

Sixth Regional Survey on

SYRIAN REFUGEES' PERCEPTIONS & INTENTIONS ON RETURN TO SYRIA

Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan

March 2021

An abstract graphic featuring a network of interconnected nodes (dots) of varying sizes and colors (dark blue, white, and light blue) against a solid blue background. Two small human figures are positioned within the network: one in the lower center wearing a white shirt and green pants, and another in the middle right wearing a green dress and red headscarf.

Introduction

This report presents the key findings of UNHCR's sixth Return Perceptions and Intention Survey (RPIS) among Syrian Refugees conducted between February and March 2021. Surveys were conducted by UNHCR in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The findings of this report represent an aggregation of country survey findings. Individual countries may have specific variations.

Pursuing durable solutions to displacement is integral to UNHCR's work and mandate, including through voluntary return in safety and dignity, which is the fundamental right of every refugee. UNHCR firmly believes in listening to refugee men, women, girls, and boys, and being guided by their hopes, intentions, and choices when it comes to securing durable solutions.

UNHCR has been carrying out Regional Perception and Intention Surveys (RPIS) of Syrian refugees since 2017 on their future intentions to ensure the centrality of refugee voices in discussions about their future, as well as to inform planning and programming. While intention surveys can provide valuable insights and trends, they have limitations including the fact that it is a reflection of refugees' intentions represents a given point in time only and can and does subsequently change depending on a wide range of factors.

Profile of Respondents

- 3,201 respondents
- 66% male and 34% female
- 81% adults between 25-59
- 12.5% young adults; 6% older people (60+ years old)
- 32% female-headed households
- 95% with official documentation

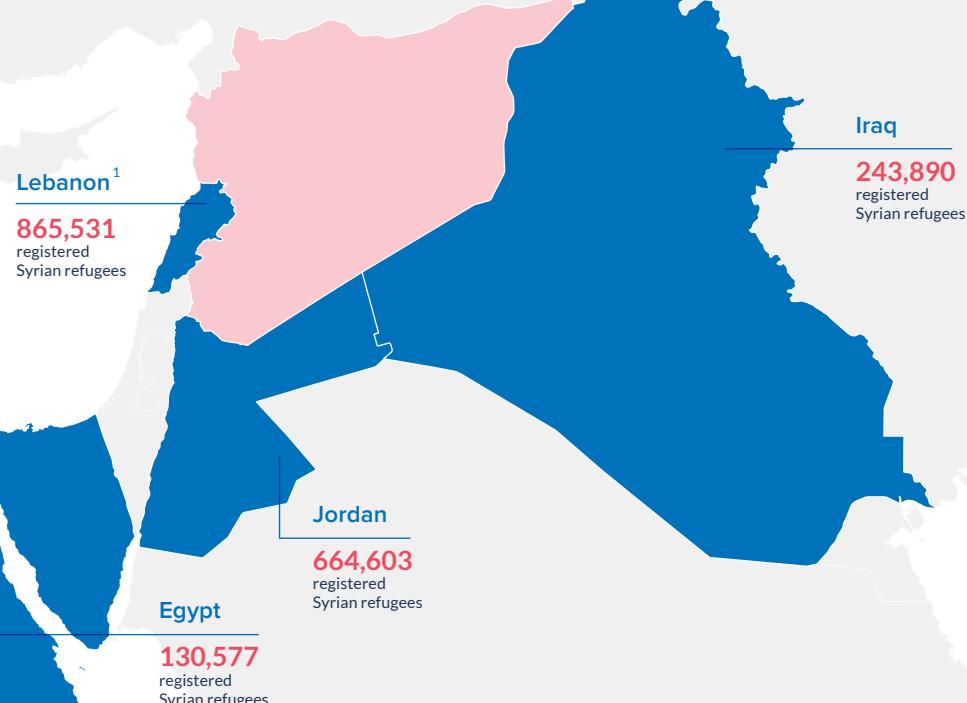
Number of registered Syrian refugees

(as of 3 March 2021)

This figure refers to refugees registered by UNHCR.

