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WHERE TO NOW? AN ANALYSIS OF SYRIAN REFUGEE
REPATRIATION DECISIONMAKING PROCESSES

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I. Introduction

Syria looks very different today than it did nine years ago. Nearly a decade of violent civil war has cost the Syrian people an unimaginable price: their livelihoods, their opportunities, and their homes. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than half of Syria's pre-war population is displaced: over 5.6 million people have fled the destruction of this war, and another 6.2 have become internally displaced within the nation's borders.¹ As Syrian refugees spend another year of their lives separated from their homes and uncertain about their futures, one question begs an answer: Will Syrian refugees ever return home? This research seeks to answer this question by relating the domestic political climate, economy, and security situation in Syria (*pull factors*) to the refugee decision-making process surrounding repatriation.

The global refugee crisis caused by the Syrian civil war has had destabilizing effects on Syria's regional neighbors, particularly Jordan and Lebanon. This instability has created problems within these host countries, such as a strain on scarce resources, barriers to education and adequate housing, inhibited access to aid, and a generally negative impact on day-to-day life for all parties involved. While the conditions in host countries undoubtedly affect Syrian refugees' decisions of whether or not to return home, these push factors do not adequately explain whether and why Syrian refugees are choosing to repatriate. Because these host country conditions differ – from a complete lack of economic opportunities in Lebanon to discouraging-yet-surmountable bureaucratic hurdles in Jordan – they cannot be the sole driving force behind repatriation decisions. For this reason, this study will analyze the common factor: the situation on the ground in Syria.

¹ UNHCR, "Operational Portal: Refugee Situations," Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response, April 17, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

Refugees living in exile look on as the security conditions in Syria rapidly change: areas of control shift, fighting ebbs and flows throughout the north, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) wreaks havoc on an already-broken healthcare system, and external actors further entangle themselves in this proxy conflict. This research argues that the presence of certain external actors, most notably Iran, amplifies the worsening security conditions in Syria and therefore has an adverse effect on refugee decisions to repatriate. We have chosen to focus on Iran over other external actors because of the Islamic Republic's strategy of culturally embedding itself into Syrian society in order to bolster the Assad regime.

This research will attempt to answer whether Syrians are choosing to repatriate and the reasons behind those decisions. Ultimately this project searches for overarching patterns in the decision-making process in an attempt to determine common themes and identify the conditions necessary for repatriation. In doing so it will answer the question: *Are Syrian refugees in Jordan or Lebanon choosing to repatriate? Why or why not?* It combines information learned from oral history projects of Syrian refugees, publicly available reports, and academic literature with an analysis of the situation on the ground in Syria, and tries to understand whether there is a correlation between this decision-making process and factors existing outside of the host communities.

As the Syrian refugee crisis continues with an indefinite end date, regional neighbors grow desperate to resolve domestic issues by easing the burdens they face by hosting millions of Syrian refugees. Additionally, Iran's attempt to support the Assad regime by manipulating the demographic composition of government-controlled areas will continue to affect the feasibility of refugee repatriation – in other words, refugees cannot return home if there is no home. This situation ultimately affects the future security and stability of the Levant and the emerging role

of Iran in Syria. The question of Syrian refugee repatriation is one that requires an answer; the longer this crisis continues and Syrian lives hang in the balance, the more difficult and complicated an answer will become for both Arab host countries and the international community.

II. What do we know about refugee repatriation?

Placement of research within present body of work

As the length of the Syrian civil war approaches a decade, there is a growing body of academic literature which addresses the refugee crisis in the Middle East. The academic community has produced plenty of literature about the refugee experience; those affected by it have begun to focus on durable solutions, one of which is repatriation. Literature about repatriation thus far has concluded that refugees prioritize safety and security above other considerations, such as access to basic necessities, when evaluating their decision to return. In general, the existing literature approaches the topic of displaced Syrians in a refugee-centric way, providing a case-by-case narrative of the refugee experience as a way to give agency to this vulnerable population; this research targets an international humanitarian audience. This literature gives insight as to of Syrian refugees' experiences in host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon and covers topics like access to labor markets and economic opportunities, navigation of a foreign healthcare system, gender-based violence, daily life in the camps, and children's educational rights.

However, the existing literature has not yet accounted for the fact that some Syrian refugees have chosen to return home despite the ongoing conflict. This research will seek to

connect the current situation in Syria to the decision-making process of whether to repatriate; it will analyze the security situation in Syria and tie these conditions to refugee decisions.

Repatriation theory

There is a widespread assumption that refugees only return when the conflict in their home country has ended. However, some refugees choose to return even when circumstances in their home country have not yet changed. One reason why some refugees choose to repatriate back to conflict zone they had originally decided to flee is that the conditions in their host country are unsafe and/or intolerable. Though the number of returnees is not large enough to comprise an overarching “trend,” these instances of return are still an important consideration when studying refugee repatriation.

A broad variety of factors contribute to refugee repatriation, and these factors differ greatly even among individuals. One critical idea to consider when analyzing repatriation outcomes is that different types of repatriation are subject to different variations.² For example, Barry Stein and Frederick Cuny situate four factors influencing repatriations along a continuum.³ The four factors comprising this analytical tool include: whether repatriation is unassisted or organized, and if so, by whom; to what extent the decision to return is voluntary, encouraged, induced, or forced; whether the return is at an individual, household, small group, or collective level; whether there has been a change as to why the individual initially left her or his home country.⁴ Stein and Cuny further define this framework by explaining that multiple variations to each type of repatriation exist. For example, refugees can repatriate due to fundamental changes

² Barry N. Stein and Frederick C. Cuny, “Refugee Repatriation during Conflict: Protection and Post-Return Assistance.” (*Development in Practice* 4, no. 3 (October 1994): 173–87).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/096145249100077811>.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

made to the politics or regime of their home country, such as refugees who returned to Namibia and Ethiopia. Another variation is refugees repatriating to areas that are not controlled by the original government of their home country; such as Iraqi refugees who returned to parts of Iraq that were controlled by rival political forces.⁵

Between 2011 and 2020 various countries around the world have become hosts to the 5.6 million Syrian refugees who have fled their homes. Repatriation, is not only the anticipated but the expected outcome of refugee crises – and this notion is not exclusive to Syrian refugees. The host countries and other external actors, such as the UNHCR, have expressed preference for repatriation as an “easy” solution once the conflict in the home country has come to an end. Nevertheless, the consideration of all factors influencing repatriation decision-making proves this idea to be somewhat misleading.⁶ Refugees, in general, have numerous concerns that factor into their decision-making process when faced with the idea of repatriation. For example, an individual might have concerns about his or her own personal security and other needs upon return. Many refugees do not return or if they do consider repatriation, they have different opinions about when it’s the right time to do so.⁷ Additionally, some choose to self-repatriate even when the conflict in their home country is not over.

At its core, the idea of migration itself is deeply complex and requires the consideration of a range of factors. When deciding to flee from home, an individual must account for where to go, how to get there, and all of the risks they could face along the way. Once an individual has reached a destination and has resettled, she or he will be forced to face many more challenges in the host state. This nexus between the refugees’ own personal decision-making process and the

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Susan Zimmermann, “Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope.” (*Population, Space and Place* 18, no. 1 (2010): 45–57). <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.647>.

⁷ Ibid

multitude of factors bearing on those decisions are two important issues to consider in an analysis of refugee repatriation. In his study *Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi*, Khaled Koser concluded that refugees compare their current conditions to their future conditions and make a final decision based on four factors.⁸ These factors are: the information refugees receive about their home country, expectations, perceptions, and experiences.⁹ Furthermore, decisions aren't necessarily made at an individual level; In some cases, the decision to repatriate is made as a household or community.¹⁰

Although Koser's argument is valid, an explanation of the host country push factors contributing to repatriation decisions is not adequate. For example, in their research about young Mayan refugees returning to Guatemala, Rousseau *et al.* deliberate on the idea that safety is not the only factor that impacts the decision to return. The economic and social circumstances at their home country are also other factors that impede repatriations.¹¹ Issues such as shortages to land access, lack of employment, and the disappointing governmental guarantees all have an impact as well. Other scholars have also pointed to other factors that impede repatriation such as long-term sustainability, peace, and familial factors. Rousseau *et al.* explain that refugees returning to their home country is still very much part of the war and not just an event that occurs when the conflict is over.¹² For some refugees, returning home and acclimating themselves to new circumstances in their homes is just as difficult as adjusting to the new culture of their host

⁸ Khalid Koser, "Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 1997): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/10.1.1>.

⁹ Susan Zimmermann, "Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope." (*Population, Space and Place* 18, no. 1 (2010): 45–57). <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.647>.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Cécile Rousseau, Maria Morales, and Patricia Foxen. "Going Home: Giving Voice to Memory Strategies of Young Mayan Refugees Who Returned to Guatemala as a Community." (*Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 25, no. 2 (2001): 135–68). <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1010600615482>.

