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MAHA YAHYA With Jean Kassir and Khalil el-Hariri

UNHEARD VOICES

What Syrian
Refugees Need to
Return Home





CARNEGIE
MIDDLE EAST CENTER

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SUMMARY

AS THE SYRIAN REGIME REGAINS TERRITORY, there have been growing calls in neighboring countries for refugees to go home. Yet refugees have conditions for a return—conditions that political efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict have largely ignored. To understand refugee attitudes toward return, the Carnegie Middle East Center listened to the concerns of Syrians—both male and female, young and old—struggling to build meaningful lives in Lebanon and Jordan. What is most striking is that despite the increasingly difficult challenges they face, a majority are unwilling to go back unless a political transition can assure their safety and security, access to justice, and right of return to areas of origin. Economic opportunity and adequate housing are important but not requirements. Above all, their attitudes make it clear that both a sustainable political settlement and a mass, voluntary return are contingent upon international peace processes that account for refugee voices.

Listening to Refugees

- Facing mounting social and economic difficulties, refugees feel trapped between host countries that do not want them and a Syria to which they cannot return.
- Refugees are pessimistic about the prospects for a Syrian peace deal. They reject any proposals that could lead to Syria's fragmentation, oppose the idea of deescalation zones, and have no confidence in safe zones.

- The refugees' primary conditions for return are safety and security. But they do not believe they are achievable without a political transition and have little faith that the Syria to which they aspire will soon be attainable.
- They have no confidence in the political actors involved in Syria, and most anti-regime refugees do not believe the opposition truly represents them.
- Women and young men are among those most fearful of returning to Syria under President Bashar al-Assad's regime. They are concerned about the lack of security and possible persecution by the regime. Many young men fear conscription.
- As the war drags on and conditions in their host countries worsen, an increasing number of refugees are considering resettling outside the region, particularly in Europe. However, they fear that once they leave the region, they may not be able to return.
- Essentially, the notion of a voluntary return of refugees is losing meaning. Restrictive policies in Lebanon and Jordan may force refugees to return to an unsafe environment in Syria; while the regime's policies in Syria—on housing and property rights, military conscription, and vetting procedures—may make it difficult, if not undesirable, for them to return.

Establishing Conducive Policy Measures

- A safe and sustainable return of refugees requires a framework that acknowledges the political roots of the Syrian crisis rather than just its humanitarian dimension; concedes that peace is not possible without justice; and recognizes the right of refugees to return to their areas of origin.
- Safety and security can only be guaranteed through a political process that creates inclusive governance mechanisms; ends criminal impunity; and facilitates reintegration, demilitarization, and access to justice.
- While this process will take time given the many forces operating in Syria, efforts to prepare refugees for a return should begin now. These could include creating a cadre of Syrian lawyers and paralegals to inform refugees of their rights and help resolve the many anticipated local disputes. They could also include establishing a network of trusted community mediators.
- Reconstruction funding should not inadvertently empower the Syrian regime. Starting on a small scale in regions that are not under regime control could provide a better alternative for local rebuilding efforts.

- Any funding should also be conditional on the return of refugees to their homes and access to their property. A vetting process should be established to ensure that local entities receiving international funding have not been involved in war crimes and are not regime fronts.
- Meanwhile, the refugees' right to a voluntary return must be respected. To encourage host countries to adopt policies that secure the basic needs of refugees, international support must include both humanitarian aid and economic investments geared toward job creation for host country nationals and refugees.

INTRODUCTION

THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA has generated the largest refugee crisis in recent history.¹ More than 5.5 million Syrians have fled the country, while another 6.1 million are internally displaced.² However, efforts to end the conflict—whether through the United Nations (UN)—sponsored Geneva process or through the Astana talks cosponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey—are failing to account for refugees’ attitudes, concerns, and basic conditions for returning home. Both negotiating frameworks implicitly assume that refugees will return the moment a peace deal is signed. That is highly unlikely. Refugees contemplating a return seek assurances about their physical safety, access to basic services, employment opportunities, and right of return to their areas of origin. They are also concerned about the provisions of any political settlement, how governance will devolve, and whether justice will be served. Moreover, they want assurances that they indeed will be welcomed back.

Both negotiating [peace] frameworks implicitly assume that refugees will return the moment a peace deal is signed. That is highly unlikely.

In responding to the crisis, the international community’s primary focus has been on humanitarian aid and, increasingly, containment. Consequently, stemming the flow of refugees toward Europe has generally taken priority over addressing the conflict’s root causes and refugees’ living conditions.³ It is assumed that refugees can remain indefinitely in host countries while the contours of a political settlement in Syria are worked out. Yet the substantial humanitarian assistance

the European Union and other donors are providing to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey is not nearly enough to address the needs of refugees and host country nationals, especially given the increasingly protracted nature of the Syrian conflict.

For Lebanon and Jordan in particular, the sudden, large-scale influx of refugees has placed tremendous strain on state institutional capacities; social relations; and already existing economic, financial, and infrastructural problems. Limited economic opportunity has created intense competition within both refugee and host communities for low-skilled jobs and access to services.

Sectarian, demographic, or security fears have further exacerbated these tensions.⁴ In Lebanon, many citizens are concerned that the large population of predominantly Sunni Muslim refugees could disrupt the country's delicate sectarian balance and replicate Lebanon's experience with the 1948 and 1967 Palestinian refugee crises and their fallout. Lebanese policymakers have been increasingly calling for the return of refugees to Syria, claiming that the establishment of deescalation zones will make such a return possible.⁵ Some politicians have responded to growing public discontent by resorting to vile, xenophobic rhetoric and using refugees as scapegoats.⁶

In Jordan, a country that also hosts Palestinian, Iraqi, and Yemeni refugees, demographic concerns prevail. Many East Bank Jordanians are worried about becoming a minority. Following a series of armed attacks in 2016, the government began deporting refugees back to Syria, despite its official stance discouraging such behavior.⁷ The deported refugees are often accused of being in contact with individuals or armed groups in Syria or of being employed illegally in Jordan.

Although Lebanon and Jordan are facing immense challenges, the situation in Syria is far from being conducive to the return of refugees. Security conditions in the refugees' areas of origin remain volatile because of either ongoing armed conflict or the potential for persecution in regime-controlled locations. And a mass return of refugees now will likely lead to further insecurity due to intense competition for limited resources and infrastructure. The World Bank has estimated that from 2011 to 2016, Syria's cumulative losses in gross domestic product (GDP) were \$226 billion—about four times its GDP in 2010,⁸ and the International Monetary Fund has estimated the cost of reconstruction in Syria to be \$100–\$200 billion.⁹ In ten of Syria's largest cities, over one-fourth of the housing stock in 2010 was either partially or completely destroyed by 2017, especially in cities that had fallen out of regime control for a time. Damage levels were significantly high in Deir Ezzor and Palmyra (41 percent each), Aleppo (31 percent), Homs (23 percent), and Daraa (15 percent).¹⁰ Meanwhile, the mass displacement of civilians has produced both a large-scale, second-hand occupation of housing by internally displaced populations and the creation of makeshift, ill-equipped camps on land owned by civilians who fled the conflict.¹¹ These issues are likely to generate legal disputes for returning refugees seeking to reclaim their assets.

Access to education and basic services has also been severely affected, contributing to further displacement. Syria's education infrastructure has been heavily impacted by the conflict, with 53 percent of all educational facilities partially damaged and 10 percent completely destroyed. Schools in the governorates of Aleppo have been the hardest hit, with about 68 percent of primary schools partially damaged or destroyed.¹² Regarding services, power generation dropped by over 62 percent between 2010 and 2015, causing long daily electricity outages. At the same time, nearly half of Syria's water pumping stations, one-third of its water towers, one-quarter of its sewage treatment plants, and one-sixth of its water wells have been partially damaged or destroyed. Finally, over half of all health facilities have been partially or completely destroyed, and at least 15,000 of Syria's 30,000 physicians have left the country.¹³

Given the multitude of difficulties refugees would face upon return, it seems imperative to gauge their minimum requirements for returning to Syria. Ultimately, no political settlement will be sustainable unless the primary needs and concerns of Syrians are accounted for. In recognition of this, scholars of the Carnegie Middle East Center undertook a field-based research project to examine refugee conditions and attitudes in Lebanon and Jordan. Between January and December 2017, the project team assessed the demographics of the refugee population, convened focus group discussions with a broad range of refugees, organized closed workshops and roundtable discussions, and held informal discussions with key informants and national and international stakeholders. In total, the team organized thirty-nine focus group discussions, comprising females (49 percent) and males (51 percent) of various ages. In Lebanon, a majority of the refugees presented as anti-regime and a minority as pro-regime; while, in Jordan, most presented as anti-regime. The names of the refugees quoted in this report have been changed to protect their privacy. Annex I details the methodology, including the criteria for selection and sampling.

The demographic assessment shed light on the composition of Syrian refugees and their areas of origin, while the discussions and interviews helped elucidate the conflict's devastating impact on both individuals and communities in Lebanon and Jordan and the complexity of their situation. Beyond the loss of friends, relatives, and homes, the scale of displacement and devastation has left in its wake a traumatized and significantly impoverished society—with consequences that will last for generations. Most Syrian refugees expressed a sense of entrapment. They have an overwhelming desire to return to their homes in Syria but believe that it is virtually impossible without a stable political transition. At the same time, they believe that constructing meaningful lives in host countries remains equally impossible. Three

The mass displacement of civilians has produced both a large-scale, second-hand occupation of housing by internally displaced populations and the creation of makeshift, ill-equipped camps on land owned by civilians who fled the conflict.

dominant narratives came out of the focus group discussions and are best characterized by an acute sense of discrimination; a tension between nostalgia for their lives in pre-war Syria and the reality of their current living conditions and what they would return to; and a profound feeling of abandonment by the international community.

An acute sense of discrimination. Syrian refugees in both Lebanon and Jordan reported experiencing an increasing level of discrimination. Various restrictions on residency, employment, and freedom of movement have left them vulnerable to exploitation.

In Lebanon in particular, widespread xenophobia has accentuated the refugees' sense of isolation and marginalization. They are bewildered by the evening curfews some municipalities have imposed on them, the security personnel's sometimes harsh treatment of them, and the collective eviction of entire refugee communities in response to crimes committed by a single individual. Even though most Syrian refugees recognize that the decades of Syrian political and military domination over Lebanon resulted in a turbulent relationship, they emphasize that this history pre-dates them and that they welcomed and supported Lebanese citizens

during the 2006 Lebanon War. In Jordan, refugees also spoke of a general atmosphere of hostility that is further inhibiting their freedom of movement and increasing their feeling of alienation. And it appears that Syrian children are bearing the brunt of such belligerence.

***"Today, everyone who leaves
Syria is considered a traitor."***

—Hassan, living in Beirut

Unregistered refugees are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation, arbitrary arrests, and forced evictions from villages. Between one-quarter and one-third of refugees in Lebanon, and almost half of those in Jordan, are not registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and thus reside in the countries illegally.¹⁴ Difficulty obtaining work permits forces these refugees to also work illegally, further exposing them to abuse by criminals and prosecution by state authorities. Given refugees' limited access to judicial redress, these situations sometimes lead to their expulsion from host countries.

Refugees also feel a sense of discrimination in relation to Syrian attitudes at home. They fear being labeled as traitors for leaving their country in its hour of need—no matter their reasons for departure. This is generating further fissures within Syrian society, posing significant challenges for postconflict reconciliation. Hassan, an unregistered young refugee living in Beirut said, "Today, everyone who leaves Syria is considered a traitor."¹⁵

The fear of going home. This sense of discrimination is further accentuated by refugees' complex feelings about going home. Many evoke an idealistic view of Syria before 2011, when daily life was depoliticized, sectarianism did not exist, and communities coexisted

peacefully. The view seems disconnected from the larger questions of politics and governance in the country during the pre-conflict period. It also reflects their longing for a sense of community that shares cultures and traditions. Most refugees simply want Syria to return to what it was before the war.

Yet the refugees made one thing clear: the longing for a pre-conflict Syria is not the same as nostalgia for the regime. Many are aware of the political realities, are averse to living life under the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, and understand that the Syria they once knew is gone. Their longing is also tempered by fears for their safety and the knowledge that legal obstacles could make it nearly impossible for them to resume their lives. Through social networks, some refugees have learned about the local vetting procedures for returnees and the Assad regime's legislative frameworks for the recovery of private property or the development of neighborhoods. The majority of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan believe they cannot go home unless the conflict's root causes are addressed in a political transition. The Syrian regime's survival continues to represent a principal obstacle to return, putting the refugees' future on hold.

Abandonment by the international community. An overriding sense of abandonment by the international community is enhancing refugees' feeling of desolation. Most believe that the Syrian conflict is now a proxy war between outside powers, that Syrians overall have been stripped of agency and the ability to influence their future course, and that a resolution lies mainly in the hands of international actors, namely Russia and the United States. Anti-regime refugees fear being left at the mercy of a regime that has committed mass murder and crimes against humanity. Pro-regime refugees describe the conflict as an international conspiracy against Syria—for which Syrians have paid with their lives.

These narratives and the feelings of injustice and humiliation may impact future relations between Syrians and Lebanese and Jordanians, as well as further dissociate Syrians from an international community they no longer believe in. This is especially true in Lebanon, where the legacy of Syria's damaging role in the country's civil war and its subsequent decades-long political and military hegemony continue to resonate with many Lebanese today.

Because a better future in Syria or in exile seems increasingly out of reach, refugees are worried about what lies ahead. They are unable to build dignified lives in host countries that are experiencing their own challenges and that view them as a burden. Yet they cannot go home to an ongoing conflict. The international community's focus on stabilizing the situation in Syria while containing

Refugees are being forced to choose between extreme poverty and exploitation in host countries and insecurity and possible persecution in Syria.

the migration flux to Europe—rather than addressing the root causes of the Syrian conflict or the principal reasons for the refugees' exile—has exacerbated their sense of desperation. As they face a lose-lose situation, the notion of a voluntary return is slowly losing meaning; refugees are being forced to choose between extreme poverty and exploitation in host countries and insecurity and possible persecution in Syria.

POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR REFUGEES IN LEBANON AND JORDAN

ALTHOUGH LEBANON AND JORDAN are dealing with the largest influxes of Syrian refugees, their legal frameworks for addressing the Syrian refugee population reveal a long-standing ambiguous approach. While both countries have hosted large numbers of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees at various periods of time, neither country has ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its accompanying 1967 protocol.¹⁶ The convention defined the refugee classification and identified the legal obligations of host countries toward refugees, including the guarantee of their rights to freedom of movement, protection, justice, and work. The protocol removed the geographic and temporal conditions limiting the convention's applicability to individuals displaced during World War II and until 1951. A pillar of both documents is the principle of non-refoulement—the idea that refugees cannot be forcibly returned to an area where their freedoms are threatened and lives are endangered.

In contrast to the 1951 convention and its protocol, the governments of Lebanon and Jordan view fleeing populations as guests, not as refugees. Consequently, neither country is obligated to recognize the rights guaranteed by the convention, unless the rights are captured by other international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In turn, the refugees' well-being is dependent solely on the largesse of the host countries and international agencies. This guest approach partly aims to prevent the integration of refugees and ensure their eventual return to their countries of origin.

