Returning Home? Why Pushing Syrian Refugees To Return Is Unlikely To Be Effective

An informal refugee settlment in Sabra, Beirut, Lebanon, 2020 (Jenny Gustaffson)

LOCATION
Lebanon

RESEARCH QUESTION
What factors shape refugees' decision to return home?

RESEARCH DESIGN
Panel survey

TEAM

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Twelve years after Syria's civil war began, 5.5 million Syrians live in neighboring countries, many of whom have been displaced for a decade or more. Much of Syria remains devastated, and many refugees considering returning fear violence, persecution, and government retribution in the postwar period. In February 2023, the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis was compounded by the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit southern Turkey and northwestern Syria, leaving even more people without basic shelter and public services. This has rekindled important questions over the fate of displaced Syrians and their prospects for returning home. Some governments have taken active steps to push refugees to return to Syria, yet many in the international community believe that conditions in the country remain unsuitable.

Absent in these discussions is the voice of Syrian refugees. Do they want to go back to Syria? If so, when and under what conditions? What factors predict the return of refugees? Researchers at the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) conducted a representative survey of 3,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2019 to learn about their return intentions.
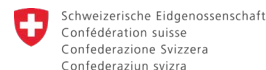
The Challenge

Worldwide, more than 27.1 million people live as refugees—forcibly displaced outside the borders of their home country. Such displacement has tremendous human costs and poses policy challenges for hosting states and the international community. Without effective policy responses, the international community often holds return as the expected (and often preferred) solution to displacement. However, we know little about when and why refugees return home. Understanding return intentions is not only useful to prepare for the return process itself, but also to support effective policies, programs, and advocacy surrounding protracted refugee situations.

Syria's ongoing civil war has caused large-scale forced displacement within Syria and to neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Lebanon, a country of 4.5 million, now hosts more than one million Syrian refugees. Over the past three years, Lebanon's economy has been ravaged by an economic crisis and inflation, and the Lebanese government has drawn criticism for taking steps to encourage Syrian repatriation. In the face of overlapping crises in both Syria and Lebanon, there is little understanding of how Syrian refugees assess these challenges and think about the decision to return.

The Survey

Between August and October 2019, IPL researchers carried out in-person survey interviews with more than 3,000 Syrian refugees across Lebanon. The team recruited a representative sample of Syrians in Lebanon, meaning the survey data enables the researchers to draw conclusions about the full population of Syrians in the country. In surveys, a head of household of either gender was asked a series of questions related to their return intentions, living conditions in Lebanon, conditions in their places of origin in Syria, and the locations of their family and friends.[1] On return intentions, questions included:

- Do you plan to return to Syria in the next 12 months?

KEY FINDINGS

- **The majority of refugees wanted to return to Syria at some point in the future, but considered it too soon to go back within the next couple of years.**

- **Approximately one third of refugees did not expect to ever be able to return to Syria.**

- **Local conditions in Syria—mainly safety, but also economic conditions, availability of public services, and personal networks—were the most important predictors of return intentions.**

- **Conditions in Lebanon, such as socio-economic well-being and access to services, did not play a primary role in predicting return intentions. We find that only when safety concerns in Syria are satisfied do conditions in Lebanon shape people's intentions. This suggests that efforts to pressure refugees to return are unlikely to succeed, especially as long as conditions at home remain unsafe.**

- Two years from now, where do you expect to actually be living?

- Do you hope to move back to Syria and live there one day?

The research team asked about a wide range of conditions in Lebanon and Syria in order to assess their relative importance in influencing intentions to return. Respondents were also asked how they get information about conditions in Syria and what sources they rely on (family and friends, social media, official news media, NGOs, etc.) Between February 2020 and June 2021, thirty-six semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a separate sample of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon. These interviews explored respondents' migration histories, migration intentions and aspirations, and process of decision-making about the future, offering insight into refugees' lived experiences and behavior.

Results

In 2019, most Syrians said they hoped to return some-day, but only five percent intended to return in the year following the interviews (Fig. 1).[2] When asked about their plans in two years, 27 percent said they expected to be living in Syria.[3]

There were significant differences between where people *expected* to be in two years (Fig. 2, top panel) and where they *wished* to be (bottom panel):

- While 27 percent said they *expected* to be in Syria in two years, 59 percent said they *wished* they could be in Syria.

