



This publication is an output of a collaborative research project co-led by Sami Atallah, former director at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS); Mona Harb and Mona Fawaz, research directors at the Beirut Urban Lab (BUL, American University of Beirut); and Rabie Nasr, director at the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR). The project is titled: 'Lebanese Municipalities and Syrian Refugees: Building Capacity and Promoting Agency'. This work was carried out with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Understanding Refugees' Intentions to Return to Syria

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Executive Summary

Even though the conflict in Syria continues to rage on, UNHCR estimates that about 250,000 Syrian refugees have already returned to their country since 2016—60,000 of them from Lebanon. Although security conditions in Syria are still not safe for a large return of refugees, some have been forcibly returned to Syria by the Lebanese state. Yet, there are others that have chosen to do so voluntarily. This brief sheds light on refugees' past experiences of return in post-conflict countries as well as the current intentions to return among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. By using the LCSRHCL (2018)—a large survey of Syrian refugee and Lebanese individuals and households in Lebanon—this brief examines the multivariate reasons refugees choose to return to Syria or remain in Lebanon. We conclude with an assessment of the main drivers that lead to such decisions and what implications those drivers have for policymakers in Lebanon and internationally.

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UNHCR. 2020. 'Syria Regional Refugee Response.' data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71.

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Hall, S. 2018. 'Syria's Spontaneous Return'; Durable Solutions Platform (DSP). 2017. 'Returns: Voluntary, Safe and Sustainable? Case study of returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad, Syria.' Briefing paper; and El Gantri, R. and K. El Mufti. 2017. 'Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence.' *International Center for Truth and Justice*.

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Introduction

As the conflict in Syria still rages on after 10 years, the government continues to seize more and more areas from rebel control. The recent Astana and Geneva peace talks have led to some hopes for a resolution to the decade long conflict. Even though fighting is still ongoing, UNHCR estimates that about 250,000 Syrian refugees have already returned to their country since 2016—60,000 of them from Lebanon.¹ Among internally displaced Syrians, about 440,000 have returned to their hometowns out of a total number of 6.3 million.² In spite of the dire economic situation in Lebanon since the 2019 crisis, the number of refugees that returned to Syria drastically dropped in 2020—from 22,728 in 2019 to 6,595 in 2020—due to the COVID pandemic and the closure of the Lebanon-Syria border that lasted the majority of the year. While the economic situation in Lebanon has deteriorated, the economic, political, and security conditions in Syria are, nonetheless, still worrisome. At the same time, there have been new waves of forced displacement, both domestically and internationally, as a result of the intensification of fighting in Idlib between December 2019 and March 2020.³ Under these circumstances, studies have highlighted the fact that the first waves of returnees may have returned to Syria under uninformed, unsafe, involuntary, or unsustainable conditions.⁴ These dynamics show that the process of return is far from uniform and can start even before the security conditions are fully restored. Still the fraction of returnees up to date is minimal, representing about 3% of the total refugee population.

In Lebanon, pressure has been growing for Syrian refugees to leave the country amid discontent toward their perceived negative economic and social impact. Government policy has echoed this trend and has recently escalated its restrictive stance toward refugees from occasional warnings of deportations to actual expulsions. Between May and August 2019, 2,731 Syrians were deported by Lebanese security forces following a new government policy of returning any Syrian who had entered the country illegally after 24 April, 2019.⁵ Anti-refugee sentiment has been fueled by many politicians, in particular Lebanon's former foreign minister Gebran Bassil who called for an immediate return of refugees and accused UNHCR of trying to nationalize Syrians.⁶ Even Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who had traditionally shown a more positive stance toward Syrian refugees, advocated in international fora for donors to help refugees return home.⁷ These pressures continued during 2020, where the Lebanese President Michel Aoun renewed his call for Syrian refugees to return to their country.⁸ The argument put forward by many of these political voices advocating for the return of refugees is that there are safe areas to where refugees could go back to with the agreement of the Syrian government.⁹

However, it is important to highlight that international treaties protect refugees against forced return (the principle of non-refoulement). Article 3 of the 1951 Geneva Convention states that: 'No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. The principle of non-refoulement is considered as 'a rule of customary international law' and, accordingly, is binding to 'all states, regardless of whether they have acceded to the 1951 Convention or 1967 Protocol.'¹⁰ Moreover, the 1962 Law Regulating the Entry and Stay of Foreigners in Lebanon and their Exit from the Country also codifies the principle of non-refoulement by stating that 'in the event that a former political refugee is deported, he or she may not be removed to the territory of a country where his or her life or freedom is threatened.'¹¹ Thus, repatriation should be based on voluntary basis when there are still safety dangers in the country of origin.¹² To this day, conflict and violence in Syria maintain high levels of insecurity which are widespread across the country.¹³ Under this highly unstable situation, any policy to promote the return of refugees contravenes legal international responsibilities and puts at serious risk the safety of the forcibly displaced population.