¹² Ibid

country.¹³ Additionally, new complications arise as refugees begin to return, such as individuals facing barriers to traveling to their original cities, neighborhoods, or even homes. It is often the case that refugees who spend a long time in exile find it more difficult to repatriate.¹⁴

The search for durable solutions

The UNHCR and the international community envisage three so-called durable solutions to refugee displacement: local integration in the host country, resettlement to a third country, or return to their home country, with the last considered the optimal solution by both host countries and the international community.¹⁵ International humanitarian law rooted in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol requires returns to be voluntary, safe, and dignified. These principles are predicated on an assumption that refugees will generally return voluntarily once the conditions precipitating their flight have ended. However, as crises become protracted, voluntary, safe, and dignified returns become increasingly elusive, and their sustainability undermined.

Decades of refugee crises indicate that forced displacement situations are likely to be protracted, and the average duration in exile for current refugees estimated at 10.3 years.¹⁶ Studies show that return has mostly been only partial and reintegration in countries of origin beset with problems.¹⁷ Although there is a widely held belief that a less violent landscape should

¹³ Barbara E Harrell-Bond, "Repatriation: Under What Conditions Is It the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research." (*African Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (April 1989): 41). <https://doi.org/10.2307/524493>.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Niels Harild, Asger Christensen, and Roger Zetter, "Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement," Refugee Studies Centre, August 31, 2015, <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-refugee-return-triggers-constraints-and-lessons-on-addressing-the-development-challenges-of-forced-displacement>

¹⁶ The World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

¹⁷ Niels Harild, Asger Christensen, and Roger Zetter, "Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement," Refugee Studies Centre, August 31, 2015, <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-refugee-return-triggers-constraints-and-lessons-on-addressing-the-development-challenges-of-forced-displacement>)

spur large-scale returns, that is not always the case. In fact, the absence of fighting is rarely a singular trigger for return. In some cases, the actual returns have taken place to areas that were far from being peaceful and stable.¹⁸ Although this may seem counterintuitive, it reinforces the argument that refugee decisions to repatriate are driven by a personal, micro-level, complex calculus that takes into consideration priorities as well as conditions inside the home country. Literature shows that four priorities are central to refugee decision-making about return: safety and security, livelihoods, services, and access to land, property, and assets.¹⁹ The refugee definition of safety is multidimensional and encompasses physical, legal, and material aspects.²⁰

Refugee return is not a linear event: it often includes an iterative, staggered, or cyclical process.²¹ The first refugees to return tend to be individual family members who go on “look-see” trips to assess the condition of livelihood assets such as land and housing, and explore the basis for a permanent return of the family or community. However, the confiscation of property in the home country as part of a process of spatial segregation along ethnic or sectarian lines may critically block returns or integration. Many refugees engage in ongoing and circular migration to maximize access to livelihoods and services.²²

¹⁸ The World Bank, “The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis,” The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

¹⁹ Niels Harild, Asger Christensen, and Roger Zetter, “Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement,” Refugee Studies Centre, August 31, 2015, <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-refugee-return-triggers-constraints-and-lessons-on-addressing-the-development-challenges-of-forced-displacement>)

²⁰ The World Bank, “The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis,” The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

²¹ Niels Harild, Asger Christensen, and Roger Zetter, “Sustainable Refugee Return: Triggers, Constraints and Lessons on Addressing the Development Challenges of Forced Displacement,” Refugee Studies Centre, August 31, 2015, <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-refugee-return-triggers-constraints-and-lessons-on-addressing-the-development-challenges-of-forced-displacement>)

²² Ibid

Refugees are not homogenous and their decisions to repatriate are further conditioned by their socioeconomic status, religious or ethnic identity, political affiliation, and gender. Women may face a particular challenge during displacement as well as after they return because they usually have less access to resources, fewer opportunities, and less power and influence than men. As a result, it may be more difficult for women and female-headed households to secure livelihoods upon return; ensure the restitution of or access to housing, land, and property; and access other essential services.²³

Some existing literature argues that it is too early to discuss Syrian refugee repatriation. Vignal asserts that the international community cannot have a conversation about repatriation until there is a durable political solution and peace in Syria, otherwise the situation on the ground is too volatile for them to return without risk.²⁴ Despite this statement, however, Syrian refugees are defying Vignal's logic as they voluntarily choose to return home. This occurrence is especially evident since Jordan reopened its Nassib border crossing in October 2018; since that time, the world has witnessed over 20,000 Syrians return home.²⁵ This research will remove projections of whether the international community should start discussing repatriation. Rather, it will accept that limited, voluntary repatriation has begun taking place and will seek to answer the question of why. It will also investigate why those who have not repatriated yet have chosen to remain displaced despite this trend of repatriation.

²³ The World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

²⁴ Leïla Vignal, "Perspectives on the Return of Syrian Refugees," Perspectives on the return of Syrian refugees | Forced Migration Review (Forced Migration Review, February 2018), <https://www.fmreview.org/syria2018/vignal>)

²⁵ Elizabeth Turnbull, "20,000 Syrians Have Returned Home since Border Reopening - UNHCR," Jordan Times, July 4, 2019, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/20000-syrians-have-returned-home-border-reopening---unhcr>)

International law, as per the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, requires that refugee returns be both safe and voluntary.²⁶ Countries like Jordan and Lebanon are attempting to reconcile their desperation for relief from hosting such large numbers of Syrians with their adherence to this law. Despite ongoing violence, some refugees have recently repatriated to Syria. This research will analyze the factors which contributed to the decision-making process of these repatriations.

Existing literature about refugees also addresses the role of push and pull factors in repatriation trends. According to migration theory, push factors include factors that cause refugees to leave one place, such as conditions in the host country, including the lack of economic opportunity. Pull factors, on the other hand, are those that attract refugees to a particular place; these may include perception of a better life or a desire to return to one's home. In the case of Syrian refugees, the interplay between these categories of factors may contribute to their decision to repatriate. Rather than focus on conditions within the host countries themselves and push factors, this research project will set out to understand Syrian refugee repatriation through a study of pull factors in Syria. Since these pull factors have been sufficient for refugees to overlook ongoing violence within Syria's borders, the researchers are interested in identifying them and analyzing their influence.

The fact that some Syrian refugees have begun returning home contradicts the existing literature. For example, a 2019 UN report found that most refugees in Lebanon and Jordan do not plan on repatriating in the near future, citing safety and security as their primary considerations.²⁷ Other research that includes interviews with Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan has found that safety

²⁶ United Nations, "The 1951 Refugee Convention," UNHCR, May 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/1951-refugee-convention.html>

²⁷ UNHCR, "Voluntary Returns of Syrian," Durable Solutions (UNHCR, January 31, 2020), <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74353>

ranks highly among their preconditions for repatriation: an end to aerial strikes, random checkpoints, arbitrary arrests, and the disbanding of armed militia groups. In addition to these security conditions, Syrians have also indicated that they would require other circumstances for return, such as regime change or an end to political oppression.²⁸ Despite all of these findings, though, limited numbers of Syrians have chosen to repatriate. This research will explore the gap between the current literature's contributions and the reality of the situation on the ground.

Iranian influence bearing on repatriation

Existing repatriation literature does not address the influence that external actors in Syria exert over the security situation there and whether that influence affects repatriation decisions. To address this shortcoming, this research will explore whether the presence of external forces, specifically the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), weigh into the refugee decision-making process.

There is sufficient literature available about the presence of the Iranian military and the IRGC in Syria. Despite this academic attention, few scholars have focused on Iran's influence on Syrian society. This gap in the literature may be due to the ambiguity that the Iranian regime strives for in its regional foreign policy. Though challenging due to the availability of information, an analysis of Iran's activity inside of Syria is not impossible. An important component of this research seeks to find how and whether Iran's influence in Syria from a security and societal perspective has an impact on refugees' repatriation decisions.

In order to maintain its strong and strategic alliance with President Bashar al-Assad, Iran has been expanding its influence in Syria beyond military aid. For example, Iran is now becoming economically involved with Syria by pursuing investment contracts on behalf of its

²⁸ Maha Yahya, "What Will It Take for Syrian Refugees to Return Home?" *Foreign Affairs*, May 28, 2018

major companies and conglomerates.²⁹ Through these efforts, Iran is working to expand the visibility and reach of Shia norms and practices among Syrians as it tries to embed itself culturally. For example, since 2011 and predominantly in 2016 mass Shia rituals such as Ashura - a day of mourning for fallen martyrs - have taken place in the streets of Damascus.³⁰ Therefore, a discussion of the ways in which Iran has been involved in Syria using soft power is crucial for understanding how it may impact refugee's decision-making in regard to returns.