Latest and official figures are available here:

[UNHCR data portal](#)



This sixth round of the RPIS came during a of significant challenge across the region given the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and difficult socio-economic situations in host countries and in Syria. Key findings from this sixth round include:

- **Nearly 90 per cent of Syrian refugees surveyed can't meet their basic needs in host countries.**
- **Most Syrian refugees continue to hope to return to Syria one day, even if not in the near term.**
- **A small number of Syrian Refugees expressed an intention to return in the next 12 months.**
- **Safety & security, livelihoods opportunities, housing, and basic services as key factors influencing return decision-making.**
- **The COVID-19 pandemic had a limited impact on intention to return.**

The results of the survey are broadly comparable to previous surveys. Overall, the hope for refugees to return home to Syria remains relatively strong compared to earlier in the crisis. However, a smaller number of refugees intend to return to Syria in the near term compared to the previous survey. This is consistent with the figures that are being observed by UNHCR in terms of actual returns.

Through the results of this survey and other feedback mechanisms, it is vital that all stakeholders listen to refugees and respect their current intentions and choices, whether it is to return at the current time or not. The international community must depoliticize these discussions and enable and support the ability of Syrian refugees to make free and informed decisions about their future.

UNHCR believes a comprehensive protection and solutions strategy remains the best approach to support Syrian refugees at the current time. This includes supporting host countries and communities to maintain a favourable asylum and protection environment, as well as expanding resettlement and complementary pathway options. At the same time, some Syrian refugees are already taking steps to return; that is their right and support to them must be enhanced.

Given that most Syrian Refugees maintain a hope to return one day, it is also vital that collective efforts are redoubled to address remaining barriers to return, as well as continuing to plan for larger-scale return. This survey outlines the factors which refugees are saying inhibiting their return – making progress in these areas will increase the likelihood that this becomes a more realistic, safe, and sustainable solution for a larger number of people.

As the Syria crisis continues beyond a decade, the need to sharpen the focus on durable solutions for Syrian Refugees is vital if we are to bring an end to their displacement and enable them to start rebuilding their lives in safety and with dignity.

Note On Methodology:

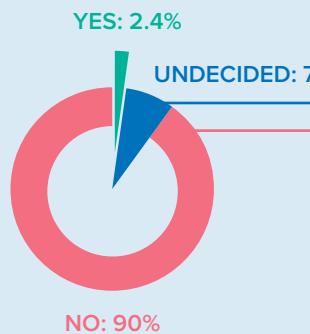
While intention surveys can provide valuable insights into refugees hopes, intentions and concerns and are a useful tool, they have limitations including the fact that the reflection of refugees' intentions represents a given point in time only and may subsequently change depending on a wide range of factors. Meanwhile, slight differences in survey methodology and questionnaire between surveys, as well as considering the margin of error, means undue reliance shouldn't be placed on trends over time.

Since 2017,
over 16,200
Syrian refugees
have been
reached through
perception and
intention surveys,
including
over 3,200
in this specific
sixth round

¹ The Government of Lebanon estimates that the country hosts 1.5 million Syrians who have fled the conflict since 2011 (including 865,531 registered with UNHCR as of December 2020).

At a Glance

**Do you plan to return to Syria
within the next 12 months?**



If answered "No" or "Undecided":

Plans of those who do not wish to return to Syria within the next 12 months



Hope to go back to Syria one day²



² Among those not planning to return to Syria in the next 12 months, nor intending to move to a third country.

Main Reasons for Returning

(respondents who answered yes)

- 1. The security situation has improved
- 2. Other³
- 3. I have work/found livelihood opportunities in Syria
- 4. Me and my family are missing home
- 5. I feel pressure from/in my current host country

Main Reasons for not returning

(respondents who answered no or undecided)

- 1. Lack of livelihood/work opportunities
- 2. Lack of safety and security
- 3. Lack of adequate housing and or concerns over my property/housing
- 4. To avoid military service
- 5. inadequate basic services

³ 'Other' includes a range of different reasons including related to the refugee's personal circumstances, family situation as well as economic considerations.

COVID-19 affected intention to return?

