due process guarantees established in Lebanese law.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, UNHCR is concerned about the application of re-entry bans to Syrians. Those attempting to re-enter Lebanon from third countries in spite (or without the knowledge) of a re-entry ban will be subjected to deportation to Syria.

### **UNHCR response to request for information by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) on transit procedures in Lebanon for Syrians returning to Syria from Europe**

5. The response shared below to the questions received from DIS is based on information received directly from contact with the Lebanese General Security Office and reflects UNHCR's experience in individual cases. It should not be treated as official information, for which the Government of Lebanon should be consulted directly. This information does not include COVID-19 related travel regulations.

#### **6. Rules, documentation, and procedures, for transit in Lebanon Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport (BRHIA) by land.**

##### **Rules and documentation**

#### **Do Syrians transiting in Lebanon in order to continue travelling by land to Syria need a visa prior to arrival?**

No, they do not require a visa prior to arrival. Transit visa is provided upon arrival (see below).

#### **If yes, what kind of visa?**

Not applicable.

#### **What are the requirements to obtain a visa? Where can it be issued?**

Not applicable.

#### **Are there any other requirements for Syrians transiting in Lebanon to continue travelling through Lebanon by land to enter Syria (e.g. proof of travel mode, proof of residence in Syria etc.)?**

Not applicable.

<sup>64</sup> "The Government of Lebanon has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to the principle of nonrefoulement. However, in practice, the lack of due process in deportation proceedings puts individuals at risk of refoulement. (...) UNHCR has documented cases of Syrians who have been arrested and detained upon deportation [from Lebanon to Syria] and shared these with the relevant Lebanese authorities." And further: "The United Nations, and notably UNHCR, has raised the need to apply the procedural safeguards set out in the national law in these deportation cases with the Government of Lebanon and its authorities. While fully acknowledging Lebanon's right to manage its borders and prevent illegal migration, UNHCR has stressed the need for due process to ensure respect for the principle of non-refoulement in individual cases"; UNHCR, *Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report: Universal Periodic Review - 3rd Cycle, 37th Session: Lebanon*, July 2020, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=8045&file=EnglishTranslation>, pp. 3-4.



**If no, can a Syrian national obtain a transit visa upon arrival in BRHIA?**

Syrians arriving at BRHIA for the purposes of onward travel to Syria through Lebanon by land can be granted by General Security Office (GSO) staff at the airport either a 24-hour pass or a 15-day residence permit in Lebanon, provided that they (i) hold a valid Syrian passport, (ii) do not have a current “re-entry ban” to Lebanon, and (iii) declare that the purpose of their entry to Lebanon is transit to Syria.

If these criteria are met, then GSO will:

(i) Grant them a 24-hour permission to Lebanon for the purposes of transit to Syria by land if the passenger has no residence permit in their country of departure or their residence permit in that country is valid for less than one month.

(ii) Grant them a 15-day temporary residence permit in Lebanon if the passenger informs GSO that they would like to stay in Lebanon before transiting to Syria and on condition that they have a residence permit valid for one month and longer in the country of departure. Such passenger will be requested to provide GSO with a full address in Lebanon where they intend to stay, including full name of the host and their phone number.

Syrians intending to remain in Lebanon will need to meet the eligibility criteria for one of the entry categories listed by the General Directorate of the GSO.<sup>65</sup>

**What are the requirements and needed documents to obtain a transit visa?**

Please see the answer above.

**Which document is it issued in (e.g., travel document/passport)?**

A transit visa is stamped in the national passport.

**Does each person need a transit visa in his/her passport?**

Yes, each person needs a transit visa in their passport (including minor children).

**Do children need an individual visa in their passport or a separate visa if included in parents travel document?**

Yes, children need an individual visa in their passport. Children are required to hold a passport / travel document, in which the visa is stamped.

**For how long is the transit visa valid?**

24 hours or 15 days, depending on the availability of a residence permit in the country of departure valid for one month and longer at the time of arrival. Please see the details above.

