

UNHCR Operational Framework

Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs

2025

Context

Following the collapse of the Assad government in Syria in early December 2024, many among the 5.5 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have expressed elation and hope about the prospect of returning to their homes, together with caution.

Subsequently, as of end-January 2025, UNHCR estimates that **some 250,000 Syrians** have already returned to Syria since then. Similarly, with unrestricted movement within much of the country restored, particularly to the northwest and northeast, UNHCR and partners have observed an uptick in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Syria who have returned home during the same period, often to damaged dwellings and areas lacking services and livelihood opportunities.

Depending on how the situation inside Syria develops, it is likely that the number of refugees and IDPs deciding to return will increase over the course of 2025.

Based on the numbers of Syrians returning home, including refugees registered with UNHCR, and explicit requests from refugees in host countries to be supported to return, **UNHCR is shifting to a mode of facilitation of voluntary refugee return.**

This Operational Framework projects **up to 1.5 million Syrians to return in 2025**. It covers UNHCR's engagement from preparations in host countries, counselling, and other protection services. It further includes the provision of return grants that will aid refugees to organize their return, and additional requirements for reintegration programmes for both returning refugees and IDPs inside Syria.

This Framework equally covers the return of IDPs, of which there are currently an estimated 7.4 million displaced inside Syria. UNHCR is **projecting up to 2 million IDPs to return in 2025**.

Planning Figures



Up to 1.5 million
Syrians voluntarily
returning to Syria
in 2025



Up to 2 million
IDPs returning
in 2025



UNHCR is appealing for
USD 370.9 million for
return and reintegration
operations for returning
refugees and IDPs

While this Framework is specific to UNHCR, inclusive partnership underpins voluntary return operations. Host governments and the Syrian authorities hold the primary responsibility to ensure the protection and well-being of returning refugees and IDPs, and with whom UNHCR and partners will interface on any planning and implementation. UNHCR is actively seeking collaboration and partnership with UN agencies, NGOs and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and consulting with refugees on operational design and delivery. Inside Syria, programmes for the reintegration of refugees will be linked to longer-term UN development and reintegration frameworks, inclusive of IDPs, returning IDPs and other Syrians in need.

For refugee and IDP reintegration to be sustainable, an urgent recalibration of the various sanctions regimes needs to occur, including a determination of their ongoing necessity.

Crucially for Syrian refugees, return and reintegration should be situated within a broader comprehensive protection and solutions approach for the region, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. Many refugees will not return in 2025. Some returnees may face continued or new protection risks inside Syria. While supporting those who want to return, protection space, funding and programmes should be maintained in host countries.

[UNHCR's position on Syria returns](#) from December 2024 remains unchanged, urging all States to grant civilians fleeing Syria access to their territories, uphold the right to seek asylum, and ensure full respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

Syrian refugees in Türkiye, including families with children, arrive at the Cilvegözü – Bab Al-Hawa border crossing point between Türkiye and Syria, with their luggage, to complete a voluntary repatriation process, before crossing into Syria to return home.

27 January 2025

Photo by UNHCR / Emrah Gürel



Refugee Voices

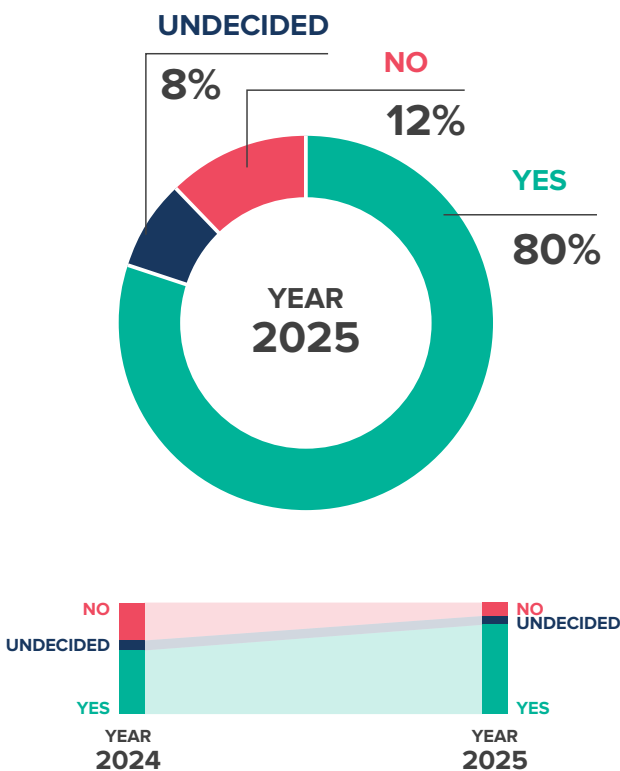
UNHCR talks to thousands of Syrian refugees in the region every day, through helplines, return interviews, counselling, focus group discussions and other community outreach mechanisms. Many refugees express a strong interest in returning home. Others are worried and prefer to see how the situation inside Syria develops, or are waiting for the end of winter, the end of Ramadan, agricultural seasons and the closure of the school year. Many have questions relating to practical issues around return, including accessing travel documents, and