Micro-level economic changes in Syria could also factor into repatriation. For instance, literature shows that Iran has formed alliances with Syrian businessmen that are supported by a newly established business council.³¹ Perhaps predictably, the key sectors in this strategic move have included oil and gas companies. However, Iran has since expanded its economic power to agriculture, tourism, real estate, and electric companies.³² It also has a strong influence on Syrian nationals who are sympathetic toward the Islamic Republic and its efforts in Syria. Iran has been working with these local partners to expand its economic and domestic influence using a bottom-up approach. If Syrians feel that there are economic opportunities present in Syria, then they may consider returning. However, it is important to take into consideration that the opposite effect may be true: that Iran's efforts in Syria might have a negative bearing on refugees'

²⁹ Sinan Hatahet, "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria." (Chatham House. Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 2019).

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

³⁰ Mahmoud Eskaf, "Damascus Haunted with Iran's Version of Ashura Rituals." (Middle East Observer. Middle East Observer, October 17, 2016). <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2016/10/15/damascus-haunted-with-irans-version-of-ashura-rituals/>.

³¹ Sinan Hatahet, "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria." (Chatham House. Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 2019).

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

³² Ibid

decisions to return. Despite this uncertainty, it is important to consider the effects that this Iranian economic strategy may have on different Syrian refugees.

Domestic politics in Iran also have an influence on how leadership is using Syria to gain economic leverage in the region. Because Iran is currently struggling to manage its economy in the face of severely restrictive sanctions as a part of the Trump Administration's maximum pressure policy, it has sought a potential market in Syria. Literature on how domestic issues in Iran potentially affect its foreign policy provides insight into Iran's motives and how these motives may have an effect on Syrian refugee repatriation. For example, Hatahet explains that by going into rural and remote areas, Iranians have built constituencies in neglected communities without much interference from the Assad regime or other foreign actors involved in Syria.³³ This move on its own has the capability to either affect the decision-making process of Syrian refugees positively or negatively, depending on the refugees' demographics. Comprehending Iran's motives on a regional level can facilitate a better understanding of Syria's political climate in terms of foreign interference.

Involvement in the domestic economy of Syria is not the only path Iran has chosen to intervene in Syrian politics. In their article "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria," Raja Abdulrahim and Benoit Faucon discuss the extent to which Iran has exerted influence on the Syrian public. Iran is furthering its involvement in Syrian domestic issues by targeting vulnerable Syrians who are mostly battered by war by offering "financial help, food, issuing Iranian ID cards, public services, and education."³⁴ This research hypothesizes that if some refugees are from or have families in these areas, then Iran's efforts in giving them stipends may have an

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Raja Abdulrahim and Faucon Benoit, "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria." (The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, March 26, 2019). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-moves-to-cement-its-influence-in-syria-11553632926>.

effect on repatriation. Iran has spread its influence from the eastern province of Deir Ezzour to the western cities bordering Lebanon. One of IRGC's main efforts in Syria is to attract the attention of Syrian locals who stayed in Syria during and after the war and who have nowhere to go in search for their basic needs. If these findings are accurate, they may be a contributing factor to the pull factors influencing Syrians to repatriate.

While Iran often benefits from instability in the region, in practice instability is a double-edged sword. An opportunistic Iran wants Syrians out of Lebanon so that refugees do not destabilize the country and cause disturbances with Iran's proxy militia group, Hezbollah. Iran does not benefit from instability in its proxies' host countries such as Lebanon, as understood by Hezbollah's October 2019 support for the Lebanese government amidst popular uprisings. Iran's actions also demonstrate a preference that refugees should return to Syria. In August 2019 Ali Asqar Khaji, senior aid for special political affairs to Iran's foreign minister, stressed the need for Syrian refugees to return to Syria.³⁵ Iran's efforts in Syria may be interpreted as trying to encourage Syrian refugees to return. However, the other side of Iran's efforts cannot be ignored.

Although Iran is a powerful Shia state, in Syria the IRGC's primary target has been the vulnerable Sunni locals in rural areas. In many cases, the IRGC offers goods and services such as food, housing, and education to this population. However, it is important to remember that Iran's goal is to change the religious demographic in Syria in a way that will benefit its long-term goals regionally. In order to do so, Iran has been persuading the Sunni Syrians to convert to Shiism. Researchers and experts have also discussed offers of joining the Iranian militia and fighting

³⁵ Islamic Republic News Agency, "FM's Senior Aide Confers with UN Secretary-General's Special Assistant." (IRNA English. IRNA English, August 2, 2019). <https://en.irna.ir/news/83421477/FM-s-senior-aide-confers-with-UN-Secretary-General-s-special>.

alongside the IRGC with Syrians themselves.³⁶ This offer may be enough to entice Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan to return to Syria. Abdulrahim and Faucon further explain that the locals they interviewed said, “In return for enlisting, the men are promised a guard corps ID card—allowing them to cross checkpoints without hassle—and \$200 a month. According to a 24-year old male resident from the nearby village of Jalaa, “From every family you find one or two people who have become Shiite,” he said. “They say they do it so they can find jobs, or they become Shiite so they can walk, and no one bothers them.”³⁷ This recruitment and conversion is happening under the watch of Bashar al-Assad in exchange for Iran’s crucial role in his “victory” over domestic opposition.

While some Sunni Syrians may have converted and Iran’s Shi`itization tactics seemed to have worked in certain areas, at other times it didn’t. In fact, it created a larger gap in Syria’s sectarian divide. For the past eight years Iran has been so focused on combating Assad’s enemies that both Assad and Iran ended up forgetting about establishing a national legitimization for the Syrian regime.³⁸ In order to put an end to further resistance, with the help of the IRGC, Assad deprived the majority of its civilians to basic services and humanitarian relief.³⁹ The Iranian aid has been going to Syrian Alawites, Shias or other communities loyal to the Assad regime.⁴⁰ This strategy just resulted in further displacement with more Syrians becoming refugees. Lastly it is one of the many reasons why Syrian refugees are not returning to Syria despite the pull factors.

³⁶ Raja Abdulrahim and Faucon Benoit, “Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria.” (The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, March 26, 2019). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-moves-to-cement-its-influence-in-syria-11553632926>.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, ""Mosaic Defence:" Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011–2016." (*The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2017): 18-67). <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxygw.wrlc.org/docview/1999053459?accountid=11243>.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

III. Methodology

This project sought to find a relationship between refugee repatriation decisions and pull factors on the ground in Syria, paying particular attention to the role of Iran. In order to accomplish this goal, the researchers have implemented a qualitative approach in order to determine whether and why Syrian refugees repatriate, and to explore the motivations behind those who do decide to return. The researchers were unable to conduct in-country research due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and so this project hinges on an in-depth analysis of the status of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as the ongoing and rapidly developing security situation in Syria. An important component of this research is information directly from the source: Syrian refugees. In order to access these accounts, the researchers examined a wide breadth of refugee first-hand accounts, such as those found in Dr. Wendy Pearlman's *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*.⁴¹ The researchers read these Syrian accounts in order to detect patterns among refugees in their decision-making processes, particularly as they related to pull factors from Syria.

In order to supplement the highly personalized information gained from these accounts, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants who have analytical insight into trends in refugee decision-making processes. These key informants included experts in academia, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations.

The researchers also analyzed the security and cultural imbalance in Syria caused by Iran. To better answer the question of why Syrian refugees choose to repatriate or not, it was important to analyze the security risks in Syria imposed by the Iranian regime. Additionally, the societal changes occurring in Syria needed to be taken into consideration as they may also have

⁴¹ Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Custom House, 2018))

an impact on refugee repatriation. A critical incentive in Iran's continued involvement in Syria is the fact that the country serves as a geographical land bridge, linking Iran to its Lebanon-based proxy, Hezbollah. Iran's activities point to plans for an extended presence in Syria, which may in turn discourage repatriation. To better comprehend Iran's role in regard to repatriation, we researched how Iran has used religion as a tool not only to recruit militiamen throughout Syria but also to help Assad change the demographic composition. By using Shia Islam and sectarianism as a tool, Iran has helped Assad displace more people and move the Syrian Shias who are loyal to him closer to the capital. These can all be dilemmas that factor in the decision-making process of refugees in terms of repatriation.

It is also important to keep in mind that Iran's foreign policy in the region is a key factor that drives its actions inside Syria. We conducted interviews with Iran experts and scholars outside of Iran so that it can help us have a better understanding of the regional security dilemma caused by Iran from various angles. In addition to asking about the role of Iran in refugee repatriation, the interviews inquired about Iranian regional foreign policy, the effects of Iran's influence in Syria, and specific Iranian activities in Syria. Due to restrictions caused by COVID-19, the researchers were able to conduct fourteen in-person interviews. We analyzed the questionnaire and deliberated the importance of Iranian influence in Syria and its possible impacts on refugee repatriation. In addition to using sources and literature in English, one researcher used her native fluency in Persian to access reliable sources from Iran such as news articles, books, journals, and academic sources to help us better understand Iran's actions and perspective. Using Persian sources in regard to Iran's activities in Syria and Syrian refugees especially in southern Lebanon has introduced the research to different assessments and added distinct detail to it.