Host Country Fears

While initially welcoming, Lebanon and Jordan have progressively adopted policies that reflect profound fears about the potential impact of a prolonged presence of Syrian refugees. This reticence has affected everything from residency and mobility to access to employment, education, and healthcare, though in varying degrees depending on the country.

Though the attitudes in Lebanon and Jordan have doubtless contributed to making the lives of refugees more difficult, they are reflective of both countries' past experiences with refugees. Each country absorbed large numbers of Palestinian refugees after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel, with no resolution ever being identified. Both countries then faced another wave of Palestinian refugees following the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. And more Palestinians came to Lebanon from Jordan following the armed conflict between the Jordanian armed forces and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1970–1971.

After the first wave of Syrian refugees in 2011, Jordanians, especially in the East Bank, were concerned about the impact on their country's demographic makeup and identity, while the Lebanese were more concerned about the impact on Lebanon's sects.¹⁷ East Bank Jordanians now fear they are fast becoming a minority in a country they once dominated. Lebanese fear that the presence of a large, mainly Sunni, Syrian population might undermine the delicate sectarian balance in the country and eventually transform it politically. The fact that the Palestinian refugee crisis was never resolved has only heightened Jordanian and Lebanese anxieties.

In addition to these concerns, both countries worry about security, as extremist groups have for a time gained the upper hand in several countries of the region, above all Syria. Syrian refugee communities are, unfairly, regarded as ideal targets of recruitment by such groups, especially following terrorist attacks in both countries. While security imperatives, like demographic or sectarian fears, do not justify the poor treatment of refugees, they do partly explain the countries' changing attitudes toward the presence of a massive number of Syrians. However, those who have paid the highest price for this situation are the refugees themselves, who, despite being victims, have become objects of blame and suspicion.

Ultimately, the quality of life for refugees within Lebanese and Jordanian societies varies significantly as a result of state policies, political and identity-based grievances, and local culture and socioeconomic status. In Jordan, the central government has established a clear legal framework and implementation mechanisms to address the refugee crisis. In time, this framework has gradually become a significant liability for refugees, as policies have shifted toward being more restrictive. In contrast, the Lebanese government, mired in political deadlock when the conflict first started, has granted local institutions far greater latitude in managing the influx of refugees and has established more arbitrary

implementation mechanisms. While this approach has opened up more space for informal employment and housing, it has made refugees more vulnerable to exploitation, leading to many of the same challenges faced in Jordan. In both countries, the length of the Syrian crisis has had an increasingly damaging impact on relations between Syrian refugees and host communities, raising questions about the long-term treatment of refugees and their well-being.

Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Lebanon is now home to the highest number of refugees per capita in the world.¹⁸ According to the UNHCR, 995,512 registered Syrian refugees reside in Lebanon.¹⁹ The Lebanese government claims that another 500,000 refugees are in the country informally, increasing the estimated total to around 1.5 million.²⁰ On May 6, 2015, the UNHCR suspended the new registration of refugees at the Lebanese government's request.²¹

Women and youths (below age eighteen) constitute the largest proportion of the total refugee population at 53 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Close to 19 percent of refugee households are headed by females.²² The population is unevenly distributed among Lebanon's geographic regions, with a larger concentration in coastal areas and large cities, especially Beirut. Young men, in particular, are concentrated in coastal governorates where there are more job opportunities. Beirut is the only governorate where the percentage of males (52 percent) exceeds that of females.²³

Refugees in Lebanon face considerable economic, legal, and social difficulties. Carnegie's focus group participants identified high living expenses and access to legal documentation as their most significant challenges, followed by access to jobs and education and discrimination. Ammar, currently residing in Lebanon, best captured the predicament refugees face when he said:

"I am tired of Lebanon but I cannot leave Lebanon. I have been illegal for the past two years. If I want to go to Syria they will ask me for \$400 at the border. . . . My wife is also illegal, so I would need to pay another \$400 for her. My daughter was born [in Lebanon], her sin is that she was born here and I could not register her. For all of us to have legal residency, I would need to pay another \$400, which means I would have to pay \$1,200 for all of us. We are not getting any aid. My salary is LL500,000 [\$333] per month and I have to pay LL250,000 [\$166] in rent every month and I have children. It is winter . . . so if I just want to get fuel for heating, nothing is left. So how are we supposed to survive? This means they're pressuring us. They tell us you have one of two choices: You either become terrorists or thieves . . . and these are two things we do not want. We want a solution that will give us back our dignity—no more, no less."²⁴

The difficult situation Syrian refugees face has not manifested by chance. The Lebanese approach is largely being shaped by four factors: the enormity of the refugee burden for a small country; demographic fears; previous experiences with refugees; and domestic political dysfunction that has contributed to an incoherent refugee policy. Unsurprisingly, relations between Lebanese and Syrians are growing increasingly strained, making an already challenging situation far worse.

Lacking a unified plan, the Lebanese government has instigated a series of policies over the past five years to deal with the continued flow of large numbers of Syrian refugees. These policies—affecting refugees’ residency status, employment, housing, and access to services such as health and education—have primarily been dictated by security concerns, political deadlock, and structural challenges of providing for a sudden and expanding influx of vulnerable population groups. Although Lebanon has provided a safe haven for refugees, these policies have also contributed to their increasing vulnerability and marginalization.

Moreover, because of the political deadlock, local authorities have been entrusted to monitor and regulate refugees. For example, municipalities were tasked early on with carrying out refugee counts and managing the sudden population influx into their areas. Yet many have since expanded their purview. As of 2017, at least 142 municipalities have imposed evening curfews on Syrian refugees, restricting their movements.²⁵

A Policy of Deterrence: Residency Requirements

Lebanon’s open border policy with Syria from 2011 to the end of 2014 reflected its strong desire to aid Syrians in need of refuge. However, as the conflict escalated and expanded during that period—overstretching Lebanon’s capacity to support a massive Syrian refugee population—the government gradually adopted a policy of deterrence that sought to limit the number of refugees entering the country.

In 2013, following a notable uptick in the flow of refugees, the government began to enact restrictive measures, initially focusing on Palestinian refugees arriving from Syria and then on all Syrians except those from border areas.²⁶ Since Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN convention, officers of the General Directorate of General Security (GS) were also given considerable latitude to deny the entry of refugees, violating the principle of non-refoulement.²⁷

In December 2014, the GS introduced new regulations to restrict the entry of Syrians.²⁸ Accordingly, Syrians applying for, or renewing, residency permits were asked to pay an annual \$200 fee, present a valid passport or identification card, and provide a document to the GS that is signed by a Lebanese national to affirm that he or she is sponsoring a Syrian citizen or household.²⁹

This had an immediate impact on refugee registration. Between January and March 2015, UNHCR reported an 80 percent decrease in registration, and by the end of July 2015, the percentage of Syrian households without a valid residency permit increased from 9 percent to over 61 percent.³⁰ Of course, the Ministry of Social Affairs' request to UNHCR in May 2015 to suspend the registration of new refugees continued this trend. By 2017, 74 percent of Syrian refugees ages fifteen years old and above did not have a valid residency.³¹

Not surprisingly, given the financial costs, the majority of Carnegie focus group participants have no legal residency papers. And because of this, they avoid traveling between geographical areas for fear of being arrested at army or internal security forces checkpoints. They are also vulnerable to exploitation by Lebanese sponsors, who are at liberty to charge large sums for sponsoring a Syrian. According to one young refugee, Karim, "It has become a commercial enterprise. Either I give money, or they benefit from me in other ways."³²

A large number of male focus group participants reported being arrested for lacking legal documentation. They also expressed high levels of anxiety that neighbors or prospective employers might denounce them to the Lebanese authorities. As a result, many are reluctant to report abuse to the authorities, believing it is useless and that justice would not be served.

Employment Restrictions

Syrian refugees are experiencing even greater restrictions on employment opportunities. The Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination Between the Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic, signed in 1993, affirmed the freedom of movement for Lebanese and Syrians between their two countries, as well as their citizens' right to work in Lebanon or Syria according to each country's labor code.³³ The agreement enabled large numbers of Syrians to work in sectors in which Lebanese either did not work or refused to accept the same low wages provided to Syrians.

However, in December 2014, the Ministry of Labor issued a circular that limits the sectors open to Syrians to construction, agriculture, and cleaning.³⁴ It then issued subsequent decrees that require employers to (1) submit proof that they first tried to find Lebanese workers for the same jobs and (2) maintain a less than 10:1 ratio of Lebanese workers to foreign workers.³⁵ In turn, the decrees require Syrians seeking work to have a Lebanese sponsor, often an employer, who has signed a "pledge of responsibility." Further, UNHCR-registered refugees seeking to renew their registration are ineligible to work in Lebanon on the grounds that they are receiving humanitarian assistance.³⁶ A 2014 International Labor Organization survey indicated that 92 percent of Syrian refugee workers in Lebanon had no legal contracts, while 56 percent were employed on a daily or weekly basis.³⁷

Women, in particular, are being greatly affected. Even though female-headed households constitute 19 percent of all refugee households in Lebanon, the percentage of employed

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I don’t have diapers to change
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income to the rest of the
household. I am the only one
working in a household
of eight people.”*

—Abdo, from Daraa

Both incomes are significantly less than the Lebanese minimum wage of \$450.⁴¹ Abdo, from Daraa, said, “Perhaps death is better for us, as in every sense of the word it is better than this life. Imagine a child who has no milk to drink. I don’t have diapers to change her. . . . If I buy for her, I deny income to the rest of the household. I am the only one working in a household of eight people.”⁴²

Highly qualified Syrians face even more obstacles to finding jobs than low-skilled Syrians, given their difficulty obtaining work permits. This has forced many to work informally, exposing them to exploitation. Most focus group participants reported that they suffer from workplace abuse, including disrespect by employers; lower or no pay for work rendered; and arbitrary termination of employment.⁴³

Poor-Quality Housing

Housing options for refugees in Lebanon are limited and often do not meet the minimum standards of security of tenure, habitability, and affordability.⁴⁴ The Lebanese government has refused to establish refugee camps for Syrians, worried that this may replicate the Palestinian experience and that Syrians may settle permanently in the country.⁴⁵ Consequently, according to a 2017 World Food Program study, 73 percent of refugee households reside in residential buildings; 17 percent reside in informal tented settlements; and 9 percent reside in nonresidential structures, such as garages, workshops, and construction sites.⁴⁶ Rental prices are a major burden for refugees. The average monthly fee, whether for a rented apartment or a makeshift tent, is estimated to be \$183, which is close to the \$206 monthly income for male refugees and significantly more than the \$159 monthly income for female refugees.⁴⁷

females, estimated at 7.6 percent, is much lower than that among males, estimated at 56 percent—indicating that females are more vulnerable than males.³⁸ Indeed, around 56 percent of female-headed households did not have any member working in the month prior to the survey, compared with 32 percent of male-headed households.

Not surprisingly, around 76 percent of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line, estimated at \$3.84 a day in Lebanon.³⁹ Syrian male refugees earned an average monthly income of \$206 as of 2017,⁴⁰ while female refugees earned only \$159.

Notably, more than half of refugees live in overcrowded and/or rundown dwellings.⁴⁸ And while 80 percent of these refugees report paying rent, only 6 percent have valid rental agreements; the rest remain vulnerable to sudden eviction with no legal recourse.⁴⁹ Indeed, refugees are prone to evictions that take place without court orders or due process.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, between 2012 and 2013, increased demand for rental units in poor areas drove up prices by a reported 44 percent.⁵¹ This may be contributing to the rising resentment toward refugees in local communities.⁵²

Inadequate Access to Services

The Lebanese government has made a concerted effort to improve access to education and health services, but significant challenges remain. Focus group participants complained about the poor quality of education, the bad treatment of Syrian children by teachers, and the limited number of hours devoted to education. They also expressed concern about the exorbitant costs of healthcare and their limited access to hospitals.

In 2014, with the support of international actors, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education initiated the Reaching All Children With Education strategy to improve the national educational system, enhance teaching standards, and support refugee student enrollment. To achieve the latter, the ministry expanded the number of schools offering second shifts to educate more children.⁵³ Consequently, by 2017, 70 percent of refugee children ages six to fourteen were attending school.⁵⁴ This is a remarkable achievement; however, problems surrounding the quality of education and the school environment continue. Public schools have had to operate beyond their capacity to accommodate refugee children.⁵⁵ The English or French curricula (unfamiliar to Syrian students), bullying, and discrimination have contributed to high dropout rates. “The first thing my daughter does when she comes home after school is cry because her schoolmates keep telling her that she is Syrian, and she has been in that school for four years,” said Fatima, a female refugee from Aleppo.⁵⁶

“The first thing my daughter does when she comes home after school is cry because her schoolmates keep telling her that she is Syrian, and she has been in that school for four years.”

—Fatima, from Aleppo

Further, the proportion of children above age twelve attending school is very low; only 13 percent of children between the ages of twelve and fourteen are in school and only 4 percent of youth between the ages of fifteen and eighteen attend secondary school, which is partially explained by the high incidence of over-age primary school attendance.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, most refugees of high school and university age have discontinued their studies due to high tuition fees, the bureaucratic difficulties of entering Lebanese universities,

or the challenges in getting accreditation for degrees obtained while at school or university in Syria. As a result, most young focus group participants reported taking low-skilled jobs upon their arrival in Lebanon. Children resorting to nonformal education face an additional burden given the lack of accreditation.

With respect to healthcare, many refugees arrived in Lebanon with considerable injuries, psychological trauma, and/or serious chronic conditions requiring sustained care. And compounding these health challenges are the dire living conditions of many refugees. As of 2015, one-third of displaced Syrians lacked access to safe water and 12 percent lacked access to bathrooms, leading to periodic outbreaks of communicable diseases such as dysentery.⁵⁸

Despite the substantial need, refugees have limited access to healthcare. Although public hospitals are legally obliged to serve the vulnerable, regardless of whether they have medical insurance, Syrian patients are required to pay 25 percent of the costs of individual healthcare. The Ministry of Social Affairs, in partnership with UNHCR and several nongovernmental organizations, offers refugees access to primary and tertiary healthcare through primary healthcare centers and hospital referrals. Although vaccines are free, other consultations have an associated fee. UNHCR subsidizes 75 percent of secondary and tertiary healthcare, leaving refugees to cover the remaining 25 percent, including medication. The inability of many refugees to pay even this amount has placed a major burden on public hospitals.⁵⁹ Some hospitals are now refusing to admit Syrian patients.⁶⁰ More broadly, the needs of refugees have had a significant impact on the Lebanese healthcare system, due to the increase in demand on hospitals. This has negatively affected the quality of service provided to Lebanese nationals, fueling resentment toward refugees.⁶¹

The fact that subsidized care does not include nonlife threatening injuries and long-term diseases or chronic conditions, such as cancer and kidney failure, is forcing refugees to make difficult choices. Many refugees return to Syria for treatment, but others decide it is too dangerous and languish without medical care.