procedures for crossing the border. For those interested in returning, their main asks include assistance for transportation, cash grants to cover basic needs and support inside Syria to rebuild their homes and their lives.

UNHCR’s January 2025 Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey (RPIS), conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, **shows an increasing proportion of the refugee population expresses a clear intention to return.**

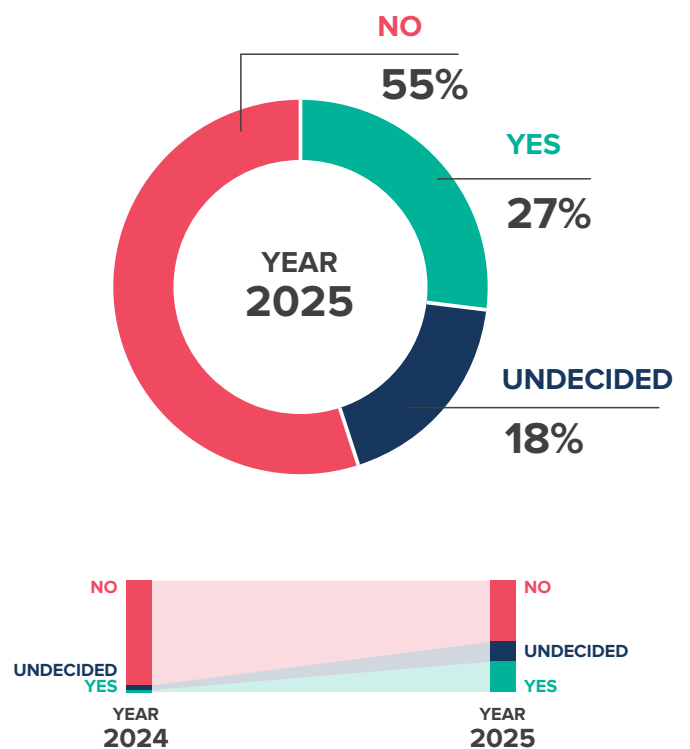
Overall, **80% of refugees hope to return to Syria one day.** This represents a major shift in refugee return intentions compared to the last RPIS conducted in April 2024 when only 57% of refugees expressed the hope to return one day.

▶ Do you hope to return to Syria one day?



Overall, **27% of Syrian refugees** expressed an immediate intention to return **in the next 12 months.** This is a major increase compared to the previous 2024 RPIS, when only 1.7% of Syrian refugees interviewed intended to return in the next 12 months.

▶ Do you intend to return in the next 12 months?



Operational Framework

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

In partnership with national governments, UN agencies, NGOs, donors, and civil society, refugees, IDPs and receiving communities, UNHCR will:

1. **Ensure return planning and implementation are anchored on international protection standards and principles.**
2. **Ensure Syrian refugees and IDPs are able to take a free and well-informed decision on whether to return and are actively engaged in the design of return processes in a participatory manner.**
3. **Facilitate voluntary return, including transportation and material assistance among others.**
4. **Support the reintegration of refugee and IDP returnees inside Syria,** taking into account conflict sensitivity and the needs of all populations in places of return, in collaboration with broader national, UN, NGO and IFI reintegration and development programmes.

The framework is structured on three main areas:

1. **Preparatory activities** in host countries and inside Syria.
2. **The Return process.**
3. **Protection and reintegration programmes inside Syria,** including UNHCR's activities in specific areas for refugee returnees, IDPs and IDP returnees.

FOR REFUGEE RETURNS

1. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

- Legal Frame:

Refugee returns should be governed by clear legal frameworks that define the responsibilities of host governments and the Syrian authorities, provide guarantees for the rights of returnees, address practical issues such as exit and entry requirements and customs, and establish the monitoring role of UNHCR.

