

## UNHCR Briefing Note: Latest Developments in displacement dynamics in countries neighbouring Syria

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Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region**

Almost ten years into the Syria crisis, the 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees and the countries and communities who have generously hosted them have been struggling through an economic downturn which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of increasing poverty and shrinking protection space, the international community needs to provide extraordinary support to host countries, communities and refugees in these unprecedented times.

Pre-COVID-19, the majority of refugee men, women, girls, and boys and vulnerable host communities were already living on or beneath national poverty levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing protection risks and socio-economic challenges, heightening the risk of a further descent into poverty, while putting the economies, services and infrastructure of host countries and communities even further under strain.

UNHCR advocates for a Comprehensive Protection and Solutions approach to the Syria crisis, encompassing support to host countries, pursuing protection and self-reliance of refugees, resettlement and enabling voluntary return. Recent developments in these areas and in the context of COVID-19, include:

- Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt continue to generously host refugee men, women, girls and boys, providing access to safety and protection, including registration and legal stay, documentation, health and education services and livelihoods opportunities, and programmes to address specific needs of refugees in light of gender, age and other characteristics. The international community has supported host country response plans with over USD 15 billion through the UN-led Refugee and Resilience Response plan (3RP) since 2015. Combining humanitarian and resilience approaches, the 3RP has set the pace globally for innovative and cost-effective programming that supports both refugees and host countries. Much more has been channeled through States bilateral support and through multi-lateral institutions. In the context of the unprecedented economic downturn and impact of COVID-19, this support needs to be further expanded into 2020 and 2021, with host governments needing more predictable multi-year funding and access to concessional loans and other packages, not least given the uncertainty COVID-19 has created. Flexible and unearmarked funding is also key, as it enables humanitarian actors to respond immediately to emerging critical needs – which has proved invaluable during the COVID-19 response.
- The dramatic reduction of global resettlement places since 2016 is concerning. The outlook for 2020 and beyond forecasts a continuing downward trend, despite the ongoing and critical needs in the region. When international movement restrictions lift, there is need for a renewed focus on resettlement and complementary

pathways as durable solutions, as a very tangible form of responsibility sharing and a solution for the refugees concerned.

- In 2019, almost 95,000 refugee returns were verified, an increase of nearly three-quarters compared to the preceding year. However, due to the impact of COVID-19, there were no verified returns between mid-March and the end of May. On 1st June, Turkey resumed official return activities. Iraq temporarily opened the border for returns in late May and early June. Though not formally verified by UNHCR, several thousand Syrians returned from Lebanon through Masnaa border crossing. The protection and socio-economic situation of the COVID crisis may impact on the decision-making of those contemplating return once border measures and other movement restrictions are lifted. Led by UNHCR, inter-agency preparedness work continues around how to better support refugees who may exercise their right to return in the near term.

It is crucial that, while addressing their own domestic challenges related to COVID-19, the international community builds on their already significant support to the governments of Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt, enabling them to help their own citizens while maintaining access to protection, services and livelihoods for refugees. Sustained support to host countries and assistance programmes is also a crucial means of enabling refugees to make free and informed decisions regarding their future, including return to Syria, and prevent refugees from feeling compelled to return before they consider it a safe and sustainable solution. Expanding resettlement is also critical both to give individual families a future, and to demonstrate to host countries that the international community is ready to share this fundamental responsibility of hosting Syrian refugees.

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## COMPREHENSIVE PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS STRATEGY

UNHCR's overall approach towards Syrian refugees is anchored in a comprehensive protection and solutions approach<sup>1</sup> for the region, in line with the [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#) and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#).