Historically, the return process is very complex and full of hurdles. Even when a war has officially ended after a peace agreement is signed, households may fear retaliation when returning to their place of origin. The sustainability of peace is another main challenge, as the cleavages that emerge due to conflict increases the risk of future conflicts in a given country. For example, Hegre et al. (2001) shows that post-conflict countries are 10 times more likely to fall back into conflict than those that did not experience conflict in the first place.¹⁴ Beyond security concerns, the reintegration of refugees in the local economic life might prove to be challenging in the post-conflict environment where markets, social networks, and institutions have crumbled due to war.¹⁵ Refugee families take into account these hurdles and are very cautious deciding when and how to return, usually sending specific family members to assess the security, land property, and economic situation on the ground before taking the decision of a more permanent family move.¹⁶

Given this context, it is necessary to stress the obligations to protect the security of refugees. Furthermore, it is also important to study the conditions for a sustainable return of refugees once security conditions are met, as well as refugees' plans and requirements to return to their country in the longer

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UNHCR. 2011. 'The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1961 Protocol.'

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Article 31 of the Law Regulating the Entry of Foreign Nationals into Their Residence in and Their Departure from Lebanon, 10 July, 1962.
<https://www.refworld.org/pd/fid/4c3c630f2.pdf>

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UNHCR. 1996. 'Handbook of Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.'

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See figure 2 below.

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Hegre, H. et al. 2001. 'Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992.' *The American Political Science Review* 95(1): pp. 33-48.

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Arias, M. A., A. M. Ibáñez, and Pablo Querubín. 2014. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia.' *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 20(1): pp. 209-233.

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Harild, N., A. Christensen, and R. Zetter. 2015. 'Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints, and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement.' *World Bank, GPFID Issue Note Series*.

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World Bank. 2019. *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

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Ala' Alrababa'h et al. 2020. 'The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions.'

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We limited the scope in three municipalities in order to be able to cover a representative sample of the population in each municipality and provide meaningful results at the local level, thus prioritizing depth at the expense of breadth. The selection of those municipalities was based on the fact that all three host a large number of refugees, while having different characteristics in terms of location, level of development, religion composition, institutional structure, and stance vis-à-vis refugees.

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Koser, K. 1998. 'Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi.' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10(1): pp. 1-19; T. Faist. 1997. 'The Crucial Meso-Level.' *International Migration, Immobility and Development: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*: pp. 187-217; and R. King. 2000. 'Generalizations from the History of Return Migration,' in *Return Migration. Journey or Hope or Despair?*, ed. Bimal Ghosh (Switzerland: IOM/UNHCR): pp. 1-18.

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For a case study on Peru, see: Cordero, I. C. 2002. 'Displacement, Insertion and Return in Ayacucho (1993-1997): Migration dan les Andes, Chili et Pérou No. 5; and for Colombia: Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubin. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia'; and Hall. 'Syria's Spontaneous Return.'

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Ghanem, T. 2003. 'When Forced Migrants Return 'Home': the Psychosocial Difficulties Returnees Encounter in the Reintegration Process.'

term. There is an overall scarcity of research in reintegration of refugees in post-war countries. In the Syrian context, a recent World Bank study compares Syrian refugees that returned with those that stayed in neighboring countries.¹⁷ Although shedding light on the motivations to return among the first wave of returnees, these drivers might not be applicable to the vast majority of the refugee population that did not return, in particular given the limited size of those initial flows. Perhaps the research more relevant to our study is Alrababa'h et al. (2020) who conducted a survey of a representative sample of 3,003 Syrian refugees in 2019 and found that conditions in Syria rather than in Lebanon were the primary drivers of return intentions of Syrian refugees.¹⁸

This policy brief studies the intentions to return among Syrian refugees who are still residing in Lebanon, using the Living Condition Survey of Refugees and Host Communities in Lebanon (LCSRHCL, 2018) conducted by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) and the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) in 2018. The LCSRHCL (2018) is an extensive survey covering 1,556 households and 7,208 individuals (2,882 Lebanese and 4,326 Syrians) representative of the population in three Lebanese municipalities: Saida, Zahle, and Halba.¹⁹ The LCSRHCL (2018) covers refugees' intentions to return to shed light on the overall attitudes toward a possible return, as well as about the profile of potential 'stayers' and 'returnees'. Understanding the drivers of the intentions of refugees to return provides valuable insights to the government and the international community in order to tailor their policy response.

Past Evidence on the Motivations of Refugees to Return Home

Although limited, the empirical literature on the topic shows that, while refugees mostly decide to leave their countries for security reasons, their decision to return is more complex, usually taking into consideration their economic and social prospects once back in the country, as well as their current situation in the host country. Refugees analyze the arguments for and against remaining in the host country or returning to their country of origin based on their expectations and the information that they have access to, which might differ from reality.²⁰ Thus, individual differences in the perceptions of risks, costs and benefits lead refugees to take different decisions on when and under which circumstances they are willing to go back home.

Most studies highlight the prominent role security conditions play in determining refugees' decision to return, which is already a key factor for forced displacement in the first place. While deciding to return, refugees assess the security situation in their hometown to see if it no longer poses a threat to their families. The World Bank (2019) report on Syrian returnees

concludes that security conditions are 'the single greatest factor determining the potential return of Syrian refugees.' The report suggests that, given the persistent insecurity in Syria, the return of refugees has been infrequent. Security is not just an objective measure but also a subjective fear given the history and experiences of refugees. Previous studies show that, regardless of the current security situation, forcibly displaced families are less likely to return when they were direct victims of attacks in the past.²¹ The trauma related to the war—experienced by many refugees—and the changes in the social environment in the regions of origin hinder the chances of a successful return of refugees unless important investments in mental health and social cohesion are made.²²

Beyond security considerations, refugees also weigh the potential economic opportunities both in the place of origin and at destination as it has been shown in different contexts, including in Syria.²³ In the host country, Deininger et al. (2005) show how, in the context of the Colombian conflict, forced-displaced families with an employed household head are less likely to decide to return home.²⁴ Regarding the economic situation in the country of origin, Camarena and Hagerdal (2019) find that Lebanese from Mount Lebanon living in exile were more likely to return to their villages of origin after the war in the years when olive prices—a main exporting commodity—were higher and thus provided more economic opportunities.²⁵ Similarly, refugees are also more likely to return when they have access to basic public services such as health, education, or infrastructure in their country of origin,²⁶ which incentivizes them to settle in higher-density urban areas.²⁷ All these opportunities not only make refugees more likely to voluntarily return, but are also key to ensuring a successful reintegration in the longer term, reducing the chances of further migration out of the country.