- Planning with Host Governments and the New Syrian Authorities:

UNHCR will support and capacitate host country-led return processes and departure infrastructure, and reception facilities inside Syria. This will include enabling self-organized returns through grants and, when appropriate, for persons with specific needs, supporting organized transportation from points of departure inside host countries to designated arrival stations proximate to the intended areas of return.

- **Participation and Consultation with Refugees:**

Accountability to Affected Populations and two-way communication channels and tools already in place will be further enhanced, including digital participatory tools, phone-based contact centres, social media tools, outreach volunteers and community protection networks. UNHCR is in process of developing a regional inter-agency platform – SyriaHome - dedicated to information on voluntary return for refugees.

- **Go-and-See Visits:**

UNHCR will support refugees to benefit from host country "go-and-see" mechanisms, where these are in place and in line with national policies. It is important such mechanisms contain safeguards on refugees' protection status and ability to return.

- **Monitoring and Information Systems:**

As an inter-agency service, UNHCR Protection and Information Management systems are being expanded to make readily available analyses of return dynamics, including refugee profiles, their intention on return and updated information relating to the prevailing conditions in return areas and available humanitarian services inside Syria. Population movement tracking systems and border monitoring are already in place for refugee and IDP returns and will be further strengthened.

2. THE RETURN PROCESS

- **Identity Management and Biometrics:**

Closely linked to the registration systems managed in host countries, UNHCR will implement an end-to-end approach to identity management as part of the return process, namely from host countries to inside Syria. In line with data protection standards, individual data and biometrics will be integrated as part of departure and arrival procedures and linked to delivery of material assistance inside Syria, including referrals to other UN and NGO partners.

- **Return Centres and Services:**

With host governments, inter-agency multi-sectoral Return Centres will be established, both virtual and in-person. They will offer comprehensive information and services on: return procedures and conditions inside Syria; counselling on legal and practical implications of returning; assessments of voluntariness; registration of vital events and regularization of civil documentation; identification of persons with specific needs; and referral of refugees for transportation and initial reintegration grants.

- **Transportation and Initial Reintegration Grants:**

UNHCR will provide a return grant for refugees in hosting countries which will enable them to organize transportation and support initial reintegration inside Syria. Being unrestricted, it allows refugees to decide how to allocate the funds as they deem necessary. Additional organized transportation will be provided for persons with specific needs and in the initial phase of return operations.

- **Activities at Final Departure Points / Borders:**

In host countries and inside Syria, inter-agency multi-sector services will be established at the borders. UNHCR will support departure and immigration infrastructure, through staffing and equipment, including medical, waiting areas, and child-friendly spaces. Protection monitoring during the return process up to the place of return, and existing border monitoring and referral systems will be strengthened country-wide.

REFUGEE RETURN ROUTES TO SYRIA

START

HOST COUNTRY

Egypt - Iraq - Jordan
- Lebanon - Türkiye

TYPE OF RETURN

Temporary Return (formal "Go & See")

TYPE OF RETURN

Other Returns

• Some refugees return through unofficial crossing points and / or without informing UNHCR.

For Travel via Airport / Plane, and Port / Ship

• UNHCR is monitoring and providing assistance

SYRIAN REFUGEES

TYPE OF RETURN

Organized Return

• Refugees planning to return approach UNHCR

TYPE OF RETURN

Self-Organized Return

• Refugees may approach UNHCR to receive information ahead of their return

- Self-organized, do request material assistance
- Self-organized, do NOT request material assistance



STEP 01 Return Center

- Deployment of multi-functional teams and services by UNHCR and partners through online and in-person support at return centers:
 - Guidance on return procedures and conditions in Syria; Counselling on return implications and answering queries; Assessing voluntary return intent; Assistance with travel and civil documentation; Support for persons with specific needs; Referral for transportation and initial cash grants in organized returns

STEP 02 Refugees Register for Assistance

- Transport / cash grants
- Assistance for people with specific needs

Provision of in-kind Transport Assistance

STEP 03 Crossing Point

- At the border, UNHCR is present to:
- Identity management
 - Match pre-return list with database (Matches database with Progress / biometric data)
 - Observe the organized movement
 - Liaise with authorities
 - Health assistance