With the 2020-2021 Refugee and Resilience Response Plan (3RP) as its cornerstone, the comprehensive approach:

- i) Supports host countries in the region, building the resilience of national institutions and host communities; provides protection and enables self-reliance of refugees, including access to protection services and assistance, education, healthcare, legal work opportunities and livelihoods;
- ii) Expands access to resettlement in third countries and other complementary pathways for legal admission to third countries, and;
- iii) Respects that return is a right to be exercised based on an individual's free and informed decision, and continues to support, and plan for, voluntary return to Syria in safety and dignity, guided by refugees needs, concerns and decisions, whether it is to return or not at the present time.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy, see the Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria, at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>; and A Roadmap to Advance Resettlement and Complementary Pathways in the Syria Crisis, at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63759>

The following sections provide updated information on each of these inter-connected components, including how the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures to respond to the pandemic have affected Syrian refugees and host communities, while setting out key recommendations for support to host countries and refugees in this.

## COVID-19: COMPOUNDING THE CRISES

The COVID-19 crisis has dramatically impacted host communities and Syrian refugees across the region. The World Bank estimates that economies in the Middle East and North Africa will face a 'growth downgrade' by around 4.2 per cent, which, along with the rest of the world, is expected to reverse years of progress toward development goals.<sup>2</sup>

At the individual and household levels, those living on or below the poverty line, with few assets or savings, and dependent on aid or daily wage labour, have been particularly affected. The vast majority of refugees live in urban or peri-urban environments, often in densely populated areas or shelters, where physical distancing and/or limiting outdoor activities are extremely difficult to implement. Against such a backdrop, protection risks, such as sexual and gender-based violence, child labour, and exploitation, are heightened, while the use of negative coping mechanisms may rise.

Despite the efforts of host governments, poverty<sup>3</sup> and unemployment rates for Syrian refugees were already high prior to the onset of COVID-19, reaching above 60 per cent in some countries, while many more refugee families were teetering just above national poverty levels. Many in host communities were in a similar position. Both refugees and host communities now face an even greater challenges in earning a livelihood, covering basic needs such as shelter or food and accessing key services such as healthcare.

### How COVID-19 has exacerbated multi-dimensional poverty and vulnerability among refugees and host communities:

- Reduction in household income/ livelihoods potentially leading to negative coping strategies.
- Reduced access to quality food and nutritious diets due to increases in food prices which is evidenced in some countries.
- Reduced access to public services like shelter, water, sanitation and waste management
- Reduced access to quality education including access to vocational training Reduced access to health services (for Covid19 treatment and other services)
- Changes in household gender dynamics, increases in women's time poverty, and risks of domestic violence
- Possible rise in social tensions between and among refugee and host communities, due to competition over scarce jobs and livelihoods opportunities and access to services.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 pandemic: a Changed World; 8th June 2020, at

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>

Percentage of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line varies between 60% and 80% across the MENA region. See as an example, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2019-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon>

Temporary regulations designed to minimise the spread of COVID 19, such as business closures and restrictions on movement have significantly reduced income and livelihoods opportunities for vulnerable men and women in host communities, increasing already high risks of unemployment, underemployment and impoverishment. Many, particularly informal workers, are not covered by social security or other safety nets. Women are particularly affected by curfew measures, bearing increased domestic and care burdens and facing increased risks of domestic violence.

National infrastructure providing essential services, such as water and sanitation have already been seriously impeded or are under increased strain, adding to vulnerabilities among entire communities. Closures of schools and educational institutions have left many vulnerable children and young people without access to quality education. In **Turkey**, an inter-agency survey<sup>4</sup> found that 34 per cent of interviewees had not been able to access basic services due to COVID-19, mostly because services were suspended or closed, or because of feeling fearful about leaving their homes due to COVID-19. In **Jordan**, assessments<sup>5</sup> have highlighted the obstacles that vulnerable families, in particular those headed by women, face in accessing the online education platforms with access to the internet and having sufficient technology as key impediments. Access to non-Covid-19 healthcare services and medicines have been highly impacted because of movement restrictions and interruptions to supply chains.

In **Lebanon**, UNHCR's protection monitoring interviews found that 21 per cent of refugee families reported lack of education for children previously enrolled in schools. The capacity to access healthcare is also reportedly deteriorating with approximately half of the most vulnerable categories such as the elderly, persons with disabilities and persons with a critical medical condition, reporting the inability to afford healthcare-related costs. Persons with a critical medical condition are the most affected, with 66 per cent saying that they are unable to afford these costs.<sup>6</sup> In Turkey, an inter-agency survey confirmed that a number of refugee students faced difficulties in accessing online education due to limited access to the internet, lack of equipment and language barrier.