Another key factor found in past post-conflict examples is the access to savings and assets, in particular land property in the home country. In general, post-conflict countries face major challenges of reintegration as many households lack formal land titles, which makes land restitution more difficult.²⁸ The refugees able to lay claim to property back home are more inclined to return,²⁹ and when they do return, this tenure is central in reestablishing their livelihood.³⁰ The current situation in Syria has resulted in extensive destruction of houses, hospitals, schools, and livelihoods. As an example, one in three houses in Syria has been destroyed, hindering the return of

23 Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubín. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia'; and Hall. 'Syria's Spontaneous Return.'

24 Deininger, K., A. Ibáñez, and P. Querubín. 2004. 'Towards Sustainable Return Policies for the Displaced Population: Why Are Some Displaced Households More Willing to Return than Others?'; *Households in Conflict Network*, No. 7.

25 Camarena, K. R. and N. Hågerdal. 2020. 'When Do Displaced Persons Return? Postwar Migration among Christians in Mount Lebanon.' *American Journal of Political Science* 64(2): pp. 223-239.

26 World Bank (2019) and UNHCR, 'Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria,' 2019.

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27 Lippman, B. and J. Rogge. 2004. 'Making Return and Reintegration Sustainable, Transparent and Participatory.' *Forced Migration Review No. 21*; and Cordero, I. C. 2002. 'Displacement, Insertion and Return in Ayacucho (1993-1997).'

28 Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubín. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia.'

29 Ibid.

30 Harild, Christensen, and Zetter. 'Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints, and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement.'

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World Bank. 2017. 'The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria.' *Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.*

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Sliwa, M. and H. Wiig. 2016. 'Should I stay or should I go: The Role of Colombian Free Urban Housing Projects in IDP Return to the Countryside.'

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Dadush, U. 2017. 'The Economic Effects of Refugee Return and Policy Implications.' *World Bank Policy Research Paper 8497.*

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Harild, Christensen, and Zetter. 'Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints, and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement.'

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Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubín. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia.'

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Omata, N. 2012. 'Repatriation and Integration of Liberian Refugees from Ghana: The Importance of Personal Networks in the Country of Origin.' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 26(2): pp. 265-282; and Harild, Christensen, and Zetter. 'Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints, and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement.'

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Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubín. 'The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia.'; and Deininger, Ibáñez, and Querubín. 'Towards Sustainable Return Policies for the Displaced Population: Why Are Some Displaced Households More Willing to Return than Others?'

refugees.³¹ Beyond guaranteeing security conditions in their hometowns, past episodes of return of refugees in post-conflict countries suggest that there is a need for large investments in the forced displaced population to incentivize them to return and to reintegrate them into the local economies. In Colombia, Sliwa and Wiig (2016) studied a large government social housing program for internally displaced people and found that free housing shaped their decision to stay or to return.³² Savings are also necessary to finance the cost of returning and settling back until households find income that can generate opportunities to sustain their livelihoods.³³ In the context of post-conflict in West Africa, Harild et al. (2015) finds that poorer Liberian households in Ghana remained longer in exile, suggesting that income and savings serve as barriers to return.³⁴

The decision to return is also shaped by other social factors, as highlighted in several studies. For example, social networks in the country of origin increase the desire to return³⁵ as they facilitate economic reintegration and provide social support that shelters conflict-afflicted populations from the fears of renewed violence.³⁶ The sense of vulnerability is internalized in the

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decision to return, and is more salient for specific groups. Women and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable

groups facing further potential challenges during and after return in post-conflict countries, where social inequalities tend to be exacerbated. These groups may have more fears of retaliation or exclusion in the reconstruction process. As a result, studies find that female-headed households and those from ethnic minorities exhibit a higher reluctance to return to their home country even when security and economic conditions have improved.³⁷

Intentions to Return to Syria Among the Refugees in Lebanon

In order to understand refugees' intentions to return to Syria, we use the LCSRHCL (2018) which has a rich module focused on this topic. According to the survey, more than 50% of Syrian households think it is likely that they could return to Syria within two years, although the degree of confidence varies from a minority of 5% who claim their return is very likely to a broader group that sees their return as somewhat likely in that timeframe (figure 1.a). Two years after the survey, we observe that the number of returns is significantly lower than what Syrian refugees had planned in 2018, highlighting the conditionality of those intentions depending on the situation in both Lebanon and Syria. When refugees were asked about the most likely time frame for their return, we also observed relevant differences depending on the place of residence in Lebanon. Most refugees in Halba expected to

return within a year, while the majority in Zahle expected to return within five years and in Saida about half did not have any intentions to return in the foreseeable future (figure 1.b). In those three municipalities combined, we estimate that about one in four refugees do not want to go back to Syria within the next 10 years.

