

Returning Home? Conditions in Syria, Not Lebanon, Drive the Return Intentions of Syrian Refugees



As of September 2020, the Syrian government had retaken control of the majority of Syria, leading to speculation about the end of the country's civil war and sparking debates both within the region and beyond about whether Syrian refugees will return. While some regional governments have begun to take active steps to encourage such return, many in the international community believe that conditions in Syria remain unsuitable for return. Still, some have started to consider steps to aid refugees with going back.

Absent in these discussions though is the voice of Syrian refugees. Do refugees want to go back to Syria? And if so, when and how? What are the conditions that predict the return of refugees? With support from IPA's Peace & Recovery Program, researchers from the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) conducted a representative survey of 3,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon from August-October 2019 to learn about their return intentions.

Key Findings

- » Refugees were ambivalent about return—a majority wanted to go back to Syria at some point in the future but thought it was too soon to go back within the next few years.
- » A substantial share of the population of Syrian refugees, approximately one third, did not expect to ever be able to return to Syria.
- » Most refugees wanted to go back to their place of origin, and local conditions in people's hometowns—namely safety, 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 an important role in predicting return intentions, suggesting that attempts to put pressure on refugees to go home are unlikely to achieve that goal.

RESEARCHERS

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COUNTRY

Lebanon

TIMELINE

August-October 2019

STUDY TYPE

Descriptive study

The Challenge

Worldwide, more than 26 million people live as refugees—forcibly displaced outside the borders of their home country. Such displacement has tremendous costs for the people living as refugees, in addition to posing policy challenges for hosting states and the international community. With a lack of effective policy responses, the international community often relies on the presumption that refugees will eventually return home as an expected solution to displacement. However, we know very little about when and why refugees return home. Understanding intentions is not just about preparing for the eventuality of return, but also having the evidence necessary to plan for long-term refugee responses, advocacy, and policy.

The Survey

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

Specifically, with regard to whether and when they intend to return to Syria, researchers asked:

1. Do you plan to return to Syria in the next 12 months?
2. Two years from now, where do you expect to actually be living?
3. Do you hope to move back to Syria and live there one day?

To examine what factors influence the return intentions of refugees, researchers used the survey data to construct a series of indices,² which they used to assess the relative

In Syria, the ongoing civil war has caused large-scale forced displacement, both within Syria and to the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Lebanon, a country of 4.5 million Lebanese nationals, now hosts approximately 1 million Syrian refugees. Now with the Syrian regime retaking control of the majority of Syria's territory, many are speculating about the end of the country's civil war and whether Syrian refugees will go home, and some regional governments are taking active steps to encourage return. While many actors in the international community believe that conditions in Syria remain unsuitable for return, some have started to consider steps to aid refugees in going home. Absent in these discussions though is the voice of Syrian refugees. Do refugees want to go back to Syria? And if so, when and how? What are the conditions that predict the return of refugees?

importance of the following factors in people's return intentions:

- Pull factors, including safety and security in respondents' place of origin, who controls that location, economic prospects and provision of services in the place of origin, as well as the location of respondents' networks of family and friends (whether many stayed in or returned to Syria).
- Push factors, including economic well-being and access to services in Lebanon, networks of family and friends in Lebanon, social well-being, such as whether they face hostility, and legal situation, including whether they are registered with UNHCR or the Lebanese authorities.

The research team examined the relationship between these indices and respondents' return plans in the next 12 months.

In addition, the research team asked respondents how they get information about Syria: Syrian family and friends in Lebanon or in Syria, Facebook, official news media by the Syrian government, transnational media (including Lebanese media), and/or UNHCR or NGOs.



Results

IF AND WHEN DO SYRIAN REFUGEES INTEND TO RETURN HOME?

