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The National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme
Towards post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in Syria - *by* Syrians, *for* Syrians

The Way Back Home

Background Policy Gap Analysis Paper on Return

Dr. Rouba Mhaissen

الأمم المتحدة
بيروت، 2018

هذه الورقة هي من نتائج منصة الحوار التقني السوري لدى برنامج الاجندة الوطنية لمستقبل سوريا.

This paper was produced as part of NAFS Programme's Syrian platform for technical dialogue.

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طبعت هذه الوثيقة في الشكل الذي قدمت به ودون تحرير رسمي، وهي تعكس آراء الخبراء الذين عملوا على كتابتها ضمن "برنامج الاجندة الوطنية لمستقبل سوريا" ولا تعبر باي شكل من الاشكال عن رأي اللجنة الاقتصادية والاجتماعية إطار الاسكوا - لغربي آسيا

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Syria: then and now

It has become an unquestionable fact that Syria represents one of the bloodiest conflicts of our modern age. Between the beginning of the uprising in 2011 and 2014, the UN's tally of Syrian lives lost reached 400,000.[1] In 2016, the UN stopped counting deaths, with estimates putting the death toll well above 500,000 people.[2] Syria's economy, too, has suffered greatly: its GDP has slid to $50.28 billion, as of 2015[3]. The country's housing stock has been hard-hit as well, with 7 percent fully destroyed and 20 percent partially damaged.[4] All told, the economic cost of the Syrian war has been estimated at $226 billion, roughly four times the 2010 pre-crisis GDP of Syria.[5] A 2017 report from the MENA Economic Monitor puts the estimated cost of infrastructure damages in six Syrian cities alone at $41 billion at current prices.[6] Syria's economy as a whole has declined 70 percent between 2010 and 2017.[7] Looking at the country's prospects of physical recovery, the IMF has estimated the cost of reconstruction to be between $100-200 billion.[8]

But the economic implications are far from being the most prominent cost of the war. Spill over of the conflict extends to country's security, demography and social fabric, as well as reaching across borders to neighbouring countries. Syrians face daily violence, detentions, life under siege, shelling, as well as a high emotional toll, political polarization, warlord vested interests, and a lack of essential and basic services. All the above have increased social divides, threatened the complex geopolitical balance, and depleted the hope of Syrians for a peaceful solution or a political transition or transformation that brings them closer to their home country, or to the Syria they used to know.

Syrians have faced displacement -- both inside the country and to neighbouring countries—due to systemic violence, mass displacements, fear for their protection and safety, and the dire economic and emotional pressures. To date, 5.5 million Syrians have fled their homes to

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[1] Specia, Megan. "How Syria's Death Toll is Lost in the Fog of War." *New York Times.* 13 April 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html

[2] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "During 7 consecutive years, about 511,000 people killed since the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011." 12 Mar 2018. http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=86573
I Am Syria. "Death Tolls." 2018. http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html

[3] CIA World Factbook, "Syria Economy." 2018. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

[4] Ibid.

[5] World Bank, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria." 10 July 2017. http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria

[6] Devarajan, Shantayanan & Lili Mottaghi. "The Economics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction in MENA." *MENA Economic Monitor: World Bank.* April 2017. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/26305

[7] CIA World Factbook, "Syria Economy." 2018. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

[8] Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial. "Syria's Conflict Economy," International Monetary Fund, Working Paper WP/16/123. June 2016. https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf

neighbouring countries, and 6.6 million are displaced inside Syria.[9] Whilst some Syrians have returned to their homes or villages in 2017, for every Syrian (internally displaced or refugee) who returned, there were three Syrians who were newly displaced.[10] This is highly relevant when thinking of return, as not only a way back home, but as a framework tackling root causes in a manner that prevents further displacement.