- Over 40 percent said they expected to still be in Lebanon, but less than 15 percent said they preferred to stay in Lebanon.

- 20 percent of Syrians said Europe would be their ideal location but only seven percent said they expected to be living in Europe.

Overall, Figures 1 and 2 show that while many Syrian refugees do not think it will be realistic to return to Syria soon, many wish they could go back.

FIG. 2

Expectations vs. Ideal
Where do refugees anticipate vs. want to be in two years?

Expectation

Lebanon 44% | Syria 27% | Europe 7% | North America 1% | Other 0% | Don't know 21%

Ideal

Lebanon 14% | Syria 59% | Europe 20% | North America 3% | Other 1% | Don't know 2%

The survey was fielded between August and October 2019, so two years in the future refers to August-October 2021.

FIG. 1

Return Intentions

Return in 1 year 5% | Return in 2 years 27% | Return ever 63%

The survey was fielded between August and October 2019, so the one-year and two-year return intentions are in reference to when the survey was fielded, therefore referring to August-October 2020 and 2021, respectively.
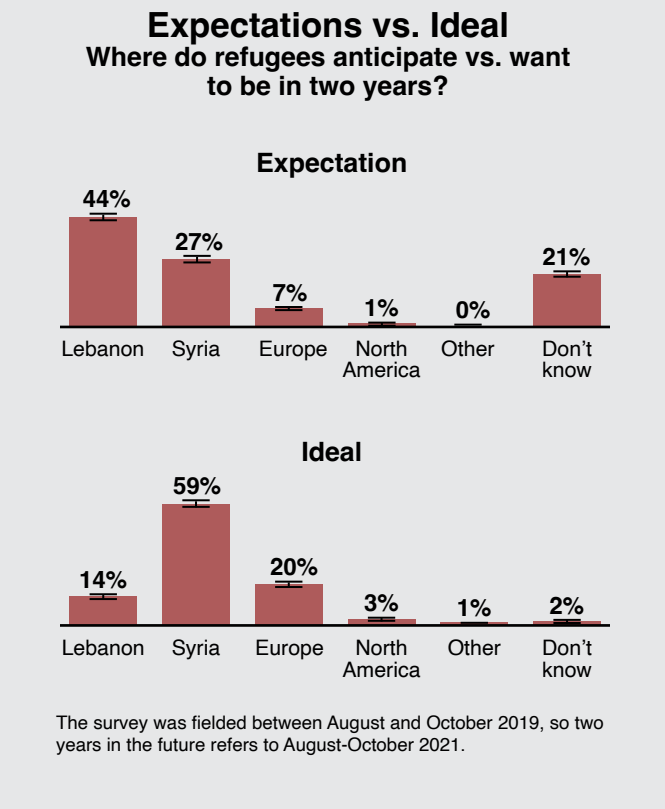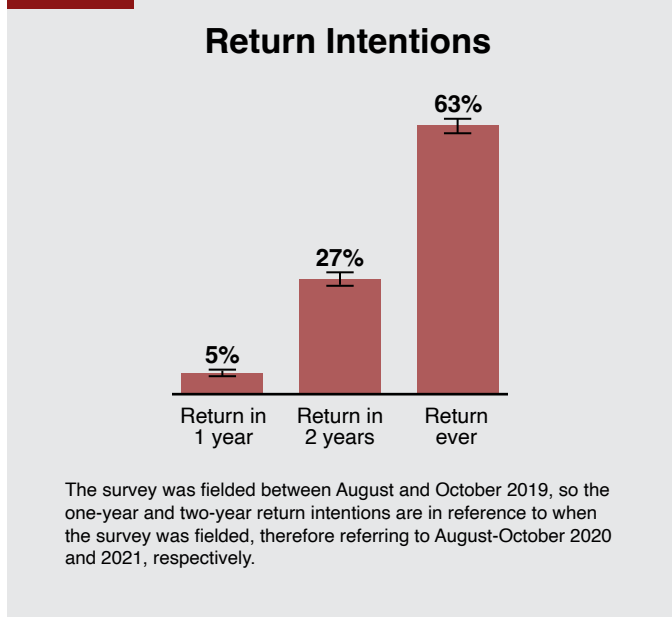
> "We barely made it out. We left our things and our house. [...] Where were we supposed to go? [...] I came to Lebanon to live whatever life would be here. I wanted to escape the war. I didn't want to lose my life [in Syria]."
>
> —Study participant

> "I said to myself we'd stay in Lebanon until the situation gets better in Syria, then we'd return. I thought that we'd stay for just a short period then we'd return, but we're still here."
>
> —Study participant

What influences the decision to return?

