



# **A LONGING TO GO HOME, IN SAFETY AND DIGNITY**

**Intentions and Perceptions of Syrian  
Refugees in Lebanon About Their Future**

**Front cover:**

*Sabah, 42, hangs laundry on the roof of her destroyed home in Baba Amr, Homs, Syria. Sabah, who has eight children, lived in her home for 20 years before it was shelled during clashes in 2012. She moved with her family to her husband's village in rural Homs before returning one year ago. With her husband now missing she has made some repairs to the house and rents out two rooms to make some money. The area still resembles a ghost town. Only a small fraction of the area's 80,000 residents have returned, most living in damaged and half destroyed homes.*

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# A LONGING TO GO HOME, IN SAFETY AND DIGNITY: Intentions and Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon About Their Future

January 2018



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## Introduction

**The vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon express a desire to return to their home country. They also say that sustainable security and safety are the most important factors influencing their decision on when to return.** These are some of the main findings from a range of surveys, focus group discussions and other initiatives that UNHCR has undertaken with thousands of Syrian refugees in Lebanon during the course of 2017, with a view to enhancing collective understanding of the intentions and perspectives of the refugees with regard to their future and longer-term prospects. Mindsets evolve over time and it is important for UNHCR to monitor this evolution regularly. The findings from a sample of these initiatives, held over the course of a 10-month period, and corroborated with information gathered through UNHCR's ongoing protection and assistance activities, are presented in this report.

Having spent up to six and a half years in a situation of temporary exile, many of the refugees UNHCR speaks with express a strong wish of being able to restart life in their own country. Many parents are worried about their children becoming a 'lost generation', living for years in a temporary situation where they cannot fully develop their potential and the skills they need for a future as adults.

**“Any return must be voluntary, safe and dignified.”**

Volker Türk, UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, 7 November 2017

When Syrians fled to Lebanon to seek international protection from persecution, conflict and war, most thought that their time in exile would be short, and that they would be able to return after one or a couple of years. The protracted nature of their displacement has not, however, diluted their dream of returning home. On the contrary, discussions with Syrian refugees in Lebanon show that they are following the developments in Syria very closely in order to inform themselves of changes in the situation that will impact on their decision and ability to return permanently, in safety and dignity.

As part of its ultimate goal and responsibility to seek durable solutions to the situation of refugees, UNHCR has maintained, since the beginning of the Syria crisis, a solutions-focus to everything it does. This has encompassed efforts to facilitate the resettlement of particularly vulnerable Syrian refugees to third countries. Since 2011, UNHCR has

submitted more than 66,870 vulnerable Syrian refugees for resettlement and other humanitarian admission programmes to more than 20 different countries, including Canada, France, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Given that staying permanently in Lebanon (i.e. local integration) is not an option available to refugees as per the Government of Lebanon's policy, third-country resettlement is the only durable solution available to them so far. This has allowed some of the most vulnerable refugees, be they victims of torture or trauma or seriously ill persons, to move on to a new life. However, for the large majority remaining, the challenge continues to be to make this temporary stay as safe and dignified as possible. UNHCR strives to help the refugees preserve their well-being while in exile. This is done through assistance, and through advocacy and other interventions aimed at protecting their basic rights, such as freedom of movement, the right to legal residence and documentation, and birth registration. UNHCR also seeks to enable refugees to regain trust, develop their human capital, self-reliance and transferable skills. This not only prevents refugees from sinking deeper into poverty while in Lebanon and from entering into negative coping mechanisms such as begging or child labour, but it also equips them to rebuild their lives back in Syria and reintegrate upon return.

Meanwhile, throughout the region, UNHCR systematically carries out activities geared at preparing for the future facilitation of voluntary repatriation of refugees, in safety and dignity<sup>1</sup> to Syria. While the conditions in Syria are not yet ripe for this, preparations need to start before, so that refugees can be assisted to return and reintegrate the day the necessary conditions and guarantees are in place. A key component of these preparations is to regularly seek the views and perspectives of the refugees on the factors that influence their decisions and intentions regarding future return. This, in turn, informs negotiations and advocacy by UNHCR and the international community to secure those conditions, and thus pave the way for voluntary repatriation towards a truly durable solution.

<sup>1</sup> Returning "with dignity" means that refugees are not manhandled; that they can return unconditionally and that if they are returning spontaneously they can do so at their own pace; that they are not arbitrarily separated from family members; and that they are treated with respect and full acceptance by their national authorities, including the full restoration of their rights. See: UNHCR, "Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection", 1996. Dignity thus implies that the human rights of the individual, including the right to life, liberty and freedom of movement, as well as the family unity, are respected at all times.

## Methodology

Understanding the situation and perspectives of refugees of different ages, gender and backgrounds is central to UNHCR's protection and solutions work, as it helps to ensure that plans, programmes and interventions are based on, and address, refugees' real needs. Above all, this participatory approach helps ensure that the refugees themselves are part of the response and solution. Placing the needs and capacities of refugees at the centre of planning directly contributes to the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.



*UNHCR is continuously in dialogue with refugees, in various ways.*

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More specifically, this report refers to consultations held with some 1,200 refugees of diverse profiles, through 34 initiatives implemented between February and November 2017. Both quantitative and qualitative data on return intentions and perceptions has been gathered through these initiatives. The first comprised a return intention survey with a random sample of 385 refugees, carried out in February 2017. This survey sought to establish an overview of the intentions and perceptions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon as regards their future, and identify the main factors that influence their decision on longer-term solutions.

In order to learn in greater detail about the factors influencing refugees' decisions, 32 focus group discussions were convened between March and November 2017, and semi-structured interviews held in July 2017 with refugees who had previously participated in the February return intention survey. The latter exercise was a way to measure the evolution of refugees' mind-sets since the beginning of the year and gather more qualitative data. Between April and May 2017, UNHCR also conducted a survey among another 385 refugees on housing, land and property issues, in view of the importance that refugees give to this topic when considering their prospects for return. A detailed overview of the surveys, focus group discussions and other consultations carried out is available in the Annex to this report.

#### **Overview of consultations conducted by UNHCR Lebanon in 2017**

Total of 1,171 Syrian refugees consulted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Women (25 years of age and above)</li> <li>■ Men (25 years of age and above)</li> <li>■ Females heading households</li> <li>■ Female adolescents/youth (between 14 and 24 years of age)</li> <li>■ Male adolescents/youth (between 14 and 24 years of age)</li> <li>■ Older persons (60 years of age and above)</li> <li>■ Persons with disabilities</li> <li>■ Persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI)</li> </ul>
32 focus group discussions	
1 return intention survey and semi-structured follow-up interviews	
1 survey on housing, land and property issues	
5 locations	

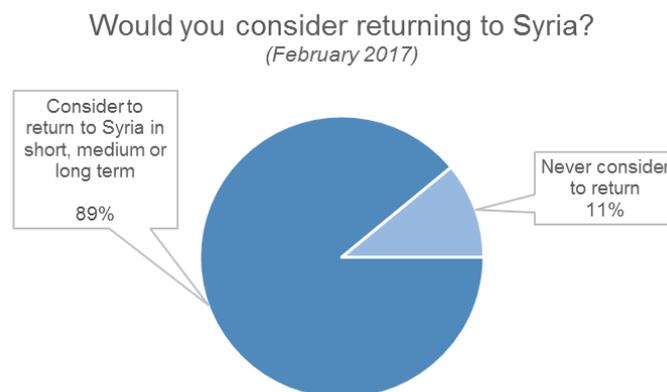
UNHCR has also continuously analysed information related to return obtained from routine discussions and counselling with thousands of refugees at its reception centres daily, reports from protection monitoring directly or through partners, and other information collected during the implementation of protection and assistance activities. The sections below provide an analysis of the consolidated findings from the return intention survey, the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews as well as the housing, land and property survey, which have been triangulated with related information obtained through other protection and assistance activities, and with information received from UNHCR's teams in Syria. The graphs with percentages contain findings from the February 2017 return intentions survey, while the findings from the focus group discussions and other consultations have been reflected throughout the text.