The high reluctance to return and the preference to stay in the host country are in line with other experience in past conflicts in the region. For example, a 2008

UNHCR study found that about 90% of Iraqi refugees in Syria were not planning to return anytime soon despite the general improvements in security conditions back home, mostly due to the fact that they feared a direct threat to their life.³⁸

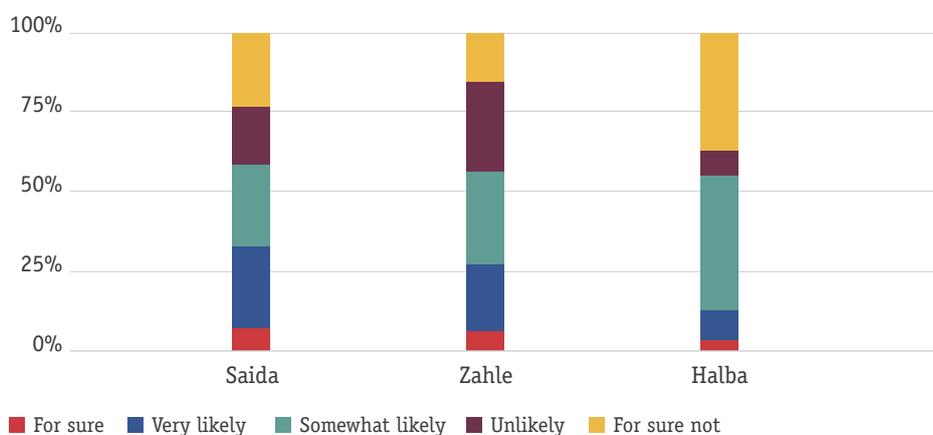
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UNHCR. 2008. 'Syria Public Information Unit Assessment on Returns to Iraq Amongst the Iraqi Refugee Population in Syria.' Geneva: UNHCR.

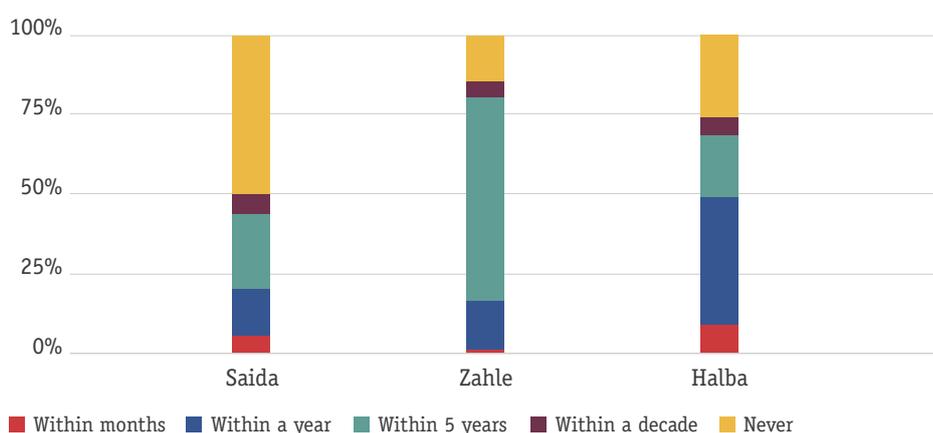
Figure 1

Intentions among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon

a Intentions among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon to return



b Intended timeframe for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return



Source: Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

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<https://pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/>

The widespread reluctance of refugees in Lebanon to return to Syria is rooted in the high levels of insecurity that persist even today in their home country. Figure 2.a plots the evolution of conflict-related deaths in Syria, which started at less than 5,000 in the first year of the war and reached 70,000 annual deaths in 2013 and 2014. While we observe a progressive decline since then, there were still about 11,000 people killed due to the war in 2019. For comparison, the conflict literature widely uses the threshold of 1,000 deaths per year to categorize a country as being at war.³⁹ The past experience of return of Iraqi refugees after the 2003 Iraq war provides further indication on how return follows security conditions, as the number of returnees only started to pick up in 2008 when conflict related deaths were reduced to

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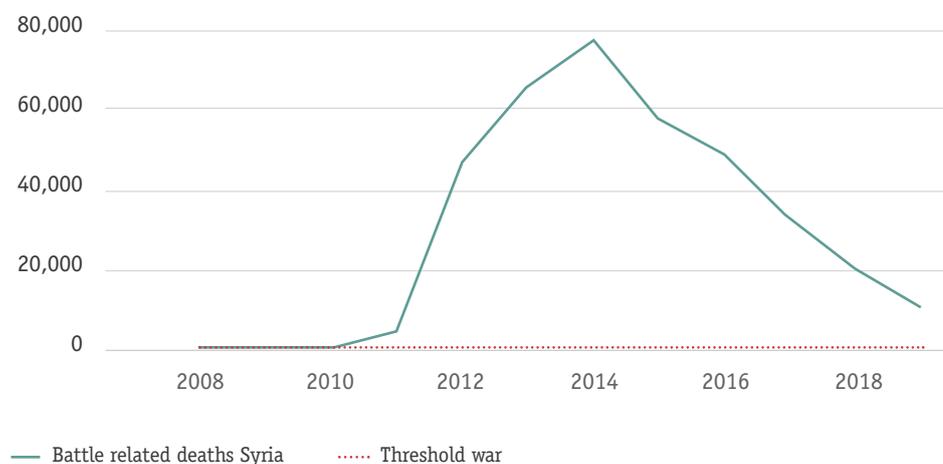
1,500-2,000. Therefore, the current circumstances in Syria still show high levels of insecurity with more than 10 times the battle-related deaths than the minimum to be considered as a country at war. While

many argue that there are safe zones in Syria, the violence and killings are geographically widespread, still affecting most of the regions in the country (figure 2.b). Thus, a prerequisite for a safe and sustainable return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is a reduction of violence in their location of origin which, as of yet, has not reached safe levels.

