

# Updates and portraits from Lebanon

by Anja Pilchowski, 07 January 2025



Since 1 October 2024, when Israel launched a full-scale war of aggression in Lebanon, a total of 1.2 million people have been forced to flee within Lebanon, while others have gone to war-torn Syria, risking abduction or forced recruitment into the Syrian army if they were Syrian, or to countries like Cyprus that seemed to promise more safety (Janmyr & Milch, 2024). From one day to the next, people lost access to employment, to their homes, to emergency and basic medical care, to food supplies, and, as schools were used as shelters and universities were closed, to education. Israel deployed ground troops in southern Lebanon, carried out particularly fierce attacks on the south and east of Lebanon as well as south Beirut, and launched attacks on civilian buildings, hospitals, universities, electricity supplies and water supplies (Arab Center Washington DC, 2025; L'Orient Today, 2024b; L'Orient Today, 2024c; Middle East Monitor, 2024a). Israel also used the internationally ostracised white phosphorus as a weapon of war, which is lethal respectively severely harmful for humans and the environment (Anera, 2024; Financial Times, 2024). By spraying white phosphorus, Israel furthermore ensured that certain areas in Lebanon remain uninhabitable and uncultivable. Between 16 September 2024 and 27 November 2024, an estimated 3,402 people were killed and 14,655 people were injured (Anera, 2024).

Israel claims their attacks have only targeted Hezbollah infrastructure - a narrative they also use in the Gaza Strip in regard to Hamas. However, since 21 November 2024, there have been arrest warrants issued in this regard by the International Criminal Court for Benjamin

Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant (International Criminal Court, 2024)<sup>[1]</sup>. The crimes they are accused of include starvation as a means of warfare, targeted attacks on the civilian population, and cutting electricity and fuel supplies, which had a direct impact on the availability of water and medical care.

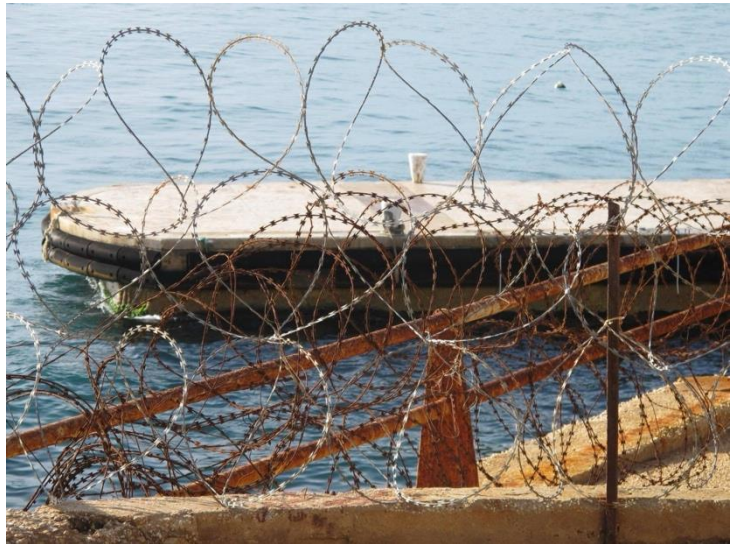
I started writing this article on 26 November 2024 when there were increasing media reports that there could soon be a temporary ceasefire if the Israeli cabinet agrees. On that very day, I also heard from friends all over Lebanon that numerous Israeli bombardments were carried out without warnings and that randomly selected buildings and locations were attacked and levelled (L'Orient Today, 2024d; The Cradle, 2024). However, because the Israeli cabinet also voted in favour of the temporary ceasefire agreement 10-1, it came into force on 27 November 2024 at 4 a.m. local time (Reuters, 2024). Despite warnings from the Israeli state (BBC, 2024), many people started returning to the south immediately afterwards to find their homes either damaged or destroyed. Since the ceasefire came into force, Israel has violated this very agreement 248 times until 18 December 2024, resulting in at least 30 dead and 36 injured people (Middle East Monitor, 2024b). Israel further did not withdraw from the south of the Litani river and on 2 January 2025 even deployed Merkava tanks there again (The Cradle, 2025; United Nations, 2025).

With this article I would like to take the opportunity to depict different realities for people on the move<sup>[2]</sup> during the weeks leading up to the ceasefire and after it came into force.

In my article from May 2024, I described the dire situation for refugees from Syria in Lebanon. During the Israeli war of aggression, Syrian people, amongst other refugee and migrant communities, have had no access to governmental shelters (Anti-Racism Movement, 2024; The Public Source, 2024a; The Public Source, 2024b). They therefore had to organise shelters and other basic needs themselves or with the help of local and international NGOs. And if the situation was already extremely difficult for Syrian refugees, it was even worse for someone who is also Queer. In the Lebanese capital Beirut, Queer-friendly accommodation is i.a. offered by the organisation *Helem* (Helem Lebanon, n.d.) and food is i.a. provided by the NGO *Nation Station* (Instagram, n.d.). However, due to a lack of financial resources, especially for the support structures of the Queer communities, there are often not enough safe shelters and not enough specific medical care e.g. for gender reassignment medication<sup>[3]</sup>.