**Can it be extended?**

No.

**If so, how and for how long?**

Not applicable

**Are there certain conditions to be met for extension?**

Not applicable.

**Are there any fees for issuing and for extension?**

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<sup>65</sup> Available at: [www.general-security.gov.lb/ar/posts/376](http://www.general-security.gov.lb/ar/posts/376), last updated on 21.03.2022 (English version: [www.general-security.gov.lb/en/posts/159](http://www.general-security.gov.lb/en/posts/159)).

Issuance of transit visas is free of charge.

**If so, what are they?**

Not applicable

**Can a Syrian who has previously entered or exited Lebanon illegally obtain a transit visa?**

Yes, if the requirements for issuance of a transit visa listed above are met, including the condition that there is not current re-entry ban for the concerned individual. Syrian individuals who, prior to their arrival in Lebanon for transit purposes, were found by GSO to be in violation of the Law of 10 July 1962 Regulating Entry into Lebanon, Stay and Exit of Foreigners, and have consequently received a re-entry ban that is in force when the transit visa is sought, are denied admission and are therefore not eligible to receive a transit visa.

It should be noted that Syrians resettled to third countries are receiving re-entry bans when leaving Lebanon.

**If yes, what rules then apply in terms of transiting in Lebanon (i.e. same as above or any difference in the requirements)?**

Not applicable. Please see the answer above.

## **7. Procedures.**

**What is the exact step-by-step practical procedure for Syrians transiting in BRHIA via land to Syria? Can you please explain the procedure from when the individual leaves the airplane (where does he/she go step by step)?**

1. Once the plane lands, the concerned Syrian passenger must go first to the GSO counter for passport and visa control.
2. GSO staff will check their passports to verify the authenticity and validity.
3. The Syrian passengers will inform the GSO staff that they want to transit to Syria through Lebanon by land (and whether they wish to stay in Lebanon for up to 15 days during such transit).
4. Provided the criteria listed above for the issuance of transit visa are met, the GSO staff will issue them a 24-hour pass permission or a 15-day temporary residence permit, depending on the declared duration of transit and availability of a residence permit valid for at least one month in the country of departure.
5. Once the GSO staff stamp the passport of the passenger with a transit visa, s/he will then head to the baggage claim area.
6. After having collected their baggage, the passenger will need to head to the Customs point for inspection. After customs checks, the passenger can leave the airport.

**Do the Lebanese authorities enquire about travel mode to the border / Proof of travel mode?**

No.

**Do the authorities follow up on whether a person granted a transit visa reaches the border within the given timeframe?**

No.

**Can a Syrian who has applied for asylum in another country obtain a transit visa?**

Yes, if the criteria listed above for issuance of transit visa are met.

**Can a Syrian who has previously overstayed their visa in Lebanon obtain a transit visa?**

Syrians who have entered Lebanon and overstayed their visas are routinely issued a re-entry ban when they leave Lebanon through official border crossing points. Syrian individuals who seek re-admission to Lebanon for transit purposes or stay, when such a re-entry ban remains in force, are not permitted entry and are not issued a transit visa. It is however possible to obtain a transit visa after the re-entry ban expires, on condition that other requirements for transit listed above are met.

**8. Implementation.**

**Are there cases where Syrians that fulfil the requirements have not been granted transit visas? If so, why? If case by case, then what grounds / procedures?**

UNHCR Lebanon does not have systematic access to the BRHIA for monitoring purposes. However, it has been observed in some cases that Syrians may be denied admission on account of re-entry bans that were previously issued without their knowledge when they were departing Lebanon.

UNHCR has also noted in several cases inconsistent application of border regulations, including situations where individuals with valid legal residency in Lebanon were refused re-entry after temporary stay in third countries, for reasons that could not be verified. However, such instances typically involve individuals residing in Lebanon, rather than seeking transit to Syria. In such situations, individuals denied entry to Lebanon are given an option of either returning to the country of departure or taking a flight to Syria, pending which they remain in custody of GSO staff at the airport.