Figure 3 presents results from an analysis examining whether people's return intentions are predicted by conditions in Lebanon, conditions in Syria, their costs of traveling to Syria, and their confidence in information about conditions in Syria.

Results show that conditions in Syria predict refugees' short-term intentions to return. Improved perception about safety, economic well-being, and service provision in Syrians' places of origin correlated with an increase in return intentions in the next 12 months. Similarly, Syrians who reported that many in their networks of family and friends stayed or returned to Syria were more likely to say they want to go back. The results also show that higher levels of Syrian government control in people's town or city of origin was correlated with a decrease in Syrians' intention to return.

Meanwhile, conditions in Lebanon do not predict return intentions. The researchers had expected that people who were worse off in Lebanon would be more likely to say they intend to move back to Syria. However, economic well-being, provision of services, family networks, social well-being, and the legal situation of Syrians were not correlated with higher return intentions. This suggests that even if the conditions of refugees in Lebanon become worse, they are unlikely to return to Syria.

A woman walks near destroyed homes in Homs, Syria (Getty Images)

FIG. 3

Predictors of Return Intentions (Observational Data)
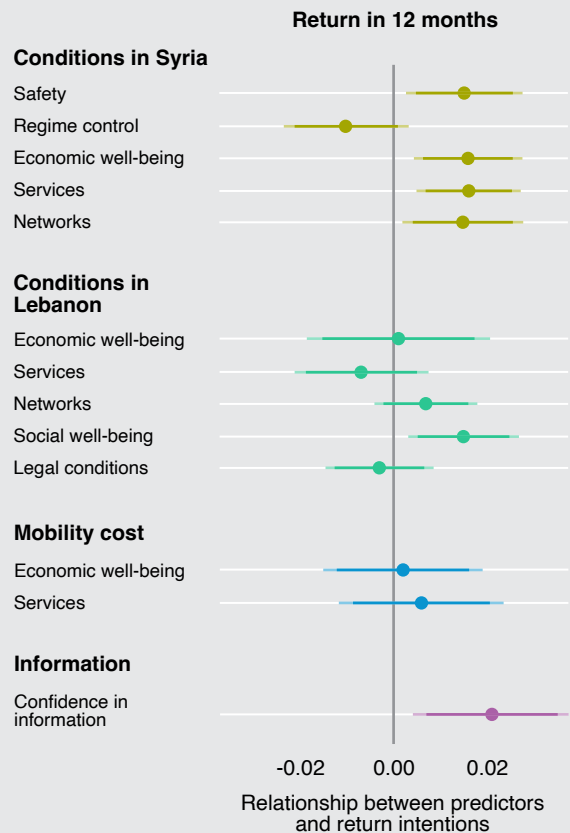
In this figure, factors that make people more likely to plan on returning to Syria within a year show a colored dot to the right of the vertical line, and factors that discourage plans to return show a colored dot to the left of the vertical line. The point estimates present the predicted change in the probability of intending to return corresponding to a one standard deviation increase in the index.

The researchers supplemented the analysis of observational data with an experiment in order to isolate the *causal* effect of conditions in Syria and Lebanon on return intentions. This experiment presents respondents with hypothetical scenarios about conditions one year in the future in Syria and Lebanon, and asks if they would return to Syria.

Figure 4 shows that findings from the experiment are largely consistent with the observational data. On average, conditions in Syria play a more important role in shaping people's return intentions than conditions in Lebanon. Results suggest that safety is the most powerful driver of return, with security in one's hometown and nationwide increasing return intentions by 35 and 42 percentage points, respectively. Both access to a good job and public services in Lebanon play a small, negative role in people's return intentions.