Rising Tensions

Relations between refugees and some Lebanese communities have significantly deteriorated in recent years. This is largely because of the toxic public discourse spearheaded by politicians and the belief of many Lebanese that the presence of Syrian refugees has dramatically worsened their own security and access to quality services. In a 2015 survey of Lebanese and Syrians, Lebanese participants reported a much higher sense of insecurity than Syrian refugees living in the same neighborhoods. However, few of these Lebanese participants reported being victims of assault and most of these incidents were carried out by other Lebanese.⁶² Further, according to Syrian participants, Lebanese frequently claim that Syrians are stealing their jobs. But, as of 2017, over 50 percent of Syrians were working in construction and agriculture—in other words, jobs mainly filled by Syrians prior to the Syrian conflict.⁶³

Due to such perceptions, Lebanese citizens have attacked refugees in the wake of security incidents, such as bombings; and, in some instances, local authorities have collectively punished Syrians following lone crimes.⁶⁴ For example, in September 2017, after a Syrian man raped and murdered a young woman, the Miziara municipal council in northern Lebanon expelled Syrians from the town, except for those with valid residency and work permits.⁶⁵ Such reactions are more widespread than many people may realize, with over half of Carnegie's focus group participants reporting incidents of harassment and physical abuse.

The inflammatory and sometimes xenophobic rhetoric of some Lebanese political leaders has exacerbated tensions and increased the likelihood of violence.⁶⁶ But, in a World Food Program study, refugees reported that it is often their neighbors, not the authorities, who are behind harassment and abuse incidents.⁶⁷ Carnegie's focus group participants similarly reported that most discrimination has involved random complaints by neighbors, bullying in the streets, and racist comments. Refugees from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa complained of more acute discrimination because they come from eastern Syria.

The conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon are likely to worsen as the conflict continues, especially without a unified, clear regulatory framework. Lebanon's ad hoc approach has placed local communities at the front lines of the refugee crisis, leaving refugees vulnerable to exploitation and limiting their access to basic needs.

Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Like Lebanon, Jordan has sustained an influx of Syrian refugees since 2011 and its policy has become more restrictive over time. Yet Jordan's response—while also shaped by mounting security concerns, demographic fears, and structural challenges—has been far more organized. Unhindered by political deadlock, the response reflected a clear strategy early on. Nevertheless, Jordan's policies are having a significant impact on refugees' freedom of movement, residency, employment, housing, education, and healthcare. In 2016, following an attack claimed by the Islamic State, Jordan closed all remaining open border crossings with Syria and continues to forcibly expel some refugees.⁶⁸

The UNHCR estimates that 659,000 registered Syrian refugees currently reside in Jordan,⁶⁹ and in 2017, the government estimated there to be an additional 643,000 unregistered refugees living in the country.⁷⁰ These refugees may not have planned to stay long, or perhaps they did not know how to register or could not access registration centers easily. Or they may have feared expulsion and eventual persecution by the Syrian regime.⁷¹ The total refugee population is relatively gender balanced. Youths under age eighteen constitute close to half of the refugee population, and about 30 percent of households are headed by females.⁷²

Like their compatriots in Lebanon, Syrian refugees in Jordan face considerable economic and social challenges and, in particular, limited access to shelter, education, healthcare,

“The main issue is meeting our expenses, particularly the rent at the start of each month. Financial problems arise in Jordan due to the high cost of living.”

—Khaled, from Daraa

and employment. Even before the refugee crisis, Jordan was experiencing major developmental challenges, including water shortages and stagnating economic growth (with an estimated average of 2.6 percent annually since 2011).⁷³ Carnegie’s focus group participants identified the high cost of living as their most significant challenge, exacerbated by the lack of em-

ployment opportunities. “The main issue is meeting our expenses, particularly the rent at the start of each month. Financial problems arise in Jordan due to the high cost of living,” said Khaled, from Daraa.⁷⁴

A Policy of Deterrence: Residency Requirements

As in Lebanon, Jordan’s open border policy from 2011–2014 demonstrated its commitment to providing Syrian refugees a safe haven. But during that time, security concerns led to the gradual closing of border crossings and more limited restrictions on the movement of Syrian refugees. The Jaber border crossing was closed in 2015 after militants took over the crossing from the Syrian side.⁷⁵ A suicide attack against the Rukban army post in June 2016, reportedly carried out by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, led to the shutting down of the Rukban and Hadalat border crossings.⁷⁶ None has been reopened since that time, except in rare instances to refugees.

Beginning in 2012, Syrian refugees entering Jordan through official border checkpoints were transferred to formal refugee camps, where they could register with the UNHCR and receive asylum seeker certificates. However, four groups of persons were regularly denied entry, violating the principle of non-refoulement: Palestinian and Iraqi refugees residing in Syria, unmarried men of fighting age, and persons without legal documents.⁷⁷ These restrictions forced many refugees to enter the country illegally, often through human trafficking networks, placing them at great risk of exploitation and possible abuse.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, refugees residing in the camps could only leave them if they were “bailed out” by a guarantor, specifically a Jordanian relative age thirty-five or older.⁷⁹ However, implementation of the bail-out process was initially quite relaxed; refugees leaving the camps without a Jordanian relative were still issued a Ministry of Interior service card that gave them access to various public services, including healthcare and education. It was not until 2015 that Jordanian authorities began to rigorously enforce the bail-out process, before canceling it altogether. In its place, the government initiated an “urban verification exercise,” which required Syrian refugees to re-register and obtain new biometric Ministry of Interior service cards.⁸⁰

Restrictions on who could obtain the new service cards left many out in the cold. Refugees who did not have asylum seeker certificates, or who had left the camps without a bail-out, were denied registration. Some could not afford the high costs involved. Further, many refugees found it difficult to obtain the new cards; they were required to have valid identity documents, a stamped lease agreement or a UNHCR-approved “residency statement,” a health certificate, and a copy of their landlord’s identity documents.⁸¹ Upon entering Jordan, authorities had confiscated some refugees’ identity documents, such as passports, marriage certificates, and “family books” (containing a list of children, a marriage certificate, and parents’ birth certificates).⁸²

As a result, by August 2016, around one-third of UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees living outside camps lacked a new service card.⁸³ One immediate repercussion was that couples without marriage certificates were unable to register their children at birth, leaving thousands of newborns stateless and without valid documentation.⁸⁴ Another consequence was that many refugees were unable to access public healthcare or enroll themselves or their children in formal education.

Employment Restrictions

According to Jordan’s 1952 constitution and the government’s memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR in 1998, foreigners, including refugees, must have a work permit to legally access jobs.⁸⁵ However, obtaining a work permit is conditional on holding a valid Ministry of Interior service card, so by 2015, the unemployment rate among Syrian refugees had reached 61 percent.⁸⁶ Around 10 percent of employed Syrian refugees had work permits, while the rest worked informally.⁸⁷

Many Syrians take on construction or other short-term jobs. And as of 2015, the average monthly income of a Syrian refugee (\$296) was less than the minimum wage in Jordan (\$310).⁸⁸ Given refugees’ limited access to work opportunities, around 20 percent have reported that cash assistance from nongovernmental organizations is their main source of income.⁸⁹ Not surprisingly, around 82 percent of Syrian refugee households live below Jordan’s poverty line.⁹⁰

In 2016, as part of a European Union (EU)–Jordan compact, the EU increased the Jordanian government’s access to grants and concessional loans and facilitated its exports to the European market, while the Jordanian government took substantial steps to increase job opportunities for Syrian refugees and facilitate their entry into the formal labor market.⁹¹ These steps included waiving work permit fees, proof of social security from employers, and the medical examination required for a work permit. Two objectives were to reduce the high costs imposed on refugees and increase their access to some labor sectors. At the time, the cost of a work permit equaled one to two months of minimum wages, depending on the sector.⁹² This amounts to a significant savings, but refugees’ participation in the labor force

did not rise as much as expected;⁹³ other obstacles to obtaining a work permit, such as hefty social security contributions, continued to be a hindrance.⁹⁴

Poor-Quality Housing

Unlike Lebanon, Jordan opted to construct refugee camps for Syrians. Yet of the total registered refugees, only 21 percent live in camps⁹⁵—with the majority living in the Zaatari, Azraq, and Emirates Jordan, or Zarqa camps.⁹⁶ The Zaatari camp, home to approximately 80,000 people, is often dubbed Jordan's fourth largest city and is one of the largest refugee camps in the world.⁹⁷ Around 20 percent of Syrians shelter in chicken houses, garages, and tents;⁹⁸ and 1 percent live in informal tented settlements.⁹⁹

Overcrowding is a major issue, with half of Syrian refugee families reporting that they have shared housing with at least one other family so as to afford rent.¹⁰⁰ According to a 2014 UNHCR survey, Syrian refugees were paying an average monthly rent of \$206, or two-thirds of what they made in monthly income.¹⁰¹ In addition, one-third of households lacked a rental agreement.¹⁰² As a result, 40 percent of those surveyed had faced eviction.¹⁰³

The problem has been exacerbated by rising rental prices. In northern Jordan, rental prices evidently doubled or even quadrupled following the Syrian refugee influx.¹⁰⁴ As in Lebanon, these increases have further aggravated tensions between Syrians and Jordanians—already running high due to water shortages and waste accumulation. Since 2011, water supply has dramatically decreased, with close to 40 percent of Jordanian households and 29 percent of Syrian households reporting shortages in 2015.¹⁰⁵

Inadequate Access to Services

Syrians have comparatively more access to education and healthcare than to shelter. Syrian refugee children can attend public schools for free, but only if they hold a valid asylum seeker certificate and a Ministry of Interior service card. Further, the quality of education varies. In 2013, the Ministry of Education allowed some schools to do a second shift to accommodate more Syrian refugee children, but education provided during the afternoon shift is normally of a lower standard. Teachers doing the afternoon shift generally have less training, which is also of lower quality.¹⁰⁶ Syrian refugee children who lack the required documentation to enter public schools can access primary and secondary education through informal programs, usually run by nongovernmental organizations or religious-based charities. However, the certificates students receive are not recognized for accreditation, so this prohibits them from enrolling in formal public schools in the future as well.

Close to 62 percent of the over 330,000 Syrian refugee children registered in Jordan are enrolled in formal education.¹⁰⁷ However, as in Lebanon, school dropout rates are high; in 2017, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that around 68 percent

of those out of school had been previously enrolled in school.¹⁰⁸ Nonattendance and high dropout rates are generally attributed to the high cost of education, bullying, discrimination, school violence, distance to schools, and the need to fulfill household chores.¹⁰⁹ Notably, as refugee children grow older, their school attendance tends to decline, partly because they see no purpose in getting an education when they desperately need to support their families economically.¹¹⁰

With regards to higher education, only 8 percent of refugees ages eighteen to twenty-four are enrolled in universities.¹¹¹ Barriers to university attendance include difficulties with passing the official secondary school exam, the high cost of a university education, English-language requirements, and the possession of accredited pre-tertiary, or high school, certificates from formal education programs. Without a university degree, Syrian refugees face additional obstacles in competing for skilled jobs. This leaves them even more dependent on aid and with less money to spend on expensive healthcare and housing.

Since 2011, the Jordanian government has made considerable efforts to improve access to healthcare, but Syrian refugees still face significant challenges. One reason is that, in 2014, Jordan revised its healthcare policy. Refugees who possess Ministry of Interior cards now have to pay for some services—formerly free at the Ministry of Health facilities—and at prices commensurate with those paid by uninsured Jordanians. And those refugees without cards are now unable to access public healthcare and, therefore, must pay the same higher rates as foreigners (at nongovernmental or private facilities), placing them at even greater risk.¹¹²

Moreover, while the Ministry of Interior card enables refugees to access public healthcare, the access is restricted to the district where the card was issued.¹¹³ This policy, coupled with the high cost of medical services, has hindered access; for example, in 2016, 37 percent of households with members suffering from chronic diseases could not access medical services, primarily because of expense.¹¹⁴ Samer, from Daraa, said, “All Syrian refugees face major hardship in access to medication. Even treatment for a minor concussion is unaffordable.”¹¹⁵

“All Syrian refugees face major hardship in access to medication. Even treatment for a minor concussion is unaffordable.”

—Samer, from Daraa

Rising Tensions

As in Lebanon, two major factors have strained the relationship between Syrian refugees and host communities: the worsening structural challenges and the negative perceptions about the impact of refugees on local living standards. For many Jordanians, the increased pressure on service provision has significantly lowered the quality of, and access to, education, healthcare, and water, as well as intensified competition over low-skill employment opportunities.

“The issue facing Syrians in all countries of refuge is that they are perceived as bad people by the locals, who accuse Syrians of taking their jobs.”

— Abu Bakr, from Daraa

and overstretched healthcare services as major problems associated with the refugee crisis.¹¹⁷ Both Syrian and Jordanian respondents stated that rising housing prices are a source of discontent and have exacerbated relations between host and refugee communities.¹¹⁸ They also agreed that employment is a source of tension. The unemployment rate among Jordanians has increased substantially since 2011, rising from 14.5 percent to 18.5 percent in 2017.¹¹⁹ Abu Bakr, from Daraa, said, “The issue facing Syrians in all countries of refuge is that they are perceived as bad people by the locals, who accuse Syrians of taking their jobs.”¹²⁰

Tensions between the two communities have sometimes led to violence and the harassment of refugees. In Irbid, half of the refugees interviewed for a study in 2015 said they had suffered from physical aggression, while most reported experiencing verbal abuse.¹²¹ And during a Carnegie focus group, Samira, from Aleppo, recalled an incident where a passerby spat on an acquaintance who was a refugee, after accusing her of stealing the locals’ wealth and land.¹²² However, interestingly, an overwhelming majority of focus group participants denied being the victims of a physical or verbal attack.

According to a recent survey, although most Jordanians living in areas hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees view their relationship as positive, many believe that the refugee influx has had a major negative impact on their lives.¹¹⁶ Jordanians listed deteriorating economic conditions, increased demand for limited job opportunities, soaring housing prices,

REFUGEE ATTITUDES TOWARD A RETURN TO SYRIA

WHILE THE CHALLENGES REFUGEES FACE in Lebanon and Jordan are significant and worsening, the cessation of hostilities in Syria will not necessarily mean an automatic return to their homes. In many cases, they have no homes to return to. This is why listening to refugees is essential to gauge their attitudes and understand what it will take for them to go back—that is, if they even want to return.

Carnegie's focus group participants clearly indicated that their situation is complex, with myriad concerns that have changed considerably since 2011. Among those concerns were their personal safety and that of their families, the long-term prospects for stability in Syria, their economic well-being, and the pursuit of justice for wartime crimes. Refugees highlighted common priorities and shared requirements for a return to Syria. Their attitudes were defined, more generally, by the circumstances of their departure from the country, their conditions for return, and a sense of the future Syria they desire.

Why They Left

The decision of Syrians to leave their country was not an easy one. In most cases, it was taken after multiple displacements inside Syria. Many refugees were subjected personally to incidents that threatened their lives or those of family members. During Carnegie's focus groups discussions, refugees spoke about why they left Syria, how they chose their country

of refuge, and what they felt were the prospects for a return to Syria. While many in Europe view Syrian refugees as economic migrants seeking a more prosperous life in the West, the reality is different. Even if Syrian refugees' attitudes toward resettlement outside the Middle East have changed over time, the initial motivation for leaving Syria was, quite simply, to find a safe haven nearby. The focus group participants made this point time and again. Omar, from Daraa, explained: "My children and I were injured in the conflict. We wanted to leave the country, and they stopped us at the Moadamiyeh checkpoint near Daraa, even though we were visibly injured and bloodied. They asked where we were going, and we told them we were leaving. . . . They [the Syrian Army] searched us and then took us to a security unit. They let the women and children go and detained me and my injured son."¹²³

The extent to which Syrian refugees' motivations and decisions were shaped by complex processes and considerable uncertainty is striking. In many cases, refugees had to make difficult choices while living in confusing and rapidly changing environments—a context that now also applies in their host countries. To fully understand the mindset of refugees, it is necessary to recognize that the considerable trauma they suffered took place within a dynamic framework—one that belies the static reading of their conditions.