The researchers are aware of the possibility that Iran's involvement in Syria may not have a significant influence on the decision-making of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. However, through some of the interviews conducted for this research, we have gathered substantial data that may support our assumption that Iran's presence in Syria affects repatriation. We believe the Syrian political atmosphere is heavily influenced by Iran and the security risks that derive from Iran's influence on the Assad regime play a role in the decision making of Syrian refugees in terms of repatriation, even if indirectly.

IV. Analysis

The UNHCR and the international community envisage three so-called durable solutions to refugee displacement: local integration in the host country, resettlement to a third country, or return to their home country, with the last considered the optimal solution by both host countries and the international community. International humanitarian law rooted in the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol requires returns to be voluntary, safe, and dignified. These principles are predicated on an assumption that refugees will mostly return voluntarily once the conditions precipitating their flight have ended. However, as crises become protracted, voluntary, safe, and dignified returns become increasingly elusive, undermining their sustainability.

Decades of refugee crises indicate that forced displacement situations are likely to be protracted. Studies show that return has mostly been only partial and reintegration in countries of origin beset with problems. Although some believe that a less violent landscape should spur large scale returns, that is not always the case. In fact, the absence of fighting is rarely a singular trigger for return. In some cases, the actual returns have taken place to areas that were far from

being peaceful and stable. Although this may seem counterintuitive, it reinforces the argument that refugee decisions to repatriate are driven by a personal, micro-level, complex calculus which takes into consideration priorities as well as conditions inside the home and host country.

Literature shows that four priorities are central to refugee decision-making about return: safety, livelihoods, services, and access to property and assets. The refugee definition of safety is multi-dimensional and encompasses physical, legal, and material aspects.

Refugee return is not a monotonic or linear event: it often includes an iterative, staggered, or cyclical process. The first refugees to return tend to be individual family members who go on ‘look-see’ trips to assess the condition of livelihood assets, namely land and housing, and explore the basis for a permanent return of the family or community. However, the confiscation of property in the home country as part of a process of spatial segregation along ethnic or sectarian lines may critically block returns or integration. Many refugees engage in ongoing and circular migration to maximize access to livelihoods and services.

Refugees are not homogenous and their decisions to repatriate are further conditioned by their socioeconomic status, religious or ethnic identity, political affiliation, and gender. Women may face particular challenges during displacement and after return, since they generally have fewer opportunities, fewer resources, lower status, and less power and influence than men. With fewer resources and lower social status, women and female-headed households may find it difficult to secure livelihoods upon return; ensure the restitution of or access to housing, land, and property; and access other essential services.

Overview of regional returns

According to the UNHCR, there are 5.6 million Syrian refugees in the countries neighboring Syria and Egypt.⁴² Figure 1 shows the distribution of refugees in the region by country. Figure 2 shows refugee returns from those countries. From 2016 to January 2020, 234,817 voluntary refugee returns from those countries took place, including 54,478 returns from Lebanon and 53,368 returns from Jordan.⁴³ The total returns represent 4.2 percent of the displaced populations. In Lebanon, the returns represent about 6 percent of the total Syrian refugee population of 910,000 and in Jordan returns represent about 8 percent of the total Syrian refugee population of 656,000. However, there was an uptick in returns in 2018 and 2019.⁴⁴ Although these numbers may not seem significant, they likely underestimate the totality of returns. The numbers only represent refugees who have registered with the UNHCR and only those cases of return that can be verified through household visits or household member interviews and the UN lacks full access to Syria.

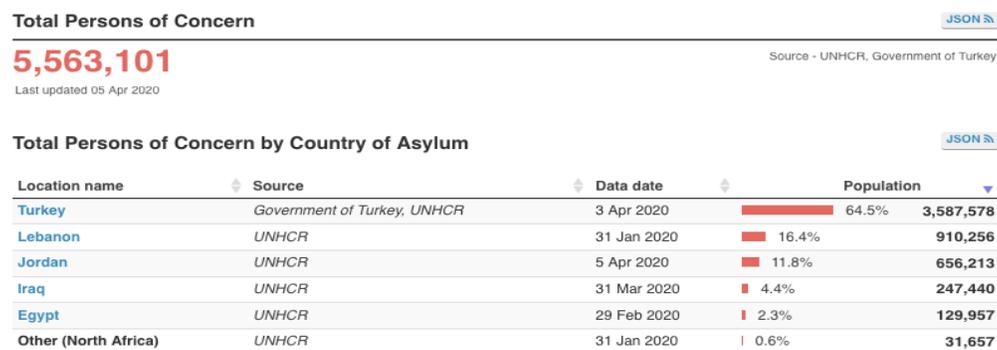


Figure 1.

Source: UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response – April 5, 2020

⁴² UNHCR, “Operational Portal: Refugee Situations,” Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response, April 17, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

⁴³ UNHCR, “Voluntary Returns of Syrian,” Durable Solutions (UNHCR, January 31, 2020), <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74353>

⁴⁴ Ibid

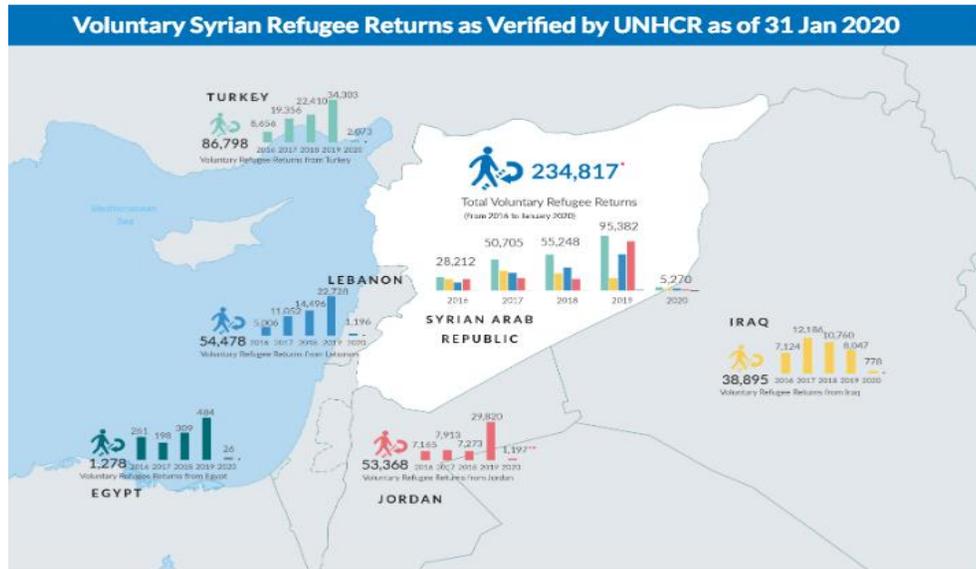


Figure 2.

Source: UNHCR Voluntary Returns of Syrian Refugees: Regional Analysis - January 2020

Refugee returns are politicized, and some governments have an incentive to inflate the numbers, even beyond the realm of possibility. In December 2019, the Syrian Minister of Local Administration and Environment Hussein Makhoulf stated that 1 million Syrian refugees had returned, most of them from Lebanon. He claimed that the numbers represent “the army’s victory over terrorism.”⁴⁵ To the Syrian regime, large scale refugee returns legitimize its victory and send a message that Assad is capable of providing security, partly in hopes of attracting reconstruction aid. Defenders of Bashar al-Assad’s regime argue that the constant trickle of voluntary returnees proves that Syria is already safe and that Western reluctance to support refugee returns is motivated by political, not humanitarian considerations. In November 2019,

⁴⁵ “Return of 1 Million Refugees, the Largest Number from Lebanon,” Youm7, December 5, 2019, Accessed April 12, 2020, (<https://www.youm7.com/story/2019/12/5/4532302/عودة-مليون-لاجئ-الى-سوريا-بأعداد-أكبر-من-لبنان>)

the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun said that 390,000 Syrian refugees had returned from Lebanon, “claiming that the refugees did not complain about any sort of pressure they had suffered after their return to their homeland.”⁴⁶ Lebanese authorities have been using increasingly anti-refugee rhetoric to distract from the country’s crumbling economy and banking crisis and widespread protests since October 2019 and refugee departures are seen as political wins for some leaders eager to distract from structural shortcomings of the state.