Access to health care has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In **Turkey**, while surveyed refugees report an overall good awareness of ways to prevent infection with the Coronavirus and what to do if infected, they also have reported reduced access to hospitals and medical facilities due to fear of Covid-19 infection at the site, language barriers and reduced availability of treatment of non-urgent illnesses.

Disruptions in economic activities and supply chains for key goods and services due to lockdowns are also negatively impacting government revenues, making the delivery of public services more challenging.

In **Jordan**, an inter-agency survey of Jordanian and refugees households conducted in April showed that of those who had a job prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, only 46 per cent of surveyed Jordanians and 35 per cent of surveyed refugees reported that they still had a secure job to return to. Given the strong dependency on the informal labour market in Jordan, for both refugee and Jordanian employment, the survey also highlighted the major disruption that COVID-19 measures have caused to the informal sector, with a concern that many of these jobs will not return once the economy is opened up.<sup>7</sup> Of key concern is the impact on female employment which continues to be low.

<sup>4</sup> 3RP Turkey Interagency Survey, March to May 2020. See Turkish Red Crescent, Impact of COVID-19, Assessment Report, April 2020, at

<sup>5</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/impact-covid-19-refugee-populations-benefitting-emergency-social-safety-net-essp>

Interagency Multi-Sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment: COVID19; Jordan; May 2020, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/multi-sectoral-rapid-needs-assessment-covid19-jordan-may-2020>

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR Lebanon, Protection Monitoring, 17 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Interagency Multi-Sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment: COVID19; Jordan; May 2020, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/multi-sectoral-rapid-needs-assessment-covid19-jordan-may-2020>

In **Lebanon**, nearly 55 per cent of refugees report<sup>8</sup> having lost employment or their source of income. Around three quarters reported having difficulties paying rent and buying food, stating that they are reducing their food consumption and going into further debt to cover daily survival needs. While 73 per cent of the Syrian refugees were found to be living below the poverty line of USD3.8/person/day and 55 per cent below the extreme poverty line of USD2.9/person/day a year ago<sup>9</sup>, the percentage of severely refugees is estimated to have increased drastically since then, due to the impact of the economic crisis and the COVID-19 situation. WFP estimates that up to 83 per cent of the refugees could now find themselves under the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket, from 55 per cent pre-economic crisis and COVID pandemic. This would leave unassisted 590,000 refugees in dire need.<sup>10</sup>

In **Turkey**, 69 per cent of respondents reported loss of employment due to COVID-19<sup>11</sup> (out of a sample of 468 households) while Syrian-run businesses expressed concern over having to shut down in the next few months with 88 per cent of Syrian-owned enterprises surveyed seeing the Covid-19 pandemic as a direct threat for their businesses<sup>12</sup>. In another survey<sup>13</sup> conducted in April with 1,500 refugees, 97 per cent of the respondents reported that they had reduced essential food expenditure in the last 30 days, 75 per cent reported buying food on credit or borrowing money to purchase essential household goods, and 25 per cent reported selling household goods to meet their basic needs in the last month. At the same time, there has been an increase in requests pertaining to financial assistance received by UNHCR counselling lines with the queries on this topic rising from 2 per cent to 54 per cent of the calls made by Syrian refugees between mid-March and end of May. In Iraq, the Iraq Information Centre (IIC) statistics from January to May show that of the 8,979 calls received from refugees and asylum seekers (not only Syrian), 67 per cent were regarding cash assistance and out of these, 45 per cent were new cases requesting cash assistance due to loss of livelihood opportunities.