# Intentions of Syrian refugees for the future

## A longing to go home

The return intention survey conducted in February 2017 found that the overwhelming majority of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon – 89 per cent – want to ultimately return to Syria. As revealed during all the focus group discussions and interviews, refugees are often discussing plans for the future with their family members and, to a certain extent, within their community.

- *Graph 1: Refugees' ultimate desire to return*

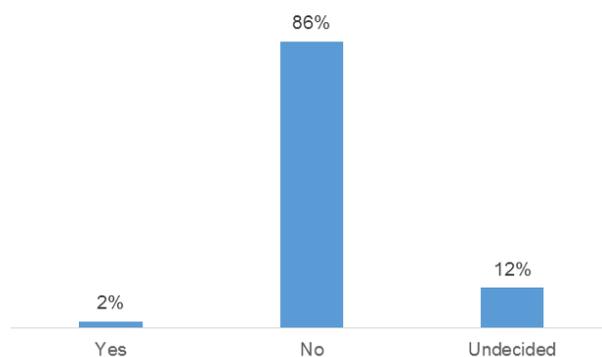


Families with children and older persons were particularly inclined to describe return to Syria as their preferred durable solution. Older persons tended to express a desire to spend the remaining years of life in their home country. One participant explained: “Returning home would bring back my dignity.”

The question of return was not a matter of “if”, but mostly a matter of “when”. Given the many challenges faced by people in Syria (e.g. security and safety, destroyed property, lack of services), most of the refugees who expressed a wish to ultimately return did not consider this to be possible in the near future.

- *Graph 2: Refugees' intentions in the short term*

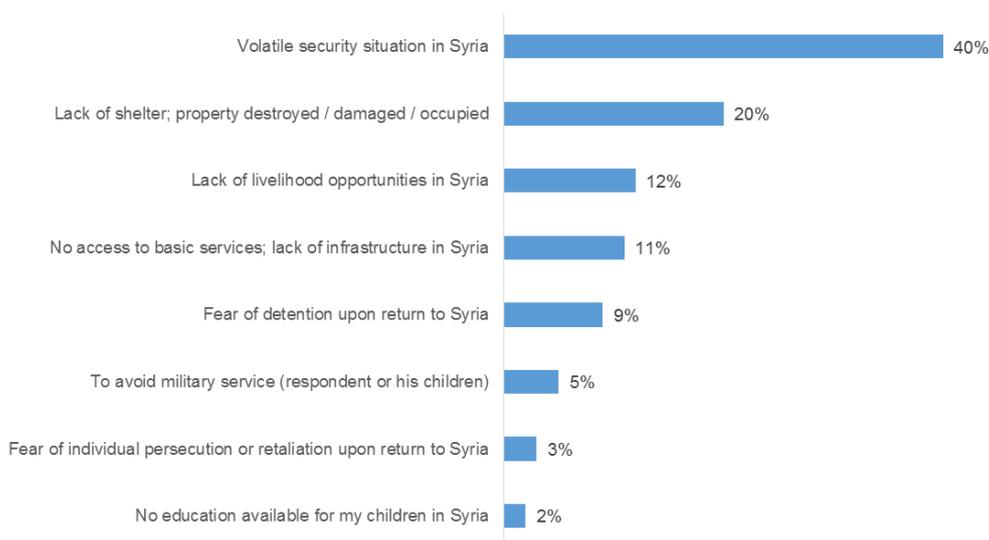
Would you consider going back to Syria within the next six months?  
(February 2017)



The 86 per cent who indicated that they did not consider returning to Syria within the next six months explained their decision by the volatile security situation (40%), the lack of shelter for reasons such as destroyed, damaged, or occupied property (20%), or the lack of livelihood opportunities (12%). Detailed findings are presented in Graph 3 below.

- *Graph 3: Reasons for not returning in the short term*

Why do you not consider going back to Syria in the near future?  
(February 2017)

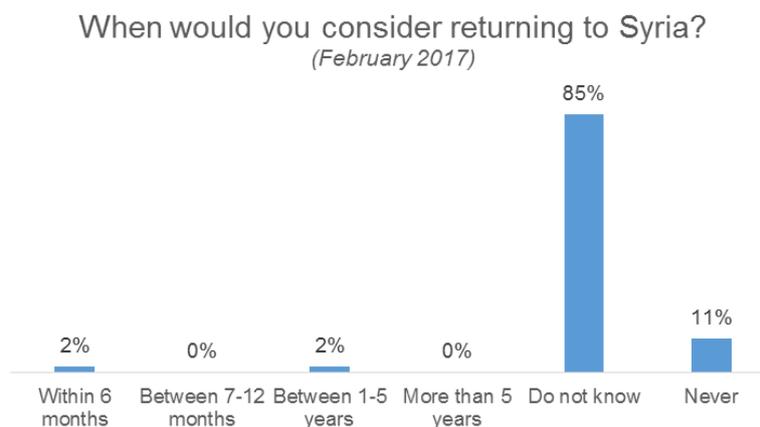


The 12 per cent who were undecided clarified that the main factors that would help them decide on return were: improved security situation in Syria (46%), availability of shelter (18%), work opportunities (14%), and infrastructure and services (11%) in Syria. Male participants were more undecided than average.

Only two per cent of the refugees who participated in the February 2017 survey considered returning to Syria in the near future. These refugees reported having difficulties to cover their basic needs in Lebanon, a perception of improved security in their place of origin, a lack of resettlement prospect to travel to a third country, and a wish to be reunited with their family in Syria. They were, however, uncertain about their ability to re-establish their life in Syria and only half of them thought that such a return would be durable.

In light of the expected challenges that returnees would be facing in the short term in their area of origin, the majority of the respondents (85%) who had mentioned that they would ultimately like to return to Syria were unsure of when they would be ready to consider return (see Graph 4 below). Notwithstanding their intentions in the short term, most of the refugees interviewed expressed an intent to return to Syria one day.

- *Graph 4: Considered timeframe for return to Syria*



Refugees who were surveyed in February 2017, including those who then indicated a desire to go back to Syria, repeated the obstacles to return during semi-structured interviews conducted in July 2017. They expressed that return would only be possible when the security situation in Syria would permit, and access to basic rights, such as hospital care and education for the children, would be secured. Access to work

opportunities was also mentioned. Between February and July 2017, the refugees' perspectives had not substantially changed, illustrating the continued lack of predictability of the situation inside Syria.