Answer suggested by research

The evidence gathered suggests that Syrian refugees are not repatriating back to Syria, at least in large numbers. Some of our interviews with experts suggest that security is the most important factor in the decision-making process of refugees. As long as there is a lack of security there will not be a widespread trend of repatriation among refugees. Furthermore, the recent violence in northwestern Syria and the health crisis presented by the novel coronavirus pandemic will also be important factors contributing to the further decrease of Syrian refugee repatriation. Though repatriations have been small in number, this project has gathered evidence about the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan who have been returning to Syria. Refugee return motivations vary and are based on several considerations: the situation inside Syria, including (in)security and access to housing, services, and livelihoods as well as a desire for family reunification; push factors in host countries, including harassment, lack of access to jobs and education, and deportation; as well access to information about the conditions inside Syria. Return patterns also depend on the ability to cross the Syrian borders and measures taken by host

⁴⁶ Jack Dutton, “Official Figures Inflate the Numbers of Syrian Refugees Returned from Lebanon,” The National (The National, November 14, 2019), <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/official-figures-inflate-the-numbers-of-syrian-refugees-returned-from-lebanon-1.937799>)

country governments in tandem with the Syrian regime and/or Russian/Iranian authorities to organize returns.

Security inside Syria seems to play a major, if not a primary, role in the decision-making process. There are reports of returnees being subjected to forced conscription, arrests, and torture. There are also concerns, especially among young men, about being blacklisted by the Syrian regime for political beliefs and anti-regime activities. Syrians define security inside Syria in various ways, such as freedom from violence, i.e. bombs, as well as guarantees of no retribution by the Syrian regime upon return.

It is worth mentioning that the number of returns varies depending on the source, and they tend to be inflated by those with a stake in proving that returns are in fact taking place. For example, the Assad regime has shown its intent on demonstrating to the international community victory in the war as well as the ability to secure an environment conducive to returns; this move serves his regime by buttressing his legitimacy. Furthermore, official return numbers, such as those reported by the UNHCR, tend to be lower than the reality, as the UNHCR only reports returnees who have registered with the UNHCR, and it cannot verify those numbers inside Syria. Furthermore, refugees tend to base their decisions on access to information: some rely on the accounts of family and friends using WhatsApp, others rely mainly on UNHCR and media reports on the conditions inside Syria. One factor that discourages refugees from returning is the fear of losing their refugee status in case upon return they decide to leave Syria again. Overall, however, returns are neither voluntary nor safe, which are two key principles of international humanitarian law.

Security and reconstruction: The role of Iran

There is no doubt that Iran and Syria are one of the closest regional allies in the Middle East. Their bond strengthened after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and even more so during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. From a geographic perspective, Syria has been and still is a very strategic ally for Iran. Therefore, it wasn't a surprise when Iran became involved in the Syrian civil war in 2012. Iran's influence in Syria and in the region as a whole peaked in 2018 when the Islamic State lost most of its territory in Syria. Additionally, Hezbollah gained more control in the Lebanese parliament and Iran had strengthened its influence within the Iraqi political system. However, when protests began to erupt throughout the region in 2019, specifically in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran's influence began to slowly deteriorate. This in turn also affected Iran's activities in Syria. Though it is strategic for Iran to fight alongside Assad and help keep him in power, the Syrian civil war has turned out to be an expensive and never-ending quagmire for the Iranian regime. Nonetheless, even with the decrease in the intensity of Iran's influence in Syria, its presence still has great effect on Syria's security.

Although all of these external actors influence Syria's domestic security and politics, Iran's intervention bares one subtle difference and that is its influence in Syria on a societal level. For the past six years, the IRGC has implemented both hard and soft power in Syria. Militarily, these forces supported the Assad regime in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) and Syrian anti-government opposition forces. Iran has leveraged its alliance with the Assad regime to exert its influence in Syria's domestic politics as well. As a Shia, non-Arab state geographically situated in a predominantly Sunni Arab region, Iran has every incentive to continue to support Assad's minority Alawite regime in order to further its regional goals for territorial gains.

In 2014 the Assad regime gained a stronger grip on its power and began to orchestrate negotiations with the rebel groups, with some coming into effect in 2017⁴⁷. Assad used Iranian and Russian forces to help push out the rebel groups and create more displacement while at the same time pulling in loyal Shia supporters closer to the capital⁴⁸. The important point to take into consideration in regard to these agreements is that many regular civilians were also pushed out and displaced as well, adding to the already large group of refugees leaving Syria. Additionally, moving the majority of the Shia closer to the capital helped strengthen Iran's influence in Syria thus preventing the stability needed that may help with refugee returns.

To reiterate, the primary goal of this research is to understand if and how various factors play a role in the decision-making of Syrian refugees. Security is one of the factors taken into consideration in this research and there is a direct correlation between Iran's involvement and influence in Syria and Syria's security. The majority of experts interviewed for this research agreed that security is one of the main factors that refugees take into consideration in regard to their decision to repatriate. When asked if Syrian Refugees perceive the Iranian presence in Syria as a threat, Karim Sadjadpour said: "Yes, if they perceive Assad as a threat then the presence of military forces that back Assad are obviously a threat as well."⁴⁹ We observed similar patterns with other interviewees when asked this question.

As Iran acts within Syria the security situation shifts rapidly. This research has situated the role of Iran in Syria within the decision-making process of repatriation and has investigated whether any influence it may have affects refugees' decision to repatriate. We concluded that

⁴⁷ Hasan Arfeh, "The Institutionalization of Demographic Change in Syria." Atlantic Council. (Atlantic Council, December 24, 2019). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-institutionalization-of-demographic-change-in-syria/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Sadjadpour, Karim. Interview by Bahar Ghonsul. In-person interview. Washington DC, February 18, 2020.

Iran's presence in Syria differs from Russia or other external actors because of its long-term goal to stay in Syria. Furthermore, with the support of Iran, Assad has been favoring Shia Syrians more and displacing more Sunni Syrians and rebels and thus forcing more people to resettle or become refugees. With the assumption that most refugees are part of the opposition and associate Iran with the Assad regime, we conclude that if refugees in Lebanon and Jordan associate the Iranian regime and its presence in Syria with the Assad regime, then that will be an important factor they take into consideration when they consider repatriation. More importantly, through our interviews and literature review we learned that until the security situation in Syria stabilizes, Syrian refugees will most likely not return.

Syrian Refugee Return Motivations

Verified and representative data on Syrian refugees who have repatriated is limited. This is mainly due to the low numbers of returnees and challenges to accessing them inside Syria. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether they returned to their areas of origin or whether they were arrested, killed, or displaced again, either as IDPs or in a host country. However, several studies and reports conducted between 2018 and 2019 complemented by anecdotal evidence and interviews with experts familiar with the Syrian refugee sphere highlight patterns of return. Although refugee returns to Syria have been low relative to the total refugee population, they provide an important snapshot of the motivations and decision-making process of returnees and those considering returns. Furthermore, understanding who has returned and the conditions in Syria at the time help explain the factors that drive return.

Security and demographics as key predictors

Various aspects of security in Syria combined with demographic characteristics of refugees such as family ties, age, and marital status are the key determinants of return, and they help explain why some have decided to return while violent conflict was more widespread while others have chosen against return even once hostilities in many areas ended. According to a 2019 World Bank report, in both Lebanon and Jordan, refugees who were single, or male, or not members of nuclear families were more likely to return. The report details, “singles are 2.7 percentage points more likely to return than married refugees, male members are 0.6 percentage point more likely to return than female, and extended family members are 12 percentage points more likely to return than nuclear family members.”⁵⁰ The report indicates there was some variation in return patterns between Jordan and Lebanon. While in the former, 89 percent of returns were individual returns, in the latter, 85 percent of returns were “cases,” which refers to a UN designation of groups, often a family with relatives.⁵¹

There is an important, gendered dimension to return considerations. A 2019 UN Women brief highlighted that Syrian refugee women may have less agency with regard to the decision to return than their male family members. Heads of household, often male, “may make the decision on behalf of entire families, even in the event of resistance from family members.”⁵² Intention surveys for returns tend to reflect the decision-making trends from the head of household. Women may also have more limited information on return dynamics due to “less access to social

⁵⁰ The World Bank, “The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis,” The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² UN Women, “Why Gender Matters in the Discussion on Returns to Syria,” UN Women | Arab States, 2019, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/gender-matters-in-returns-to-syria-discussions>)

networks and social media, ownership of mobile phones, and lower literacy rates.”⁵³

Additionally, women may face greater legal obstacles upon return. “Legally, women do not have equal access to inheritance rights and property rights, and customarily, women are less likely to have HLP (Housing, Land, and Property Rights) registered in their name.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, women may not physically possess civil documents necessary to access services upon return to Syria. All of these considerations likely affect whether Syrian refugee women choose to return to Syria.