(all respondents)



Key Findings

1. The survey took place at a time when nearly 90 per cent of the refugees can't meet their basic needs in host countries

- 89 per cent of those interviewed said they couldn't meet their basic needs in the host country, which is in line with the findings of recent vulnerability assessments.
- Refugees said they were particularly struggling with food, housing, basic commodities, medical and school expenses.
- The top three sources of income / support were: 1) work; 2) government or humanitarian assistance; and 3) loans or credit.

2. Most Syrian refugees continue to hope to return to Syria one day, even if not in the near term

- Survey results indicate that 70 per cent of Syrians hope to go back to Syria one day, among those not planning to go back in the next 12 months nor planning to move to a third country.
- Around 20 per cent of refugees indicated they have no hope to return to Syria.
- Around 10 per cent are unsure about their longer-term intentions.

3. A small number of Syrian Refugees expressed an intention to return in the next 12 months

- 2.4 per cent of total respondents stated they plan to return within the coming year.
- The intention rate highest among Syrian refugees living in Iraq (5 per cent).
- 89 per cent of people intend to return to their area of origin.

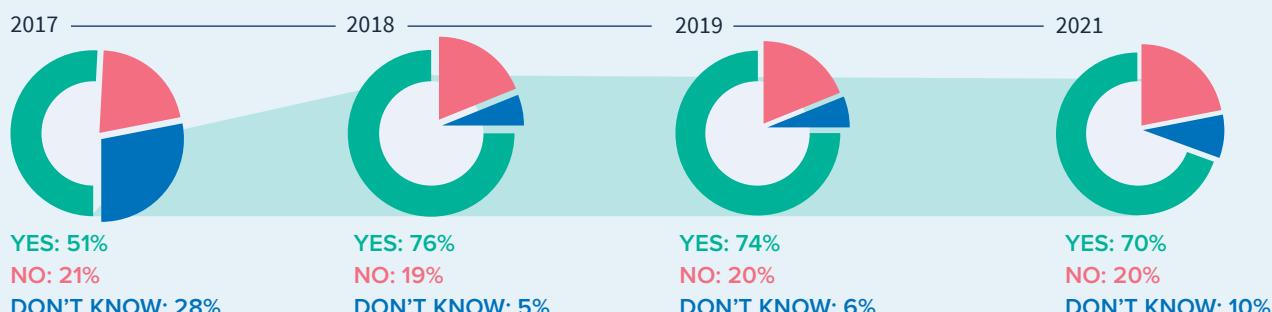
4. Respondents noted safety and security, livelihoods, housing, and basic services as key factors influencing their return decision-making.

- Safety and security were cited by more than half of all respondents as the top consideration related to return.
- Livelihoods opportunities was cited as the second top consideration related to return, also cited by almost half of respondents.
- Housing and accessing to basic services followed closely behind as the next most cited reasons.

5. The COVID-19 pandemic had a limited impact on intention to return.

- Most respondents (85 per cent) interviewed indicated that COVID-19 related developments did not impact their return decision-making.
- Only 6 per cent said it severely influenced their decision. Refugees cited concerns about the infection, health services and reduced livelihood opportunities inside Syria as the main COVID related concerns.
- The prevailing situation in host countries does not seem to act as a strong motivating factor, rather the intention to return was slightly higher among those who could meet their basic needs than those who said they cannot.

Do you hope to go back to Syria one day?



Country Spotlight

The findings of this report represent an aggregation of regional findings. Individual countries may have specific variations. When comparing the regional findings of the current survey with the results from previous years, it is apparent that intention to return has been and continues to fluctuate across refugee populations living in different host countries as well as over time and the data included here should be viewed accordingly.

While the hope among refugees for an eventual return to Syria remains strong, intention for a return in the next 12 months has decreased for all countries except Iraq. In Iraq, the number of people indicating an intention to return in the next year increased from three to nearly five per cent. The increase in those indicating no intention to return in the next year was particularly pronounced among respondents living in Egypt and Jordan. Proportionally, the number of respondents that are unsure decreased by 14 per cent and 11 per cent in the two countries. In the case of Jordan this percentage is only slightly below that during 2018.