Escaping Conflict

Most Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan are not economic migrants. A tiny minority were already living and working in both countries (though much less so in Jordan) prior to the 2011 uprising. Of the refugees Carnegie surveyed during focus group discussions,

around 82 percent fled Syria because of deteriorating security conditions or a specific security incident targeting them or their family. These incidents included arbitrary arrests, random stops at checkpoints, or the death of a family member or friend. Many young men left to avoid military conscription, mandatory for males age eighteen to forty-two. These findings are in line with reports by international organizations, including an August 2012 Médecins Sans Frontières report affirming that 75 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon left home for security reasons.¹²⁴ Oussama, a young refugee from Daraa, spoke for many when he said, "We left the country so that we wouldn't kill or get killed. We wanted to live like everyone else . . . we did not

"We left the country so that we wouldn't kill or get killed. We wanted to live like everyone else . . . we did not leave to fight. If we wanted to fight we would have stayed and taken on the world. But we have women and children. We do not want someone to come and rape them. We do not want to be insulted or humiliated. Syrians are the most humiliated nation in the world."

—Oussama, from Daraa

leave to fight. If we wanted to fight we would have stayed and taken on the world. But we have women and children. We do not want someone to come and rape them. We do not want to be insulted or humiliated. Syrians are the most humiliated nation in the world.”¹²⁵

Among the minority who did not leave for security reasons were pro-regime refugees—some of whom moved to Lebanon, mainly from Damascus and Latakia, for economic purposes. Fadi, a pro-regime refugee, pointed out, “We were all drafted for conscription into the army. While everyone would like to serve the regime and one’s country, economic conditions [prevented us from doing so] . . . and [we do need to] help our families.”¹²⁶

Because the economic opportunities in Lebanon and Jordan were already limited, most anti-regime refugees noted that leaving Syria for economic reasons would not have made sense. While many refugees had lost everything at home, others were forced, over time, to spend all the assets or savings they arrived with. They essentially had to restart their lives in countries offering limited employment opportunities, if any.

Most refugees expressed frustration with the aid network in both countries. And the minority of refugees who reported receiving aid asserted that it was insufficient to satisfy their needs. Many refugees were also unclear about the UN’s criteria for distributing aid; several relayed anecdotes of aid bypassing them and going to neighbors or acquaintances who were better off economically.

Choosing a Host Country

For Syrian refugees, multiple factors determined their choice of host country: primarily geographical proximity; preexisting familiarity with the country; family, tribal, or social ties; cultural or political affinity; and prior or current employment in the country.

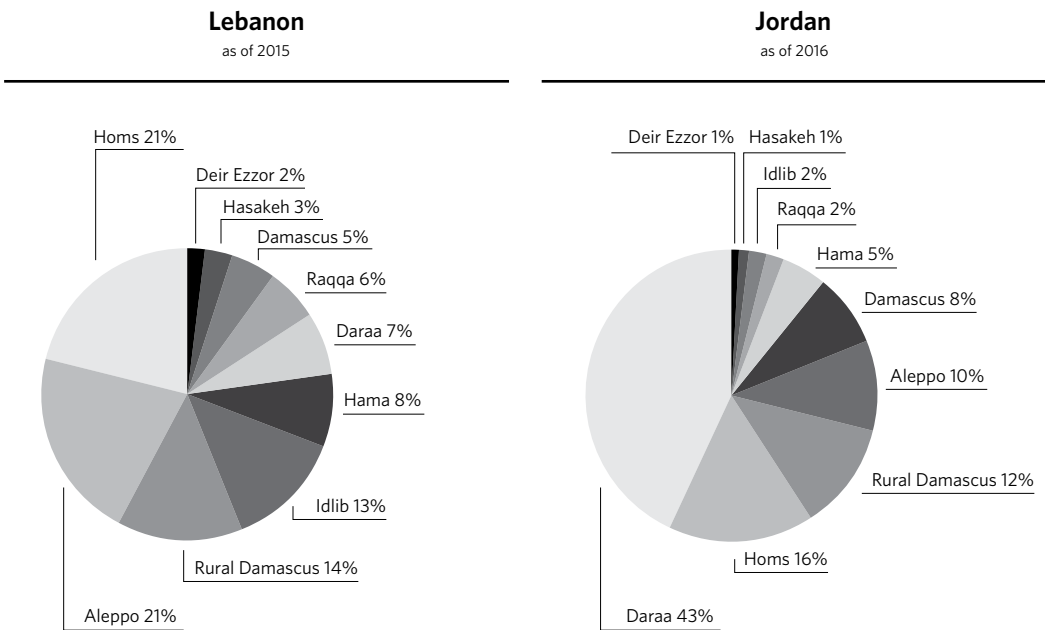
Some refugees, particularly those supportive of the Assad regime, chose Lebanon because of its political leanings. They perceived the political outlooks of Turkey and Jordan to be hostile, while Hezbollah’s presence in Lebanon and the country’s geographical proximity to regime-held areas made for a safer choice. Anti-regime refugees saw Hezbollah’s presence as a key concern and instead opted to flee to Jordan. Most refugees admitted to regretting their choice, especially those in Lebanon, because of their families’ exacting living conditions and lack of future prospects.

Many refugees initially did not want to leave Syria. Around half of the focus group participants had been displaced numerous times within Syria before crossing the border. Many first fled to safer localities nearby to escape fighting. But as insecurity became more widespread, and the safety of their families became more precarious, many made the difficult decision to move on to Lebanon or Jordan. Note, however, that the challenges in tracking the movements of individuals and families have made it impossible to identify the exact number of internally displaced Syrians who later became refugees.¹²⁷ What is clear is that most refugees left

believing that their stay in the host country would only last a few months. Malek, from Idlib, observed, “When I first came [to Lebanon], I believed it would be a matter of four to five months and then the situation would get better. I would complete my education. But it did not work out and I stayed here.”¹²⁸

As of 2015, most Syrian refugees in Lebanon originated from the governorates of Aleppo (21 percent), Homs (21 percent), Rural Damascus (14 percent), and Idlib (13 percent) (see figure 1). And as of 2016, most refugees in Jordan originated from the governorates of Daraa (43 percent), Homs (16 percent), Rural Damascus (12 percent), and Aleppo (10 percent). This is mainly because Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and Rural Damascus were among the regions most heavily impacted by the war. The mass departures took place under considerable duress, as individuals and families sought to escape aerial bombings, arbitrary arrests, or sectarian killings.

Figure 1. **Registered Syrian Refugees by Area of Origin**



Source: Based on author calculations using UNHCR data provided in various reports published in 2013-2015 (Lebanon) and 2016 (Jordan). Area of origin was identified for 98 percent and 99 percent of the registered refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, respectively.

Attitudes Toward Resettlement

Refugees' attitudes toward resettlement outside the region varied and are potentially changing. A majority of focus group participants in Lebanon and Jordan expressed a strong desire to return to Syria, voicing numerous concerns about resettlement in Europe. However, many of them, especially women and older people, were understandably worried about the situation in Syria. Roughly one in eight participants said they never want to return; these refugees are mostly youths who suffered serious trauma and say they have little left to return to—and therefore, for them, resettling in Europe is simply the only option to secure their future.

A majority of focus group participants reported that they initially rejected the idea of resettlement outright, while a minority immediately and wholeheartedly embraced it as they saw no future for themselves in Syria. For many who initially rejected the idea, taking refuge in Lebanon and Jordan left open the option of returning home should it become possible. Others were simply not ready to start a new life, learn a new language, and adapt to a different culture. They were worried about “dying in a foreign land,” as one participant put it.

Mothers, in particular, were worried about cultural differences and were afraid “to lose their children” in European countries with different moral values. Souad, from Damascus, said, “I am not encouraged to go to Europe. We found it difficult to adapt even in Lebanon so how would we cope elsewhere?”¹²⁹ A considerable number of participants mentioned having rejected offers of asylum in Europe and North America.

However, the refugees have generally become less resistant to the idea of resettlement over time, mainly because of the enduring political stalemate and insecurity in Syria and the worsening conditions in their host countries. Nasser, from Rural Damascus, remarked, “We went to Jordan in part because it is a Muslim country, with the same cultural traditions and values, and there is some social familiarity. Our desire now is to leave, to be resettled in another country, whether Europe or another Arab country, for employment opportunities . . . and for the education of the children. The future of our children would be secure.”¹³⁰

Refugees in Lebanon expressed fewer current reservations about resettlement than those refugees in Jordan; however, because a majority in both countries still hope to

return to Syria, perspectives on the duration of resettlement varied according to individual or family situations. For some, especially middle-aged individuals, the stay in Europe would be temporary, offering safety and security, the promise of a decent standard of living, and educational opportunities for their children—at least until the situation in Syria stabilized

“I have started thinking [about leaving]. It is impossible for me to return to Syria for as long as Bashar al-Assad is in power. If anyone gets the chance to travel to Europe, they will not turn it down.”

—Rashed, from Rural Damascus

sufficiently. The only other option would be to remain in their host countries, given all the risks in going back to Syria.

Most of the participants also remarked that the timing for resettlement was contingent upon a political transition in Syria. Rashed, a young refugee from Rural Damascus, summarized this attitude well: “I have started thinking [about leaving]. It is impossible for me to return to Syria for as long as Bashar al-Assad is in power. If anyone gets the chance to travel to Europe, they will not turn it down.”¹³¹

Views on Timing

Many refugees worry about returning too soon, before a comprehensive solution to the country’s conflict is reached. This may be due to the uncertain security situation in Syria or the restrictive policies in host countries, especially Jordan, where refugees who travel to Syria are barred from reentering.

In Lebanon, porous borders have allowed a limited number of refugees to travel back to Syria for medical care or to check on family and property. According to the focus group participants, a small number of middle-aged and older individuals have returned to Syria periodically to receive treatment for chronic diseases—treatment that they cannot afford in Lebanon. Other refugees, particularly youths, felt pressure to go home because of the systematic humiliation they faced in Lebanon. However, several refugees recounted stories of young men who had returned to Syria out of despair, only to die because of forced conscription or conflict in their areas. In reflection, Aisha, from Homs, asked laconically, “Would anyone walk toward death on their feet?”¹³²

In contrast, in Jordan, the government’s legislative framework bars refugees from returning if they leave the country.¹³³ In 2015, according to friends and family members of those involved, refugees who were driven to return to Daraa by dire living conditions and dwindling humanitarian aid later regretted their decision, after Daraa came under opposition control.¹³⁴ As Umm Mohammed, from Daraa, put it: “Once my son’s family had joined him in Daraa, fighting broke out and they had to move to a nearby village. Now he regrets his return. He is without a job and relies on his siblings in Jordan to send him some money to survive.”¹³⁵ Indeed, when Daraa fell back under regime control, her son’s family was forced to leave again but was unable to reenter Jordan.¹³⁶

Refugees in Jordan, like those in Lebanon, also told stories of relatives or acquaintances who had returned to Syria, only to be forced to serve in the army and die on the battlefield. Others, especially refugees in Lebanon, reported that the Syrian authorities prevented them from going back to their areas of origin.

It is clear from these examples that refugees are extremely wary about returning to Syria before a comprehensive settlement can create better conditions for a return. Their justifications

for this reluctance challenge those in Lebanon and Jordan who argue that a return to Syria is possible today. Returning now could have highly negative, indeed potentially fatal, consequences for refugees. At the same time, a return to Syria may be very different than a return to one's area of origin, as the government may not allow them to do so.

What They Need to Return

Despite an overwhelming desire to go home, refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily in the near future, even if there is an announced cessation of hostilities. The focus group participants emphasized a number of preconditions, including guarantees of safety and security, the potential for a sustainable political transition, a return to their areas of origin, the establishment of judicial mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for their war crimes, and economic opportunities.

In both Lebanon and Jordan, most refugees were skeptical that stability and order would be restored in Syria anytime soon. Even pro-regime participants expressed mixed opinions about the country's future; while some were confident that things are going in the right direction, with the regime regaining control of territory, others were convinced that Syria will remain unstable for some time. Farah, from Rural Damascus, described her expectations: "In the coming period, we will definitely not have a government. It will be war, warlords, and the chaos of conflict."¹³⁷

Most refugees also agreed that a return is impossible under the current circumstances, but at the same time, felt that they no longer have a place to call home. The refugees were also terrified of what the future might hold for them and their children. Many have lost most of what they owned and are living in squalid conditions. They

are also facing mounting personal debt and dwindling safety nets as UN organizations cut back on their support for Syrian refugees in host countries.¹³⁸ Their children are not getting the education they need to secure a productive future. In essence, they are stuck in limbo, unable to build meaningful lives in exile and unable to return home.

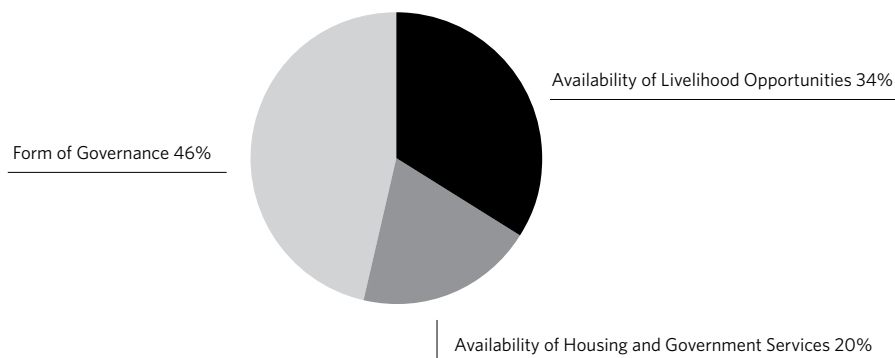
"In the coming period, we will definitely not have a government. It will be war, warlords, and the chaos of conflict."

—Farah, from Rural Damascus

Safety and Security First

Most focus group participants said safety and security were their primary preconditions for a return, followed by a sustainable political transition, the availability of livelihood opportunities, and access to their homes and services. For most of the refugees, however, these conditions were closely interrelated. They believed that the restoration of safety and security was impossible without political change or a different government in Syria (see figure 2).

Figure 2. **Refugees' Top Priority for Return After Safety and Security**



Note: Given the survey's small sample size, these figures are not representative of the countries' total refugee populations.

Source: Based on Carnegie's mini survey of a selection of focus group participants in Lebanon and Jordan. From the priorities identified during focus group discussions, participants were given three options to rank: form of governance, availability of housing and government services, and availability of livelihood opportunities. The project team excluded safety and security because all refugees cited them as their overarching concerns.

Bilal, a young refugee from Rural Damascus, remarked, “We are all looking to live safely, we are living without dignity in Lebanon, but it is what it is. This is better than Syria security-wise for our children and siblings. We will return to Syria if the regime is gone and there is security, which means there is no killing and no bombings.”¹³⁹ However, what constituted safety and security varied among refugees depended on their political affiliation and gender.