A threshold model of refugee return

Despite expectations that conditions in both countries would shape return intentions, we find that host-country conditions have little impact. As a result, we develop an alternative framework to understand refugees' decision-making about return. As refugees flee their homes to avoid violence, safety conditions in the home country may need to exceed a certain threshold before they consider returning.

The threshold model implies that host-country conditions have little effect on return as long as safety concerns in the home country are not addressed. Only once safety concerns are met will people evaluate the potential trade-off between conditions in the home and host countries.

To explore this prediction, we re-analyze scenarios from our survey experiment where conditions in Syria are described as safe or unsafe. Focusing on the scenario where conditions are described as unsafe, the left panel of Figure 5 shows the effects of other factors in Lebanon and Syria. In line with the threshold model's prediction, we do not find strong evidence that the availability of jobs and public services in Lebanon and

FIG. 4

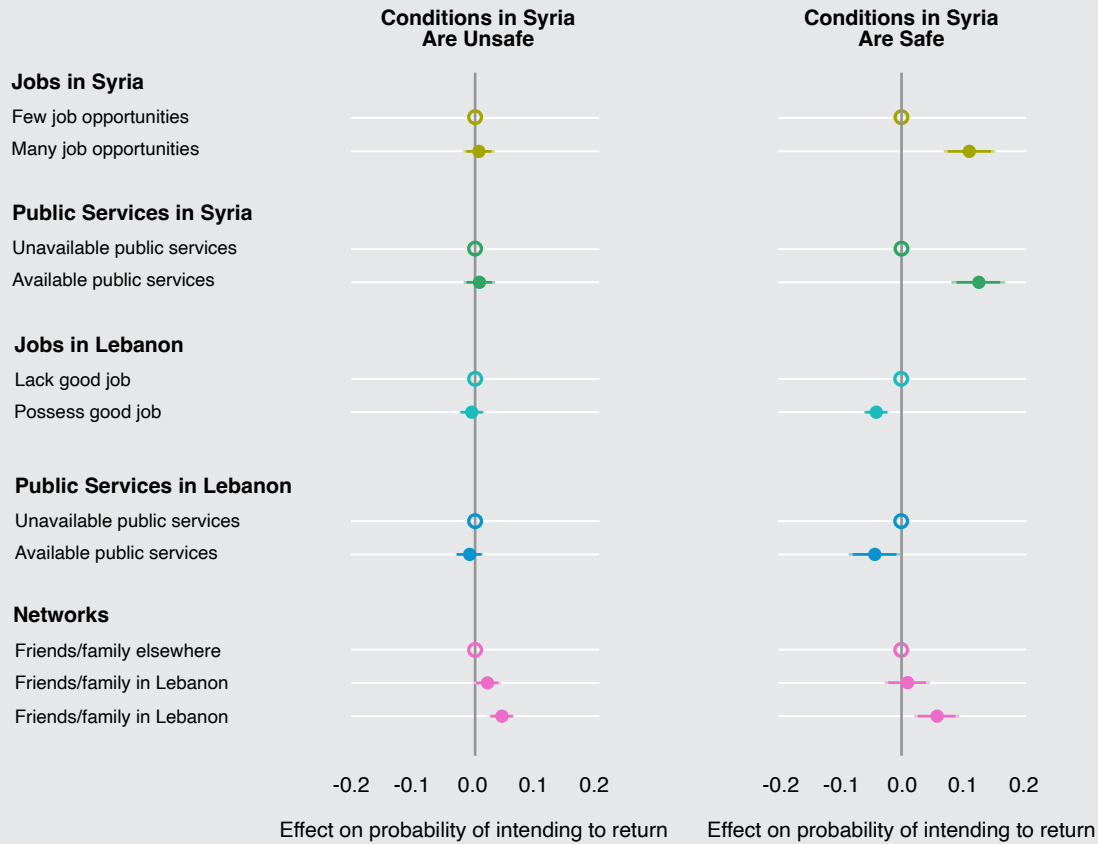### Predictors of Return Intentions (Experimental Data)
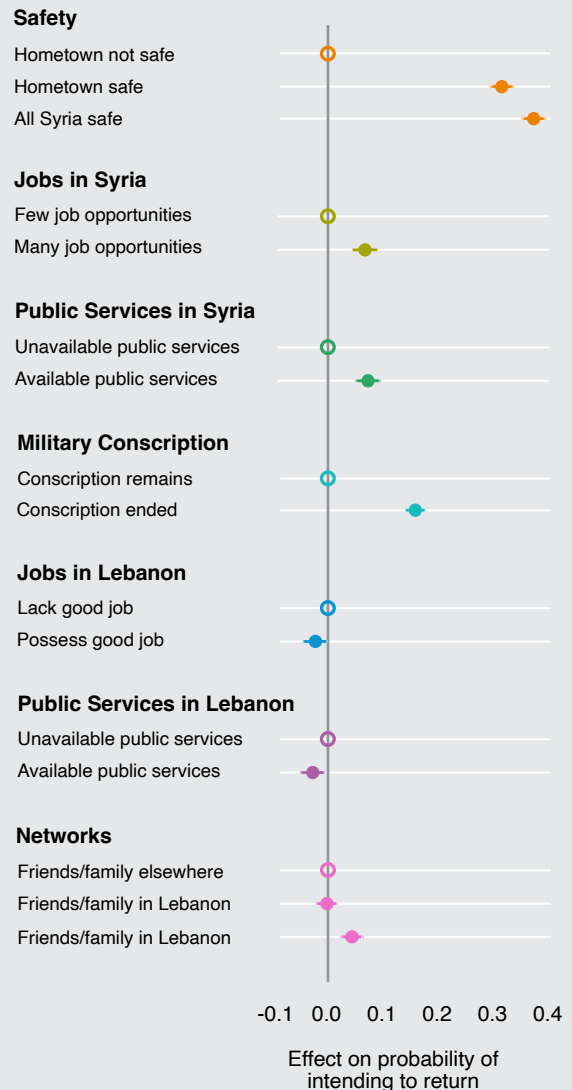
Each dot represents the effect on the probability that respondents would return to Syria in a given hypothetical situation, presented with its corresponding 95 percent (transparent lines) and 90 percent (solid lines) confidence intervals. The empty circles indicate reference categories. We cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