STEP 03 Crossing Point

- At the border, UNHCR is present to:
- Identity management
 - Match pre-return list with database (Matches database with Progress / biometric data)
 - Observe the organized movement
 - Liaise with authorities
 - Health assistance

STEP 04 Transport

- For both organized and self-organized returns, UNHCR and partners provide transport from the border crossing points to immigration, Border Health, and Protection Support Points

STEP 05 Reception and Assistance

- Matches database with Progress / biometric data

STEP 06 Organized Transport

- UNHCR and partners provide transport from the border to major cities such as Da'raa, Damascus or Homs

STEP 06 Travel in Syria

- Returnees can choose to travel to their intended destination by way of self-organized transport

ARRIVAL IN SYRIA

- Protection and return monitoring
- Inclusion in UNHCR and other agencies' reintegration programmes

ARRIVAL IN SYRIA

- Monitoring by UNHCR inside Syria

ARRIVAL IN SYRIA

- Protection and return monitoring
- Inclusion in UNHCR and other agencies' reintegration programmes

National and UN-led Development and Reintegration Coordination and Programmes

The exact process will vary between host countries, depending on the existing systems and procedures that are already in place by the respective host governments.

Returns from beyond the Region

There are an estimated 1.37 million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees in Europe, including some 1.2 million in EU member states. Germany has been hosting the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees (some 800,000), followed by Austria (113,000), Sweden (88,000), The Netherlands (79,000) and Greece (55,000).

There are over 40,000 registered Syrian refugees and asylum seekers across North Africa (not including Egypt) and the Gulf Cooperation Council region. Refugees and asylum-seekers are already approaching UNHCR in these countries enquiring about both go and see visits and support for return.

UNHCR will:

- Ensure that Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees have **access to objective and up-to-date information** on the potential impact of return on their legal status, and access to rights and assistance in host countries.
- Collect information on **return intentions of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers**.
- Where return grants are not provided by countries of asylum, UNHCR will provide **assistance** to support voluntary return, on a case-by-case basis.

At the Jdeidet Yabous border crossing between Lebanon and Syria, a UNHCR staff member speaks with Syrian refugees Khaled (23) and Daham (19) who were crossing into Syria after 12 years of displacement. The brothers shared their hopes of rebuilding their lives in Syria once again.

January 2025
Photo by UNHCR



FOR IDP RETURNS

1. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

- Legal Frame:

IDP returns will be directed by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement to ensure the safety, dignity and sustainability of these returns, and that an informed decision to return can be made voluntarily without coercion.

- Planning with Syrian Authorities:

UNHCR is engaging closely with the new Syrian authorities both at the central and local levels to ensure that the rights of IDPs are respected, and to coordinate on practical elements of the return process as necessary, including the provision of organised transportation assistance for people with specific needs. This engagement will extend to relevant camp authorities with respect to IDPs residing in the northeast and northwest.

- Participation and Consultation with IDPs:

As with refugees, Accountability to Affected Populations and communication tools and channels with IDPs will be enhanced to provide information to make an informed decision to return, including on assistance and services available in their areas of intended return. Depending on demand and available resources, UNHCR will assist “go and see” visits to areas of intended return for people with specific needs, which will further strengthen UNHCR’s understanding of priority return and reintegration needs and inform the design of the response.

- Preparations in Areas of Return:

Through its leading role in the interagency coordination structures, UNHCR will engage with partners to implement multisectoral and complementary approaches to respond to the priority needs in areas of return of IDPs (noting the overlap with many areas of intended return of refugees) to improve the capacity of available services and infrastructure to ensure the sustainability of return.

- Monitoring and Information Systems:

The expansion and strengthening of UNHCR Protection and Information Management systems will include enhanced tracking of IDP population movements, analyses of IDP return profiles and intentions, and assessments of protection conditions (particularly with respect to damaged housing and Housing, Land and Property concerns) in return areas and their host community population.

2. THE RETURN PROCESS

- Identity Management:

A standardized and centralized identity management approach, aligned with UNHCR data protection policies, will be implemented at points of service, to enroll recipients of protection services and material assistance delivered by UNHCR and its partners inside Syria. This will ensure that individual profiles of IDPs and their needs are captured, facilitating the targeting and eligibility process, referrals, and avoiding duplication. Additionally, the centralized system will provide accurate data to enhance the planning and monitoring of return programmes, ensuring that UNHCR provides targeted support to refugees and IDPs returning home as appropriate. For returning refugees, the same identity

management systems will be linked to UNHCR registration data-bases in host countries, ensuring continuity of services and protection, as well as addressing potential duplication between country operations.