For a majority of refugees, safety and security included an end to aerial bombardments and sieges, the dissolution of armed groups and random checkpoints, the dismantling of militias, and an end to arbitrary arrests. Most refugees expressed their unhappiness with the militarization of society and the multiplicity of armed factions. They believed that only legitimate authorities should be permitted to use violence, under the rule of law. However, pro-regime and anti-regime refugees defined these authorities differently. Pro-regime refugees believed that the current government should remain in control of the security services, while anti-regime refugees believed that the security services should be reformed through a political transition that places someone else in control.

Most anti-regime refugees viewed local actors—on all sides of the conflict—as incapable of ensuring their security. Both pro-regime and anti-regime refugees generally believed that only international actors could provide genuine guarantees—although, paradoxically, pro-regime participants said they trusted the Assad regime and were exasperated with

the foreign presence in Syria. Many anti-regime refugees, despite their criticism of Russia and the United States at the political level, believed that both countries had enough leverage over the different local actors to impose security and meet their conditions for a return.

Anti-regime refugees were also largely in favor of using an international force, such as United Nations peacekeepers, to guarantee their security and were open to returning under such conditions. Pro-regime refugees were also open to it, provided that the peacekeepers' role was confined to helping the current Syrian government restore order and regain control over its territory. For anti-regime refugees, key conditions for their safety and the country's stability also included the release of all political detainees and the withdrawal of foreign forces and militias. The latter condition reflects a narrative prevalent among refugees that the Syrian conflict has become a proxy war between non-Syrians.

Assad's continued presence also factored into discussions about safety. Many refugees, especially in Jordan, linked the improvement of conditions in Syria with Assad's departure, saying his presence makes them feel unsafe and is preventing their return. Meanwhile, a minority of refugees, mainly young males and older females, suggested that only a Sunni president would make them feel safe. However, other refugees in the same focus groups often countered this view, stating that it is political performance rather than the sect of the president that matters.

It is important to note that the threshold for safety and security as a condition for return appears to be much higher among refugees than among internally displaced persons—likely because they have already embarked on an arduous journey outside the country. The International Organization for Migration reported that between January and October 2017 more than 710,000 internally displaced persons returned to their areas of origin, while only 30,000 refugees returned.¹⁴⁰ However, the categories used to define return are unclear, raising questions about the figures' accuracy. Among the refugees, some returned to Syria as part of locally negotiated deals in Lebanon—but to locations other than their areas of origin.¹⁴¹ In turn, others made their way back either voluntarily or by force from Jordan and Turkey. Regardless of this definitional issue, a mass return of refugees under the current security conditions seems unlikely.

“We are all looking to live safely, we are living without dignity in Lebanon, but it is what it is. This is better than Syria security-wise for our children and siblings. We will return to Syria if the regime is gone and there is security, which means there is no killing and no bombings.”

—Bilal, from Rural Damascus

A Political Transition

A mass return seems even less likely when factoring in politics. Most focus group participants indicated that they would not go back unless political conditions were favorable, even if there were available jobs, services, and housing. Notably, when asked if they would return under favorable political conditions but without economic opportunities or housing, most refugees said they would do so. Khouloud, from Rural Damascus, stated, “If Bashar al-Assad is removed and there is security in Syria, even if there is no food or drink, we would get flour and make it with our hands.”¹⁴²

Specifically, most participants said a change in the form of governance was their highest priority, followed by the availability of housing and government services for participants above age twenty-five and the availability of livelihood opportunities for those below age twenty-five. A large number of refugees also indicated that even if their homes were destroyed, they would still return to Syria if security and political conditions allowed it and jobs were available. They insisted they would pitch a tent on the rubble of their homes and rebuild them.

***“If Bashar al-Assad is removed
and there is security in Syria,
even if there is no food or drink,
we would get flour and make
it with our hands.”***

—Khouloud, from Rural Damascus

When asked whether Assad’s presence would impact their willingness to return, again, most pro-regime participants indicated that they would not return if he was removed from power. In contrast, most anti-regime refugees affirmed that they would not go back if he remained in power, believing that there were no guarantees for their security under the current regime. Tareq, a young refugee

from Homs, remarked, “I used to work as an undertaker in Syria. My job was to bury the martyrs. When I saw what they had done to them, how they were cut up with knives, no way, there is no trust. Even if they secure everything we need, there is no trust.”¹⁴³ A small number of anti-regime refugees indicated that they were resigned to the possibility of Assad’s presence and that they would return if security and jobs were guaranteed—as they do not want to remain in exile indefinitely. Other anti-regime refugees said that if forced to go back under the current regime, they would seek to oppose it, as they would not let Assad take over the country.

A Focus on Women and Youth

While poor living conditions in host countries have played a role in shaping attitudes toward return, many refugees remained reluctant to go back home. Indeed, their fear of the repercussions of return often outweigh the challenges they face in host countries. For example, they were worried that they would be forced to take part in the conflict and

were concerned about the safety and security of their families. Youths, in particular, were worried about forced conscription and were more keen to resettle in a third country, with the hope of building a better future for themselves. Women, while less enthusiastic about resettlement, similarly did not want to return with their children unless significant security guarantees were in place.

Female refugees generally took a more uncompromising position than males on the question of return and the conditions they required. More than two-thirds of the female focus group participants were either undecided or reluctantly sought to resettle in another country, believing it to be the better of two evils, while only one-third sought to return to Syria. In contrast, more than half of the male participants were looking forward to returning to Syria, while the others were undecided or sought to resettle in another country. A small minority of both male and female refugees wanted to remain in their host country.

The more hardline position on the question of return to Syria among females was driven by a number of considerations. As mothers or grandmothers, most were unwilling to take risks by moving their children and families into places characterized by uncertainty, where safety and security under the current regime was, as far as they were concerned, simply not possible.

In addition to improved security and political conditions, women also require access to basic services, particularly education and healthcare, and housing support. For female refugees, a political transition and access to adequate basic services went hand in hand. Yet the former was a higher priority, as a move back to Syria under the current regime meant they were endangering their families by taking them into a conflict zone. Most female focus group participants expressed the need for transitional justice mechanisms—specifically for the release of detainees, restitution of property, the prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes, and the disarming of armed groups.

The desire to return tends to increase with the age of the refugee. Of the focus group participants below age twenty-five, one-third looked forward to returning and more than half were either undecided or preferred to resettle elsewhere. A negligible number sought to remain in Jordan or Lebanon. In contrast, more than half of those above age forty looked forward to going back to Syria.

The sense of resignation, entrapment, and despair was more pronounced among youths than their elders. This is partly due to the limited opportunities available to them to build a future in host countries. Some would like to go back to Syria but fear being imprisoned by the regime for evading conscription, before being sent to the front to die. While most hoped to resettle in Europe, due to desperation, a lack of prospects in host countries, and the difficulty of traveling abroad, a small minority were considering returning to Syria rather than continuing to live in humiliation, even if they risked death. A few were resigned to adapting to the present situation. Within this group, most suggested they would like to

return to Syria and find ways of resisting the Assad regime from within—without taking up arms—and eventually contribute to rebuilding their country.

Fear of mandatory conscription drove most of the young focus group participants—both pro- and anti-regime—out of Syria and has kept them out.¹⁴⁴ The fears of anti-regime refugees were also related to sectarianism. A recurring narrative among male anti-regime youths was that Sunni conscripts were usually sent to the front lines to die, while Alawites from the Syrian president's minority community were usually kept away from the front. Ahmad, from Aleppo, remarked, "Because of the war, they will place me, the Sunni, at the front and leave the Alawite behind me. Why would they place me at the front? Who am I going to fight? Why is the Alawite hiding behind me? Why should I die and not the Alawite?"¹⁴⁵

Recently promulgated laws on conscription will make it much harder for young men to go back.¹⁴⁶ Legislative decree 24/2017 denies the Syrian Army's general command the authority to provide exemptions from military service. Those males between ages eighteen and forty-two who do not join the army are required to pay a fine of \$8,000 within three months of reaching the age of conscription. If they do not join subsequently, they are imprisoned for a year and penalized \$200 for every year after the starting date of conscription, up to a maximum of \$2,000. They also risk having their assets, such as property or cash, seized until payment is completed.

Ghazi, a young Syrian living in Tripoli, sarcastically stated, "The problem is that you can go to Syria. There are many roads that lead to Syria. But once there what do you do? Either you join the army or you need around \$3–\$4 billion."¹⁴⁷

Notably, negative attitudes toward conscription did not translate to a rejection of the army. On the contrary, many young refugees professed their respect for the army as an important state institution and believed it was their duty to serve their country. Rather, they opposed serving the regime and killing their fellow citizens. This reaction reflects a deep sense of patriotism among Syrians; focus group participants repeatedly stated, "It is important to serve the country, but I did not want to kill my brethren or serve the regime."

A Return to Area of Origin

The areas of origin of refugees also shaped their attitudes toward return. Individuals originating from areas where the uprising occurred and areas that subsequently became rebel strongholds were the most reluctant, even terrified, to return to Syria. For example, the refugees from Homs and Aleppo were the least interested in returning and the most interested in seeking asylum elsewhere. In contrast, refugees from the parts of Rural Damascus that had not witnessed sieges and aerial bombardments were more willing to return.

For an overwhelming majority of focus group participants, a return to Syria was synonymous with going back to their homes and areas of origin. However, they were scared of

what they would find. Many expressed concern that they would not recognize their neighborhoods, either due to widespread destruction or because their former neighbors had left or even emigrated.

Many refugees from Aleppo, Daraa, Homs, and Zabadani also believed that they would not be allowed to go back to their neighborhoods. Refugees have limited access to reliable information on recent government decrees, especially related to housing, land, and property rights. This means that many are relying on informal networks and word of mouth, generating considerable anxiety among refugee communities. Talal Barazi, the governor of Homs, outlined some of vetting procedures the regime has established and that will likely make a return very difficult. To recover their homes, returnees must submit a legal document proving their place of origin and ownership of their property. They must also undergo a security check by local police to determine that they have no security or felony charges pending.¹⁴⁸ Recently enacted regulations further mandate that refugees wanting to reclaim their property must do so in person. Under these circumstances, many refugees feared that they would be arrested, even if they had not participated in the conflict. Men below age forty-two also feared that they would be forcibly enrolled in the army. Many indicated that they simply do not have the required legal documentation.

And while the Syrian conflict is mostly political in nature, its ethnic and sectarian overtones in some areas add another layer of complexity. Following the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq,¹⁴⁹ ethnic or sectarian majorities seemed to return home much more rapidly than minorities after a phase of displacement. This will not be the case in Syria; most refugees are Sunni Muslim, majority in Syria, and oppose the regime. With Assad in power, and in view of widespread lawlessness and destruction, the prospects for a voluntary refugee return are quite dim. For many, returning to their homes seems unlikely in view of the regime's ongoing efforts to engage in population resettlement.¹⁵⁰ The social fabric of many areas is being changed beyond recognition, a situation refugees expressed considerable concern over.

Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, theoretically protected by the regime, were also afraid of returning. They worried that the damage done to Syria may never be repaired. Their trust in the regime and satisfaction with its military victories did not translate into optimism regarding Syria's future, as many were skeptical that the end of hostilities would be followed by safety, order, and stability. In this context, and with the diminishing likelihood that refugees will return to their areas of origin, it is not surprising that refugees are increasingly seeing resettlement as the only viable option to guarantee their safety and protection.

Access to Property

Refugees also want to return to their own homes and receive support to restart their lives. Yet given the widespread destruction in Syria's cities and towns, the condition of homes

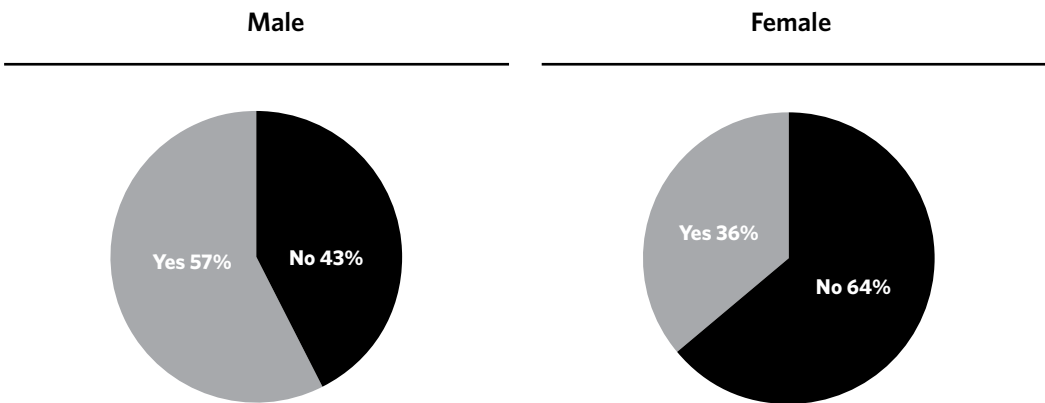
complicates the prospects of return for most refugees. According to World Bank estimates, 30 percent of Syria’s housing stock has been partially or completely destroyed, mostly in Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, and Palmyra.¹⁵¹

Half of the focus group participants in Jordan and two-thirds in Lebanon indicated that their homes were either partially or fully destroyed. Other refugees indicated that their homes were occupied by displaced Syrians or regime-affiliated entities, such as pro-Iran militias; particularly concerned were refugees from Daraa, Homs, Rural Damascus, and Zabadani, as well as the Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zaynab, where some areas were once controlled by the Islamic State or pro-Iran militias.¹⁵² Ibrahim, from Rural Damascus, explained his departure: “The reason was the militias, Iranian militias . . . Iraqi militias . . . there seemed to have been a deliberate plan to force people out.”¹⁵³

In this context, refugees voiced significant concern about housing, land, and property rights. Prior to the conflict, much of the property in Syria was informal; properties were built without proper permits or on publicly owned land and as part of informal settlements. A large portion of these properties have been destroyed during the years of fighting.¹⁵⁴ Lamia, from Rural Damascus, said, “They tell me that whichever house has an absentee owner is immediately occupied by the army, even if there is a tenant. . . . They take the lease, throw the tenant out, and take the house.”¹⁵⁵

Almost half of the focus group participants left Syria without title deeds or legal documentation proving ownership of their properties (see figure 3). Among those whose houses were destroyed, at least half did not have any form of documentation, which will make it

Figure 3. **Access to Proof of Ownership**



Note: Given the survey’s small sample size, these figures are not representative of the countries’ total refugee populations.

Source: Based on Carnegie’s mini survey of a selection of focus group participants in Lebanon and Jordan. Participants were asked, “Do you have legal documents proving ownership of your home?”

extremely difficult to recover their homes. Further, various reports from Syria indicate that the regime has used land registries to identify constituencies, or areas, allied with the opposition. The regime then organized military campaigns to specifically target these areas and collectively punish and demoralize their civilian populations—with the aim of forcing them to turn against the opposition.¹⁵⁶

“They tell me that whichever house has an absentee owner is immediately occupied by the army, even if there is a tenant. . . . They take the lease, throw the tenant out, and take the house.”