Most respondents said they anticipated returning someday, but as shown in Figure 1, only 5 percent of Syrians intend to return in the year following the interviews.³ When asked where they expect to be living in two years, the percentage of Syrians who said they expect to be living in Syria rose to 27 percent. When asked if they ever hope to return, more than 60 percent said yes.⁴

There were significant differences between where people expect to be in two years and where they would wish to be under ideal circumstances (see Figure 2):

- Less than 30 percent said they expected to be in Syria, but 60 percent said they wished they could be in Syria.
- Over 40 percent said they expected to still be in Lebanon, but less than 20 percent said staying in Lebanon would be their ideal choice.
- 20 percent of Syrians said Europe would be their ideal location to live but only 7 percent said they realistically expected to be living in Europe.

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

Another important question for the humanitarian community is whether households plan to return together or separately (i.e., “split return,” where one or more household member moves back to Syria before/without all other household members). As shown in Figure 3, the research finds that more than half of households that plan on returning soon (of which there are relatively few) anticipate that not all household members will be able to move together.

Return Intentions

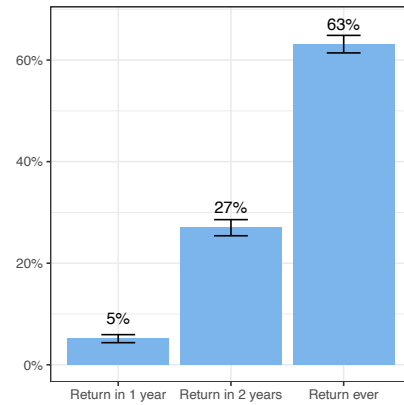


Figure 1. The return intentions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon over different time horizons. The survey was fielded between August and October 2019, so the one-year and two-year return intentions are in reference to when the survey was fielded, therefore referring to August-October 2020 and August-October 2021, respectively.

Expectations

Where respondents expect/ideally want to be living in 2 years

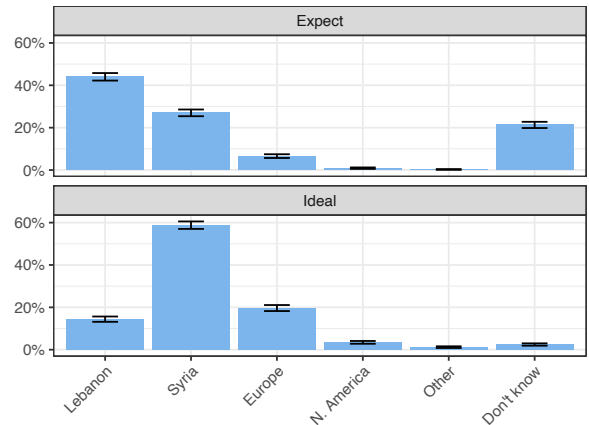


Figure 2. Comparison of respondents’ expectations about where they would actually be living in two years and where they ideally wish they could be living in two years. The survey was fielded between August and October 2019, so two years in the future refers to August-October 2021.

Split Returns

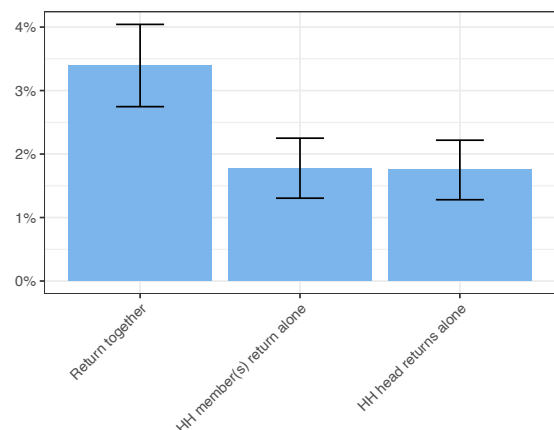


Figure 3. Split return of Syrian households.



PHOTO: RUSSELL WATKINS/DFID

WHAT INFLUENCES THE DECISION TO RETURN?

As shown in Figure 4, “pull factors” in Syria predict refugees’ short-term intentions to return. Specifically, an increase in perceptions about safety, economic well-being, and service provisions in Syrians’ places of origin was correlated with an increase in return intentions in the next 12 months.⁵ 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 in the next 12 months. The results also showed 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, “push factors” from 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 in the short term. This suggests that even if the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon become worse, they are unlikely to return to Syria as long as the conditions in their places of origin are not suitable.⁶

The estimated relationships in Figure 4 are generally small, although the difference in the overall results for conditions in Syria and those in Lebanon are clear—conditions in Syria correlate with people’s return intentions, whereas conditions in Lebanon do not predict people’s return intentions.