Marilyn\*<sup>[4]</sup>, a Queer Syrian activist who arrived in southern Lebanon a few days before 1 October 2024, had to flee again northwards shortly after her arrival. She needed and still needs Queer-friendly shelter, food and medication for gender reassignment. Marilyn\* reported that she was sometimes denied some support services such as food distribution because of being Queer, that she often did not know how long she could stay in her shelter, and due to lack of availability that she only started taking contraceptive pills as gender reassignment medication after the ceasefire came into effect. However, there is no supervision and no permanent source of supply for this medication. Richie\*<sup>[5]</sup> is another

Queer person from Syria who came to Lebanon in October 2020. He explained that Syrian people were forcibly deported to Syria even during the war of aggression. Richie\* often moved back and forth between his room in a shared accommodation, his workplace and other places due to the fear of either being bombed or snatched for deportation to Syria. And as if that was not enough, the rent for his room was also increased, which made him worry about losing it. And just like Marilyn\*, Richie\* also needs gender reassignment medication. Before the al-Assad regime was ousted, Richie\* was able to obtain the drug Testosterone Enanthate 250<sup>161</sup> as gender reassignment medication from pharmacies in Lebanon.



Neither Marilyn\* nor Richie\* have any residence papers in their dead names, let alone access to legal papers to represent their chosen identity since Lebanon inter alia lacks a national refugee law and has not ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention with its 1967 Protocol. This circumstance is making them prone to harassment and persecution not only due to their illegalised residencies but also because of their Queerness. Both are on gender reassignment medication, which is normally taken for other reasons, and without proper medical supervision. And both are struggling to make ends meet, as their illegalised status prevents them from finding official employment and support from the UNHCR is meagre. They want to leave Lebanon for a safer country and are thus registered under the Humanitarian Corridors programme, which offers a legalised way to leave Lebanon for Italy or France (Mediterranean Hope, n.d.). However, following the ouster of the al-Assad regime, it is yet unclear whether this programme will be continued. And although the Syrian al-Assad regime collapsed on 8 December 2024, neither Marilyn\* nor Richie\* are considering returning to Syria, as they are both persecuted by family members for their Queerness and have no trust in the newly emerging interim government.

In my article from July 2024, I highlighted the challenging situation for refugees from Sudan in Lebanon. Being Black and a migrant/refugee at the same time is a difficult challenge in Lebanon. Not only is there no support from the Lebanese government, but there is also hardly any support from local or international NGOs, as most of them are specialised in supporting Syrians or Palestinians. On 4 November 2024, some Sudanese people protested again in front of the UNHCR building in Beirut to once again amplify their now even more desperate situation between two wars, one in Lebanon and one in Sudan (Inkstick Media, 2024; The Public Source, 2024c). Others have been caught between the abusive Kafala [work sponsorship] system, the non-assistance of the embassies of their countries of origin and the war in Lebanon.

In response to this neglect and due to the urgent need, Black people on the move<sup>[2]</sup> (refugees, migrants, survivors of the Kafala system) have largely organised the provision of their basic needs themselves. In Beirut, many displaced people had to sleep in the streets because they had no access to governmental shelters. In general, the majority of the internally displaced people had to find shelter outside the governmental shelters with other family members, friends, in mosques, churches or in makeshift shelters on the street. As one result, the Club Sudan in Beirut was transformed into a shelter for internally displaced Sudanese people (Inkstick Media, 2024). And the migrant women-led grassroots organisation *Regroupement des Migrant.e.s de l'Afrique Noire (REMAN)*, organised the distribution of essential goods such as mattresses, pillows, hygiene products and food. Viany Nguemakoue, a designer and tailor of fashion with African fabrics, co-founder of *REMAN* and activist for migrants' rights, has transformed her workplace into a centre for this emergency relief for marginalised people mainly from African and South-Asian countries, but also Lebanese people (Migrant Women Press, 2024). Many distributions were organised together with Abu Ali, a person from Syria who works as a driver for *REMAN*.