## Determining factors for return to Syria: Safety first

Refugees' intentions for the future were shaped by their perception of the conditions in Syria, most notably in regard to the security situation, practices of military conscription, housing, land and property issues, and access to livelihood opportunities and essential services. These issues were identified, to different degrees, by the refugees as the main obstacles to return. Many emphasized that positive developments would be needed for durable return to be possible.

### *Security situation in Syria*

Throughout all consultations, the lack of predictable and sustainable safety and security in Syria was raised as the primary factor influencing refugees' plans for the future. This was described as a major concern, due both to indiscriminate violence and to targeted protection threats. Generalized violence, shelling or bombings, kidnappings, arbitrary arrests, as well as military conscription and punishment for evading military service and conscription during the war, were mentioned as specific examples.

The need for a sustainable change in the security situation in Syria was consistently stressed by the refugees in almost all of the focus group discussions.

### CONDITIONS OF SAFETY

Return must take place under conditions of:

- **Physical Safety:** this includes the right to life, the right to liberty and security, and protection from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. All appropriate measures should be undertaken, primarily by State authorities, to guarantee that refugees and returnees are protected from violence or threats to their physical safety, both en route and in areas of return in the country of origin.
- **Legal safety:** means that returnees have non-discriminatory access to essential services, national protection mechanisms and administrative procedures for obtaining documentation and restoring property, and enjoy recognition of civil status and the rights associated with nationality;
- **Material safety:** means that returnees can enjoy their social, economic and cultural rights (e.g. food, water, sanitation and shelter; property restitution; access to livelihoods; health care; education) on an equal footing with any other nationals, and are provided with material and community-based support, particularly in the initial stages of the return to facilitate their reintegration.

Despite recent developments and efforts to reduce violence through de-escalation agreements, violence continues in nearly all parts of Syria. Various state and non-state actors are involved in partially overlapping conflicts, and increasingly also different regional and international actors. Serious and widespread violations of international humanitarian law, as well as violations and abuses of human rights law, are widely reported. Armed conflicts are ongoing in many parts of the country.<sup>2</sup>

The unpredictable security situation makes it difficult for the majority of the refugees to assess when they will be able to return in safety. Refugees are afraid of what will happen to them if they return. Mines and booby-traps in areas of return, as well as the remaining presence of large amounts of weapons were mentioned as

“When we say ‘security’ with regard to Syria, we are speaking first and foremost about the risk of physical injury and, ultimately, life or death. In Lebanon, our situation still feels like life or death, but at least it is a slower death, and we are buying time for our luck to change.”

[Male participant in the Bekaa, July 2017]

serious obstacles for return to Syria. Concerns related to rape and sexual harassment of women in Syria were also raised during focus group discussions. Throughout all the consultations, risks related to military recruitment for men in Syria were strongly emphasized by the refugees. These are all examples of security-related considerations that present a serious risk to the life and safety of refugees and prevent them from deciding to return in the near future.

### *Military service: Mobilization and punishment for draft evasion*

The fear of being mobilized to take part in the conflict in Syria, or to be punished for having evaded the military draft, plays a key role in the decision of refugee families to remain in Lebanon for the time being. Men, women and youth agreed during the various consultations that men of drafting age, between 18 and 42 years, youth approaching recruitment age, as well as those who were wanted in Syria for desertion or draft evasion, would not go back for fear of being mobilized. This topic was most often raised by male refugees, who expressed a fear of punishment for having evaded or deserted from the army, and noted that men between 18 and 42 years can be enlisted in in the reserve unit.

<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the conflict and security situation in Syria, and its impact on individuals' need for international protection, is contained in the "International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic (Update V)", issued by UNHCR in November 2017, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59f365034.html>.

Draft evasion is a criminal offense in Syria and is seen as a political, anti-government act,<sup>3</sup> which may lead to punishment beyond the relevant sanctions for the criminal offense of draft evasion, including harsher treatment during arrest, interrogation, detention or - once deployed - during military service. Conscription activities from various sides to the conflict have intensified towards Syrian men and so has the mobilization of reservists. In areas re-taken by government forces, men of mandatory military service or reserve duty age<sup>4</sup> have reportedly been arrested in large numbers for the purpose of conscripting them in the army. Men of conscription or reservist age are avoiding movements, have gone into hiding, have relocated to areas held by opposition groups, or have indeed fled the country.<sup>5</sup>

“Some refugees are wanted and at risk of being detained upon return, like draft evaders and others who are wanted by the regime. Until proven innocent they would not go back to Syria. Their names would be on checkpoints.”

[Male participant in the South, February 2017]

Men returning from abroad are reported to be consistently checked for their military service records.<sup>6</sup> Refugees, having fled the war and violence, are worried to have to go back to it. Therefore, female participants in the focus group discussions tended to believe that it was more likely that women and children would return to Syria first. Youth participants indicated that they would consider onward movement to a third country instead of return, as a consequence of their fear of forced military conscription in Syria.

### *Issues relating to housing, land and property*

Syrian refugees face numerous, complex challenges relating to their housing, land and property (HLP) situation in Syria. Research and HLP-specific surveys conducted by

<sup>3</sup> The draft evader may also be perceived as not sufficiently loyal to the government or to be supporting the opposition.

<sup>4</sup> According to Article 15 of Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007, after completion of the compulsory period of duty and if he chooses not to enlist, a Syrian man remains in the reserves and can be called up for active duty until the age of 42. Before the current conflict, the government only infrequently called up reservists, and the reserve service generally consisted of only several weeks or months of training in order to maintain necessary military skills similar to reservists in other countries. Since 2011, however, the government has increasingly called up reservists up until age 42 or sometimes older.

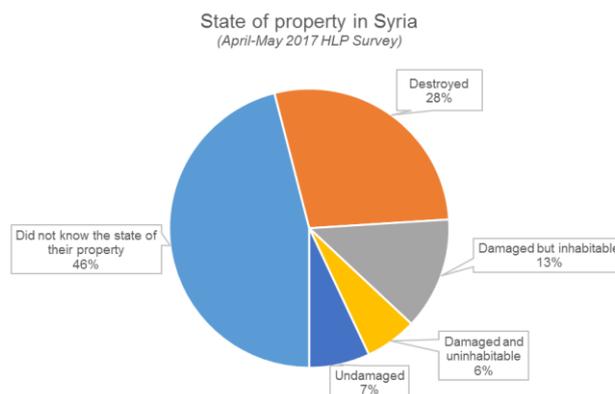
<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, “International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic (Update V)”, November 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59f365034.html>, p. 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, “Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR’s Country Guidance on Syria”, February 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58da824d4.html>.

UNHCR in 2016 and 2017 show that these include insecurity of tenure, lack of documentation, extensive property damage and secondary occupation. In addition, an outdated and incomplete land administration system, coupled with a regulatory framework encompassing over 130, sometimes inconsistent, HLP-related laws that include over 30 new laws enacted since 2011, is likely to further complicate the situation for refugees and returnees seeking their HLP rights.

