

Dynamics of Refugee Return to Syria from Lebanon



The civil war in Syria caused large-scale forced displacement, both within Syria and to neighboring countries. What factors determine whether Syrians return home? With support from IPA's Peace & Recovery Program, researchers from the Immigration Policy Lab conducted a representative survey of over 3,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon from August-October 2019 to learn about their return intentions. The survey found that a majority wanted to return at some point in the future but thought it was too soon to go back within the next few years, and that refugees' plans and aspirations to return are largely shaped by the situation in Syria and less so by the conditions in the host country.

Read the full policy brief [here](#) and the working paper [here](#).

Policy Issue

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.

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COUNTRY

Lebanon

PARTNER

PROGRAM AREA

Peace and Recovery

TOPICS

Conflict, Forced Displacement

TIMELINE

2019

Evaluation Context

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. 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 return home, with some regional governments taking active steps to encourage return. While many in the international community believe that conditions in Syria remain unsuitable for return, some have started to consider steps to aid refugees with their return. Absent in these discussions though is the voice of Syrian refugees. Do refugees want to return? And if so, when and how? What are the conditions that predict the return of refugees?

Details of the Intervention

This study is not a randomized controlled trial.

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.

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, and then assess the relative importance of the following factors in people's return intentions:

- “Pull” factors, including physical 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: 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 and Policy Lessons

Return intentions: Most respondents said they anticipated returning someday, but only 5 percent of Syrians intend to return in the year following the interviews.¹ When asking respondents where they expect to be living in 2 years, the percentage of Syrians who said they expect to be living in Syria rose to 27 percent. When asking Syrians if they ever hope to return, more than 60 percent said yes.

There were significant differences between where people *expect* to be in two years and where they would *wish* to be under ideal circumstances:

- 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, these results highlight 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 returns before/without all other household members). 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 return together.

Factors influencing return decisions: “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 people’s places of origin was 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 return 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 return 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.

Variation among groups: 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 return to Syria at some point in the future.
- Age: Younger and older respondents 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 urban communities in Lebanon were more likely to say they want to return in 2 years or ever compared to those living in informal tented settlements in Lebanon.

Policy Lessons

The results suggest 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 return as long as local conditions in their places of origin remain

unsuitable. The results also suggest 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 for the foreseeable future, including in areas of refugees' economic conditions and access to services. 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.

Sources

¹ 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.

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