**Can a person with a transit visa be rejected at the border by the Lebanese authorities? If so, on what grounds? Can the person reapply?**

UNHCR understands that this question refers to procedures for the exit of individuals who transit through Lebanon to Syria. UNHCR is unaware of any instances in which a Syrian individual holding a transit visa was denied exit. The possibility of individuals transiting through Lebanon being denied exit in exceptional circumstances not related to immigration controls can however not be excluded.

**9. Land border crossings**

**Which of the three official land border crossings are currently in use:**

There are currently six official land borders in use:

- Al Masnaa (Damascus)
- Matraba (Rif Quasir). *Opened in May 2022*
- Machareeh Al Qaa (Rif Quasir)
- Al Arida (Tartous)
- Al Aboudiyeh (Homs)
- Boqaia (Homs)

**Can they all be used for individual personal travel?**

Yes.

**If no, which borders are not accessible for personal travels?**

Not applicable.

#### **10. Rules and procedures**

**What are the step by step procedures at the Lebanese side when a Syrian/PRS reach the border to exit Lebanon?**

Syrian individuals approach the GSO staff at the official land border crossing point for passport check. GSO check the validity and authenticity of the passport, and the transit visa stamps to verify how long the concerned individuals have stayed in Lebanon. Exit stamps are put in the passport. Thereafter, the individuals pass through customs control and cross the border.

#### **11. Rules, procedures, documentation for transit in Beirut Hariri int. airport by airway**

**Do Syrians transiting in Lebanon in order to continue travelling by air to Syria, Damascus int. airport need a visa for Lebanon prior to arrival?**

No, if at the point of departure the passenger has checked in for the entire travel to Damascus.

**If so, which kind of visa and what are the requirements?**

Not applicable.

**Where can it be issued?**

Not applicable.

**Are there any other requirements for transiting in Lebanon int. airport when travelling by plane to Syria, Damascus int. airport for Syrians?**

No.

**What is the exact step-by-step procedure for Syrians transiting in Beirut int. airport via plane to Damascus int. Airport?**

1. Once the plane lands at BRHIA, the Syrian passengers who continue their travel by air to Syria will head from the Arrivals area to the Departure board where the gate number of the next flight is indicated.
2. Such passengers do not pass through GSO passport controls and are not considered by authorities as having entered the territory of Lebanon.
3. The luggage, which was checked in to their final destination in Syria, is transferred to the next flight by the airport personnel.

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## Meeting with Western Embassy (C), 17 June 2022, Beirut, Lebanon

### **Transit visa at Beirut international Airport**

1. Whether a Syrian travelling from Europe can obtain a transit visa at Beirut International airport depends on what travel document s/he is travelling on.
2. In relation to obtaining a transit visa for the purpose of voluntary return, the embassy further informed that the main requirement is a valid Syrian passport. The embassy opined that Syrians are

also requested to show a national ID card at the airport when boarding, to check the national number against the passport. If the person travelling does not have his/her national ID card, he/she may or may not be allowed to board, depending on the MEA staff at the counter. It frequently occurs, that the MEA will contact General Security to check if the person can board. The more documents provided, the more flexibility will be given.