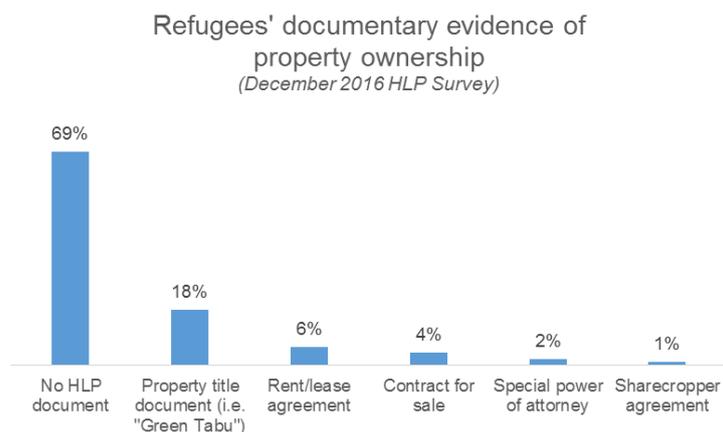
Refugees clearly emphasize that the lack of housing or shelter upon return is a major obstacle preventing return. Some indicated that their property has been destroyed or damaged, while other property is reportedly occupied without their consent or seized by the authorities in the area. Single female heads of household and widows may face particular difficulties in recovering property, as almost all property is in the name of the husbands. Indeed, based on the April-May 2017 HLP Survey, only five per cent of property was reported as being in female ownership, and only three per cent of single female heads of household said they owned their property in Syria.

- *Graph 5: Extensive destruction of properties in Syria*



An additional problem for Syrian refugees in terms of HLP rights is that many do not have any, or any legally valid, documentary evidence of their property ownership, or even civil documents such as identity cards or marriage or death certificates that are also critical to confirm ownership. For HLP documents registered in the Land Register in Syria, a copy might be found through a search of existing records. However, the pre-conflict Land Register was paper-based and non-centralized, and not all property was registered. Moreover, it has suffered damage to infrastructure and records, the full extent of which is not clear.

- *Graph 6: Missing proof of property ownership*



To obtain a clearer overview of the HLP situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and to ensure that (available) HLP documents are recorded in the refugees' files and copies are safely stored in case of loss or damage, UNHCR started to systematically record and collect HLP information and documents in August 2017. At UNHCR reception centres, relevant information is captured (including location, ownership, possession of HLP documents and condition of property), and copies of presented HLP documents are scanned and placed in the refugees' files.<sup>7</sup>

Returnees will face additional challenges to secure their HLP rights due to secondary occupation of properties, unresolved inheritance issues, or fraudulent transactions made on their property while they were away. In light of the expected large number of HLP-related claims, it is essential that a fair and transparent dispute resolution mechanism is put in place to enable returnees to claim their HLP rights, and to prevent HLP-disputes from becoming a cause of further instability. Finally, the extensive presence of unexploded ordnance and/or landmines is likely to further restrict returnees' access to their properties.

<sup>7</sup> By the end of December 2017, UNHCR obtained information on 10,640 properties. For 34% the documents were not accessible; 57 per cent indicated that they had no documents. Of the documents presented, "tabus" (official evidence of property title) comprised 45 per cent and contracts for sale 15 per cent. The remaining 57 per cent were other types of documents.



*Two chairs sit on top of a building in the destroyed neighborhood of Warsha in the Old City of Homs, Syria. Homs has been witness to some of the worst fighting of the Syrian conflict and the Old City district now lies in ruins.*

© UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

### *Lack of access to livelihood opportunities and essential services*

Other key challenges highlighted by the refugees during the consultations included the lack of livelihood opportunities and the unavailability of essential services for survival. Access to, or lack of, livelihood opportunities in Lebanon or Syria was regarded as a determining factor influencing decisions on return. The conflict has had a severe impact on livelihoods in Syria, and has caused increased levels of poverty and unemployment. By the end of 2017, 69 per cent of Syrians were estimated to live in poverty (on less than USD 1.90 per day), which is more than twice the pre-crisis rate.<sup>8</sup> Access to food, water and sanitation, housing, health care and education continues to be severely affected by the cumulative effects of armed conflict and the related destruction of infrastructure, disruption of essential services and loss of livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview, the unemployment rate stood at 53 per cent at the end of

<sup>8</sup> UN OCHA, "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic", November 2017, available at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018\\_syr\\_hno\\_english\\_3.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018_syr_hno_english_3.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, "International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic (Update V)", November 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59f365034.html>, p. 28-29.

2015, rising to levels as high as 75 per cent among youth (15-24 years).<sup>10</sup> Overall, an estimated 2.3 million livelihoods have been lost as a consequence of the crisis.<sup>11</sup> In Lebanon specifically, 76 per cent of Syrian refugees are estimated to live in poverty and 58 per cent in extreme poverty (minimum survival threshold of USD 2.9 per day), unable to cover their basic needs including food.<sup>12</sup>

Refugees are concerned about their ability to provide for their family upon return. Given the importance of having a source of income, some refugee families indicated during the consultations that they are considering to temporarily leave one family member, usually the breadwinner, behind to earn a living for the family who returns to Syria. Safe and dignified livelihood possibilities are thus essential for sustainable returns. Current and future social support and livelihoods programmes for Syrian refugees, especially for women to avoid them having to resort to negative coping mechanisms, are and will continue to be important for families, both in exile and when they eventually return to Syria.<sup>13</sup> Also, the link between livelihoods and military conscription is evident. For refugee families to feel confident to return, breadwinners in the family need to have assurances that they will be able to provide for their family upon return and not be sent to frontlines, leaving families on their own in a highly destroyed and dysfunctional environment.

### *Other issues*

Documentation was highlighted in several of the focus group discussions as another factor inhibiting return. Refugees specifically raised the problem of damaged or lost Syrian national IDs and stated that without a valid ID, or at least a receipt from the concerned authority confirming that the ID was being replaced, people would be at risk of arrest upon return to Syria.<sup>14</sup> Several refugees stressed the importance of being able to register and receive documents confirming changes in civil status (e.g. births, deaths, marriages) that have taken place during the time in exile in Lebanon, and ensuring that

<sup>10</sup> UN OCHA, "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic", November 2017, available at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018\\_syr\\_hno\\_english\\_3.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018_syr_hno_english_3.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> See: UNDP in Syria, "About Syria", available at: <http://www.sy.undp.org/content/syria/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

<sup>12</sup> WFP/UNHCR/UNHCR, "2017 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR)", December 2017, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14762>.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), "Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees", 8 October 2017, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14349>.

<sup>14</sup> The main challenges reported by Syrian refugees in Lebanon in this regard include fear of approaching the Syrian Embassy, the prohibitive cost and lack of required documentation, including – to some extent – those who are not able to show an exemption from military service.

these would be fully recognized in Syria. Without either a Syrian passport or national ID, Syrian refugees are not able to register some of these vital events that have occurred in Lebanon. A Syrian passport or national ID is also required for those who are 15 years or older to obtain and maintain legal residency, and to enter and exit Lebanon through the official border crossing points.

Some of the refugees also expressed a strong worry that children born in Lebanon would be at risk of becoming stateless if their births were not registered in Lebanon. While recent positive developments in Lebanon in the area of birth registration will facilitate the ability of Syrian parents to register the births of their children with the Foreigners' Registry, children whose birth remains unregistered are at risk of statelessness, especially those of single mothers or of fathers who are missing and whose identity is unknown.

