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The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions

Ali Alshabab^{1,2}, Daniel Mesteren^{3,4}, Marine Casali⁵, Dominik Hangartner^{1,2,6*}
and Jeremy Weinstein⁷

¹Center for International and Comparative Studies, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, ²Immigration Policy Lab, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA, and ³ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, ⁴Department of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA, ⁵Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, and ⁶Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA
^{*}Corresponding author. Email: dominik.hangartner@ipps.ethz.ch

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Abstract

We study the drivers of refugees' decision making about returning home using observational and experimental data from a survey of 3,003 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We find that the conditions in refugee-hosting countries play a minor role. In contrast, conditions in a refugee's home country are the main drivers of return intentions. Even in the face of hostility and poor living conditions in host countries, refugees are unlikely to return unless the situation at home improves significantly. These results challenge traditional models of decision making about migration, where refugees weigh living conditions in the host and home countries ("push" and "pull" factors). We offer an alternative theoretical framework: a model of threshold-based decision making whereby only once a basic threshold of safety at home is met do refugees compare other factors in the host and home country. We explore some empirical implications of this new perspective using qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data.

Keywords: comparative politics; refugees; immigration; conflict processes; Middle East

Mass forced displacement has proven to be an enduring challenge in contemporary international politics. Forcibly displaced people face joblessness and food insecurity, lack legal status, and experience hostility and violence in host countries. Meanwhile, the governments of many hosting countries struggle to meet the additional demands that refugees place on public services and infrastructure (Verme et al. 2015). The consequences of forced migration are most acute in developing countries—where a large majority of refugees reside—due to constrained government budgets, weak state capacity, and limited public infrastructure.¹ Making matters worse, as of 2018–19, 78 per cent of all refugees worldwide were in protracted refugee situations, living in exile for more than five consecutive years. The largest protracted refugee populations are Afghans, Syrians, and South Sudanese; the vast majority of these people reside in neighboring countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.²

¹According to 2019 data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) 83 per cent of refugees lived in developing countries (see <https://www.unhcr.org/data/201909>).

²Data from the UNHCR (see <https://www.unhcr.org/refugees-statistics/>). UNHCR statistics do not include the 5.7 million Palestinian refugees who are under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). If Palestinians were included, the statistics would shift to 21.7 million people in protracted refugee situations, accounting for 83 per cent of refugees worldwide.

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We study the drivers of refugees' decision-making about returning home using observational and experimental data from a survey of 3,003 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We find that the conditions in refugee-hosting countries play a minor role. In contrast, conditions in a refugee's home country are the main drivers of return intentions. Even in the face of hostility and poor living conditions in host countries, refugees are unlikely to return unless the situation at home improves significantly. These results challenge traditional models of decision-making about migration, where refugees weigh living conditions in the host and home countries ("push" and "pull" factors). We offer an alternative theoretical framework: a model of threshold-based decision-making whereby only once a basic threshold of safety at home is met do refugees compare other factors in the host and home country. We explore some empirical implications of this new perspective using qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data.