3. Middle East Airlines (MEA) are cooperating with General Security. It is a state owned airline company which is owned by the Central bank. The Embassy informed that MEA staff have the option of scanning documents, such as a visa or residence permit at the gate and send it to GS on the spot. The MEA staff will receive a response immediately. This procedure serves as a pre-departure screening of passengers.
4. To the knowledge of the embassy, transit visas obtained at Beirut airport are issued in the Syrian passport with a duration of 48 hours. During the COVID-19 pandemic the transit visa was valid for 24 hours. Since the spring of 2022 the duration of the transit visa is valid 48 hours like it was prior to COVID-19.
5. There are no fees for issuing the visa. There are no formal written requirements for obtaining this. However, it is well-known that one has to prove legal exit from Syria as well as legal entry in to Europe. The Embassy has heard of many cases where Syrians that left Syria illegally and were subsequently rejected a transit visa in to Lebanon.
6. The embassy informed that the transit visa will be stamped in the passport at the border control and contains date of entry. In addition, the General Security officer at the border control will write by hand, the purpose of the visa. For example for the transit visa, the officer will stamp the passport with the date of entry and across the stamp write '*murur*' meaning transit.
7. In case a family is travelling together, each person will receive a stamp in their individual passport and each stamp will have a hand written statement. For example, the stamp of the child, will state 'accompanying mother or father on transit visa'. Furthermore, a mother travelling alone with her children must prove guardianship of the children. Her stamp will then state 'accompanying x number of children'.
8. The Lebanese authorities do not conduct any follow up checks to ensure that Syrians travelling through Lebanon on a transit visa, do in fact leave Lebanon within the timeframe of the visa. Syrians that have overstayed their transit visa will be issued a travel ban for one year. In some cases, persons have paid a fine for over staying; however it is uncertain if this results in the entry ban being lifted.
9. In addition, Syrians that left for resettlement in a western country, and whose exit clearance from Lebanon was obtained by UNHCR, will also be issued a travel ban. The embassy was not certain of the period but it could be up to five years.
10. It is not possible for Syrians to check with the Lebanese authorities in advance of travelling, if one has an entry ban, unless the person has a contact within Lebanon to do so. This could be obtained by use of *wasta* (a contact within the authorities) or by paying your way to this information through informal channels. As such no a formal process of inquiry of having a travel ban issued against an individual exist.
11. The Embassy was not aware of whether a Syrian travelling on a newly issued passport that does not contain proof of legal exit and entry would be allowed to enter Lebanon on a transit visa.

12. However, the embassy informed, that some Syrians have passports issued at the Syrian Embassy in Beirut. Lebanese authorities perceive the Syrian embassy in Beirut to be more tightly controlled and regulated by Syrian authorities than other Syrian embassies around the world and thus Syrians obtaining the passports from the Syrian embassy in Lebanon are considered to more thoroughly vetted by Syrian authorities in the eyes of Lebanese authorities.
13. In such cases, Syrians were allowed in to Lebanon on newly issued passports. The Embassy informed, that a Syrian passport can also be issued by proxy at the Syrian Embassy in Beirut, but that one would need connections at the Embassy to do so. Therefore, whether a person will be able to obtain a passport by proxy or not it depends on his or hers access to a person in Lebanon (a *wasta*) with contacts at the Syrian embassy in Lebanon.
14. The western embassy explained that a travel document issued for refugees (in Danish: *rejsedokument for flygtninge*) is not accepted by the Lebanese authorities and persons traveling on this document will not be allowed to board the airplane at the airport from which they are departing. Only in cases where 1) a person has residency in Lebanon and thus does not need to have a visa or 2) a Lebanese citizen acts as a guarantor, is it possible to apply for a visa on a travel document for refugees. If granted, this will be inserted in the travel document upon arrival. The traveler will carry a confirmation note from the Lebanese embassy which s/he can present to the authorities upon arrival. The confirmation note is merely a small piece of paper that will have a code/number that the embassy has received from General Security.

#### Implementation of procedures

15. At the land border crossing, General Security checks their computer system to ensure that the requirements for the visa are met and that you are allowed to exit. A person may fulfill the visa requirements, but s/he could be wanted by the Lebanese authorities for security reasons and breaches of Lebanese law. Asked why this is not addressed at the airport, the Embassy stated that in some cases General Security may not look at whether the person has a file with the Lebanese authorities. In cases where a person is registered with the authorities, General Security at the land border crossing will not allow the person to exit.