Displacement touches lives differently, and every displacement is a story of its own. This is an important premise for this paper, and one that should frame the conversation on return, considering it as a refugee-centred long-term process of reintegration. Leaving Syria were young people, talented and ambitious, on the lookout for a better future far from forced conscriptions and armament: brain drain. Heads of households fled to look for the basic needs for their families after hope has been lost: economic need. Syrian men and women left to escape detention and kidnapping: protection. Shelling, bombing, violence and besiegement have pushed many communities out: safety. Families that have lost their social networks and became minorities in their own lands have left: social networks. Humans left to look for dignity, basic human rights, freedom and a better tomorrow for their offspring: social justice. Millions of different stories forming the trends of displacement affecting Syria's social fabric, and ultimately shaping the ways that people will return, if at all.

Another premise of this paper is that in Syria today, the conditions leading to a safe, voluntary and dignified return are still not in place. Violence is ongoing, so is intimidation, authoritarian political regime, mass conscriptions, sieges, shelling, and a lack of for decent living conditions. The third premise is the recurrent focus in communities on the need for guarantees of a sort even before speaking of return. What are those guarantees? To be explored throughout this paper, they include guarantees of access to your own house and property, safety guarantees, and a minimal level of basic needs met. For some, this may extend to a guaranteed political agreement ending the war, or some form of political transition, with differing definitions of what such a 'transition' may entail, and what post-agreement may be legitimate, accepted and respected at local and community levels. Guarantees for justice, accountability, or a minimal rule of law also form a necessary piece for some Syrians.

Neighbouring countries and the international community more broadly have started discussing 'return' --disregarding at times the above premises, and the complexity of the issue of return and its implications. This paper aims to explore and problematise what could be considered as 'safe,' 'voluntary' or 'dignified.' It hopes to link the causes of internal or external displacement of Syrians, with what they may consider pre-conditions to return, looking at research already produced about the issue. It will also try to find patterns of displacement and adaptive mechanisms in countries where Syrians now live, and in internal areas of displacement, as well as survey the conditions of their initial areas of departure, to better understand what frameworks need to be in place for return, if and when it happens.

[9] ReliefWeb. "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic." 2018. https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2018-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-enar

[10] IRC, DRC, NRC, Save the Children, Action Against Hunger, CARE. "Dangerous Ground: Syrian Refugees Face and Uncertain Future." 5 Feb 2018. https://reliefweb.int/report/.../dangerous-ground-syria-s-refugees-face-uncertain-future

A discussion of the above-mentioned push and pull factors for return will allow the paper to explore possible challenges, and ultimately, provide recommendations. This paper will thus open a space for conversation, and highlight themes for further investigation.

Syrians Reclaim the Streets

The diversity of human stories leading to displacement mirror stories of the Syrians who took the streets in 2011: varied motives and a culmination of reasons over time leading to a collective tipping point triggered by the Arab wave of revolutions. The importance of reviewing causes of the Syrian uprising lies in the detection of elements that Syrians consider essential in order to call Syria home again. Any return framework that does not incorporate solutions for those root causes risks being ineffective, unrealistic, and not legitimate to Syrians.

Several explorations exist as to why Syrians reclaimed the streets of Syria asking first, for reforms, and eventually for political change[11],[12], [13]. The causes that are often cited range from environmental to institutional, socio-economic, geo-political, governance related, and historical. Environmental arguments link Syria's uprising to the drought from the 1990s, up until its peak in 2007-2008, that has heavily affected the agricultural sector, and put pressure on suburbs of cities (such as Damascus and Aleppo). Socio-economic reasoning explores the neo-liberal reforms (both in the early 2000s and in 2005 onwards) leading to a bigger reliance on real estate and services (low in productivity and with a high chance of corruption) as quick wins rather a real investment in industry, infrastructure, or more sustainable economic growth pathways. Add to this the public finance decreases in the years leading up to 2011 due to low oil revenues and low taxes. All the above-created deep-rooted inequalities that surfaced in 2011.