The intensity of conflict in Syria as another important determinant in return decisions. Under intensive conflict, 14 percent of nuclear family members and 74 percent of non-nuclear family members return; however, during high-intensity conflict in the district of origin, i.e. tank, artillery, airstrikes, only 3 percent of nuclear family members return.⁵⁵ Around 88 percent of non-nuclear family members over the age of 55 return when conflict is low and 67 percent when it is moderate. This may explain why older relatives return for “family reunification, to identify return conditions, or to guard property against appropriation.”⁵⁶ Although security inside Syria is a primary determinant of returns, it is not limited to the absence of violence. Insecurity also includes the risk of arbitrary arrests, conscription, imprisonment, and torture. To many refugees in Lebanon and Jordan returning to regime-controlled areas constitutes a threat to their security. Refugees are 3.6 percent more likely to return to districts of origin if they are not controlled by the Government of Syria.⁵⁷

⁵³ UN Women, “Why Gender Matters in the Discussion on Returns to Syria,” UN Women | Arab States, 2019, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/gender-matters-in-returns-to-syria-discussions>)

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ The World Bank, “The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis,” The World Bank (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

Access to information

Access to accurate information on the situation inside Syria plays an important, albeit under highlighted role, in refugee decision making. The 2019 UN intention survey found that almost half of its respondents felt they lacked sufficient information to decide on their return. “The majority of refugees expressed strong need to receive more regular information from trusted sources, especially related to security situation at place of origin, availability of basic services and shelter facilities.”⁵⁸ The survey also found that most refugees relied on family, state media, friends, and social media for information on conditions at home. These findings align with those of a 2019 Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity (SACD) study on returnees, where 61 percent of those interviewed had relied on relatives and acquaintances to obtain information about conditions in Syria before they returned, 14 percent used social media outlets, and 8 percent used state media sources.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ UNHCR, “Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria” (UNHCR, March 2019), <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68443>

⁵⁹ “Between Hammer and Anvil,” The Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, November 2019

Sources of Information for Returning

Figure 11. Most Important Source of Information about Returning



Note: figure shows participants' responses to the question 'What are the most important sources of information you used when you took the decision to return?'

Figure 3

Source: SACD, 2019

A false sense of security: Regime misinformation

While unfair, unhealthy, or unemployed conditions in host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon make refugees want to return home, there would be no space for them to fulfill that wish without conditions in Syria that allow that possibility. Though the civil war has not officially come to an end and no transition of government has occurred, the Assad regime has created a false perception of security in Syria in order to encourage refugee returns. It has done so by capitalizing on the fact that access to Syria is strictly limited, and so misinformation can travel across borders easily. In 2018 and 2019 Bashar al Assad made statements encouraging refugees to return to Syria. In early July, coinciding with the Russian-led plan for repatriations, Assad made the first formal appeal broadcast on official media for refugees to return, claiming

that the country had been cleared of “terrorists.”⁶⁰ In February 2019, Assad spoke to the heads of local councils in Syria saying that Syria “needs all its people back.”⁶¹ In September 2019 the Mufti of Damascus and its countryside, Sheikh Muhammad Adnan al-Afyouni, stated that the migration of Syrians is “wrong under Sharia,” calling on refugees to return to reconstruct their country.⁶² It is likely that a seemingly inviting government rhetoric may have swayed some refugees to return home in 2018 and 2019.

The Role of the UNHCR

Although the UNHCR, the agency responsible for assisting refugees and overseeing returns, is not a primary source of information for refugees and returnees, its representation of the situation on the ground in Syria has elicited controversy. The UN is a politicized institution, and it must walk a fine line between its mission and its relationship with host country governments. Since its survival and ability to fulfill its mission depend significantly on coordinating with the host regime, the UN’s access to various parts of a country and to information may be limited. Therefore, it cannot guarantee that returns will be safe. However, its inability to directly criticize conditions in the host country may send an erroneous message to potential returnees that it is in fact safe to come home, endangering their lives. Although the UN continues to hold that although fighting in the country has largely subsided, conditions in Syria “are not right for the safe, orderly return of large groups of refugees,” and it even called for greater access inside the country.⁶³ Some civil society organizations have accused the UN of

⁶⁰ Voice of America, “Syrian Government Calls on Refugees to Return Home,” Voice of America, July 3, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-government-calls-refugees-return-home>

⁶¹ Enab Baladi, “Assad Calls on Refugees to Return to Syria,” (Enab Baladi. February 17, 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/282494>

⁶² Mohamed Homs and Jamal Ahmad, “Syria Disintegrating: Where Do Refugees Return?” September 19, 2019, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/09/syria-disintegrating-where-do-refugees-return/>

⁶³ Lisa Schlein, “UN Warns Against Mass Return of Syrian Refugees From Lebanon,” VOA, January 10, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/un-warns-against-mass-return-syrian-refugees-lebanon>

presenting a false ‘mirage’ of security especially with social media posts of UN representatives visiting various areas of Syria claiming conditions were improving.⁶⁴ As such, it has potentially and inadvertently encouraged some returns.

According to Jesse Marks, an analyst of Syrian refugee repatriation dynamics,

“The UN doesn’t have access to people who go back and a lot of areas and it needs to communicate that. If the UN has concerns with the regime, it needs to make that known. But the UN does not vocalize this as much as it should because of how politicized humanitarianism has become. Because the UN has to operate from Damascus the regime has control of the framework that creates major concerns for returnees.”⁶⁵

According to Mai El-Sadany, the Legal and Judicial Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy:

“One of the biggest challenges when it comes to return of refugees is there is no systematic reporting on what happens to refugees once they return. So that lack of the ability for Syrian refugees to be able to tell how risky the decision is and whether they can weigh it fairly with whatever other factors may be pushing them to return is really problematic because it impedes their ability to make fully voluntary decisions.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, “UNHCR’s Dangerous Mirage of Safe Return to Syria: Debunking a False Narrative.,” Medium (Medium, March 12, 2019), <https://medium.com/@SACD/unhcrs-dangerous-mirage-of-safe-return-to-syria-debunking-a-false-narrative-deb35a8895ea>

⁶⁵ Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., February 24, 2020

⁶⁶ Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., February 12, 2020.

Return destinations

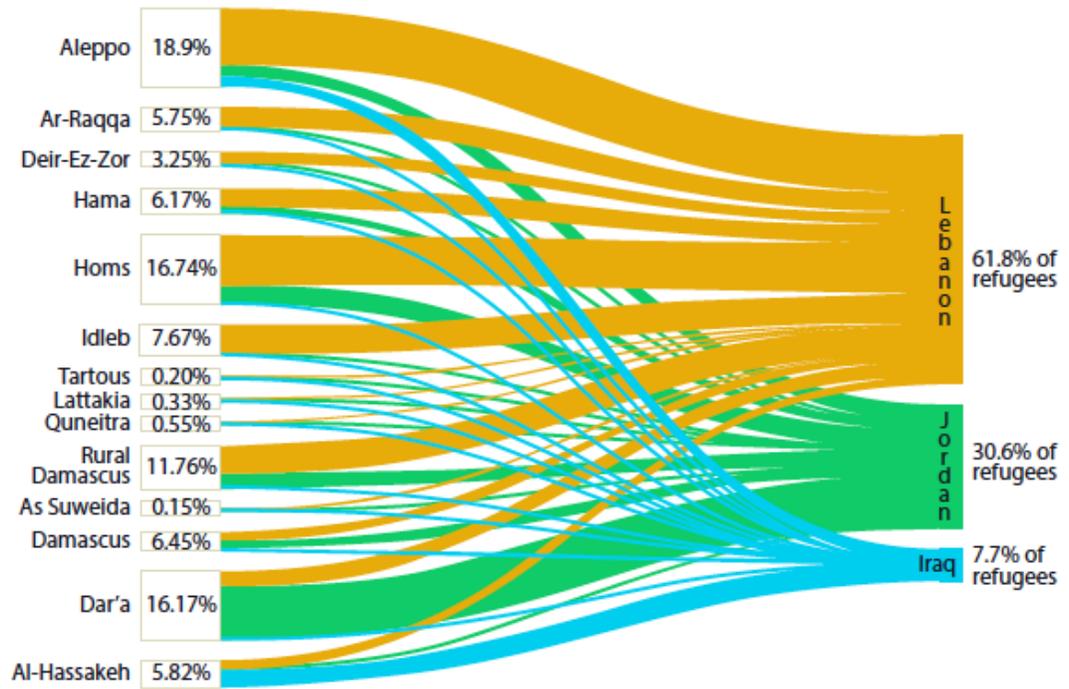
Return destinations are difficult to confirm, as returnees are often further displaced internally and follow up with them is a challenge. However, a 2019 UNHCR survey on refugee intentions on return conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 with refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt found that 93 percent of respondents intended to return to their place of origin.⁶⁷ The top areas of planned return were Daraa, the Damascus area, Homs, and Aleppo. Figure 4 shows the origins in Syria of refugees who have fled to Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Iraq. Homs and Daraa indeed have had some of the highest outflows of refugees. A Lebanese NGO, SAWA for Development and Aid, found that “most refugees who are going back are returning to Rural Damascus, particularly to Zabadani, followed by Homs and Daraa.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, areas that have seen extensive destruction, like Baba Amr in rural Homs, have not seen returns. Moreover, the SAWA report found that returns were not always unidirectional; returnees sometimes went back and forth between Syria and host countries, often through illegal routes.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ UNHCR, “Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria,” UNHCR, March 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68443>.