Syria impacts return intentions. This suggests that a change in economic or social conditions in either country will not influence return if the safety situation

FIG. 5

A Threshold Model of Refugee Return

Each dot represents the effect on the probability that respondents would return to Syria in a given hypothetical situation, presented with its corresponding 95 percent (transparent lines) and 90 percent (solid lines) confidence intervals. The empty circles indicate reference categories. We cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

remains precarious. The right panel focuses on scenarios that describe conditions in Syria as safe. It shows that when safety concerns at home are met, refugees evaluate economic and social conditions in both the host and home countries in deciding whether to return.

"Lebanon is a prison. If the crisis ended, I would return to Syria and live there. [...] It's better than here."

—Study participant

"If the war ended in Syria, I'd think about returning, but as long as the war continues and the security situation isn't good, I won't return."

—Study participant

Who intends to return?

The research team explored demographic differences in refugees' return intentions and largely found similar results across groups.

- **Gender:** Women and men think similarly about return in the short term, although a slightly larger share of women said they intend to go back to Syria at some point in the future.

- **Age:** Younger and older respondents had similar answers across all outcomes.

- **Education:** More educated Syrians report higher intentions to return to Syria in the short and medium term.

- **Urban/rural:** Syrians living in informal tent settlements in Lebanon were more likely to say they intend to return than those living in urban areas.
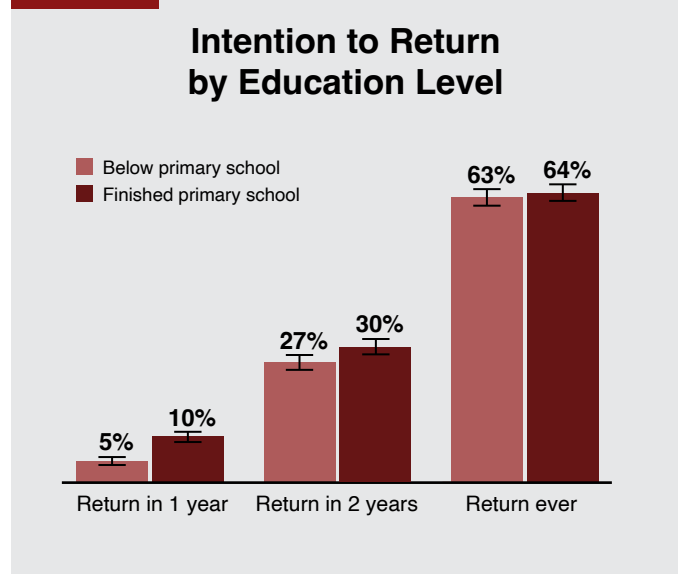
FIG. 6B