WHO WANTS TO RETURN?

The research team found some variation among different groups in their intentions to return to Syria:

- **Gender:** Women and men think similarly about return in the short term, but more women said they want to go back to Syria at some point in the future.
- **Age:** Younger and older respondents (below/above sample median age, 33 years old) had similar answers across all the outcomes.
- **Education level:** More educated Syrians report higher intentions to return to Syria, especially in the near term (1 year and 2 years).
- **Urban/rural:** Syrians living in informal tented settlements in Lebanon were more likely to say they want to return in 2 years or ever compared to those living in urban communities in Lebanon.

Predictors of Return Intentions

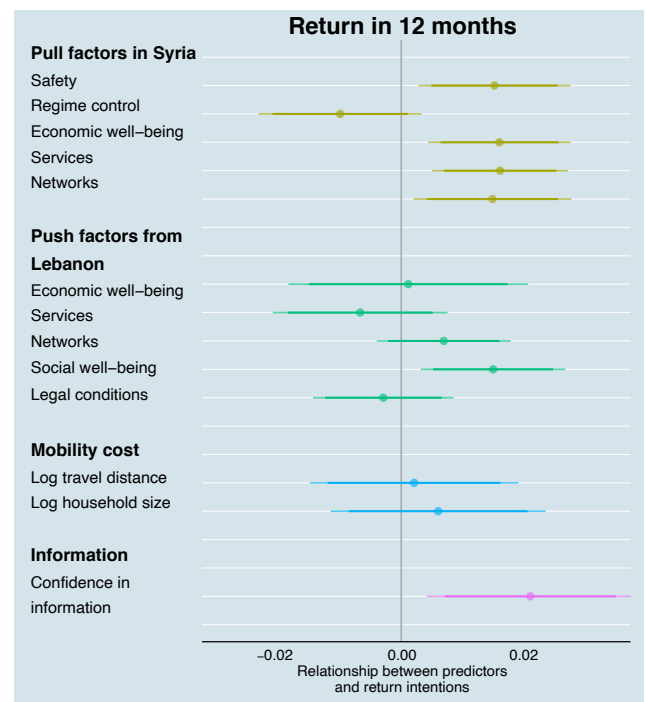
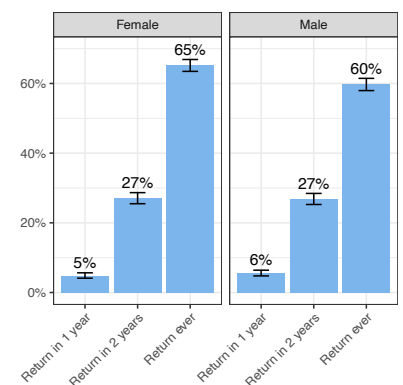


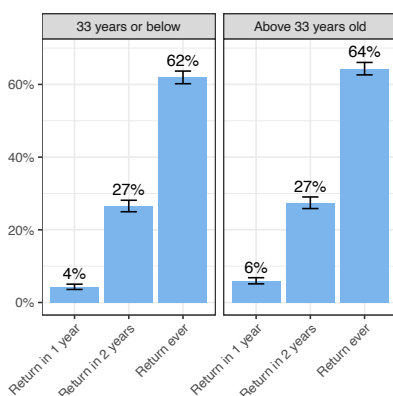
Figure 4. In this figure, factors that make people more likely to plan on returning to Syria within a year show a colored dot to the right of the vertical line, and factors that discourage plans to return show a colored dot to the left of the vertical line. The point estimates present the predicted change in the probability of intending to return corresponding to a one standard deviation increase in the index. For intuition about what a one standard deviation increase in an index means, a one standard deviation increase from the mean of an index implies a comparison to people 34 percent higher in the population distribution for the index.

Figures 5A-D. Subgroup analysis of return intentions in 1 year, 2 years, and ever.