Additionally, the young social pyramid that was in Syria prior to the conflict, with high fertility rates and a high percentage of youth, translated into high human capital but low pathways of employment. This was deepened by new vested interests following the economic reforms (monopolies, crony capitalism) which were not able to accommodate employable youth, leading to a large and growing informal sector. The economic growth at this time was not in any way inclusive; it failed to address food insecurity, further reinforcing economic and social exclusion by their failure to reform formal institutions to respond to the needs of the society, achieve pro-poor growth and improve institutional performance. While social services existed, they were often low in quality. Coupled with a lifting of subsidies on certain vital

[11] ESCWA. "Syria at War: Five Years On." Feb 2016. p. 7
https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/syria-war-five-years.pdf
[12] SCPR. ""Socioeconomic Roots and Impact of the Syrian Crisis. 2013.
http://scpr-syria.org/publications/policy-reports/socioeconomic-roots-and-impact-of-the-syrian-crisis-2013/
[13] Nasser, R. and Mehchi, Z. "Role of Economic Factors in Political Movement: The Case of Syria." (2012)
http://scpr-syria.org/publications/policy-reports/role-of-economic-factors-in-political-movement-the-syrian-case-2012/

public services, these policies heightened prior societal frustrations. Young Syrians' motivations thus felt uncatered for, whilst families struggled for a good quality of life.

Last but definitely not least were the demands for political freedoms due to people's disenchantment with the governance system in Syria prior to 2011. An authoritarian state had ruled Syria for 40 years, with extreme centralisation of powers, lack of inclusion or proper accountability. The legal structures surrounding the state served it greatly, with a clear violation of separation of powers between its executive branch, and the legislative and judicial branches, both of which it controlled. Meritocracy, civil society, women participation, cultural expression, free media and inclusion were close to obsolete. This all added to growing class divisions, the political ruling of the 'few' over the 'majority' as well as a false notion of unity under a top-down system rather than organic or participatory 'nationalism'. Historical wounds were re-awakened such as the 1982 Hama massacre, the repression of the 2001 Damascus Spring, the use of military force in 2011, and the suppression of other attempts for change and political dissent, with a lack of a notion of social justice dealing with the implications of this suppression. Such grievances, if not properly addressed when dealing with return, will come back to haunt the stability of Syria and the unity of its people.

A mix of the above causes culminated into a popular uprising in 2011. Soon enough the social movement demanding freedom and justice by peaceful means, transformed into a proxy war, through the forces of regional and international political powers and external military interventions, continued state oppression, and the emergence of extremism. As such, linking the uprising to one root cause is simplifying the complex collective and individual motivations-- collective in the sense of the will of the Syrian people, and a sense of a shared suffering, and individual in terms of the wounds and aspirations of every Syrian living in the country.

Return frameworks must be refugee-centred, and look at individual experiences and motivations, but also at the collective as much deeper than their sum: throughout the years, those root causes have been deepened, with the added complexity of violence, displacement, and the emergence of new identities. If not properly addressed, with the involvement of Syrians themselves, any political solution or eventual roadmap to return will be top-down and fragile and may cause a relapse into conflict. But more important to this paper, and as the next sections will explore, those causes that motivated Syrians to leave will surely affect their return choices.

1. a. Causes and Phases of Displacement
in relation to Nexus 1. a. Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Leaving Home Behind

We cannot pin down the causes of Syrians' displacements to one alone, as each story was experienced relatively, and triggered different degrees of reactions. Throughout the past seven years, millions of Syrians decided to stay under siege and bombardments, with all the

associated obstacles. Many have decided to move internally to relatively safer areas, and others left the country altogether either voluntarily or involuntarily. The majority of those who were eventually displaced, however, would fall under the category of forced displacement, which in its simplest definition refers to persons fleeing their homes due to conflict, violence, persecution and human rights violations. Here, the line between of what is forced and what is not blurs: violations of rights must extend to the right to decent living, education, and access to basic needs.