⁶⁸ Rouba Mhaissen and Elena Hodges, "Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns," SAWA for Development and Aid. February 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SAWA_Unpacking_Return_Report.pdf

⁶⁹ Ibid

Figure I.3. Refugee Flows from Syrian Governorate of Origin to Selected Country of Asylum



Source: UNHCR registration data (April 2018); World Bank staff calculations.

Figure 4

Refugee flows from Syrian Governorate of origin to selected country of asylum

Source: The World Bank, 2019

Legal measures in Syria

Since conditions in the home country tend to outweigh the conditions in the host country, several measures taken by the Syrian regime in the last two years addressing security considerations and access to shelter may help explain an increase in refugee returns in that time period. Some of the key decisions included amnesties, reconciliation agreements, and property

laws. In October 2018 the Syrian president passed Legislative Decree No. 18, which granted a general amnesty to certain individuals accused of deserting or avoiding military service.⁷⁰

Furthermore, since the outbreak of the civil war, the Assad regime has passed several laws targeting housing and property. Law Number 10, ratified by President Assad in April 2018, allowed the government to confiscate the properties of Syrian refugees. As part of a scheme intended to enable the Syrian government to designate land anywhere in the country for redevelopment, Law Number 10 required property owners to present in person within a month to prove ownership. Following widespread condemnation, the law was amended in November 2018 extending the deadline to a year.⁷¹ This measure likely upped the ante for many refugees who feared the expropriation and dispossession of their land and properties. As a result, it may have spurred many of the returns in 2018 and 2019, especially those of older, male family members whose names were likely to be on ownership documents, as families desperately risked their lives and scrambled to secure their homes.

Broader implications

The current situation with the novel coronavirus pandemic, and consequent border closings, implies that the chances of Syrian refugees returning to Syria in larger numbers are very low. Furthermore, the ongoing violence in Idlib, the last anti-Assad stronghold, continues to displace Syrians internally and forces them to consider refuge outside Syria. In regime-controlled areas, stories of returnees facing torture, imprisonment, and disappearance discourage those in exile from returning. Moreover, widespread destruction and the conditioning of reconstruction

⁷⁰ TIMEP Brief: Legislative Decree No. 18: Military Service Amnesty, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, December 6, 2018, <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-legislative-decree-no-18-military-service-amnesty/>

⁷¹ TIMEP Brief: Law No. 10 of 2018: Housing, Land, and Property, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, December 12, 2018, <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-law-no-10-of-2018-housing-land-and-property/>

aid by the West on a political process inside Syria are further delaying the prospects of large-scale returns. Our interviews with experts imply that even when the pandemic ends until the security situation and economic factors in Syria are ameliorated it is very unlikely that refugees will return.

V. Conclusion

Based on returnee experiences to date, it is unlikely that large scale returns will take place in the near future. For most refugees contemplating returns, the primary conditions of return inside Syria have not improved. Although the geographic scale of violent hostilities has narrowed, reports of resurging violence even in regime-controlled areas persist and the Syrian regime's widespread territorial control remains fragmented at best. Furthermore, refugee perceptions of threats have remained, albeit in different forms.

Although refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan increased in the last few years, most of those returns were neither "voluntary" nor "safe." Increasing reports of insecurity returnees faced following returns, from harassment to imprisonment, forced conscription, torture, and death in addition to stories of secondary displacement inside Syria or back to host countries, following returns, undermines any illusion of safety. Returns based on incomplete information (from the UNHCR) and intentional misinformation (from the Syrian regime and its allies) compounded by pressures to return home also raise questions about the voluntary nature of these returns. According to a humanitarian aid organization representative,

"We are seeing some rates of return, but it is definitely questionable whether those are indeed voluntary or if they are a consequence of a series of push factors in their host countries that have led them to this decision. Return is really a last resort and if it's a last

resort it's really tough to argue that it's actually voluntary.”⁷²

In the near future the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and consequent border closings make it unlikely that many refugees will return to Syria, at least through official channels. However, once the pandemic is under control the returns will likely remain small, and may be smaller than the previous spikes of the last 2 years. The following considerations have led us to this conclusion.

A UN Survey conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 reported that over 75 percent of Syrian refugees hoped to return to Syria someday, but less than 6 percent intended to do so in the next 12 months.⁷³ Refugees consistently cited the state of security in Syria as a primary consideration of return and for most the primary conditions of return inside Syria have not improved. Although the geographic scale of violent hostilities has narrowed, reports of resurging violence even in government-controlled areas persist and the Syrian regime’s widespread territorial control remains fragmented at best.⁷⁴ Furthermore, refugee perceptions of threats have remained, albeit in different forms, especially with regard to the regime. Dr. Lina Kreidie, a researcher working with refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, noted:

“In Jordan the majority of refugees are from the opposition. So the possibility of people from Jordan going back is less than those from Lebanon. In Lebanon it's more of a mix or

⁷² Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., March 17, 2020.

⁷³ UNHCR, “Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria,” UNHCR, March 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68443>.

⁷⁴ Michael Land and Nadia Atieh, "Syria Situation Report: April 15-28, 2020," Institute for the Study of War, April 30, 2020.

most of them at this point are neutral or pro-regime and these are the ones that are returning.”⁷⁵

Another expert, who is a political methodologist with extensive research experience throughout the Levant, commented on the influence of the regime of repatriation decisions:

“The Syrian authorities are thinking of revoking citizenship for people who have been outside the country for a certain amount of time. We started hearing this about a year ago. This mostly affecting males who were supposed to serve in the military, so it is a way to force them to come back and serve or don’t come back and we are done with you.”⁷⁶

Potential returnees, who as mentioned earlier depend heavily on friends and family in Syria for information, will likely be further discouraged by rumors and reports indicating that fellow returnees, perhaps motivated by regime promises of reconciliation and amnesties, have paid for their trust with their freedom and lives. These anecdotes have likely eroded much of the tenuous trust refugees already had in regime guarantees. Rumors and reports indicate that many returnees who risked returns, perhaps motivated by regime promises of reconciliation and amnesties, have paid for their trust with their lives and freedom. Cautionary tales have been encapsulated in a report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) published in August 2019 entitled “The Syrian Regime Continues to Pose a Violent Barbaric Threat and Syrian Refugees Should Never Return to Syria.”⁷⁷ The report has documented that 638 refugees were

⁷⁵ Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., February 26, 2020.

⁷⁶ Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., February 11, 2020.

⁷⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights, “The Syrian Regime Continues to Pose a Violent Barbaric Threat and Syrian Refugees Should Never Return to Syria,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, September 2, 2019, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2019/08/15/54146/>

forcibly disappeared after their return and 15 returning refugees were killed as a result of torture,” not to mention those who were conscripted and sent to the front lines in Idlib.⁷⁸ The SNHR’s chairman warned that “The Syrian state under the current regime has become a mafia authority, and we warn refugees of the risk of returning, and call on all states to respect customary international law and not to forcibly return anyone because that state will bear responsibility for what might happen with them.”⁷⁹

Reports published by the European Asylum Support Office in March and April 2020 found that returning Syrians, especially those perceived as opposition members and those working in certain professions, including journalists, medical professionals and human rights activists, were targeted by the Syrian government as well as non-state groups.⁸⁰ Additionally, a 2019 assessment conducted by the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity that interviewed 165 people in Homs, Damascus countryside, Dara’a and Aleppo found that 59 percent seriously considered leaving regime-held areas, with 77 percent of those wishing to leave feeling insecure. The majority, 84 percent, advised those considering returns not to go back to regime-held areas, citing “a vicious circle of fear of arrest, enforced disappearance, inadequate basic living requirements, monopolies enforced by regime-backed traders, pervasive corruption, and the absence of the rule of law.”⁸¹ One member of the Congressionally mandated Syria Study Group, who was interviewed for this study, commented:

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ European Asylum Support Office, “Syria: Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Internal Mobility” (European Asylum Support Office, April 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1265566/download>

⁸¹ Danny Makki, Tom Rollins, and Charles Lister, “Vengeance, Repression, and Fear: The Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians,” Middle East Institute, October 17, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/vengeance-repression-and-fear-reality-behind-assads-promises-displaced-syrians>)

“In terms of refugee motivations or deterrence to go home, the overriding factor is the desire of the Assad regime to exclude as many Sunni Muslim says possible. Refugees in Lebanon and in Jordan know quite well that the Syrian government such as it is does not really want them to come home. But lurking behind all of this is the fact of sectarian cleansing.”⁸²

Iran’s presence continues to interact with the dynamic security situation on the ground. This research has situated the role of Iran in Syria within the decision-making process of repatriation and has investigated whether any influence it may have affects refugees’ decision to repatriate. We conclude that Iran’s presence in Syria differs from Russia or other external actors because of its long-term goal to stay in Syria. Furthermore, with the support of Iran, Assad has been favoring Shia Syrians more and displacing more Sunni Syrians and rebels and thus forcing more people to resettle or become refugees. With the assumption that most refugees are part of the opposition and associate Iran with the Assad regime, we conclude that if refugees in Lebanon and Jordan associate the Iranian regime and its presence in Syria with the Assad regime, then that will be an important factor they take into consideration when they consider repatriation. More importantly, through our interviews and literature review we learned that until the security situation in Syria stabilizes, Syrian refugees will most likely not return.