Intention to Return by Education Level

Below primary school
Finished primary school

5% 10% — Return in 1 year
27% 30% — Return in 2 years
63% 64% — Return ever

FIG. 6A

Intention to Return by Age

33 years or younger
Older than 33 years

4% 6% — Return in 1 year
27% 27% — Return in 2 years
62% 64% — Return ever

FIG. 6C

Intention to Return by Residence Type

Tented settlement
Urban

4% 6% — Return in 1 year
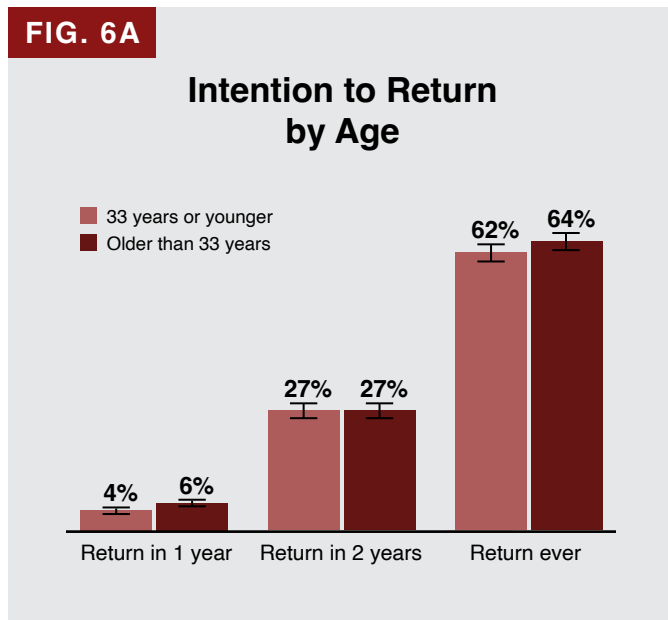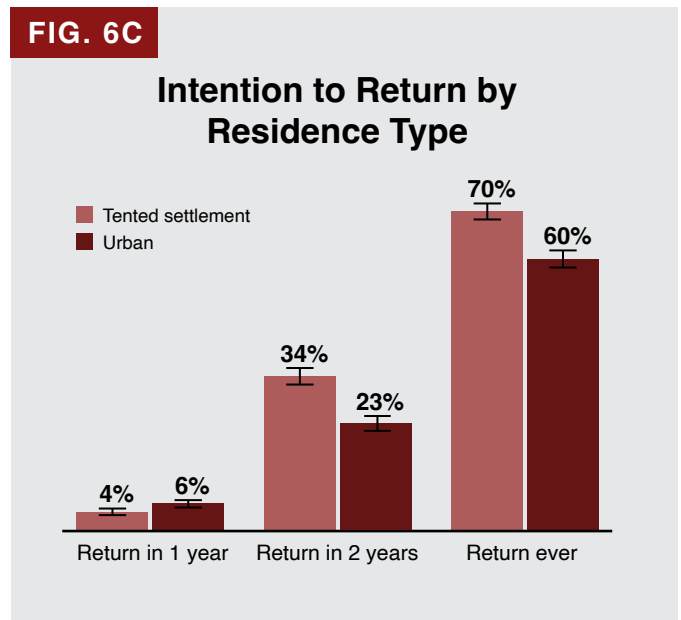34% 23% — Return in 2 years
70% 60% — Return ever

Where do refugees get their information about Syria?