Figure 2

Number of conflict-related deaths in Syria

a Casualties in the Syrian war



b Geographical distribution of conflict-related deaths in Syria



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Date of retrieval: 01/06/2021).

The survey results also show that the conflict has resulted in the destruction of social networks and key assets—such as houses—which the literature on forced displacement has highlighted as key limiting factors for the decision to return and for a successful reintegration. Given the nature of conflict, many refugees fled their hometowns with their entire families, leaving no close relatives behind. As a result, 56% of respondents stated they do not have a single family member in Syria. There are large variations by host municipality: While most refugee households in Zahle maintain family links in Syria (72%), only 24% and 35% of refugees in Halba and Saida have immediate kin ties in their hometown (figure 3.a). Similarly, while about three in four Syrian families still own a house in Syria, in most cases, their houses have been severely damaged due to combat. This case is particularly salient for refugees living in Halba, where close to 70% of refugees cited having their houses back home completely destroyed. The worse reported housing situation of refugees in Halba might be driven by their geographic composition, as they mostly came from the city of Homs.⁴⁰ Estimates based on UNOSAT satellite imagery suggest that Homs has been one of the most severely damaged cities in Syria.⁴¹

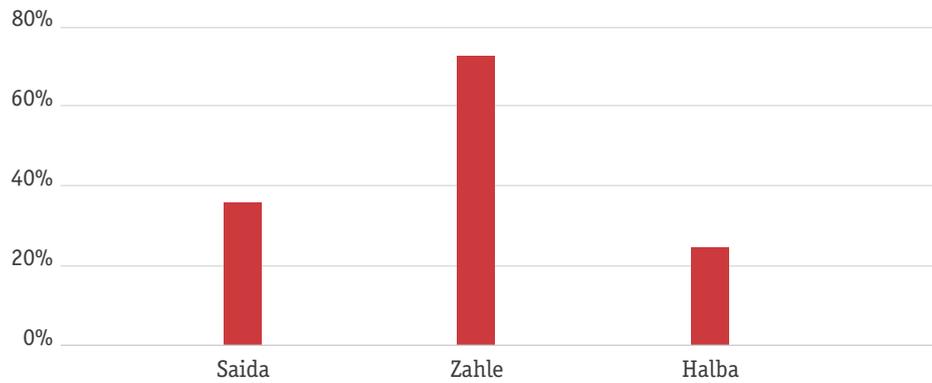
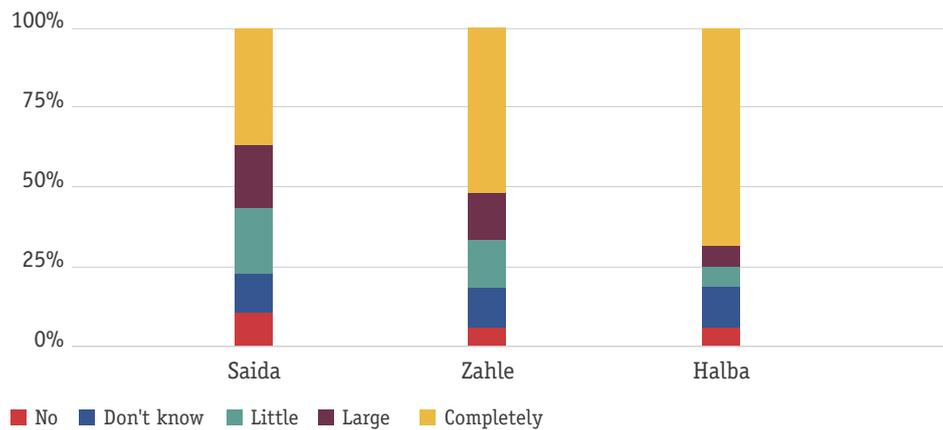
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86% of Syrian refugee families in Halba come from Homs.

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Najjar, A. 2018. 'Damage Caused by the Syrian Civil War: What the Data Say.' Towards Data Science. <https://towardsdatascience.com/damage-caused-by-the-syrian-civil-war-what-the-data-say-ebad5796fca8>