—Lamia, from Rural Damascus

Multiple reports from 2016 also claim that the regime has been destroying land registries throughout Syria to erase proof of ownership,¹⁵⁷ as well as forging new ownership records in favor of pro-regime constituents.¹⁵⁸ A report covering the situation in Homs observed, “In July 2013, the Land Registry office that housed official documentation of property ownership was destroyed in a fire, which some believed to be intentional as it was the only structure burned in the most secure part of the city.”¹⁵⁹

Most focus group participants desired to return to their areas of origin even if their homes were no longer standing and even if conditions were better elsewhere in Syria. For some refugees, they simply wanted to put an end to their condition of displacement. Farida, from Homs, stated, “We are tired of the label ‘refugee.’”¹⁶⁰ Most asserted that they would rebuild their homes with their own hands if the political and security conditions were favorable—irrespective of work opportunities and the availability of services. However, many refugees also mentioned the need for financial support to rebuild their properties. Female participants were the most adamant about this, believing it to be the government’s duty to rebuild. A small minority of participants stated that all of Syria was home to them and that they would settle in another part of the country if it was the only option.

The Syria They Want to See

Asking refugees to describe what kind of Syria they would like to see is essential for gaining a better understanding of what will motivate them to go back. Most focus group participants had a clear vision of the Syria they want. The defining characteristics were shaped by their sense of safety, security, and justice but also their perceptions of ongoing international efforts to end the Syrian conflict.

A Free Syria

A large majority, many of whom oppose the Assad regime, envisioned a Syria that adheres to the values of freedom, equality, and justice and that is governed democratically, under the rule of law. Many stressed the need for reconciliation, national unity, and coexistence,

“What is freedom? Freedom is to be an entity [to exist]. To have rights, not to have the wife or the son of an officer come take what is yours.”

—Asmahan, living in Beirut

highlighting Europe as a model because of its respect for the rule of law, human dignity, and human rights.

Asmahan, living in Beirut, said, “What is freedom? Freedom is to be an entity [to exist]. To have rights, not to have the wife or the son of an officer come take what is yours.”¹⁶¹

In addition to insisting on reconciliation and adamantly asserting that Syrians could work and live together as before, the focus group participants were unwilling to assign blame for the conflict to one sectarian or ethnic community. They underline that if left alone, as Syrians, they would be able to work out their differences.

However, these visions of a future Syria were tempered by an ambient sense of demoralization among the refugees. Most focus group participants were pessimistic about the future and did not trust that stability and order would soon be restored. They also believed that violence in Syria would likely just take other forms. They feared the militarization of society and the hegemony of warlords in any postconflict settlement. Even pro-regime participants expressed mixed opinions about Syria’s future. While some adopted the regime’s narrative that order and stability would soon prevail, others were skeptical and argued that improvement would take time.

The despondency felt by refugees also stems from the profound sense of abandonment by the international community and the belief that if external parties to the Syrian conflict wanted to impose peace and stability, they could do it. Moreover, it stems from refugees’ general lack of confidence in the Astana and Geneva peace processes: “We see a lot of talk, but in reality, little action on the ground,” said Samira, from Rural Damascus.¹⁶² In essence, most were convinced that the peace processes are largely designed to advance the interests of the parties involved—particularly Russia, the United States, and Iran—and not Syria or Syrians.

A Territorially United Syria

The focus group participants discussed several different approaches to the governance of Syria, namely federalism, decentralization, and power sharing. They all emphatically rejected any approach that might lead to Syria’s fragmentation.

When participants were asked to consider federalism, the reactions were mixed. A minority of refugees appreciated the notion of being able to govern themselves at a regional level. But a majority rejected the idea outright, believing that a federal Syria would be broken up into multiple parts. Showing an erroneous understanding of federalism, many refugees echoed the sentiment of Ibtissam, from Rural Damascus: “We don’t want to go back to a Syria

where we need visas to cross from one region to the other.” She emphasized, “We would end up needing a passport to travel from Aleppo to Homs.”¹⁶³

Refugees were generally more accepting of administrative decentralization. While a majority did not know what this entailed, the idea of direct representation and leverage over one’s local representatives was attractive to them. Only a small minority were aware of the government’s 2011 decree on decentralization (Decree 107),¹⁶⁴ which granted more political and financial prerogatives—including for local development projects—to local elected councils, provincial councils, and governors.¹⁶⁵ However, most refugees were simply unsure of its ramifications and what it would mean for them.

While most participants were adamant that sectarianism prior to the conflict was nonexistent, both pro-regime and anti-regime refugees were ready to accept power sharing based on ethnic and religious identity, seeing it as a pragmatic way to address the Syrian conflict and protect minorities. A majority of the refugees were Sunni Muslim, and most viewed the conflict to be political rather than sectarian in nature. Some even pointed out that many Sunnis were supporting the regime to protect their business interests. While a minority of refugees expressed concern that the share of Sunnis in power relative to the community’s demographic size would decline under a sectarian or ethnic power-sharing system, all were adamant about the need for inclusive governance mechanisms in which all Syrians, irrespective of sectarian or ethnic identity, participated. A small number of refugees openly voiced their concern about having an Alawite rule the country; essentially, a Sunni president would have to be in power for them to feel safe.

An Inclusive Syria

While pro-regime and anti-regime refugees agreed on the need for inclusive power sharing, there was no consensus on the political options for Syria and the potential form of government. While anti-regime refugees favored a national unity government, despite their skepticism about its ability to stabilize Syria, pro-regime refugees rejected this outright. They discredited all political opposition groups and potential alternatives to the Assad regime.

Recognizing that a complete change in government is unlikely because of the regime’s gradual consolidation of power and the support of Russia and Iran, anti-regime refugees were willing to consider a transitional government that included both regime and opposition figures. Pro-regime refugees were less willing to compromise; they believed they were winning the conflict and expressed disdain for opposition members, whom they view as traitors. They also rejected possible international oversight of a future political process and of the regime. This reflects the regime’s position, which is that it will oppose any political settlement that transfers the full executive powers of President Bashar al-Assad to a transitional government. By rejecting this proposal, as part of the Geneva peace process, the regime can elude international supervision of Syria’s postconflict situation.

These disagreements aside, both pro-regime and anti-regime refugees unanimously opposed proposals to freeze the front lines between the factions. They feared that the enforcement of deescalation zones would lead to the breakup of Syria. The United Nations special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has also said that these zones—proposed during the Astana peace talks—could result in a “soft partition” of Syria.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, all the refugees firmly rejected the idea of creating “safe zones” for them inside Syria. Many refugees repeatedly noted that safe zones are safe today but not so much tomorrow.

A Representative Syria

Most refugees contended that the end of the conflict could only be brokered by non-Syrians and that Syrians would have little say in the process. However, they had lost faith in the current national or international actors involved—including Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries—and in the ongoing political peace processes. They claimed that all these international actors were sacrificing Syria and its citizens to advance their own goals. Both pro-regime and anti-regime refugees also expressed a sense of fatigue and disgust with regard to politics and politicians.

Most refugees argued that no one represented them. While pro-regime participants explicitly supported Assad, they were quite detached from politics in general. Most stated that politics was too complicated, that it was merely a source of problems, and that they wanted nothing to do with it. All they yearned for was a normal life.

Anti-regime refugees expressed their disappointment with all the political actors in Syria and their lack of confidence in the leadership of various opposition groups within and outside Syria. Most believed these actors and groups were working for their own interests, were too divided, or had betrayed the Syrian people and the principles of the revolution. Yet a significant number distinguished between those fighting in Syria, whom they saw as more legitimate representatives of Syrians since they were on the ground, and the opposition in exile, whom they referred to as the “hotels opposition.” Mansour, from Zabadani, said, “We

“We no longer know the difference between those who are good and those who are not. We only have confidence in God. Anyone who represents me has to empathize with me, with my pain, and with the tragedy I am living.”

—Mansour, from Zabadani

no longer know the difference between those who are good and those who are not. We only have confidence in God. Anyone who represents me has to empathize with me, with my pain, and with the tragedy I am living.”¹⁶⁷

At the same time, anti-regime refugees expressed sympathy and a certain nostalgia for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), believing that it truly exemplified the values and goals of the Syrian revolution—that it

engaged in a nonsectarian conflict that was focused on fighting the regime. Yet they were very critical and cynical about what the FSA had become, pointing out that corruption and personal agendas had led to its irrelevance.

Notably, some refugees in Jordan expressed more positive views about opposition figures. They stated that despite the opposition's shortcomings, they still felt represented by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which speaks for the opposition in Geneva.

A Just Syria

Among the focus group participants, justice primarily related to the concepts of rule of law and accountability—values seen as central to governance and state functions. Mahmoud, from Zabadani, said, “Justice is . . . to have a change in government, to have a justice ministry. If someone kills, they are held accountable. If you complain, someone listens. If you tell them your house was destroyed, they help you or give you a loan. In other words, having a state. Right now, we don't have the qualities of a state in Syria.”¹⁶⁸

When discussing how justice would be administered in a postwar Syria, the participants engaged in heated debates over the idea of amnesty. Two distinct understandings of amnesty prevailed: some refugees associated it with a presidential pardon of all those who had evaded conscription or participated in activities opposed to the regime, and others associated it with a blanket impunity for all crimes committed during the conflict.

While pro-regime refugees were very hostile to the idea of a presidential pardon, anti-regime refugees were more clearly split. Most pro-regime refugees insisted that there was a real need to prosecute those, as they put it, who had conspired against Syria. Among anti-regime refugees, some asserted that they would not return to Syria on the basis of a presidential pardon, which they did not trust. Others believed it was a necessary prerequisite for return, given refugees' widespread fear of arrest for having participated in protests or avoided military conscription. Attitudes on the release of detainees were also shaped by political affiliation. While anti-regime refugees insisted on the need to release all detainees, pro-regime refugees believed them to be criminals who had to be held accountable.

For those refugees who associated amnesty with a wider, blanket impunity, it either meant—depending on political affiliation—pardoning crimes committed by regime officials, forces, and their allies, or, alternatively, pardoning opposition groups. While all pro-regime refugees adamantly opposed a blanket approach, anti-regime refugees were again more divided in their opinions. Most anti-regime refugees, especially women and youths, viewed a blanket amnesty negatively, believing that a sustainable peace was not possible without justice and accountability and that Assad should not get away with his crimes. Some felt it would simply pave the way for further conflict and encourage individuals seeking justice to take matters into their own hands. Those in favor of the approach considered it to be a necessary

evil. A common argument, particularly among older men, was that “we can’t put the entire Syrian people on trial.”

Debates over who should be given amnesty, should it be possible, resulted in a general agreement that those who gave orders to kill should be held accountable, while lesser crimes, such as theft, could be pardoned. However, when confronted with the reality that they might one day encounter the person who committed murder, particularly of a loved one, many refugees said that they might try to exact revenge and that trials were necessary

to prevent people from administering their own justice.

“To see the person who killed my brother and my cousin living normally, walking around, and enjoying himself, impossible! No, I will not return because there will be civil strife. People will say, ‘I will commit murder today and be pardoned through an amnesty tomorrow.”

—Issam, from Rural Damascus

Issam, from Rural Damascus, stated, “To see the person who killed my brother and my cousin living normally, walking around, and enjoying himself, impossible! No, I will not return because there will be civil strife. People will say, ‘I will commit murder today and be pardoned through an amnesty tomorrow.”¹⁶⁹

A majority of anti-regime refugees expressed little faith in the current legal system in Syria, seeing it as a tool of the regime that lacks integrity and independence.

Yet, when asked how those prosecuted for war crimes should be judged, many spontaneously answered, “They should be judged by the people.” This implied that criminals should be tried in Syria, by Syrians. But many anti-regime refugees indicated that only the International Criminal Court would be able to pursue such prosecutions—although they did highlight the need for collaboration between international judicial bodies and Syrian legal entities. What these entities would be, in view of their distrust of the Syrian judiciary, was never made clear.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON AND JORDAN had a clear sense of the Syria they would like to see but recognized that it was almost impossible to achieve under the current circumstances. To guarantee a better future, all efforts to reach a sustainable political settlement must address the roots of the conflict and its repercussions on refugees in host countries. Most important, the efforts must enable a safe and secure return of refugees to their homes. As regime forces recapture parts of Syria, many people in host countries, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan, are insisting that Syrian refugees be returned to “safe” areas in their country. These calls are essentially forcing refugees to choose between returning home and risking their lives or accepting an increasingly painful and humiliating exile due to the deteriorating situation in their host countries.

Current security conditions in Syria are highly unpredictable and therefore unsuitable for the return of most refugees. Intense military operations are ongoing in several regions, resulting in new waves of population displacements. Despite the regime’s military gains, Syria remains largely fragmented into multiple zones of influence, making the outbreak of future conflict very likely. Even deescalation zones have proven unstable, with numerous violations being recorded in recent months.¹⁷⁰

Given this reality, refugees in Lebanon and Jordan are facing an increasingly difficult situation. Policymakers and populations in both countries do not want to see refugees settled permanently. So while they support providing refugees some access to employment, basic

education, and health services, their policies have become gradually prohibitive, resulting in various legal and social forms of discrimination and limited access to justice. This has left refugees in a highly precarious socioeconomic situation and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Three interconnected factors place refugees at great risk should they be forced to return. First, with regime forces playing a role in population transfers, through sieges and local peace deals, refugees returning to their areas of origin could be turned away or persecuted. Second, the fragmentation of territories, the destruction of urban centers and rural areas, and the recent legislation governing property rights will make it extremely hard for refugees to recover their houses and rebuild their lives. And third, the proliferation of gangs and militias in regime- and opposition-held areas will likely make the journey back very unsafe.

In this context, the notion of a voluntary return, a bedrock of international conventions on refugees, has lost its meaning. Refugees are increasingly facing unsatisfactory choices, or even none at all, as some have already been forcibly returned to Syria through various means.¹⁷¹ They basically have three options: return to an unstable Syria, continue to live in uncertainty in host countries, or make the treacherous journey to Europe.

The international community's response to the crisis has primarily focused on reaching a political agreement through the Geneva talks and preventing refugees from reaching Europe's shores.¹⁷² This approach assumes, unrealistically, that refugees can reside indefinitely in host countries bordering Syria while the details of a political settlement are worked out. Even though the European Union and other donors have provided considerable humanitarian assistance to Lebanon and Jordan, it has fallen well short of what is needed, given the increasingly protracted nature of the conflict. The challenge is not simply to address the funding gaps, which are substantial, or to end the paralysis that afflicts political negotiations.

Any settlement that ignores the root causes of the war would simply generate fresh conflicts that further destabilize the region, trigger more population displacements, and create new waves of refugees.

Because bringing stability to Syria will take time, the international community must also work with host governments to revise existing policy frameworks regarding refugees and invest in their local economies.

Moreover, international actors need to listen to what the millions of refugees and internally displaced populations actually think. Although one-quarter of the Syrian

population now lives in exile and almost one-third has been internally displaced, their specific concerns and priorities are not being represented in the negotiations over a postwar political settlement. In parallel to the Geneva process, ongoing talks in Astana have focused on stabilization and deescalation efforts, while also ignoring the plight of refugees and

internally displaced populations. From the refugees' perspective, and in view of the current conditions in Syria, the question of return is becoming increasingly more challenging and contingent on issues beyond their control.

It is in the long-term interest of the international community, including Lebanon and Jordan, to invest in a sustainable peace settlement in Syria. Any settlement that ignores the root causes of the war would simply generate fresh conflicts that further destabilize the region, trigger more population displacements, and create new waves of refugees. A sustainable settlement is viable only if questions surrounding a voluntary return, political representation, reintegration, and access to justice are addressed as part of an overall peace deal. Therefore, a vital part of this effort will be establishing a new framework for refugees and implementing conducive policy measures.