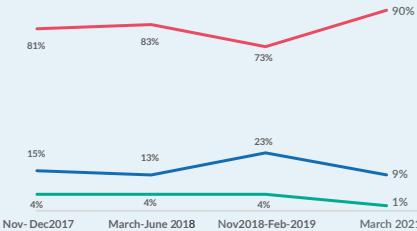
It will be important to explore further the relationship between the ability to meet basic needs and an intention to return.

Do you plan to return to Syria in the next year?

No
Don't know
Yes



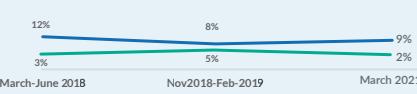
Respondents in Egypt



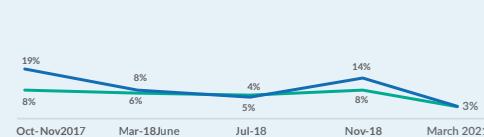
Respondents in Iraq



Respondents in Lebanon



Respondents in Jordan



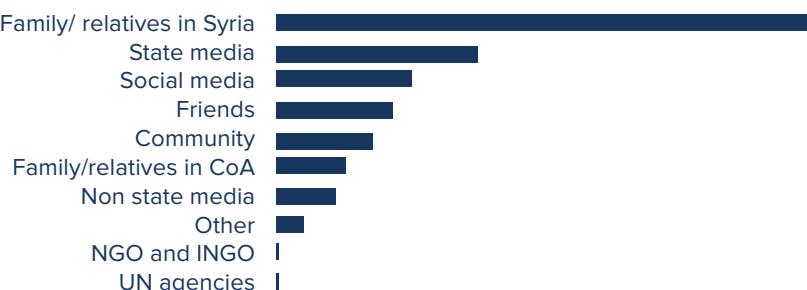
Return Intentions and Dynamics

Of those surveyed in this sixth round in the four countries, the current status of intentions can be summarized into three broad groups. These are 1) those who plan to return in the next 12 months; 2) those who do not plan to return in the next 12 months; 3) those who are undecided. This section explores the reasons, motivations, and dynamics of these three groups while acknowledging that there is a certain amount of fluidity among the groups.

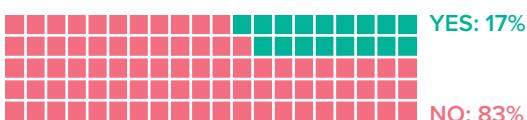
Do you feel you have sufficient information to decide on your intention to return to Syria in the next 12 months?



Main sources of information



Have you visited or temporarily travelled to Syria?



Important for you or member from your community to first visit Syria



Refugees intending to return in the next 12 months

Of all those surveyed, some 2.4 per cent expressed an intention to return in the next 12 months. Those who responded positively about return and who are actually making plans to return reportedly based their decision on several factors as outlined in the graph below, including improvement in the security situation in their place of origin, family reunification, and work opportunities in Syria.

Even among those expressing an intention to return in the next 12 months, there remained concerns about the situation back in Syria. The most cited concerns related to safety and security, indicating that while people felt there were sufficient improvements to commence with actual return plans they still felt a degree of uncertainty about the same. Other factors mentioned included: limited access to livelihoods, military service amnesty and a lack of access to basic services.

Main Reasons for Returning

1. The security situation has improved
2. Other
3. I have work/found livelihood opportunities in Syria
4. Me and my family are missing home
5. I feel pressure from/in my current host country

Concerns about return

1. The security situation
2. Lack of work/livelihood opportunities
3. Lack of amnesty for military deserters / draft evaders
4. Lack of adequate basic services
5. Other

WITH WHO? The majority of those planning to return in the next 12 months intend to return with their family members (both immediate and extended).

Returning with family?

1. All family members
2. Alone
3. Undecided
4. Some family members/external family members while others will remain in the host country
5. All family members and extended family



12 out of 14 governorates in Syria were mentioned as intended return locations.





Sanah (11)
Syrian Refugee in Egypt

Eleven-year-old Syrian refugee Sanah sits for a portrait photograph in Cairo. Originally from Homs, Sanah has been living in Egypt with her family since 2013.