Figure 3

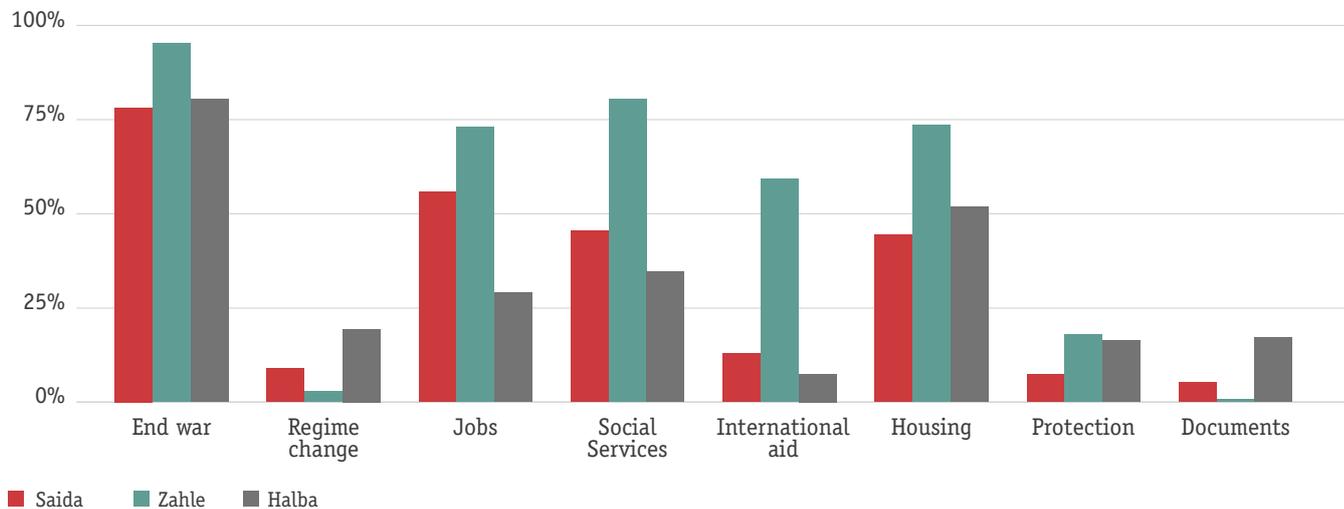
Refugees' family links and housing situation in Syria**a Family links of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in their hometown****b Level of destruction of Syrian refugees' homes in their hometown**

Source Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

Who Wants to Return and Under What Conditions? Drivers of Refugees' Intentions to Return

In general, Syrian refugees in Lebanon not only report the ending of the war as a necessary condition to return, but also mention other requirements in order to make the decision to move. A sizable part of refugees currently residing in Lebanon think job opportunities and social services—such as education, healthcare, and housing—in Syria are necessary for their family to decide to return (figure 4). The availability of international aid in Syria, although not as relevant as other factors, is also commonly cited among refugees that currently reside in Zahle.

Figure 4

Requirements for Syrian refugees to go back to their home country

Source: Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

Beyond the overall important needs of Syrian families in Lebanon to return, the intentions to move or stay vary across households depending on their different backgrounds, their situation in the host municipality, or their links and situation back in their hometowns. We first compare the raw differences between groups according to different drivers that have been previously found in the literature to affect the intentions to return. Table 1 shows the differences between families that intend to return to Syria within the next 5-10 years ('returnees') with those that do not have the intention to return ('stayers') across different categories that can be grouped into: (i) Household characteristics; (ii) legal status and networks in Lebanon; (iii) economic conditions in Lebanon; (iv) social and security factors in Lebanon; and (v) assets and networks back in Syria.

Economic conditions in Lebanon are also correlated with the intentions to return

Regarding household characteristics, those who do not intend to return to Syria have smaller families and fewer children. Adults in families that want to stay in Lebanon tend to have higher levels of education, with six years of schooling on average compared to five years among potential returnees. It is also worthwhile to notice that households headed by a woman, who are particularly vulnerable, are less interested in returning. With respect to legal conditions and networks in Lebanon, we find that, while there are no differences in the share of those registered with UNHCR among stayers and movers, those who do not have intentions to return are twice as likely to have residency permits in the municipality where they reside. Similarly, those who have

deeper networks in Lebanon, measured by memberships in different social organizations, although few, exhibit less interest in returning.

Economic conditions in Lebanon are also correlated with the intentions to return, as refugees who are more reluctant to leave have a larger share of family members employed in Lebanon, higher earnings and income per capita, lower probability of being under the poverty line, and live in better housing conditions. They are also less likely to report a worsening in their economic situation compared to the living conditions back in Syria. Security conditions in Lebanon seem to also shape refugees' likelihood of returning. For example, only 36% of households that do not want to go back to Syria report mobility restrictions such as curfews and security checks imposed by Lebanese authorities, compared to 68% of those that are more willing to leave. Similarly, in an index that ranges safety perceptions in Lebanon from very safe (4) to very

81% of Syrian families that expect to return own a house in Syria, compared to 60% of those that do not want to leave

unsafe (1), 'stayers' rate their safety situation 15% higher than potential returnees. Social variables are somewhat less relevant since we do not find significant differences

whether children are enrolled in school or not, or whether the family receives health treatment when needed. However, families with better relations with the Lebanese community are more inclined to stay.

Finally, intentions to return are also associated with variables that reflect refugees' links with Syria and the potential role of humanitarian agencies in the post-conflict reconstruction. One such example of this is demonstrated by the fact that 81% of Syrian families that expect to return own a house in Syria, compared to 60% of those that do not want to leave. Similarly, 'stayers' are less likely to have family members in Syria, and are thus more disconnected with their home country. Also, those more willing to return have more positive views on the role of international humanitarian agencies, suggesting that they might have higher hopes for these organizations to have a key role in the reconstruction of Syria and in smoothing their transition and reintegration back in Syria.