Establish a Refugee-Centered Framework

A return of refugees is not just the physical movement of people across borders. Rather, first and foremost, it requires guarantees of safety and security, a favorable political infrastructure, and access to basic services and justice. Without these, a wholesale voluntary return of refugees to Syria may prove treacherous.

While listening to focus group participants, it became clear that a new refugee-centered framework is needed—one that would facilitate a sustainable return of refugees and enable them to make the choices best suited to their circumstances.¹⁷³ The framework would have to be founded on three interconnected principles: recognition of the political roots of the refugee crisis; understanding of the role of justice in achieving a sustainable settlement; and acceptance of the need to uphold the refugees' right of return to their areas of origin and homes.

Acknowledge the Political Roots of the Refugee Crisis

The international community's efforts to address the refugee crisis are frequently depoliticized and approached from a strictly humanitarian mindset. This ignores the fact that millions of Syrians were forced to leave their country because of political and security reasons. Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have escaped barrel bombs, sieges, mandatory conscription, forced evictions, arbitrary arrests, as well as political and sectarian killings. Moreover, most refugees in both countries are opposed to the Assad regime and believe they will not be safe in places that it controls. Many are also unable to return to their areas of origin because they were evicted from their towns and villages for political or sectarian reasons, without guarantees that they can go back.¹⁷⁴

For refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, the question of return is directly linked to Syria's future governance model and the nature of the postconflict political leadership. Refugees

need to be assured that the dividends of peace, including basic infrastructure, will not be distributed according to political, ethnic, or sectarian considerations and will not become instruments for the regime to consolidate power.

Make Justice the Centerpiece of a Peace Settlement

The establishment of deescalation zones will not result in significant stability, nor will it lay the foundation for sustainable peace. Currently, Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Jordan, and to a much lesser extent Egypt, all have spheres of interest in Syria—a reality partly facilitated by the Astana talks. Therefore, while the intensity of the conflict may subside in the near future, the situation on the ground will be far from stable for some time

A political transition process that provides impunity to individuals accused of ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity would not allow for fair political competition, nor would it safeguard individual liberties and human dignity.

to come. The parties' incompatible agendas have raised concerns that the return of refugees and internally displaced persons may be complicated by political, sectarian, and ethnic considerations.¹⁷⁵

Further, a singular focus on bringing an end to military operations, without addressing the conflict's root causes and the transformed power structures in Syria, makes future conflict almost inevitable. A political transition process that provides impunity to individuals accused of ethnic

cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity would not allow for fair political competition, nor would it safeguard individual liberties and human dignity. Critically, it would also undermine international norms of justice and accountability. The creation of new political, judicial, and security structures that respect human dignity will be necessary to avoid a resurgence of violence.

Uphold the Right of Refugees to Return Home

The international community must seek to uphold the right of refugees and the internally displaced to return to their homes in Syria. A majority of Carnegie's focus group participants were unwilling to compromise on this. Under the present circumstances, however, Syrian refugees are at risk of losing their right of return. The Syrian government is enacting a new legislative framework that will make it exceedingly difficult for refugees to go home. The measures introduced include vetting mechanisms, regulations on property rights, and revised laws regarding military conscription.

International actors must insist on the removal of political (and sometimes ethnic- or sectarian-driven) vetting procedures imposed by the regime and armed groups in recaptured

areas. Essentially, they must target any measures that infringe upon Syrians' right of return to their areas of origin and homes, especially those people displaced inside Syria or forced to seek refuge outside the country as a result of sieges, ethnic cleansing, or sectarian attacks. Security guarantees and confidence-building measures must be in place to enable the reintegration of returnees and prevent acts of revenge.

Implement Conducive Policy Measures

Adhering to the above principles means implementing key measures to guarantee the safety, security, protection, and reintegration of returning populations. Some of these measures will require long-term institutional efforts, but several immediate actions could be taken to address refugees' conditions and concerns related to governance, reconstruction, and rights to protection and dignified lives.

Plan for a Political Transition

A majority of the project's focus group participants emphasized that safety and security was their highest priority and that it can only be guaranteed through a different governance system and new political leadership. However, the prospect of this happening right now is low, given the continuing foreign interventions, the militarization of Syrian society, the multiplication of local armed groups, and the absence of accountability or access to justice. Also, governance reform can be a long and arduous process, particularly in conflict situations. This is especially the case in Syria, where the complex interplay of local and international politics presents a considerable challenge to achieving a sustainable political settlement and the return of stability.

Ensuring the safety and security of all Syrians, including refugees, will require systematic efforts to demilitarize Syrian society; address the proliferation of armed groups through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs; and reform the national security institutions, including the army. These measures will take time. However, in the event of a political settlement, and as the process of demobilizing local militias begins, United Nations peacekeepers could be immediately deployed to help address the security concerns of refugees and boost their confidence should they choose to return. This is particularly true given refugees' higher threshold for return compared to internally displaced persons and their distrust of both local and international parties to the conflict.

Further, for any political settlement to be sustainable, access to justice must be placed at the center of ongoing negotiations. The vetting mechanisms being implemented in different parts of Syria—especially former opposition strongholds in Aleppo, Homs, and Rural Damascus—have put many refugees who participated in peaceful protests or expressed hostile views of the regime at risk of being denied entry into their areas of origin. These vetting procedures must be removed and a mechanism for redress must be created. Also vital will be

the establishment of mechanisms to dispel the notion of impunity, hold people accountable for major crimes perpetrated during Syria's conflict, and discourage any further lawlessness. The role of international judicial institutions will likely be crucial, especially given the considerable influence of the government and security apparatus on Syria's judiciary.

For refugees to return, they need assurances that they will have access to justice and that accountability measures will be in place to address their concerns. While fully meeting their needs may be too difficult right now, especially in regime-controlled areas, the international community can prepare them for eventual judicial processes.

Refugees could be advised on their legal rights under the Syrian system, particularly in light of the large number of legal disputes—including over housing, land, and property rights—that will likely accompany an end to the conflict. In fact, the creation of a cadre of Syrian lawyers or paralegals familiar with the country's legal frameworks and the rights guaranteed through international conventions could go a long way in enabling Syrians to fend for

themselves. They could inform refugees of their rights and responsibilities, educate them on the legislative changes regarding private property, and further raise their confidence. Such a cadre could also help address the likely shortage in lawyers and judges capable of dealing with the anticipated disputes.

Given the ethnic, sectarian, and political nature of the Syrians' displacement, the development of trusted and skilled com-

munity-based mediators could also help returnees settle potential local disputes. In addition, they could help the international community vet potential partners in the reconstruction process and provide insights into local needs.

The international community must also adopt measures to ensure that the current Syrian laws addressing mandatory conscription, political detainees, and the disappeared become a central part of discussions in both Geneva and Astana. Ongoing political negotiations must include an examination of new laws pertaining to property rights and urban development and their implications for refugees, particularly regarding the seizure of assets. The property rights of women are chiefly important, as many more households are now headed by females. Traditionally, in Syria, most property is registered in the male's name, and even when it is registered in the female's name, she typically does not have access to the deed. This situation will make it much easier for local authorities to deny access to properties, especially in areas where the regime is tampering with refugees' rights.

The creation of a cadre of Syrian lawyers or paralegals familiar with the country's legal frameworks and the rights guaranteed through international conventions could go a long way in enabling Syrians to fend for themselves.

Ensure That Reconstruction Does Not Empower the Regime

From the international community's perspective, reconstruction efforts would bolster stability and provide job opportunities that would, in turn, represent an incentive for refugees to return. However, while this may be the case for some refugees, most of the project's focus group participants stated that they would not return if economic opportunities were not accompanied by security guarantees and political change.

Further, wide-scale funding provided through the central state would likely just empower the regime, even in instances where assistance is provided at the local level. This is partly because the regime has already exploited the conflict, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, to create networks of local intermediaries run by individuals it trusts—many of whom have emerged as prominent warlords.¹⁷⁶ Within the areas it controls, the regime would likely use any reconstruction funding to rebuild what it destroyed and portray itself as the indispensable interlocutor for reconstruction.

This would bolster the regime's legitimacy and sway over funding priorities, giving it a tremendous source of power. It would also further cement the regime's political, economic, and social order that centers on warlords and population transfers.

However, despite these concerns and given that some states are still keen to start rebuilding, the international community could feasibly commence work in areas that have been devastated yet remain outside regime control. Notwithstanding the political tensions among international players in Syria, support for reconstruction in these areas would help encourage internally displaced populations to return to their homes. It would also help create a participatory model for reconstruction that includes locals in the planning, design, and implementation process—and takes into account postconflict social sensitivities.

Should realpolitik prevail and reconstruction funding be made available in regime-held areas, several measures must be taken. These include establishing vetting mechanisms for local entities that will receive international funding and requiring that any money spent inside Syria be conditional on people being able to return to their areas of origin and recover their properties. The latter is critical given the regime's considerable efforts at various times to re-engineer Syria's political and demographic map through population transfers and new vetting mechanisms.¹⁷⁷

Support for reconstruction in these areas [not controlled by the regime] would help create a participatory model for reconstruction that includes locals in the planning, design, and implementation process—and takes into account post-conflict social sensitivities.

In this context, any political settlement must also provide alternatives for refugees unable to return to their areas of origin, particularly those that witnessed ethnic and sectarian cleansing or where populations were subjected to sieges or other major crimes. The alternatives could include compensation for lost properties or the establishment of substitute locations for resettlement should refugees opt for this.

Respect the Right of Refugees to a Voluntary Return

Given the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, the international community must reinvigorate its efforts to respect both the right of refugees to a voluntary return and the non-refoulement principle. This is critical in light of increasing demands in host countries for the forced repatriation of refugees. And it means not only defending the idea of non-refoulement but also reducing the factors in host countries that push refugees to return home prematurely, as well as addressing the factors in Syria preventing a return. In other words, it is about both limiting the debilitating conditions in host countries that deny refugees a dignified life and addressing legal and security measures in Syria that deny refugees the ability to return to their homes.

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, the international community should support measures to boost the economies of host countries, particularly Lebanon and Jordan, and build their capacities to engage in service delivery. This would enhance the resilience of these countries and help safeguard the dignity and rights of both refugees and locals. In turn, Lebanon and Jordan should roll back their more restrictive residency and labor policies. It is in their long-term interests to do so, as the illegal status of refugees increases their vulnerability to exploitation and expands the informal economy. This, in turn, opens the

door for considerable illegal activity and provides ample room for spoilers to capitalize on the dissatisfaction of refugees and locals alike.

... [the international community should reduce] the factors in host countries that push refugees to return home prematurely, as well as address the factors in Syria preventing a return.

More sustained dialogue between international actors and policymakers in Lebanon and Jordan is needed, and it must be focused on upholding the right of voluntary return. Together, they should outline the requirements of a dignified life

for refugees and the policies needed to meet them. They should also consider the profound, often existential, identity-related concerns permeating the discussion on refugees in both Lebanon and Jordan. Otherwise, the principle of voluntary return loses its meaning and refugees may increasingly consider a return home under highly dangerous circumstances.

Support for host countries should also be expanded to include the financing of infrastructure projects. Such projects could enable better service provision and increase livelihood opportunities for both locals and refugees, especially in the poorest regions of Lebanon and Jordan where many refugees reside. They could also address some of the sources of tension between locals and refugees and bolster prospects for continued stability.

The return of refugees is a process laden with difficulty. In the case of Syrian refugees, the ordeal of their departure, combined with the survival of a regime accused of crimes against humanity, makes their return exceedingly challenging. No political settlement and no voluntary return will be sustainable unless it accounts for refugees' needs and circumstances. Their voices must be heard. And it is the international community's duty to ensure that they can live in dignity and that their basic conditions for a return to Syria are met. If not, the effects of Syria's conflict may spread further into neighboring countries and beyond the Middle East.

ANNEX I: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

THE CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER launched its project, *Triggers for the Return of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon*, in October 2016. It included both qualitative and quantitative analysis using primary and secondary material. Central to the methodology was a series of field-based focus group discussions (FGDs) that solicited the perspectives of Syrian refugees. These discussions were supplemented by desk research, a literature review, roundtable discussions, workshops, meetings, and interviews.

The desk research focused on compiling and analyzing existing information and data about the geographic composition of the refugee populations in Lebanon and Jordan. It was instrumental in determining the refugees' areas of origin, their demographic characteristics, and the challenges they face. It also helped to shape the profiles of the focus group participants and the question guide used in the discussions.

This research was accompanied by a literature review, roundtable discussions, workshops, and one-on-one meetings. The literature review included studies on the conditions Syrian refugees face in host countries, as well as comparable case studies from other countries and regions. In one roundtable, the project team brought together individuals working with Syrian and international nongovernmental organizations, activists, journalists, and researchers to consider the key challenges and lessons learned from historical cases of displacement and repatriation. The participants also explored the relative importance of “push factors” in the host country versus “pull factors” in the country of origin and how they may lead to different forms of repatriation, whether mass, staggered, cyclical, or other. In two other roundtables, the team brought together practitioners and academics to discuss

the dynamics of postconflict reconstruction following the April 2017 Brussels conference on Syria and analyze the principal findings of Carnegie's project and key policy recommendations.

The project also organized two workshops. One focused on the challenges of return from a comparative perspective, looking at the experiences of refugees and internally displaced populations from Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq, as well as the lessons learned. The other workshop explored the prospects for a sustainable political settlement and refugee repatriation in postconflict Syria. In particular, it examined key issues likely to influence refugee return, including housing, land and property rights, transitional justice, war economies, and the role of civil society organizations and tribal leaders in facilitating return.

Field-Based Research

The field-based research included two rounds of FGDs with refugees, as well as one-on-one interviews with select individuals. The focus group approach was chosen because it allowed for a nuanced discussion of politically and socially sensitive issues. The team also conducted a mini survey with the second round of focus group participants so as to allow for a finer understanding of individual responses during their discussions. The key findings were supplemented and validated through the one-on-one interviews, roundtable discussions, and workshops.

Focus Group Methodology

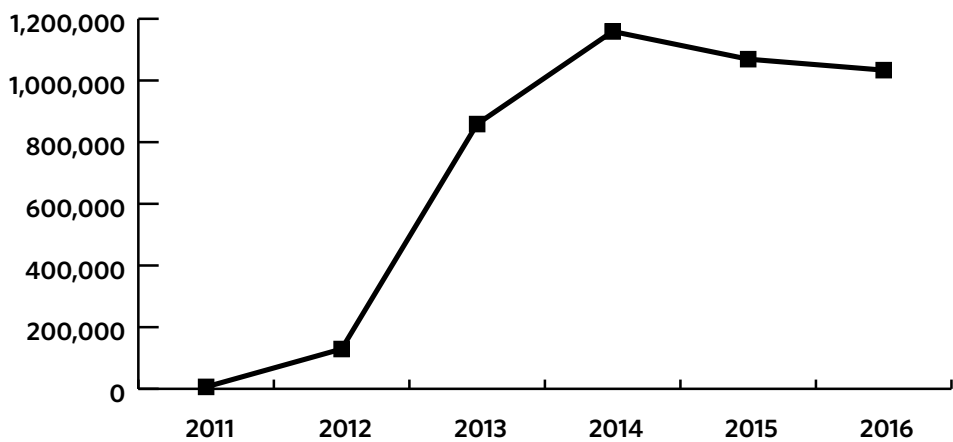
Four main criteria were deemed central for defining the focus group profiles: area of origin of participating refugees, area of settlement, gender, and age, as well as other socioeconomic variables. The area of origin was important for determining the conditions at the time of departure and, in turn, the attitudes toward return. Area of settlement allowed the project team to better understand the varying conditions in the host countries. The refugees' ages, gender, and socioeconomic and legal status were useful to better assess the impact of demography on political attitudes toward return. While some statistics were readily available, such as age and gender, other data, including the governorates and towns of origin of the refugees, were more scattered across a significant number of UNHCR reports.