Political affiliation – real or imputed - to either the opposition or the government was raised as a strong factor influencing the decision to return. The absence of social cohesion in the place of return was also seen as a key concern, especially by male participants who were worried about divisions in their community as a result of the conflict, as well as about not being accepted in the community if they do not belong to, or side with the views and/or profile of the majority in the area. Somewhat linked to this was a sentiment expressed by some, that they would be afraid of crossing certain areas on their way back home, and therefore believed that families living closer to border areas in Syria could be among the first to return. Although specific information on the treatment of persons currently returning to Syria is scarce, individuals are said to be investigated at the point of entry into Syria and upon arrival at their destination to establish whether they are wanted for security-related incidents (including crimes, real or perceived anti-government activities or views, contacts with political opposition abroad, or military conscription).<sup>15</sup> Some with specific profiles are reported to be at risk of prolonged *incommunicado* detention and torture, and returnees are reportedly at risk of arrest even on account of family members wanted by the authorities.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, "Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Syria", February 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58da824d4.html>.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*.

## Information about the area of origin: what information to trust?

Refugees are generally well informed about the situation in Syria. Participants in the focus group discussions said that they were keeping themselves updated, in particular in relation to general developments, safety and security issues, and the availability of essential services in their area of origin. At the same time, the refugees consulted generally lacked specific information about obstacles faced by people upon their return.

As indicated above, refugees also generally seem to lack detailed information about the condition and status of their property in Syria, including whether it is occupied. Refugees indicated that they were trying to inquire, through relatives or contacts in Syria, about the state of their property or infrastructure in their area of origin. Sometimes, pictures were obtained through relatives.

### THE NEED FOR A FREE AND INFORMED DECISION

According to international standards, the decision to return to one's country is a personal decision and it should be a voluntary decision. This does not mean that refugees can go back and forth open-endedly to their country of origin and change their mind multiple times. This is a fundamental decision of critical importance in people's lives.

Voluntary repatriation based on a free and informed decision therefore means that refugees should be able to decide for themselves whether and when to return to their home country, without being coerced or pressured by anyone, including their own family or community, and based on reliable information about the return process and conditions in the area of intended return.

Decisions to return should indeed be based on the conditions in the country of return and not on the conditions in the country of exile (e.g. community pressure or discontinuation of assistance). That said, individual refugees may decide to return home before conditions normally in place for facilitated refugee returns are met. This may depend on their individual circumstances. UNHCR respects such decisions, if made freely and on the basis of accurate information.

### *Perceived reliability of information sources*

Refugees obtain information on the situation in Syria through a variety of sources, including relatives, news outlets, YouTube, and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). Some refugees were also informed through word of mouth within their community.

**“We don’t trust the media anymore. I prefer someone that lives in Syria to give me trusted information.”**

[Female head of household in the North, July 2017]

Information from relatives who have remained in Syria, or who have already returned, was perceived to be the most credible and reliable source of information. Social media was mentioned as a common source of information, but was at the same time considered the least credible since it could be manipulated. Some participants mentioned that they rely on TV channels, while others considered that these were politically affiliated.

Some of the participants indicated that UNHCR should be in charge of providing, or verifying information. The refugees discussed that there is a risk of inaccurate, fraudulent or manipulated information about the situation in Syria being presented by smugglers, or by persons engaged in criminal networks dealing with issues such as property and documentation.

UNHCR is profiling return areas in Syria including information on existing services, including health care facilities and schools, so as to inform refugees who are considering to return. Today, UNHCR, through its various offices inside Syria, monitors the return and reintegration, mainly of internally displaced persons but also of the limited number of refugees who have already gone back to Syria. However, there continues to be many hard-to-reach areas that humanitarian actors, including UNHCR, are unable to reach in a sustained manner, as well as areas where access remains highly restricted due to insecurity and restrictive policies vis-à-vis humanitarian actors.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> It is estimated that approximately 2.98 million people are living in UN-declared besieged and hard-to-reach areas in Syria, of which 1.2 million are children. In the 10 UN-declared besieged areas, 419,000 Syrians are experiencing severe forms of hostilities with indiscriminate attacks and airstrikes. The remaining 2.56 million people are in hard-to-reach areas. The needs of people in UN-declared besieged areas continue to be extremely severe due to arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement, imposed constraints on the delivery of basic commodities and humanitarian assistance, the lack of livelihood opportunities, and ongoing hostilities. See: UN OCHA, “2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic”, November 2017, available at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018\\_syr\\_hno\\_english\\_3.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2018_syr_hno_english_3.pdf).

### *Communication channels preferred by refugees*

Social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook were mentioned by many of the refugees as the preferred ways to receive information. However, refugees mentioned that more traditional communication channels, such as awareness sessions for communities and leaflets, should also be used, as these would allow refugees without access to internet and older persons to receive the necessary information. Outreach volunteers were specifically mentioned as a trusted source who can be helpful in disseminating correct information.

UNHCR Lebanon is engaged in initiatives aimed at further strengthening the communication with communities, to ensure that refugees receive the information they need to be protected and have access to services and assistance. To this end, a wide range of methods are used for communication, including phone applications, social media, a dedicated refugee web-portal, and outreach networks within the refugee community.

## **Modalities of return: Returning with guarantees**

Refugees repeatedly expressed their preference to return, when the time was ripe, under the auspices of the international community, as UNHCR's presence in the areas of return would constitute a guarantee of protection and due process. They felt that this would give them assurance that their return would be monitored and interventions made in case of difficulties. UNHCR is currently discussing, on behalf of refugees, with various interlocutors the guarantees and safeguards required for refugees to feel confident to return.

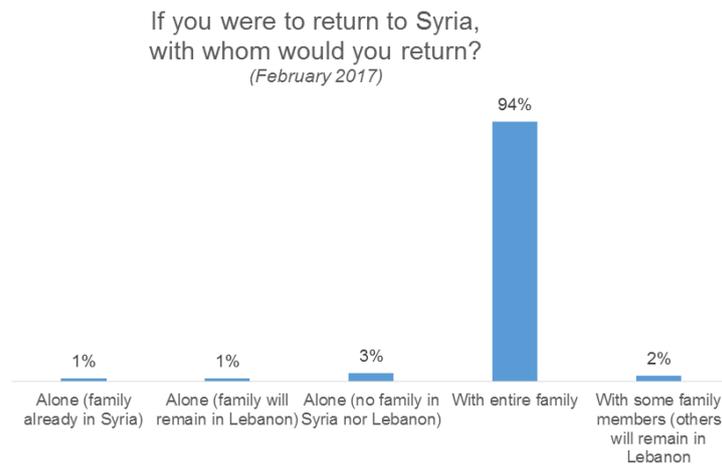
**“We would like to return under the auspices of UNHCR, as it gives us an assurance that international standards and guarantees will be respected.”**

[Female participant in the South, November 2017]

### *Keeping the family together*

If they had the choice, almost all (94%) of the Syrian refugees participating in the February 2017 survey indicated that they had the intention of returning with their entire family at once. Maintaining one's family unity is a crucial aspect of being able to return with dignity.