In **Egypt**, 46 per cent of those surveyed expressed concern over having lost their source income, fearing evictions or being able to fund. Most are daily wage labourers with little or no savings, and are particularly affected by movement restrictions

In **Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon**, there is evidence of an increase in intimate partner violence against women and violence, abuse and neglect of boys and girls. The number of new survivors seeking help through hotlines remains low, however, possibly due to being isolated with the perpetrator. In Jordan, partners report a significant rise in Mental Health and Psycho-Social (MHPSS) consultations, by over 50 per cent. In Lebanon, an increase in suicidal behaviour has been reported among refugees.

In **Turkey**, difficulties in identifying SGBV and child protection cases and in conducting psycho-social activities and vulnerability identification over the phone due to limited privacy in home settings have been reported, thereby increasing the vulnerability of refugees at risk. Moreover, an inter-agency survey<sup>14</sup> has shown that refugees are suffering from increased stress.

The bottom line is that COVID-19 has effectively exacerbated many of the pre-COVID crisis vulnerabilities faced by refugee men, women, girls and boys, in an economic context which was already challenging for host communities and which has also worsened.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR Lebanon, Protection Monitoring, March to May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Inter-agency, 2019 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.

<sup>10</sup> LCPR Livelihood Sector, Livelihoods Briefing Note, March 2020

<sup>11</sup> IFRC and TRC, Turkish Red Crescent, Impact of COVID-19, Assessment Report, April 2020, at

<https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/impact-covid-19-refugee-populations-benefitting-emergency-social-safety-net-essp>

<sup>12</sup> Business4Goals Platform, COVID-19 Business impact and needs survey, March 2020.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers, April 2020

<sup>14</sup> Inter-agency, Protection sector, COVID-19 Rapid Needs Assessment, June 2020

## SUPPORT TO HOST COUNTRIES AND REFUGEES

The five countries covered under the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for the Syria crisis (3RP) – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt – continue hosting over 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees, as well as other refugees and asylum-seekers of many nationalities. While most Syrian refugees wish to return one day, only a very small proportion feel confident to do so soon according to the latest intention surveys<sup>15</sup>. Many Syrian refugees are likely to remain in host countries for the medium term where they, and the government and communities who generously host them, continue to require comprehensive and sustained support.

Even before the onset of COVID-19, host countries were contending with a range of economic and social challenges. Economic growth has remained sluggish across the region, debt-to-GDP ratios have remained high and poverty and unemployment rates, according to national measures remained a major concern, particularly among young people. The challenging situation found in many host countries has been exacerbated by COVID-19 which is having a profound impact on all 3RP countries and is likely to have far reaching health and socio-economic impacts in the medium term, affecting refugees and host communities alike.

Against the uncertainty in the short and medium terms fuelled by COVID-19, maintaining and expanding support to host countries remains as critical as ever to ensure host governments' ability to withstand the pressures and sustain the provision of basic social services to all those in need, including refugees and vulnerable host communities. Further expanding refugees' ability to develop their human capital and become self-reliant is crucial to ensure dignity and productivity when in asylum. This will also support their capacity to one day return and rebuild their lives in a dignified and sustainable way in Syria.

The international community has long recognized that host countries in the region are the “top donors” to the Syrian refugee crisis, while also channelling over US\$15 billion in funding through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) to enable UN agencies and NGO partners to support national efforts to deal with the crisis. A record of almost US\$7 billion was pledged at least years Brussels conference, as well as multi-year pledges of close to US\$ 2.4 billion for 2020 and beyond, and bilateral and multilateral loans totalling over US\$20 billion, including those at concessional rates.

As part of the 2020 response, 3RP partners across the five countries are supporting national efforts by promoting continued access by refugees to international protection; helping to meet the basic needs of refugees and affected host community members; striving to build resilience and self-reliance at all levels; and helping to strengthen the capacity of national and local institutions. Indeed, most ongoing activities in existing 3RP country plans directly or indirectly support national efforts to curb the spread and lessen the impact of COVID-19, while 3RP partners have also developed COVID-19 specific plans. Importantly, concrete efforts have been undertaken to engage a broader range of development actors to help restore development momentum and join up humanitarian and development activities in a way that ensures maximum impact for people and need and secures the long-term sustainability of the response.