To construct an approximate picture of the refugees' demographic characteristics and areas of origin—up until April 2015 for Lebanon and September 2016 for Jordan—the project team consolidated the widespread UNHCR information into one coherent dataset. The information for Jordan was dated close enough to the project's launch date to be used as is. However, for Lebanon, the project team assumed that the 10 percent decline in aggregate registered refugee figures recorded during the April 2015–September 2016 period was proportionally distributed across governorates and towns. In other words, the composition of the registered refugee population was more or less the same in April 2015 and November 2016. (See figure 4 below and figure 1 earlier in the report.)

The team also used data published in various UNHCR reports to identify refugee settlement locations within host countries and, in turn, the areas where focus groups would take place. Even though refugees tended to move around, the impact of these movements was not deemed significant enough to affect the focus group profiles. In addition, the demographic profiles of the FGDs were made to resemble as closely as possible the demographic profiles of refugees identified in both countries by the UNHCR, as well as their areas of settlement.

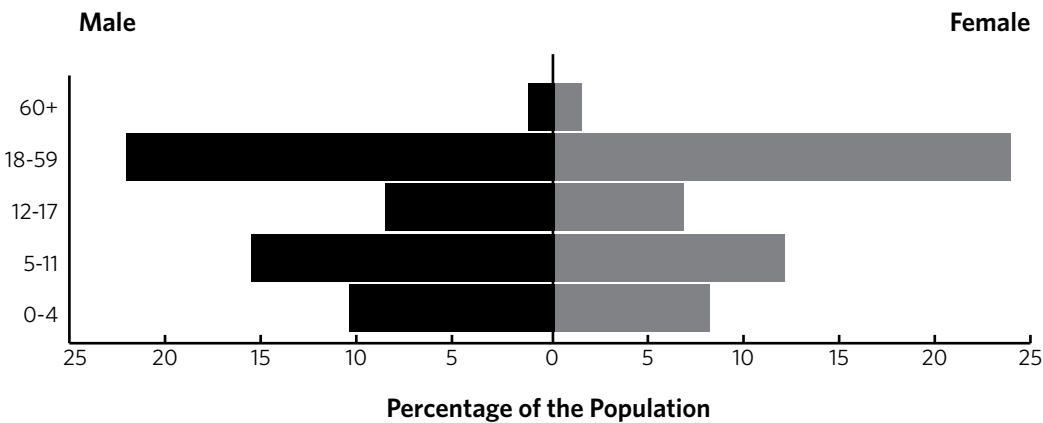
Figure 4. **General Demographics of Refugees**

Registered Refugee Population Growth in Lebanon, 2011-2016



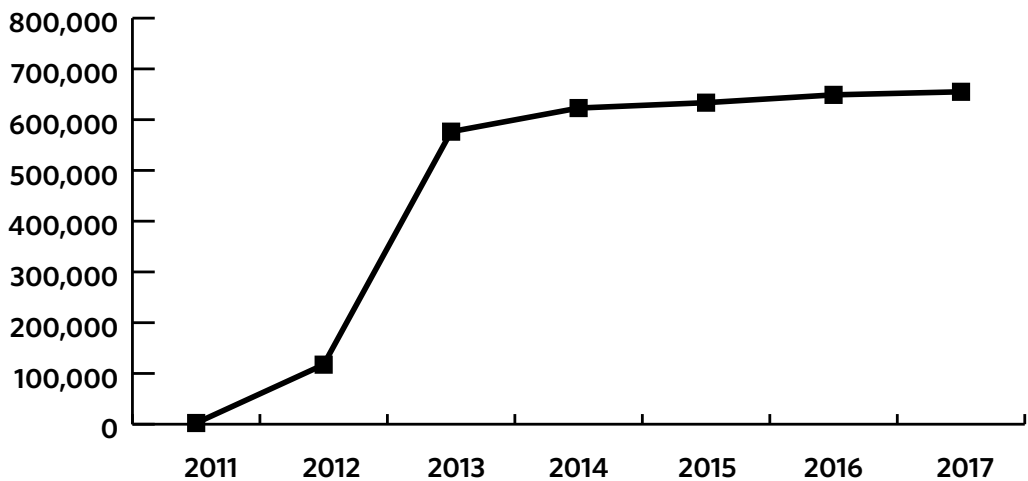
Source: Hana Addam El-Ghali, Roula Berjaoui, and Jennifer Deknight, *Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Lebanon* (Beirut: UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States and Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2017). Based on 2016 UNDESA and UNHCR data.

Demographics of Registered Refugees in Lebanon, by Age and Sex



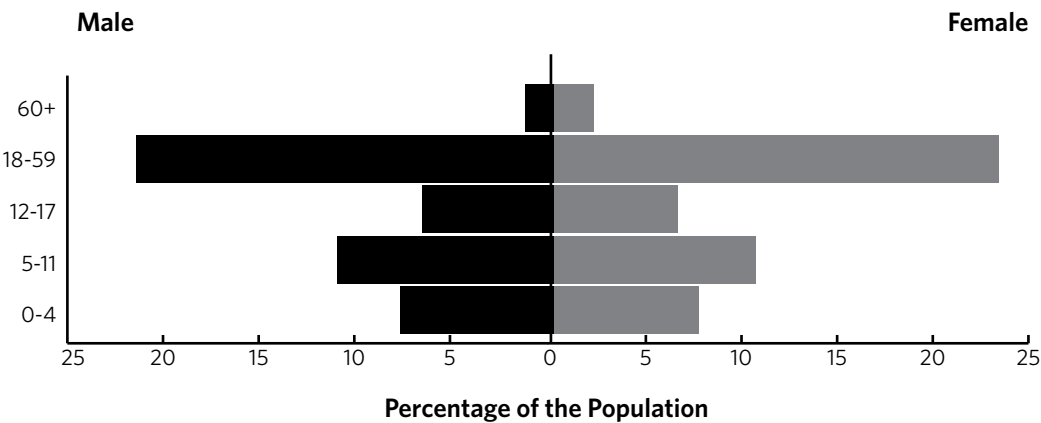
Source: UNHCR, “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Demography,” UNHCR, January 31, 2018, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>.

Registered Refugee Population Growth in Jordan, 2011-2017



Source: UNHCR, “Registered Syrians in Jordan,” UNHCR, October 15, 2017, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60421>.

Demographics of Registered Refugees in Jordan, by Age and Sex



Source: UNHCR, “Registered Syrians in Jordan,” UNHCR, October 15, 2017, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60421>.

Focus Group Profiles

The project team carried out the field work in two phases: between January and March 2017 and between May and August 2017. Phase I included nine FGDs in Lebanon and eight in Jordan. Phase II included another nine FGDs in Lebanon and thirteen in Jordan. In between the phases, the team assessed the findings from the first round, adjusted the question guide as needed, and prepared a mini survey for Phase II participants to fill out before every discussion. In total, twenty-one focus group discussions were carried out in Jordan and eighteen in Lebanon (see tables 1 and 2). Fifty-one percent of participants were male and 49 percent were female, ranging in age from twenty-five years old and younger (youth) to fifty years old and older (middle-aged).

Table 1. Focus Group Discussions, January–March 2017

FGD Number	Country	Location	Demographics and Area of Origin	Date
1	Lebanon	Beirut	Males, mixed origins	January 24, 2017
2	Lebanon	Beirut	Males, unregistered, mixed origins	February 1, 2017
3	Lebanon	Beirut	Female heads of households, mixed origins	February 6, 2017
4	Lebanon	Tripoli	Males, worked in Lebanon previously, Aleppo	February 8, 2017
5	Jordan	Amman	Males, mixed origins	February 11, 2017
6	Jordan	Amman	Females, mixed origins	February 12, 2017
7	Lebanon	Saadnayel-Beqaa	Males, working age, Homs	February 19, 2017
8	Lebanon	Saadnayel-Beqaa	Males, working age, Daraa	February 19, 2017
9	Lebanon	Nabatiyeh	Males, mixed origins	February 23, 2017
10	Lebanon	Nabatiyeh	Females, Aleppo	February 23, 2017
11	Lebanon	Saadnayel-Beqaa	Mixed, Zabadani	February 24, 2017
12	Jordan	Amman	Females, Damascus	March 2, 2017
13	Jordan	Amman	Males, no work permits, mixed origins	March 2, 2017
14	Jordan	Irbid	Males, Homs	March 6, 2017
15	Jordan	Irbid	Female heads of households, mixed origins	March 6, 2017
16	Jordan	Mafrq	Females, Daraa	March 7, 2017
17	Jordan	Zaatari	Females, mixed origins	April 23, 2017

Table 2. **Focus Group Discussions, May–August 2017**

FGD Number	Country	Location	Demographics and Areas of Origin	Date
18	Lebanon	Tripoli	Male youths, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor	May 9, 2017
19	Lebanon	Tripoli	Mixed youths, mixed origins	May 19, 2017
20	Lebanon	Tripoli	Female heads of households, mixed origins	June 6, 2017
21	Lebanon	Tripoli	Male youths, Idlib	June 6, 2017
22	Lebanon	GhazzeH-Beqaa	Females, Rif Dimashq	July 17, 2017
23	Lebanon	GhazzeH-Beqaa	Males, Rif Dimashq	July 17, 2017
24	Lebanon	Saida	Females, mixed origins	July 29, 2017
25	Lebanon	Saida	Males, mixed origins	July 29, 2017
26	Lebanon	Borj Ham-moud	Females, Syrian-Armenian, Aleppo	August 7, 2017
27	Jordan	Mafraq	Females, Homs	August 9, 2017
28	Jordan	Mafraq	Males, Homs	August 9, 2017
29	Jordan	Amman	Females, Homs	August 10, 2017
30	Jordan	Amman	Males, Rif Dimashq	August 10, 2017
31	Jordan	Amman	Males, Daraa	August 10, 2017
32	Jordan	Amman	Females, Rif Dimashq	August 13, 2017
33	Jordan	Amman	Mixed, Aleppo I	August 13, 2017
34	Jordan	Amman	Mixed, Aleppo II	August 13, 2017
35	Jordan	Zarqa	Females, Rif Dimashq	August 14, 2017
36	Jordan	Zarqa	Females, Daraa	August 14, 2017
37	Jordan	Zarqa	Females, Homs	August 14, 2017
38	Jordan	Irbid	Males, Daraa	August 15, 2017
39	Jordan	Irbid	Males, Rif Dimashq	August 15, 2017

Due to the sensitive nature of the discussion topics, the focus group coordinators and recruiters made a conscious effort to ensure group homogeneity. The topic of return and political settlements is complex, and, in heterogeneous settings, participants might have been compelled to respond differently, given the potential risks of being viewed as dissenters within the community. Essentially, the project team sought to avoid situations where participants might speak untruthfully so as to protect themselves or their families. Of course,

political inclinations were very difficult to assess and only became apparent through successive, probing questions. In Lebanon, the majority of refugees presented as anti-regime, with a minority presenting as pro-regime; whereas, in Jordan, most refugees presented as anti-regime.

The coordinators and recruiters also tried to avoid including individuals who knew each other, but this was equally difficult to ascertain at times. In a few discussions, the recruiters inevitably included family members or neighbors in the same group. This issue was addressed by discounting any responses that indicated that family influence was playing a role.

Focus Group Discussions

The questions used for the focus groups were phrased to minimize the risk of influencing the respondents' answers. The discussions lasted, on average, one hour and a half, excluding subsequent probes. The moderators asked about, among other topics, their reasons for leaving Syria, their living conditions in Lebanon and Jordan, their perspectives on their futures and the prospects of returning to Syria, and the Syria they would like to see. Ample room was left for their own interpretation of the topics being presented. In addition, a mini survey was shared with Phase II participants to garner some additional information about them and allow the team to better triangulate responses and provide a more nuanced reading of individual positions on key issues.

Data Limitations

The limited availability of certain data impacted the analysis of project findings. For example, there was insufficient information about the sizable, unregistered refugee populations in both Lebanon and Jordan. Jordan's last national census in 2015 estimated the number of Syrian refugees to be 1.27 million, and still only around 659,000 are registered as of March 2018.¹⁷⁸ In Lebanon, the size difference is less dramatic; of the total 1.5 million refugees estimated to be living in the country in 2016, around 1 million are currently registered.¹⁷⁹ Consequently, while the project team was able to conduct FGDs with unregistered refugees, the macro picture related to their broader demographic characteristics and areas of origin could not be factored into the analysis.

The absence of publicly available information also meant that the project team was unable to combine the datasets detailing the geographic origins of refugees and their settlement locations in Lebanon and Jordan. Therefore, the team was unable to identify how many refugees from specific areas in Syria ended up settling in the various geographic regions in Lebanon and Jordan. To mitigate the problem, the team solicited the input of local partners, key informants, and consultants to help identify and recruit participants based on predetermined focus group profiles. Such input also included the employment and legal status of focus group participants.

Because of data limitations, other metrics that might have affected the participants' attitudes toward return were also not usable. Foremost among these was the phase of displacement. Assuming that the conditions under which an individual left Syria would impact his or her attitude toward return, it would have been possible to differentiate between the groups that left during earlier periods of the war and those who left as military operations began to escalate. While figures for registered populations are readily available, the data are not correlated with on-the-ground developments. This is partly because refugees were often displaced multiple times within Syria before making their way over the border. This time lag was further extended by the delayed registration of refugees with the UNHCR, as a result either of backlogs or sometimes the reluctance of individuals to immediately register. Discussions with key informants indicated that the time between crossing a border and registration often ranged from six months to a year. Furthermore, in May 2015, the Lebanese government requested that the UNHCR end the registration process. This particular shortcoming was partially addressed through the mini survey for Phase II participants. The survey revealed that most of them had left Syria in 2013 as a direct result of insecurity and military operations that targeted them or their families.

Terms and Definitions

The project team defined youth as all those refugees below age twenty-five years old. The areas of origins referenced in the report correspond to governorates and not cities, unless stated otherwise. The categories "pro-regime" and "anti-regime" were favored over "pro-regime" and "pro-opposition," as a significant number of anti-regime participants did not identify as pro-opposition per se and were critical of both the armed and political oppositions. However, they did define themselves as anti-regime. Finally, all the participants' names have been changed for security reasons and to maintain their privacy.

NOTES

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Houmam al-Sayed is a contemporary Syrian artist. Born in Mesyaf, Syria, in 1981, he graduated from the Sculpture Department at Damascus University in 2003.

Al-Sayed's distinctive portraiture shows compressed figures, with upward facial features, that represent a loss of hope and a new beginning. In his most recent work, al-Sayed tackles the effects of the Syrian conflict, with recurrent themes of displacement, poverty, and destruction. Indeed, his work often depicts families fleeing or men huddling in streets. Another distinctive trademark of al-Sayed's work is a flattened cap covering one eye, reflecting the current state of affairs in Syria: people refusing to see the full picture and choosing the one angle of (hi)story that works for them.

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