- Transportation Support:

For IDPs residing in camps, organized transportation from the camps to key locations in areas of return will be provided for IDPs with specific needs and based on demand.

- Activities at Departure / Arrival Points:

For organised returns movements inside Syria, inter-agency multi-sector services will be available at the points of departure and arrival. UNHCR will provide support through physical staff presence and equipment, including information help desks, waiting areas and child-friendly spaces. Protection monitoring during the return process up to the destination points will be strengthened.

3. PROTECTION AND REINTEGRATION RESPONSE INSIDE SYRIA (for refugee and IDP returnees)

UNHCR's approach to protection and reintegration activities for Syrian refugees and IDPs will be anchored within a broader protection and advocacy approach that supports national authorities to fulfil their legal obligations relating to returning IDPs and refugees.

IDP and Refugee return programmes will be situated within a national framework, under the leadership of national authorities and the UN Resident Coordinator, that addresses both the immediate and medium-term reintegration needs of returning IDPs and refugees at the same time as those of other Syrian populations.

UNHCR will pursue a conflict-sensitive approach, providing assistance to returning refugees and IDPs and receiving communities through an area-based approach, guided by need and vulnerability.

UNHCR's interventions will address immediate and medium-term needs and will be designed in a manner that interfaces with longer-term national systems as well as to the programmes of other UN agencies, IFIs and major development agencies. UNHCR's direct interventions will be focused in particular sectors, as below. Partnership with other agencies and NGOs in other specialized sectors, will be crucial to ensure that return is sustainable and that reintegration is effective.

PROTECTION:

Existing protection activities and services are being scaled-up and delivered by UNHCR and partners through its community-based protection network of facilities, including 122 Community Centres.

Key protection interventions will include: 1) Housing, Land and Property (HLP) analysis and advocacy for legal reforms; 2) Counselling and legal aid, including on civil documentation and HLP issues; 3) Two-way communications with communities and feed-back mechanisms; 4) Support to national and local government, including the rehabilitation and equipping of civil registries and cadastral offices; and 5) Protection monitoring to ensure that safe, and dignified return is sustained.

In places of return, UNHCR will expand and strengthen its monitoring capacity, collecting data under a standardized protection framework for refugee returnees, IDPs, IDP returnees and receiving communities across the whole country, informing inter-agency responses and UNHCR's advocacy and protection interventions.

MATERIAL ASSISTANCE AND INCLUSION:

UNHCR will scale-up its interventions inside Syria, including through cash as a modality. UNHCR Cash-Based Interventions (CBI), protection services and identity management systems will interface with any future national systems, in an inclusive and protection sensitive manner.

UNHCR will engage with key Social Protection actors, including national entities, UN agencies and IFIs, to contribute to the design of inclusive national programs and prepare for the eventual transition of its livelihood interventions. UNHCR identity management will seek to interface with and complement inclusion of returnees in national data systems, while maintaining data protection standards.

SHELTER:

UNHCR's existing shelter response and capacity will be expanded in scale and scope to provide increased support to IDP returnees and include refugee returnees and affected communities through repairs and rehabilitation. Modalities will include physical repairs through partners, direct implementation in some locations, material distribution and installation, and cash for shelter.

	Syria	Türkiye	Lebanon	Jordan	Egypt	Iraq	Regional Activities	TOTAL
Return	56,250,000	69,575,000	55,468,852	20,750,000	3,750,000	747,500	500,000	207,041,352
Protection	25,125,000	20,700,000	21,431,148	1,250,000	187,500	172,500		68,866,148
Material Assistance & Inclusion	55,000,000							55,000,000
Shelter	40,000,000							40,000,000
TOTAL	176,375,000	90,275,000	76,900,000	22,000,000	3,937,500	920,000	500,000	370,907,500

The total budget in this Operational Framework represents financial needs for UNHCR operations in host countries and inside Syria. UNHCR Syria has already issued an approved Operations Budget which covers IDPs and IDP returnees, separate from the budget above. Some of the protection related costs of neighboring countries are also part of the approved respective operations' budgets. The total requirements, approved by ExCom, for UNHCR Syria in 2025 currently stand at USD 399 million.