One of the most immediate causes of why people left their homes is direct violence. In a recent report by Carnegie, Syrians in neighbouring countries and those who resettled outside the Middle East pointed towards this clear initial motivation: simply, "to find a safe haven nearby."[14] Of the refugees surveyed during focus group discussions in early 2018, around 82 percent fled Syria because of deteriorating security conditions or a specific security incident targeting them or their family. These incidents included arbitrary arrests, random stops at checkpoints, or the death of a family member or friend.[15] According to a 2012 MSF report, 75 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon left home for security reasons.[16] As to internal displacement, gross violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law by Syrian state forces and dissident armed groups, as well as and to a lesser degree other parties to the conflict, continue to be key drivers of forced internal displacement.[17] Such violations extended to the very right to life, let alone a dignified one. If these safety concerns persist, return remains a distant hope for many.

Beyond immediate physical safety, personal protection concerns highly motivated the first wave of displacements: many young men left Syria to avoid military conscription, mandatory for males aged eighteen to forty-two.[18] Many young men were and continue to be on reserve lists of the army after the authorities have increased their army reserve measures. Those men are often the main providers for their families, and thus leaving alone or being taken to the army would be a threat to their survival and that of their relatives, which has led many families to flee Syria altogether. Families of young men who defected from the Syrian army to join the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups were also persecuted and had to flee.

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[14] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 26
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[15] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 26
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[16] Médecins Sans Frontières, "Fleeing the Violence in Syria: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," Médecins Sans Frontières. August 2012.
http://www.msf.or.jp/library/pressreport/pdf/MS1221_LebanonReport_Final_LoRes_v2.pdf

[17] UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of IDPs, Chaloka Beyani, UN General Assembly, 15 July 2013, A/67/931, para. 16, as quoted in Brookings. "Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs, and Shortage of Solutions." 18 Sept 2013. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-CrisisMassive-Displacement-Dire-Needs-and-Shortage-of-Solutions-September-18-2013.pdf

[18] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 26
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

Additionally, civil society activists that were at the heart of the social movement faced increasing threats of arrest, leading to mass departures under considerable duress, as they and their families sought to escape arbitrary arrests, detentions, and forced disappearances.[19] As the war escalated, military men and activists ceased to be the only victims of protection violations. Government forces and affiliated militias continued to perpetrate systematic attacks against civilian populations more broadly, leading to mass killings, including sectarian killings, aerial bombings, civilian targeting, and mass looting of properties.[20] The personal targeting of civilians and properties continues to be a fear for Syrians until this date, and prevents any potential return.

Apart from safety and protection concerns affecting lives in the most direct manner, the cost of war extended to the economy's resources, as well as to social conditions more generally, the culmination of which led more Syrians to decide to leave. For many, the crisis had started a decade earlier through a combination of global financial shocks, domestic agricultural shocks, and in the more recent years, conflict. The large price increases in both commodities and food prices in the 2000s continued and was accentuated by war, the degradation of the currency, and inflation.[21] In 2006, about 20 percent of all employment in Syria was provided by the agricultural sector; agricultural employment then declined to 5 percent within just four years.[22] This was further accentuated by severe drought in 2007 and 2008. Massive waves of Syrians at the time of the outbreak of the crisis had already been on the move within the country (150,000 alone due to the drought) as well as over a million who were in economic distress, leaving rural areas affected by the drought and economic calamities more generally, settling in the peripheries of the main urban centres of Aleppo and Damascus, already characterised by low living standards. These are the same peripheries that saw much of the harshest fighting during the conflict, resulting in millions of IDPs and refugees.[23] Early recovery plans preparing for return, or any subsequent attempts of reconstruction, that do not address those economic and social exclusions, risk furthering inequalities and replicating punished areas and populations.