- *Graph 7: With whom to return*



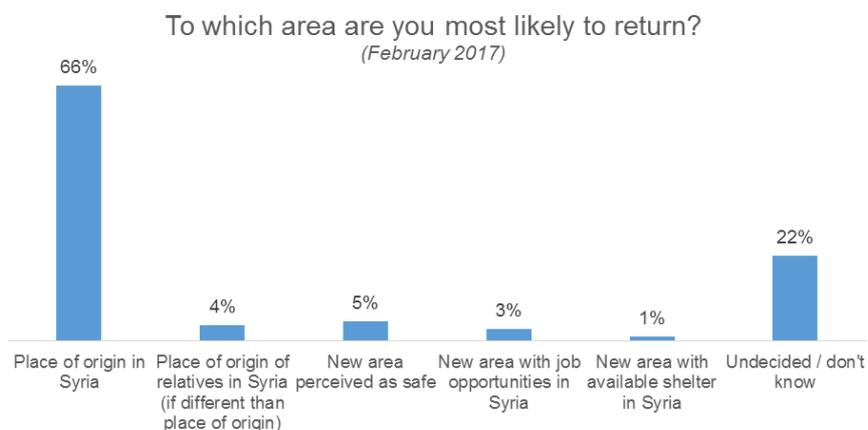
However, as noted above, female participants often mentioned during the discussions that women and children would likely return first, as the men feared being conscripted and would remain in Lebanon for the time being to earn an income for the family.

On the other hand, some of the male participants stressed that the Syrian men also needed to return to help rebuild the country. Adolescents in one of the focus group discussions said that they felt capable and having the necessary skills to rebuild Syria, if and when their area of origin would become safe and accessible. In one of the focus group discussions, the majority of the participants emphasized that the rehabilitation of Syria could not take place without the youth. One participant felt that youth were often marginalized in discussions about their future compared to other groups, while they are the ones who will rebuild Syria through their skills, competences, and knowledge. Participants thus agreed that supporting and empowering the Syrian youth in Lebanon will help ensure that they can play a central role in the rehabilitation of their country.

## Areas of return: Familiar place and support from relatives are musts

Returnees have the right to freedom of movement in their country and the right to determine their own place of residence.<sup>18</sup> As such, refugees have the right to return to any location within their country of origin, and this includes their place of origin. The February 2017 survey showed that, if conditions allowed, the preferred destination of return for the majority of refugees (66%) would be their place of origin. The largest governorates of origin of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Aleppo and Homs. During some of the consultations, refugees expressed that returnees would be more likely to engage in rehabilitation and reconstruction if they returned to their place of origin.

- *Graph 8: Most likely area for return*



When the refugees intending to return to their place of origin in Syria (i.e. 66% of the respondents) were asked what they would do if this was not possible, 74 per cent of the respondents indicated that staying in Lebanon would be the most likely scenario until return became possible, nine per cent responded they would return to the place of origin of relatives in Syria, six per cent indicated that they would go to a new area perceived as safe, while six per cent indicated that they could move onward to a third country.

<sup>18</sup> The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the border of each State” (see Article 13(1)), available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html>. This is also confirmed in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states: “Everyone lawfully within the territory of a State shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence” (see Article 12(1)), available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html>.

Especially women noted that the presence of family members in Syria would be a contributing factor to return, as they would help with rebuilding their lives. The discussions

**“Refugees will not return to other villages.”**

[Female participant in the North, March 2017]

also showed that the safety and security situation in Syria might be a contributing factor in determining the geographical area of return. Men stated that refugees might not necessarily go back to their places of origin but rather decide to go to areas perceived as safer, while some of the women and youth expressed that they did not think people could live in other villages. In particular, women reported that refugees would not return to other villages than their own due to the absence of their community, the perceived fractured social cohesion in Syria, and the fear of retribution. In decisions about return, it is thus important that all members of the family be given a say.



*Listening to female and child refugees is crucial to better understand the challenges they face and develop appropriate responses to their problems.*

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## Continued stay in Lebanon: A time-limited yet critical option for many

Until conditions in Syria evolve in such a way that refugees feel confident to return, the most probable alternative in the short term for most Syrian refugees in Lebanon is to stay.

In general, the perception of safety and security in Lebanon was a strong motive for people to remain, at least temporarily. Despite a rising anti-refugee discourse in the public opinion and debate in Lebanon, refugees still consider their situation safe in comparison with the violence and risks back home.

“I chose Lebanon because they are our neighbours. Between us, there is only a mountain. It is easier to return, and we are very close to each other.”

[Male adolescent youth in the Bekaa, July 2017]

Refugees are worried about their children not being able to go to school, and mentioned the continuation of educational opportunities as one of the reasons to remain in Lebanon in the near future, as schooling in Syria was disrupted by the conflict and might not resume soon. This was particularly the case for university students with scholarships. The majority of refugees consulted were thinking about their children’s future and their need to have an education. Many expressed appreciation that children could go to school in Lebanon without being at risk of shelling or generalized violence. The skills acquired in Lebanon through formal and informal education opportunities were presented by many younger refugees as decisive to help them build their future once back in Syria.



*One of the most agonizing problems facing refugee families, particularly those who have been displaced for a long time, is education. At home in Syria, the children of the Koushak family were always bright students. When they fled to neighbouring Lebanon, and despite missing a year of school, they maintained their educational excellence and hope one day to return home and use their knowledge to rebuild Syria.*

© UNHCR/Haidar Darwish

UNHCR and education partners work closely with the Government of Lebanon, in particular the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, to ensure that refugee children are able to attend school and continue their education. This is important as an investment in human capital and building capacities, increasing refugees' self-reliance and developing transferable skills, which will enhance their possibilities to reintegrate back in Syria or integrate in resettlement countries.

On the other hand, in the absence of real long-term alternatives, refugees living in all regions of Lebanon expressed feelings of being trapped in Lebanon. The majority of the women in Mount Lebanon and in the South conveyed concerns over the cost of living in Lebanon, and women in the South considered that more political dialogue on solutions in Syria was needed given the dire situation in Lebanon. Some participants displayed signs of distress in relation to tensions between communities, evictions, costs relating to legal residency, the cost of living, and the lack of livelihood opportunities in Lebanon.

## Moving elsewhere (other than Syria): Resettlement and the risks of irregular routes

Resettlement through UNHCR was seen as the preferred legal admission pathway to a third country (other than Syria), especially for the most vulnerable ones. From Lebanon, UNHCR submitted 13,265 Syrian refugees for resettlement and other humanitarian admission programmes in 2017, and is advocating with countries to increase resettlement quotas in 2018 to at least match 2016 levels, when more than 23,400 submissions were made. Since the beginning of the conflict, and as at the end of December 2017, UNHCR has submitted more than 66,870 Syrian refugees for resettlement and other humanitarian admission programmes to more than 20 countries.

Male adults and youth are the ones who are mostly thinking about moving elsewhere to secure a better future. This is in line with earlier observations indicating, for example, that men are fearful of being conscripted to fight when returning to Syria. Many youth emphasized their preference to search for better opportunities in a third country. Female adolescents believed that the main reasons for moving to a third country were law and order and the availability of work opportunities.