Also in my article from July 2024, I portrayed Tariq\*<sup>[8]</sup>'s story. He concluded that he is very tired of the unpromising life in Lebanon. But since he cannot return to war-torn Sudan, he would like to move/relocate to a European Union (EU) country. In the beginning of September 2024, Tariq\* decided to move to Europe in an illegalised way. A Sudanese friend brought him in contact with a person facilitating illegalised movements. Tariq\*'s preferred journey would have been from Lebanon to the EU, as technically the right to apply for refugee status still exists there- even though the EU works hard to abolish it (borderline-europe, 2024). After having paid an initial amount of 1500 USD, his first stop was in Syria, where he was brought to an apartment in Ḥalab (known also as Aleppo). Tariq\* stayed there for two weeks awaiting the resumption of his journey. The people on-site requested a further payment to the facilitator, otherwise his journey would not continue. After paying another 1300 USD and waiting for several days, he learnt that the facilitator was put in jail and that the amount he had already paid was lost with that person. As he had no alternatives and had already been stranded in Syria for several weeks, Tariq\* organised a trip back to Lebanon, even though the war of aggression had already begun. Including the fees for the return journey, Tariq\* paid 3050 USD. A sum he would not have had to pay if there was freedom of movement for all and not just for a privileged few (Mau et al., 2015). When Tariq\* returned to his flat in Beirut, he was pleased to find that his flatmates were now hosting up to 16 other Sudanese people seeking shelter after fleeing from southern Lebanon. This community then worked together to find solutions for further challenges.

The Palestinian social worker Samra\*<sup>[9]</sup>, who is a descendant of survivors of the Nakba, was born in Lebanon and lives in the Shatila refugee camp in the south of Beirut. She and her family have decided to leave the Shatila camp before 1 October 2024, as there were rumours that Israel might attack Palestinian refugee camps again. Many Palestinians, including Samra\*'s family, took these rumours very seriously, since a genocide against the Palestinian people is taking place in the Gaza Strip (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024) and the memory of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre is still very fresh in the collective memory of Palestinians (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2024). Samra\* and her family fled to

the north of Lebanon and paid an extortionate price for transport there. In general, prices doubled and tripled not only for transport, but also for food and rents (FEWS NET, 2024; L'Orient Today, 2024a) and tenants were forced out of their homes when landlords/landladies found people willing and able to pay the higher rents.

The temporary ceasefire will expire at the end of January 2025. It is still unclear whether it will be extended. On 9 January 2025, the Lebanon Parliament will meet to elect a new president after that office has been vacant for more than two years (Le Monde, 2024). There are not many people who really hope that the political camp of the newly elected president will bring solutions to the economic crisis, the political deadlock, the hostile situation for people on the move and other marginalised communities, and further challenges such as reversing the fragmentation of health insurance for profit by private companies into the Universal Health Coverage (International Labour Organization, 2024; Republic of Lebanon, n.d.). However, most people expect that some movements in the political apparatus will be able to turn the temporary ceasefire into a permanent one.

The people of Lebanon deserve to live in peace. All people on this planet deserve to live in peace. "Peace is more than the absence of conflict; it is a catalyst for economic well-being, laying the foundation for societies to thrive for generations to come. (...) Peace facilitates economic activities, leading to greater financial resources available for investment in health care, education and social welfare" (United Nations, 2024).

To conclude this article, I would like to emphasise that it is important to provide ongoing financial support to local NGOs<sup>[10]</sup>. Local NGOs have bridged and filled the gaps of political neglect for many years now in Lebanon and know best how to respond to various crises on the ground. Indigenous knowledge or local knowledge acquired over the years is important to help exactly where it is needed. In addition, local NGOs have a flat hierarchy and less bureaucracy, so that much more support reaches exactly where it is urgently needed.

*The photos used in this article were sourced from Canva, as the current situation in Lebanon makes it dangerous for non-journalists to take photographs, as it could be perceived as espionage.*

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[1] For completeness, it needs be added that an arrest warrant was also issued against Mr Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri, highest commander of the Hamas' military wing Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, for killings including at the Supernova Festival in Kibbutz Re'im in October 2023.

[2] The realities for Lebanese people have been undeniably challenging as well. However, my focus was and still is on people on the move in Lebanon.

[3] The organisations Proud Lebanon, The A Project, Tajassod and Queer Mutual Aid (QMA) Lebanon are trying to fill the gaps with health care services, legal and psycho-social support, a sexuality hotline, referral services, crowdfunding, and advocacy.

[4] The name has been changed to ensure data protection.

[5] The name has been changed to ensure data protection.

[6] The drug Testosterone Enanthate 250 is usually used by some cisgender men to treat low testosterone levels or as a steroid in the bodybuilding community. In the past, it found its way from Iran via Syria to Lebanon.

[7] *People on the move* is an exonym, and many people wish to enjoy the same rights in Lebanon as the Lebanese people. Many have been there for many years and even decades and consider Lebanon their new home.

[8] The name has been changed to ensure data protection.

[9] The name has been changed to ensure data protection.

[10] In this article, I have mentioned the local organisations Helem, Nation Station and REMAN, which did excellent work during the Israeli war of aggression and continue to offer their services. Same as Proud Lebanon, The A Project, Tajassod and Queer Mutual Aid (QMA). Other options include direct support to self-organised Queer or migrant communities that share resources with each other, or direct support to individuals.