Looking ahead, the 3RP seeks to continue to strengthen the refugee and resilience response and look to play its part in advancing the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a way that leaves no one behind. More than anything, this will ensure host countries can continue to provide asylum and protection for Syrian refugees, so that they can benefit from enhanced burden- and responsibility-sharing from the international community.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan; March 2019, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/fifth-regional-survey-syrian-refugees-perceptions-and-intentions-return-syria-rpis>

UNHCR continues to pursue durable solutions comprehensively in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. While expanding access to resettlement and complementary pathways, and supporting safe, voluntary, and dignified return, priorities in terms of support to host countries, communities and refugees include:

1. **Encouraging support for the 3RP:** The 3RP has remained the cornerstone of the international community's support for the last five years, ensuring that refugees basic rights are realized, increasing self-reliance and dignity and supporting national and local authorities. Further support will enable 3RP partners to address acute needs, while complementing and helping strengthen national efforts at all levels.
2. **Enhancing the role of bilateral partners and International Financial Institutions:** Increased complementarity between humanitarian and development actors is critical to mobilize resources at the scale necessary to systematically tackle socio-economic challenges, strengthen national and local service delivery systems and expand job and other economic opportunities, particularly for the most vulnerable.
3. **Ensuring alignment with national plans, priorities and delivery systems:** The sustainability and legacy of the response is bolstered when programs are aligned with national plans and priorities and delivered through national systems. While host countries have generously opened their basic service systems to refugees, further progress in this area is critical to ensure that "no one to be left behind".
4. **Building on the commitments of the Kuwait, Brussels and London Conferences:** Building on the commitments made at the London and Brussels Conferences can further increase self-reliance, lessen dependence on direct assistance, and help mitigate exposure to additional risks, including the possibility of undertaking irregular movements to third countries.
5. **Expanding local opportunities in the context of durable solutions:** As most refugees are likely to remain in host countries in the medium term, expanding local opportunities as a precursor to solutions remains critical. Providing support in a way that secures current and future skills, education and capacities is vital to the future realization of a durable solution, including safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable return.

## Key Facts and Figures



**70%**  
of people in need in the region are women or children



**Some 35%**  
of children are out of school while over 20% of children cannot continue education through distance learning



**93%**  
of Syrian refugees across the region reside within the host community, mainly in urban areas;  
7% reside in camps

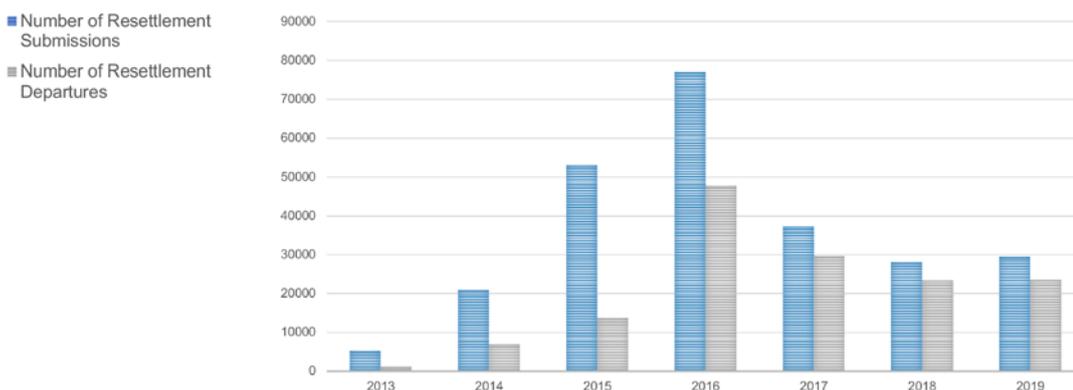


**Over 60%**  
of the households reported loss of job and entire income due to the pandemic in some countries

## RESETTLEMENT AND COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS

Since reaching its peak of 76,000 resettlement submissions in 2016, the dramatic reduction of resettlement places for Syrian refugees in recent years has had a significant impact on the lives of refugees in host countries. Still, despite an overall decrease in resettlement places globally, there was a small but critical increase of approximately 1,500 Syrian resettlement submissions in 2019 compared to 2018. This increase was much welcome and UNHCR aims to maintain – and potentially increase – the current rate of submissions for Syrians in the next few years, given the region’s complex and volatile protection context. In the current climate, every resettlement place is valuable as these opportunities often represent life-saving interventions for most vulnerable refugees. Furthermore, UNHCR is able to maximize the benefit of a sizeable resettlement programme by highlighting the commitment to responsibility-sharing, which is critical in terms of, at least, maintaining the protection space in host countries.