Access to housing and property inside Syria is one of the top factors for those considering returns. About 38 percent of respondents indicated that their family would likely return to Syria if they found out from their neighbors in Syria that their house was intact, but the destruction of

⁸² Anonymous. Interview by Anna Jozwik in person, Washington D.C., February 4, 2020.

the family's house reduces the likelihood of return by 22–23 percentage points.⁸³ However, for many refugees access to homes inside Syria is becoming more elusive. Some are unable to reclaim their homes due to measures such as Law 10. Many refugees are unable to prove ownership because either they never had official documents, or they lost them over the course of their displacement. Additionally, there are reports that registries containing property ownership documents have been intentionally targeted by Syrian regime forces.⁸⁴ In other cases, those homes are no longer livable. Over 9 percent of housing in 8 governorates has been fully destroyed, with a further 23 percent partially destroyed.”⁸⁵ This has been aggravated by looting by government forces.⁸⁶ Finally, due to competition over housing, rent prices are simply unaffordable.

The demographics of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan also suggests that large-scale returns are unlikely in the near future. Most refugees in both host countries consist of families with young children. As such, considerations about their children's future must weigh heavily on them. Refugees are likely to postpone returns in the near future due to the lack of access to services such as education and livelihoods which will be exacerbated by reduced access to housing. The likelihood of further displacement after a potential return may not be a risk that refugee families are willing to take. Furthermore, the longer they stay in exile, the more difficult it will be for refugees to reintegrate into a country and society that may be hostile to those who left. In July 2018, Major General Jamal al-Hassan, the head of Syria's air force intelligence and one of country's most senior security chiefs said: “A Syria with 10 million trustworthy people

⁸³ European Asylum Support Office, “Syria: Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Internal Mobility” (European Asylum Support Office, April 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1265566/download>

⁸⁴ Maha Yahya, "What Will It Take for Syrian Refugees to Return Home?" Foreign Affairs, May 28, 2018

⁸⁵ Rouba Mhaissen and Elena Hodges, "Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns," SAWA for Development and Aid. February 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SAWA_Unpacking_Return_Report.pdf

⁸⁶ Ibid

obedient to the leadership is better than a Syria with 30 million vandals. After eight years, Syria will not accept the presence of cancerous cells and they will be removed completely.”⁸⁷ This clearly sends a message that Syrian refugees are no longer welcome. This along with the lost hope of reclaiming land and property and the continuing risks to their safety might mean that refugees have lost any incentive to go back.

Recommendations

The US should recognize the protracted nature of the refugee crisis and treat it as a development opportunity. Therefore, it should offer support to frontline states, especially Lebanon, that have borne the brunt of hosting Syrian refugees and invest in Syrian youth. A World Bank study estimated that the average duration of exile for current refugees is 10.3 years.⁸⁸ However, they do not have to be wasted, unproductive years. Lebanon is currently hosting the highest per capita refugee population in the world. With its overstretched public resources and fears of upsetting a fragile sectarian balance, some Christian and Shia elements have increasingly called for Syrians to leave. Although the US cannot force a foreign, sovereign government like Lebanon to make policy changes, it can provide certain incentives to discourage forced, premature repatriations and encourage the Lebanese authorities to view the Syrian refugee presence as a resource and opportunity to improve its economy.

⁸⁷ Martin Chulov, "We Can't Go Back: Syrian Refugees Fear for Their Future After War," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2018

⁸⁸ The World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," *The World Bank* (The World Bank, February 6, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>)

The US should continue to support UN initiatives that provide support to displaced Syrians inside Syria and in host countries. The US has been the largest donor to the Syrian humanitarian crisis and has donated almost \$10 billion since 2011.⁸⁹ However, significant need remains. During the Brussels III conference in March 2019, donors pledged \$7 billion to support humanitarian, resilience and development activities in 2019. As of the end of June, only \$1.6 billion has been reported as received, which is only 30 percent of the regional need of \$5.5 billion.⁹⁰ In comparison, only 62 percent of the need was met in 2018.⁹¹ The US should continue to lead this effort and use diplomatic pressure to ensure its allies in Europe and the Gulf meet their funding pledge obligations. This is not only an ethical and humanitarian imperative; it is also a chance for the US to counter Russian and Iranian initiatives to win the hearts and minds of the Syrian people.⁹²

In addition to humanitarian aid, **the US should help the UN establish an effective mechanism to organize returns and buttress the UN's mission of ensuring voluntary, gradual repatriations.** To that end, the US should encourage the UN to sponsor formal 'look, see' refugee visits to Syria, on the model implemented in the case of Somalis from Dadaa camp in Ethiopia, to assess for themselves whether it is safe for their friends and families to return to certain areas of the country. Those refugees who make the trip should be allowed to keep their refugee status for a period of time in case they need to leave Syria again. Refugees considering

⁸⁹ Carla E. Humud, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response," Congressional Research Service, 25 March 2019

⁹⁰ UNHCR, 3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, 2019 Progress Report, UNHCR, August 2019

⁹¹ Carla E. Humud, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response," Congressional Research Service, 25 March 2019

⁹² Raja Abdulrahim and Benoit Faucon, "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria," The Wall Street Journal. 26 March 2019.

return should be allowed to make informed decisions. They should have access to a cadre of trusted UN professionals who can educate them about the recent conscription and property laws implemented by the Assad regime and advise them on the best way to navigate the new system, including obtaining required documentation. The US should pressure Russia in the Security Council to in turn pressure the Syrian authorities to allow the UNHCR greater access to returnees throughout Syria. When and if a political solution is reached, the UN should work with the Syrian authorities to reach formal tripartite agreements on repatriation between them and host countries, develop legal mechanisms for property and document restitution, and carefully map areas of return to ensure gradual, voluntary, safe, and sustainable returns.

The US should invest in building resiliency among Syrian youth. It could reactivate the Fulbright program for promising Syrians to equip them with leadership skills. It could also work with the UN to revive the Casablanca Protocol of 1965 to target Syrian refugees and grant them the right to work throughout the Arab League. The League, especially the Gulf countries, has an incentive to alleviate the refugee crisis to counter Hezbollah's calls for refugees to return to Syria. Along with the US, the League has an interest in countering the expansionist ambitions of Iran, which has been providing aid to Syrian IDPs and returnees while pressuring them to convert to Shiism in an effort to establish the 'Shia Crescent.'

The US should make sure that women and girls remain on the agenda of safe and voluntary refugee returns. Women account for the majority of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and many refugee families are female-headed households. As such, it is imperative that they have access to information and documentation that will allow them to make informed decisions about returns and once they have gone back. All return programs should take women's perspectives and

concerns into consideration. Safeguards must be established to ensure that women and girls can reintegrate into Syrian society and can access services related to gender-based violence (GBV).

Finally, the US could contribute to international burden sharing and agree to accept more Syrian refugees. “Just 563 Syrians were let in last fiscal year, and just 320 are on track to enter this fiscal year.”⁹³ By accepting a fairer share of Syrian refugees, the U.S. would offer a much-needed reprieve to our allies currently shouldering most of the financial and political costs of hosting the largest numbers of Syrian refugees. More importantly, it would send a message to the international community that U.S. is a team player cognizant of the protracted nature of the Syrian refugee crisis. Consequently, it would give credence to U.S. values and safeguard its leadership role, not only in shaping the future of the Syrian refugee crisis but also other future events requiring interstate cooperation to protect peace and stability.

⁹³ Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, “Syria’s Tragedy, Our Lessons: President and CEO of the IRC David Miliband CSIS Speech,” CSIS, [Admissions and Arrivals: From October 1, 2018-September 30, 2019](#). Refugee Processing Center. March 2, 2020

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