Roughly 60–70 percent of respondents said they rely on Syrians in Lebanon and Syria to learn about conditions in Syria (see Figure 7). This is followed by transnational media and social media, which approximately 20 percent said they use to learn about conditions in Syria. Official Syrian media was used by just over 10 percent of Syrians in Lebanon. Finally, UNHCR and NGO announcements were relied upon by around five percent of Syrians to learn about conditions at home.

FIG. 7

Information Sources
Where do refugees learn about conditions in Syria?
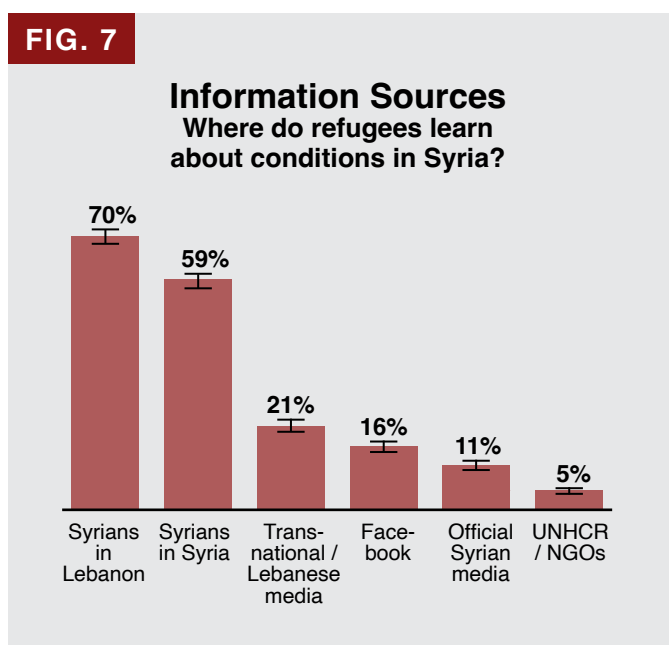
Conclusion

What are the prospects for Syrian refugees in Lebanon?

Looking at why people intend to return, this research reveals that refugees' plans and aspirations seem to be largely shaped by the situation in their home country. For Syrian refugees in Lebanon, we find that conditions in Syria play an important role in influencing people's return intentions. Our threshold model suggests that conditions in Lebanon shape return decisions only when refugees consider Syria to be safe.

The results indicate that efforts to push Syrians out of the host country are unlikely to be effective as long as there is little change in the security situation in Syria. Even refugees facing significant hardship in Lebanon would not choose to go home as long as conditions in their places of origin remain unsuitable. The results also show that although most Syrian refugees may eventually return, more than a third expect to remain in Lebanon, including some of those who wish that they could return. Many of those refugees live in very difficult situations, suffering from poverty, hostility, and formal restrictions on their mobility that need to be addressed. As such, it is critical that the humanitarian community continue to support refugees in Lebanon and other host countries to gain legal status, access to services, and labor-market opportunities. These ongoing efforts to improve refugees' living conditions will require sustained funding from the international community in the years ahead. ∎

1. All analyses apply sampling weights defined by our stratified sampling strategy, which allows us to draw conclusions for the whole Syrian population in Lebanon. We conducted stratified random sampling in order to recruit a representative sample of Syrians in Lebanon. First, we randomly selected localities based on the prevalence of Syrian refugees using UNHCR data and the sectarian composition of the localities using data from the 2018 elections in Lebanon. In each locality selected, we interviewed a local leader (such as the mayor) to find locations where Syrians are concentrated and then conducted a random walk sampling strategy in those areas to identify Syrian households to be interviewed.

2. A UNHCR survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 finds the same. See the Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria.

3. In Figure 1 and subsequent figures, the black bars around the top of each blue bar represent the margin of error in our estimates.

4. Prospective safety in Syria is measured as an index constructed from a number of survey questions intended to measure prospects for risk of physical harm and arrest. These include respondent perceptions about current physical safety in their place of origin (i.e., town or urban neighborhood), their expectations about the future security situation in their place of origin, whether their place of origin was a site of anti-government protests, whether the household has men of conscription age, and whether household members directly experienced wartime violence in their hometown.

5. All data collection for this project took place before Lebanon's protests starting October 17th 2019, COVID-19 lockdowns, and the economic crisis.

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