Persons with disabilities expressed a wish to move to a third country due to the lack of proper education and health care support in both Lebanon and Syria. Resettlement is, in their view, the only solution for them, especially given the challenges in Lebanon related to the lack of legal residency, limited access to education for children, reduced freedom of movement, and vulnerability to exploitation.

Women, on the other hand, overall believed that – if they were given options and the security situation in Syria would allow for return in safety and dignity – their preference would be to go back. The same was the case for older refugees.



*Shahd, a five-year-old Syrian refugee girl, packs her school books in a bag. She is preparing to resettle to the United States from Lebanon, where she has spent most of her life as a refugee.*

*Refugees identified by UNHCR for resettlement go through intensive screening for up to two years. Resettlement programmes are designed to offer a lifeline to the most vulnerable refugees, including children at risk, survivors of torture and those with medical needs.*

© UNHCR/Lisa Abou Khaled

Meanwhile, other than resettlement through UNHCR, onward movement through irregular ways was highlighted as a consideration by many respondents, for lack of other options. However, the high costs and associated risks make this a difficult resort for most refugees. UNHCR remains concerned about refugees feeling compelled to put themselves at risk of exploitation and abuse by smugglers, and is continuously raising awareness about the risks of smuggling and human trafficking. While advocating for refugees' rights and dignified stay while in exile in Lebanon, UNHCR calls for the creation of more legal pathways to third countries through, for example, accessible family reunification procedures.

## Way forward:

### Revive third country resettlement as a safety valve

A small percentage of the five million Syrian refugees in the region are offered resettlement. In 2016, a target was set to resettle 10% of the Syrian refugees in the region by 2018. The success of this target will depend upon the continued hospitality of third countries outside the Syria region and their creativity in identifying additional pathways such as scholarships, family reunion, and humanitarian or work visas. Resettlement is and will remain a safety valve for those who cannot wait for the situation to improve in Syria due to a serious illness for example, or for those who will never be able to return to Syria due to trauma or the hardship they have gone through. Resettlement efforts will therefore continue, even as larger scale repatriation commences.

### Maintain solidarity in Lebanon

While preparing for future returns, it is important that the basic needs and dignity of the refugees continues to be supported in Lebanon, together with the needs of the Lebanese communities hosting them, often in the most underserved areas of the country. Solidarity and coexistence between communities needs to be maintained to ensure that refugees do not feel compelled to return before conditions are in place for their safety and reintegration back home.

## Preparing to ensure that return is a success

The vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon want to go home, and some have started to do so through their own means.<sup>19</sup> While the situation in Syria is not yet considered conducive for UNHCR to facilitate voluntary repatriation in line with the required international standards, much can – and should – be done already now to ensure that future returns will be a success.

### VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION

As the durable solution of choice for the largest number of refugees, voluntary repatriation requires safeguards, monitoring, and the continuing support of the international community throughout the crucial post-conflict phase to ensure that those who make the decision to go home can reinstate their lives in a stable environment.

UNHCR has assisted well over 30 million refugees in returning to their homes ever since its creation in 1950. In the Agency's experience, premature or poorly planned returns are often not sustainable and frequently result in secondary displacement in the country of origin, or in new displacement to the previous country of asylum or a new one. In the worst case, such returns can result in returnees being killed or harmed. It can also lead to a loss of trust in the entire return process and thus delay the return of the majority of refugees who are still in the country of asylum. Return is about building trust and establishing credible options.

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR estimates that over 11,000 refugees have spontaneously left Lebanon to return to Syria during 2017. This does not include the persons who joined the movements from Aarsal to Syria, under deals negotiated between armed actors during the summer of 2017. These last movements were essentially targeted at fighters and did not provide the conditions that should apply in refugee (i.e. civilians by definition) repatriation situations, as per international standards. They should therefore not be a reference for future refugee voluntary repatriation movements.

## What can be done now?

In line with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants of September 2016<sup>20</sup> and its mandated responsibilities,<sup>21</sup> UNHCR works in all circumstances to secure durable solutions to refugee situations, particularly in protracted ones. The Agency focusses on sustainable and timely voluntary return in safety and dignity, as the preferred option for refugees and usually the solution for the largest numbers. When the time is ripe, UNHCR will deploy its various tools, and use the insights about the needs and capacities of the refugee community, accumulated during the years of exile, to properly accompany and manage returns.

**Negotiating conditions for return** takes time and efforts. But this is essential. UNHCR is involved in such a process for refugees who have fled the Syrian conflict. This also benefits Syrians who have

### UNHCR'S ROLE IN RETURN

UNHCR **promotes** voluntary repatriation when conditions in the country of origin are safe and stable. When refugees nevertheless want to return home and minimum conditions have been met, UNHCR can **facilitate** their return.

To ensure the sustainability of return and reintegration, UNHCR works on:

- Monitoring and analysing refugees' intentions, as well as indications that returns are being considered or prepared;
- Advocacy and interventions to preserve respect for international standards;
- Assessing the voluntariness of return initiatives;
- Negotiating guarantees for returnees;
- Facilitating and managing returns;
- Monitoring and intervening for the protection and well-being of returnees;
- Supporting the restoration of national protection and the rule of law in the country of origin; and
- Sustaining returns through reintegration activities.

UNHCR's mandated responsibilities continue several years after refugees have returned to ensure that they fully recover national protection, including access to civil documentation, recovery of housing, land and property, access to schools and basic services, and are not discriminated on account of having been displaced.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants", resolution A/RES/71/1 adopted on 19 September 2016, available at <https://undocs.org/A/RES/71/1>.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR's Statute, as adopted by General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950, outlines UNHCR's mandate to provide international protection to refugees and to seek permanent solutions to their problems. Specifically, the Statute calls upon Governments to cooperate with UNHCR and assist the High Commissioner in efforts to facilitate and work on the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Numerous Conclusions on International Protection, adopted by member States of UNHCR's Executive Committee over the years, have reaffirmed UNHCR's role in facilitating the voluntary repatriation of refugees in safety and dignity.

been displaced within their own country. Conditions include standard safeguards which apply in all refugee situations, such as non-discrimination on account of having been displaced, as well as specific issues that are important for those who have been displaced in the particular context of Syria.

While this takes place, a number of activities are needed to ensure the success of return. Many of these are already underway in Lebanon and in the other host countries in the region. For example:

**Documentation:** UNHCR is raising refugees' awareness of the importance of obtaining civil status documents and birth registration, and helping refugees obtain such. This will ensure that refugees can move on with their lives back home, and return as a family with all the events (e.g. births, marriages, divorces and deaths) that happened during exile recognized in their home country, thereby guaranteeing access to justice, inheritance, services, school, timely vaccination, and voting rights, amongst others.

**Residency renewal:** While the lack of, or expired, legal residency entails multiple challenges for refugees while in exile, it also constitutes a further obstacle to return due to the heavy fine that refugees need to settle upon departing the country. Efforts to facilitate residency renewal following the commitments made by Lebanon and the international community at the London and Brussels conferences on supporting Syria and the region, in 2016 and 2017 respectively, need to be sustained and will contribute to removing such obstacles.