Table 1

Comparing conditions in Lebanon and Syria for Syrian refugees with and without intentions to return

		Return	No return	Difference	Significance
Household characteristics	Household size	6	5	1	***
	Number of children	3.4	2.8	0.6	**
	Number of elder	0.10	0.06	0.03	
	Age of household head	40.0	42.5	-2.5	
	Percentage of household head female	10%	20%	-9%	**
	Ethnic minority	1.1%	1.4%	-0.3%	
	Years of education adults	5.0	6.0	-1.0	**
Legality and networks in Lebanon	Registered with UNHCR	95%	94%	0%	
	Residency permit	35%	78%	-43%	***
	Member organization in Lebanon	1%	6%	-4%	*
	Time in Lebanon	5.5	5.7	-0.3	
Economic conditions in Lebanon	Percentage of household head employed	64%	66%	-2%	
	Percentage employed per household member	22%	27%	-5%	**
	Wages per household member	47	94	-47	*
	Worsening economic conditions	2.9	2.5	0.4	***
	Poverty (spending measure)	76%	53%	23%	***
	Poor housing conditions	81%	59%	22%	***
Social/security conditions in Lebanon	Percentage of children enrolled in school	32%	35%	-3%	
	Percentage of households that didn't receive needed medical treatment	23%	24%	-2%	
	Eviction threats	16%	11%	5%	
	Relations with Lebanese	2.8	3.3	-0.4	**
	Safety perceptions	2.9	3.3	-0.4	***
	Percentage of households with mobility restrictions	68%	36%	32%	***
	Assets and networks in Syria	Percentage own house in Syria	81%	60%	21%
Percentage have relatives in Syria		60%	45%	15%	**
Frequency of getting news/updates from Syria		2.3	2.1	0.2	
Positive opinion on humanitarian agencies		3.8	3.3	0.4	**

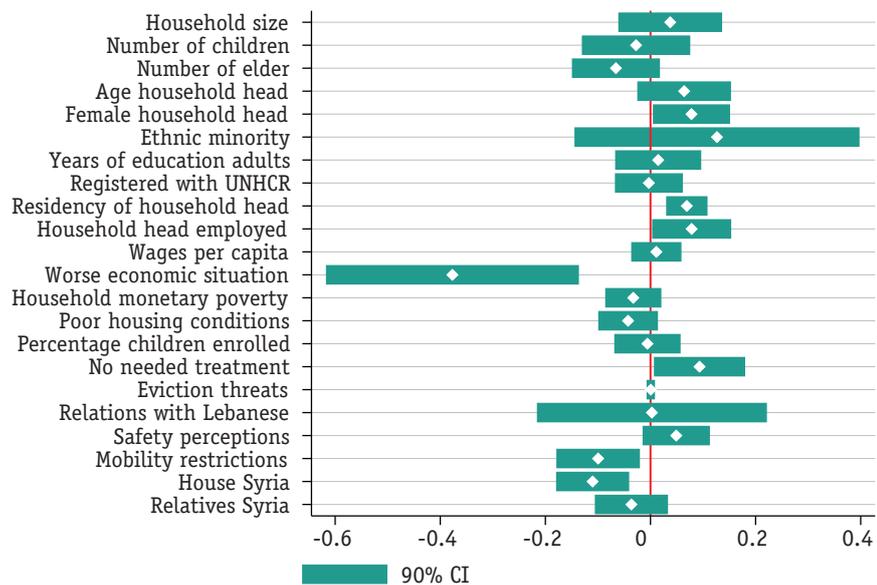
Source Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

The previous results only show raw differences between the group of Syrians who intend to stay and those who want to go back. However, many of these factors interplay and interact with each other. In order to tease out the most salient drivers of refugees' intentions to return, we use multivariate regression models that control for each of the variables mentioned above, as well as the region where refugees come from in Syria and the municipality in which they currently reside. The former might affect the likelihood to return regardless of individual characteristics of refugees by having different levels of insecurity, economic conditions, public services, or social tensions.

In line with previous studies of return from forced displacement, we find that vulnerability of households as well as the expected security and economic conditions in both Lebanon and Syria affect refugees' expectations of returning. First, households headed by women are more likely to decide to stay. When families have more elder members, they are more inclined to return. Economic and safety conditions in Lebanon also shape their decision, while the social situation is less salient. Families where the household head has residency permits and is employed in Lebanon, as well as those who did not suffer a significant worsening in their economic conditions after displacement are less willing to go back to Syria. On the other hand, mobility restrictions and perceptions of insecurity in Lebanon lead refugees toward considering returning. Finally, we observe a strong impact of having assets in Syria, as households that own a house in their hometown are significantly more likely to consider returning in a shorter timeframe.