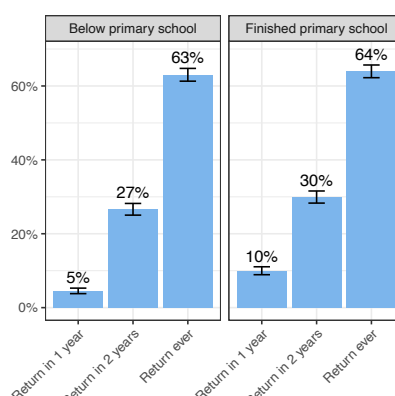
Gender



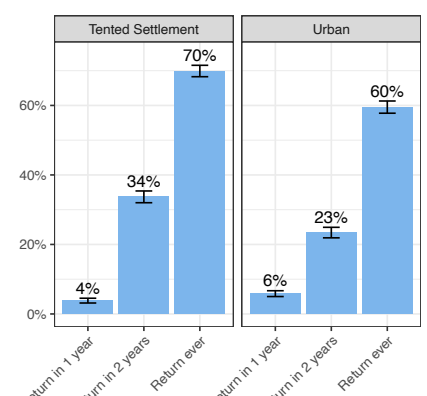
Age



Education



Urban/Tented Settlement



WHERE DO REFUGEES GET THEIR INFORMATION ABOUT SYRIA?

Roughly 60-70 percent of respondents said they rely on Syrians in Lebanon and in Syria to learn about conditions in Syria (see Figure 6). 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 used by around 5 percent of Syrians to learn about conditions at home.



Information Sources

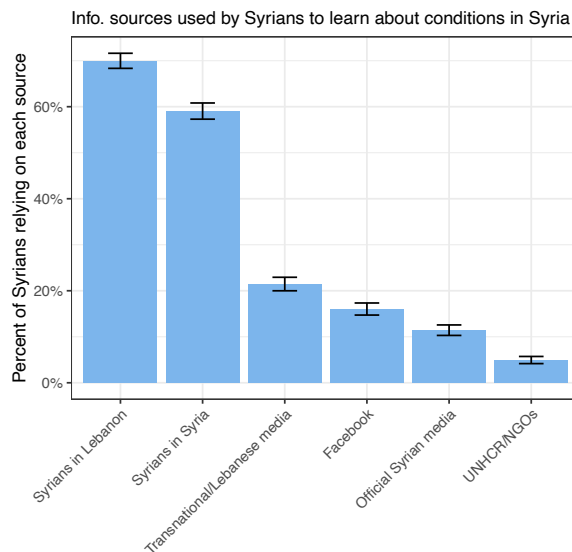


Figure 6. Info. sources used by Syrians to learn about conditions in Syria.

Conclusion

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON?

Looking at why people intend to return, the research finds that refugees' plans and aspirations around return seem to be largely shaped by the situation in Syria. This suggests that many refugees will not go home before local conditions are safe and there are economic opportunities and services.

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 on the ground in Syria. Even refugees facing significant hardship in Lebanon would not want to go home as long as local conditions in their places of origin remain unsuitable. The results also show that although a majority of

Syrians may eventually return, more than one third expects to continue living in Lebanon, including some of those who wish that they could return. Many refugees live in difficult situations in Lebanon and other host countries and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. As such, the humanitarian community needs to maintain its involvement in supporting refugees in the host countries, including around legal status, access to services, and labor-market opportunities. Many of these refugees also suffer from hostility and formal restrictions on their mobility that need to be addressed for those who remain in host countries in the years ahead.





PHOTO: ASHRAF SAAD ALLAH AL-SAEED / WORLD BANK

Endnotes

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 component of the localities using data from the 2018 elections in Lebanon. In each locality that was 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. Indices were constructed with Principal Component Analysis with pre-specified inputs.
3. 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.
4. In Figure 1 and subsequent figures, the black bars around the top of each blue bar represent the margin of error in our estimates.
5. 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.
6. All data collection for this project took place before Lebanon's protests beginning on October 17th 2019, COVID-19 lockdowns, and the economic crisis. Ongoing panel survey data will allow us to study how Syrians were affected by these intersecting crises.

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