#### Palestinians from Syria

16. The embassy is not aware of whether PRS have the right to obtain a transit visa at the airport on the same conditions that a Syrian citizen can. However, the embassy was of the belief – based on other experiences - that regardless if the rules are the same or not, PRS will be subjected to more scrutiny by General Security. There is always a sensitivity around Palestinians from the perspective of General Security, due in part to the legacy of the civil war in Lebanon.
17. The western embassy has not dealt with any cases of PRS returning to Syria via Lebanon.

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## Skype meeting with International NGO, 16 June 2022, Beirut, Lebanon

### Background

1. The International NGO informed that their information, counseling legal team focuses their work around providing legal assistance to Syrians and PRS (Palestinian Refugees from Syria) in Lebanon. Concretely, the ICL-team supports these refugees in obtaining civil documents and inform them of existing procedures and any changes and additions to these procedures.
2. The International NGO does not conduct any monitoring of returns to Syria through Lebanon nor are they involved in any return activities.

#### **Legal framework pertaining to transit visas in Lebanon**

3. International NGO had no practical experience of assisting Syrians or PRS in obtaining transit visas but were aware of the legislation pertaining to the transit visa in Lebanon.
4. According to International NGO there is a Law of Entry, Stay and Exit to Lebanon, which is the law governing entry from Syria for all non-Lebanese including Syrian and PRS. The application of this law usually take place by internal memos issued in the GSO for them to follow specific procedures. The most important memo is the Internal Memo 99 issued in January 2015, covers Syrian citizens. The transit visa is mentioned in this regulation.
5. General security issued another memo on 21/03/2022 and imposed new entry regulations. The memo listed the categories under which Syrians can enter Lebanon among and included transit visa and indicates relevant required documents: a valid passport, a non-refundable ticket and thirdly a visa issued by the country of final destination, if the individual is not a citizen of the destination country.
6. The duration of the transit visa is 24 hours, allowing the person to enter Lebanon and travel to Syria by land. The International NGO were not aware of the specific requirements for obtaining a transit visa but informed that persons with travel bans to Lebanon will not be allowed entry.
7. In cases where exit regulations have not been fulfilled (for example in cases of illegal exit) the Lebanese authorities will issue a travel ban against the individual. Individuals are not always informed that a travel ban has been issued against them. A person that has been issued a travel ban by Lebanese authorities will not be allowed entry into Lebanon.
8. There is no formal mechanism for Syrians to check with the Lebanese authorities if they have in fact been issued a travel ban by Lebanese authorities prior to their departure to Lebanon.
9. The International NGO informed that while it had not been involved in any cases involving transit visas, the implementation of other regulations pertaining to Syrians in Lebanon is opaque and arbitrary in its implementation by Lebanese authorities.

#### **Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS)**

10. The Internal memo 99 does not apply to PRS and it is more difficult for PRS to obtain access to and legal stay in Lebanon. Generally, there are fewer options for PRS in obtaining access to Lebanon. As The International NGO is not engaged in cases of PRS returning to Syria, they do not have any practical knowledge of PRS obtaining a transit visa for Lebanon.

## Annex 2: Terms of Reference: Lebanon – Transit for Syrians and Palestinians from Syria (PRS)

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### 1. Transit in Lebanon for Syrians returning to Syria from Europe

#### 1.1. Current rules and regulations for Syrians entering Lebanon

1.1.1. Rules, procedures, documentation for transit in Lebanon and accessing Syria by land

1.1.2. Rules, procedures, documentation for transit in Beirut Hariri International Airport

1.1.2.1. Rules and procedures at currently open border crossings

#### 1.2. Implementation of rules and procedures

### 2. Transit in Lebanon for Palestinians from Syria (PRS) returning to Syria from Europe

#### 2.1. Current rules and regulations for PRS entering Lebanon

2.1.1. Rules, procedures, documentation for transit in Beirut Hariri International by land

2.1.2. Rules, procedures, documentation for transit in Lebanon and accessing Syria Airport

2.1.2.1. Rules and procedures at currently open border crossings

#### 2.2. Implementation of rules and procedures