Refugees not intending to return in the next 12 months

As in previous surveys, the majority of respondents – almost 90 per cent – are not planning to return to Syria in the next 12 months, but ultimately wish to return (some 70 per cent). Reasons cited by respondents in this group for having no immediate intention to return remain the same, including the lack of safety and security in Syria, limited access to livelihood opportunities, and limited or no access to adequate housing. Concerns over housing were the most pronounced among female respondents who cited this as their primary concern.

Of those who are not intending to return over the next 12 months, close to 69 per cent intend to continue staying in the host country for now, 19 per cent hope to move to a third country, while about seven per cent are currently undecided.

Of those who are not intending to return in the next 12 months, some 70 per cent stated an eventual wish to return to Syria.

The main inhibiting factors for people to return in the near term are the same factors they indicated would affect their decision in the future.

Main Reasons for not returning in the next 12 months

- 1. Lack of livelihood/work opportunities**
- 2. Lack of safety and security**
- 3. Lack of adequate housing and/or concerns over my property/housing**
- 4. To avoid military service**
- 5. Inadequate basic services**



Abudefatah
Syrian Refugee in Iraq

Abudefatah is 75 and did not want to flee his village in Syria, but no one was left in his village. He lives now in Bardarash refugee camp in Iraq.

Refugees undecided on whether to return in the next 12 months

9.8 percent of respondents indicated they are undecided about their return plans in the near future. This rate was highest in Iraq where nearly one quarter of all respondents selected this option. When asked what factors could help them decide, improved safety and security and access to livelihood were highlighted as key considerations. Additional factors were access to property, basic services, and improved rule of law.

While about half of the respondents from this group stated during the last survey that it is important for them to visit Syria prior to making a final decision about a permanent return, this percentage has decreased to 40 per cent during this round. This is perhaps in part linked to the better access to information as reported by refugees.

What can help you decide about your return plans?

1. Improved safety and security/ conflict

2. I am confident that there are livelihood/work opportunities

3. I am confident that there is access to my own property/ housing or alternative housing

4. I am confident that I will have access to adequate basic services

5. I am sure there is an amnesty for military deserters/draft evaders

6. When it's no longer mandatory to complete military service

Methodology

During the sixth round of the RPIS, between February and March 2021, a total of 4,808 Syrian refugees residing in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan were contacted. Out of these, 3,201 were successfully reached and consented to being interviewed, allowing for a representative sample.

Sampling strategy and data analysis

An RPIS is conducted through a common questionnaire which is used by all participating country operations.

The sampling approach adopted for this survey aimed to generate a representative sample of the overall population of Syrian refugees known to UNHCR in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. A random sample was drawn from UNHCR's databases in the four participating countries, with sample sizes per country proportionate to their share of the Syrian refugee population known to UNHCR. A 40 per cent non-response rate was taken into account when setting the sample size.

Who answered the survey?

The majority (88 per cent) of the respondents reached were the Principal Applicants (PA) of the case, most of whom are male. The remaining 11 per cent were the adult spouse, mostly female. About 27 per cent of the respondents are female and head of households.

Limitations

Findings of the intention surveys reflect refugees' intentions at a given point in time only and may subsequently change. Due to the reliance on phone surveys, it was not possible to gather sensitive protection and personal information as well as access to refugees with specific needs.

Of those contacted for the survey, 67 per cent could be reached. With the number of respondents interviewed, the confidence level remained at the planned level of 95 per cent.

Although data collected through previous surveys gives an interesting perspective of trends over time, the survey methodology and questionnaire used varied slightly across the different surveys. This challenge was mitigated by focusing on the current analysis, comparing only the most reliable indicators over time and between operations.

Use of the Survey Data

UNHCR will use the data generated from the survey and associated analysis to generate insights and inform its operational response, programming, and policy and advocacy efforts in the region, in line with its Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy.

Profile of Respondents

- 3,201 respondents
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- 81% adults between 25-59
- 12.5% young adults; 6% older people (60+ years old)
- 32% female-headed households
- 95% with official documentation

Photo credits:

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