### Resettlement Submissions and Departures 2013 - 2019



According to all estimates, Syrians remain the largest refugee population globally in need of resettlement in 2020. Given that the resettlement needs – with an estimated 579,031 Syrian refugees currently in need of resettlement – far outnumber the resettlement spaces, vulnerable refugees remain in host countries for longer, which compound their needs and result in increased pressure on assistance programmes and vital services.

For Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, maintaining and increasing resettlement places conveys the international community’s ongoing commitment to responsibility-sharing and is a tangible message of support and solidarity with Syrian refugees and with host States.

As the situation develops in Syria, robust, diverse and predictable resettlement programmes in the host States will safeguard the international community’s accountability towards Syrian refugees in the region. UNHCR envisages an ongoing, multi-year resettlement programme for Syrians which adopts a targeted approach and is coherent with and complementary to wider durable solutions planning. Resettlement will remain as the reliable and effective protection tool reserved for those with compelling protection needs, and for whom return to Syria will not be possible in the foreseeable future. UNHCR will continue to work with the Chairs of the Priority Situations Core Group to share good practices, demonstrate the strategic impact of resettlement and identify further solutions, including through the pursuit of complementary pathways. Through working closely with partners, UNHCR will aim to expand current implementation of family reunification, third country scholarships and labor mobility.

The Global Compact on Refugees highlights the importance of ensuring that refugees have access to durable solutions, including resettlement and complementary pathways. The support of States is critical in the following ways:

1. States are asked to **maintain, and where possible expand, their current allocation** of resettlement for Syrian refugees from the region both now and in the coming years. Refugees pending solutions have been severely impacted by the restrictions wrought by COVID-19. At the same time, the adaptation of UNHCR's operational responses to mitigate COVID-19 imposed restrictions may provide new ways to ensure access to solutions for the longer term as well as meeting the solution needs of those most impacted.
2. **UNHCR stands ready to work with States and partners to ensure the continuity of solutions** through online interviews, gathering and forwarding of documents and measures to streamline resettlement and complementary pathway processes both during the COVID-19 response and beyond.
3. **States and all partners are asked to collaborate with UNHCR to re-engage public attention** towards the Syrian crisis to engender a strong level of public support towards resettlement and complementary pathways programmes.



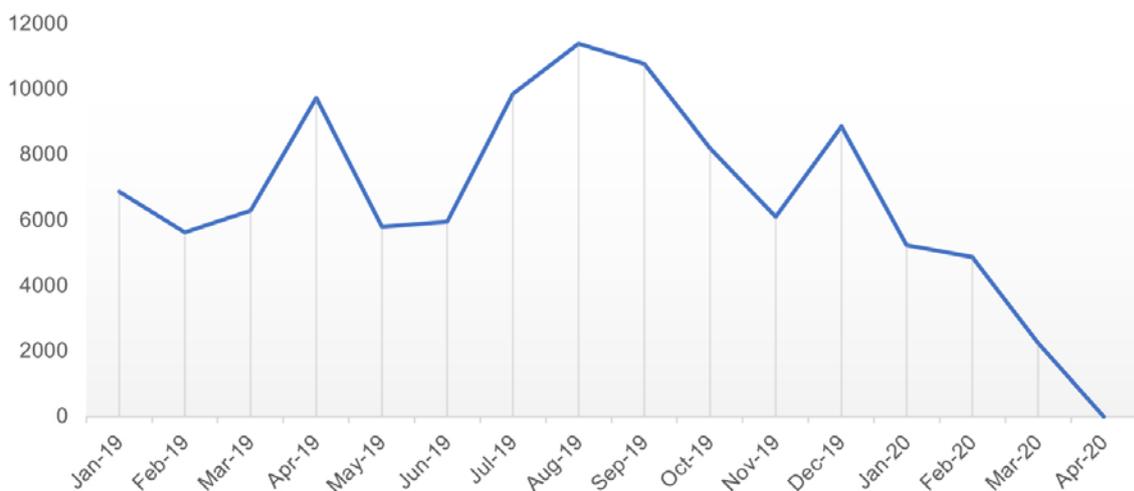
Resettlement – Syrian refugee Abdel, his wife Fatima, their eight-year-old twins, Mohamad and Jomaa, and their daughter, Shahd, aged five prepare to leave Lebanon.  
Photo by UNHCR / Lisa Abou Khaled