Figure 5

Determinants of intentions to stay in Lebanon based on a multi-variable analysis



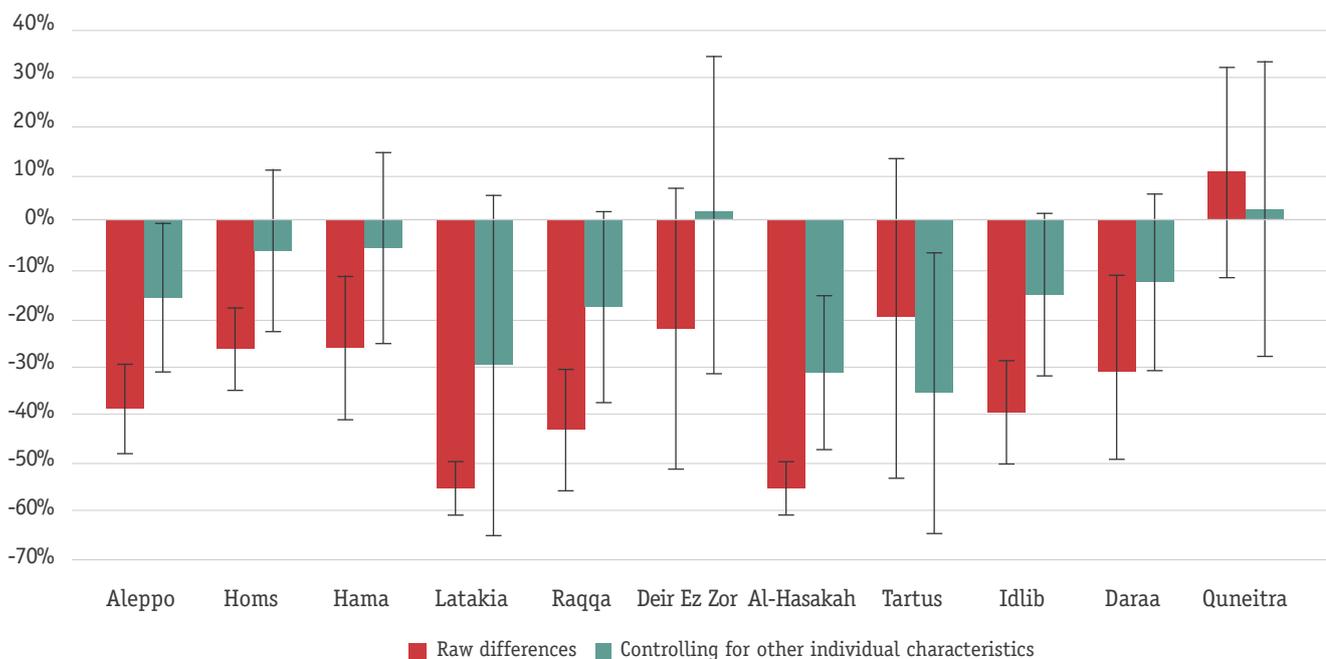
Source Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

Note The blue lines show the 90% confidence intervals. 'No needed treatment' refers to whether a household had a member that needed healthcare treatment but could not have access to it. 'Years of education adults' refers to the average years of education of the adults (25+) in the household.

Besides differences in individual characteristics and circumstances, the region of origin in Syria also impacts this decision. Controlling for all the individual factors explained above, we find that refugees coming from different regions in Syria have different opinions on the timeframe of their stay in Lebanon. That is, two refugee families with similar background, economic, social, and security conditions in Lebanon and networks and assets in Syria, might be more or less averse to return depending on the region of origin. Figure 6 exhibits those different likelihoods of staying in Lebanon across regions of origin comparing it to refugees coming from Damascus, which is used as a baseline. When looking at the raw differences, we observe that refugees from most regions are more likely to return than those coming from the governorate of Damascus, in particular those from Latakia, Al-Hasakah and Aleppo. Once we control for the different backgrounds and conditions in Lebanon, as well as relatives and house ownership in Syria, we still find that refugees from Damascus are the least willing to return jointly with those from Quneitra. However, the differences with the other regions are smaller and are only statistically significant in Aleppo, Al-Hasakah and Tartus. Refugees from Tartus and Latakia—two of the regions with a bigger Alawite population and strongholds of the Syrian government which have remained relatively calm during the war—are about 30 to 35% less likely to intent to stay in Lebanon for a long period of time compared to refugees from Damascus. The overall regional differences—where refugees from the south of Syria tend to be less likely to return than those coming from the northwest—can be related to the different grievances of the refugee communities and the conflict intensity in each area.

Figure 6

Likelihood of refugees to intend to stay in Lebanon by region of origin compared to those coming from Damascus



Source Own elaboration based on the LCSRHCL (2018).

Notes 'Raw differences' are the differences in the likelihood of refugees to respond that they do not want to go back to Syria by region of origin and compared to those coming from Damascus. The second measure controls for different individual characteristics of refugees coming from each region.

Conclusion

This brief sheds light on refugees' past experiences of return in post-conflict countries as well as the current intentions to return among Syrians in Lebanon. As there are increasing pressures in Lebanon for Syrian refugees to return to their home country, it is important to stress the principles of voluntary return and to avoid forced repatriations that can put refugees' security at risk, which are sanctioned by international treaties and domestic

Past examples of post-conflict settings show that not all refugees will choose to return even if the security condition improves

legislation. In this regard, security conditions in Syria are still not safe for a large return of refugees.

Past examples of post-conflict settings show that not all refugees will choose to return even if the security condition improves. Lebanon itself experienced a large outflow of forcibly displaced population during the civil war of 1975-1990, and only a small proportion of those who emigrated eventually decided to return to Lebanon, not only for safety reasons but also given economic considerations.⁴²

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In the current refugee crisis in Lebanon, we find that Syrian refugees have seen many of their economic and social networks and ties in Syria broken and, thus, are more reluctant to move back.

In a future, post-conflict scenario in Syria, the international community has a key role to play in helping with the economic reconstruction and social reconciliation of the country and in smoothing the transition and reintegration of refugees on a voluntary basis. Only under these circumstances could the return of refugees be successful and sustainable, while a premature return to adverse conditions could actually result in renewed attempts to emigrate as past return episodes show,⁴³ potentially affecting not only refugees but also the stability of sending and host countries.

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