**Referrals:** Profiling vulnerabilities and systematically updating data on refugees with specific needs is another activity that will enable UNHCR, when the time comes, to refer medical and other issues for continued follow-up by aid actors inside Syria upon return of refugees.

**Housing, Land and Property:** Raising refugees' awareness about the importance of safekeeping their original housing, land and property documents and keeping a copy of these for the refugees in Lebanon will assist them in re-gaining access to their homes and property once back in Syria.

**Situation analysis:** UNHCR teams in Lebanon and Syria are in constant liaison to analyse the situation in the country of origin, in order to adequately inform refugees, to plan for the facilitation of returns when the conditions in Syria allow, and to follow-up on the conditions of those who have returned.

**Listening:** This work is informed by a continuous dialogue with refugees, including on their return intentions and the obstacles they see preventing their return.

By working to address these obstacles overtime, UNHCR endeavours to be as ready as possible when the refugees are.

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## Annex: Detailed break-down of 2017 surveys and focus group discussions

This Annex presents a detailed overview of the specific surveys and focus group discussions that UNHCR Lebanon has undertaken in 2017 to inform a better understanding of refugees' intentions and perceptions in regard to durable solutions in general and return in particular, and the factors influencing their decisions on their future.

- A return intention survey was carried out between 3 and 17 February 2017, for which interviews were conducted with a random sample of 385 Syrian refugees residing in various governorates of Lebanon.

### Return intention survey (February 2017)

Random sample of 385 Syrian refugees

- Various locations throughout Lebanon

- In order to complement this (quantitative) return intention survey with qualitative data, 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) on return intentions were conducted in March 2017, with 143 Syrian refugees in five locations throughout Lebanon, in the North, the South, Bekaa and Mount Lebanon. The participants were refugees active in their community who have good knowledge of their respective community's concerns, priorities, needs and intentions. They included groups of men (from 25 years of age), women (from 25 years of age), and youth (between 18 and 24 years of age).

### Focus group discussions (March 2017)

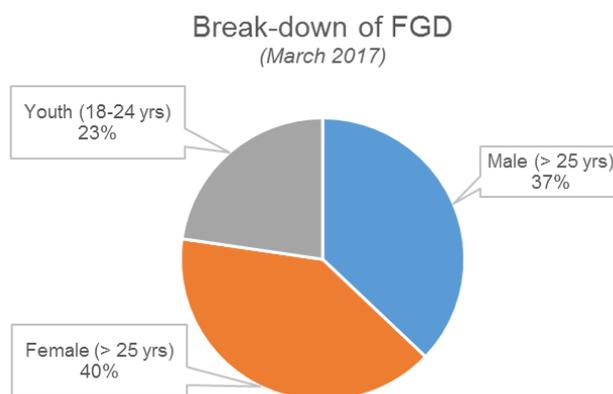
Total of 143 Syrian refugees

11 focus group discussions

5 locations

- Men (25 years of age and above)
- Women (25 years of age and above)
- Youth (between 18 and 25 years of age)

- *Graph 7: Break-down of interview groups (FGD, March 2017)*



- To further complement the findings, UNHCR Lebanon held consultations with a group of ten refugees, selected among refugees particularly active in their communities, in March, May, July, August and November 2017. These periodic consultations have also served as one of several communication channels with the refugee community on durable solutions. This, in turn, is contributing to minimizing information gaps, managing expectations, and enabling refugees and their families to make informed decisions about their future

### **Small-scale in-depth consultations (March-November 2017)**

Selected group of 10 Syrian refugees

■ March, May, July, August and November 2017

- The largest consultations took place in July 2017, with a total of 201 Syrian refugees taking part in 16 focus group discussions across Lebanon. Interview groups were identified applying an age, gender and diversity approach, and taking into consideration areas of origin in Syria<sup>22</sup> and potential differences between other groups within the population. The male and female adolescent/youth groups were consulted separately to ensure equal participation and engagement.

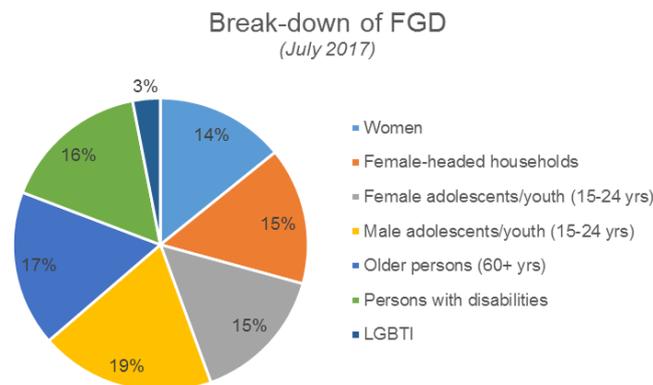
<sup>22</sup> To ensure diversity of views on the situation in Syria, each group had at least one participant originating from each of the following Syrian governorates: Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, and Rural Damascus.

### Focus group discussions (July 2017)

Total of 201 Syrian refugees  
16 focus group discussions  
5 locations

- Women (25 years of age and above)
- Females heading households
- Female adolescents/youth (between 14 and 24 years of age)
- Male adolescents/youth (between 14 and 24 years of age)
- Older persons (60 years of age and above)
- Persons with disabilities
- Persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI)

■ *Graph 8: Break-down of interview groups (FGD, July 2017)*



- Besides the focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2017 with 46 of the refugees who had previously participated in the February return intention survey. These semi-structured interviews were a way to measure the evolution of the refugees' mind-sets since the survey was held, and to elicit more qualitative information on their position and perceptions on return to Syria.

### Semi-structured interviews in follow-up to the return intention survey (July 2017)

46 Syrian refugees who had been previously interviewed in February 2017

Based on position in February 2017:

- Undecided
- Intention to return within six months
- Not considering return within six months
- Never consider return

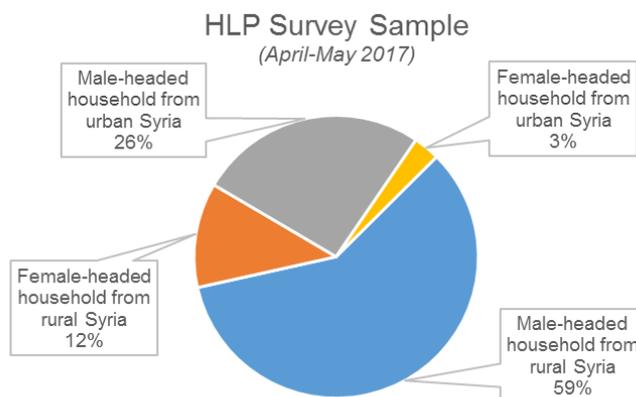
- To obtain a deeper understanding about the challenges Syrian refugees in Lebanon may face with regard to their housing, land and property situation in Syria, UNHCR conducted surveys in December 2016 with 361 Syrian nationals and in April and May 2017 in which a randomly selected sample of 385 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR throughout Lebanon was interviewed.

**Survey on housing, land and property (April-May 2017)**

Random sample of 385 Syrian refugees

- Rural area of origin in Syria
- Urban area of origin in Syria
- Females heading households
- Males heading households

- *Graph 9: Break-down of survey sample (HLP Survey, April-May 2017)*







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