## VOLUNTARY RETURN TO SYRIA

From January 2016 up to mid- June 2020, UNHCR has verified the return of over 243,000 Syrian refugees from neighboring countries. This figure represents only refugee returns verified by UNHCR; the actual number is likely higher. In 2019, almost 95,000 refugee returns were verified, an annual increase of nearly three-quarters. Returns from Jordan accounted for the bulk of the 2019 increase, following the reopening of the Jaber-Nassib border crossing in late 2018. To date, Aleppo and Dar'a stand out as the two main governorates of origin of refugee returnees in 2019, followed by Rural Damascus and Homs.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on return to Syria in 2020. While the level of return in the first two months of 2020 were broadly comparable to previous years, return through official border crossings slowed down significantly in March as countries started to enact border measures and other public health containment policies to spread the halt of the virus. There were no verified returns between late March and late May 2020.

2019-20 Refugee Returns to Syria (as verified by UNHCR)



By mid-June, only Turkey had resumed refugee repatriation activities through its border, while returns were also noted from Lebanon and Iraq. While there are few returns currently on-going, the worsening protection and socio-economic situation of the COVID crisis is expected to impact on the decision-making of those contemplating return once border measures and other movements restrictions are lifted. Host countries neighboring Syria have shown unparalleled generosity and hospitality in protecting and supporting Syrian refugees. Faced with economic crises at home, they need to be supported to ensure that pressure on refugees to return does not grow

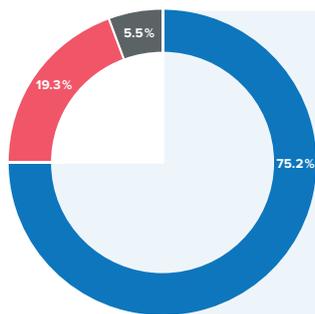
All refugees have the fundamental human right to return to their country of origin at a time of their own choosing. The decision to return must be made on a voluntary basis by refugees, based on up-to-date and reliable information, and not coerced either overtly through forced return, or indirectly through changes of policies that restrict refugee rights or by limiting assistance to refugees in the country of asylum. UNHCR continues to advocate that returns must, to the greatest extent possible, be orderly and sustainable. Ensuring these basic principles are adhered to will require a renewed collective commitment to depoliticize refugee returns

Forced and premature returns to Syria may have several adverse consequences, including:

- Fundamental freedoms and well-being may be at risk.
- Violations of the principle of non-refoulement and a breach of international law.
- Exposure to immediate dangers
- Undue hardship in rebuilding their lives and accessing basic services, shelter and livelihoods.
- Sociation exclusion, marginalization and stigmatization, discouraging further returns
- Potential for further displacement

UNHCR and partners’ operational approach continues to be guided by refugees’ intentions, concerns and decisions on whether to return or not at the present time. Both the needs of those who return and the needs of those who prefer to wait should be addressed. An agile and nuanced operational approach is needed that follows refugees’ own decisions.

DO YOU HOPE TO GO BACK TO SYRIA ONE DAY?

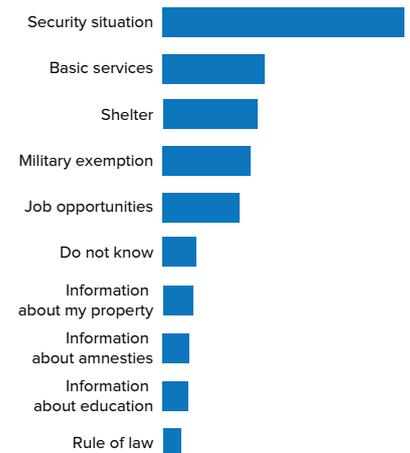


■ YES  
 ■ NO  
 ■ DO NOT KNOW

WHILE YOU HOPE TO RETURN TO SYRIA ONE DAY, DO YOU PLAN RETURNING IN THE NEXT YEAR?



KEY FACTORS FOR DECISION MAKING ON RETURN



UNHCR and inter-agency partners will continue to support to refugees who have made the decision to return in a free and informed manner. Such support is provided in full engagement with host governments and guided by the [Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria](#) and the inter-agency [Return Operational Framework](#), released in 2019. It includes, for example, the provision of information, pre-departure counselling or return monitoring. Such support also extends to documentation, assistance to persons with specific needs or in compelling humanitarian cases, pre-departure vaccination and health referrals, support at the borders or transportation. Other types of non-return specific support in host countries, related to education and skills for example, also help to contribute to a greater prospect of a more successful and sustainable return and reintegration.

In Syria, returning refugees are supported through and included in ongoing humanitarian programmes at the community and village-level and based on need equal to that of other populations, including IDPs and returning IDPs and vulnerable individuals from host communities. Complementing these operational efforts, there is a dialogue with the Government of Syria and other stakeholders to gradually address issues that refugees say

inhibit their return, such as concerns over safety, conscription, prosecution, housing, livelihoods or access to services, including education, but also important enabling factors, in particular expanded humanitarian access, assistance and services for people in need in Syria, including IDP and refugee returnees.

Even against the backdrop of COVID-19, return planning and preparedness for the return of Syrian refugees continues through the interagency Durable Solutions Working Groups, under the 3RP coordination framework, at the regional level and in several host countries. On-going efforts span several areas including assistance, mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS), Housing, Land and Property (HLP) and civil documentation, and mine risk education. By fully and carefully thinking through these issues now, it is hoped that these measures, whenever they are implemented at the appropriate time, will yield important protection dividends, reducing the risk of harm during the return journey, and ultimately increase the likelihood of a successful return and reintegration.

**While enhancing support to host governments and communities and expanding access to resettlement and complementary pathways, priorities in terms of safe, voluntary, and dignified return include:**

- 1. Promoting freedom of choice:** Refugees have the right to return to their country of origin and decide when it is possible for them to do so, in a safe, dignified and sustainable manner, based on their individual circumstances and the situation in their place of desired return. Enabling and supporting their ability to make free and informed decisions is critical for the sustainability of returns, and building trust in return as a solution. Placing the intentions and perceptions of the refugees at the heart of planning and operational support is therefore crucial.
- 2. Preventing forced returns:** Returns that are forced, whether directly or indirectly, put persons at risk, may amount to violations of international law, could hamper stability and reconciliation in Syria and may have a deterring effect on other potential refugee returnees as stories of hardship circulate.
- 3. Strengthening operational support to returnees:** As refugees return home, some of the most vulnerable will need support. Building on the Regional Operational Framework, UNHCR and partners continue to evaluate how to best support and address the needs of refugees who take a free and informed decision to return.
- 4. Unfettered humanitarian access in Syria:** Unfettered access in the main areas of return is critical so that UNHCR and partners can increase its operational role toward those returning. Support for humanitarian programmes, services and infrastructure is also critical as a means of ensuring return is dignified and sustainable.
- 5. Working to remove obstacles to return:** UNHCR and partners continue to engage with the Government of Syria as well as other States and stakeholders to gradually address and remove what refugees say inhibit their return, such as concerns over safety, housing, livelihoods or access to services.