On the other hand, before the war, estimates point to the fact that about 200,000 Syrians a year were already leaving the country in search of a better life, peaking at around 3.5 million Syrians over the years leading up to 2011. Subsequently, this brain drain only accelerated, with many of skilled Syrians leaving to Europe, Gulf countries, and anywhere their skills and

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[19] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 28 https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[20] UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,* A/HRC/23/58, 4 June 2013, p. 1 www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-23-58_en.pdf

[21] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. 7 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

[22] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. 33 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

[23] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. 7 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

networks could carry them. The loss of human capital in Syria was thus due to inflation, poverty, lack of channels for talent, and accentuated by the war that halved jobs available in the economy. This affects mostly skilled Syrians, in particular the youth, whose return will be most challenging, unless economic comprehensive pathways for the employment and retention of social capital are incorporated in return plans.

Indirect causes of displacement also include Syria's infrastructure and physical destruction. Houses, roads, hospitals and schools were destroyed. Syria's productive capacities decreased massively, with a sharp decline in GDP by more than half. Sanctions affected certain sectors of the economy, adding further strain on health and food security. This, adding to the destruction of factories and leakages of capital outside the country, led to a massive decrease in cereal, food and medical production. Sharp increases in prices of consumer goods, real estate, and increased demand for subsidised goods were witnessed.[24] Education provision plunged inside Syria, as well as access to health and medical services. In areas under siege, conditions of survival became next-to-impossible. In addition to the Syrian population, the hard-hit economy had to continue catering for 500,000 Iraqi refugees and over 500,000 Palestinian refugees. For IDPs, the situation worsened, and an additional burden of shelter was imposed on them, whereby half of them live in rented houses.[25] The need for basic survival needs and finding income generating activities pushed millions of Syrians to leave, and if not met may prevent them from returning in the near future.

In sum, direct violence, protection concerns, lack of freedoms, worsening economic conditions, infrastructure, brain drain, as well as survival needs were all causes for many Syrians to leave, and will be factors that will be further examined in the next sections when thinking about approached and pre-requisites to return.

Places and Phases of Displacement

Similarly to motivations explored in the previous section, there were detectable trends in places, phases of internal and external displacement, highlighting the obstacles, and concerns Syrians faced, and the interim locations and accompanying hurdles they faced in their displacement.

At the start of the Syrian war, the *first phase of displacement* happened internally for those who were fleeing from violence. Syrians fled from suburbs to other suburbs, or to neighbouring cities deemed to be temporarily safer. But as violence kept spreading and repeatedly displacing people from the areas where they were seeking refuge inside Syria, and as the majority started moving away from family and friends and neighbouring towns, internal displacement became too costly -- both in terms of lives lost and in terms of economic costs.[26]

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[24] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. 34 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

[25] SCPR. "Forced Dispersion: Syrian Human Status. The Demographic Report." 2016. http://scpr-syria.org/publications/forced-dispersion-syrian-human-status-the-demographic-report-2016/

[26] Ferris, Elizabeth, Kemal Kirisci & Salman Shaikh. "Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs, and Shortage of Solutions." 18 Sept 2013. p. 5 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-CrisisMassive-Displacement-Dire-Needs-and-Shortage-of-Solutions-September-18-2013.pdf

Throughout the spring of 2011 Syrians began fleeing in small numbers to Turkey and northern Lebanon. Cross-border displacement during later in the initial phase of the conflict stayed sparse, with many still fleeing localised violence in hot areas to safer cold areas within Syria, moving in greater numbers to Aleppo, Homs, and Rural Damascus, each hosting between 200,000 and 4000,000 IDPs by mid-2012.[27]

The second phase of displacement resulted from an intensification of conflict throughout 2012. The Syrian government began employing heavy artillery and shelling entire neighbourhoods, escalating its operations in Zabadani, Duma, and Damascus in late January and staging a crackdown on Homs in February. This shift in tactics led to a wave of displacement; by the end of 2012 over 500,000 Syrians had fled to seek refuge in other countries.[28] By March 2013, over one million Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR in Lebanon and Turkey.[29]

External displacement decisions were not always easy to make. Attitudes of host communities and governments often precluded Syrians from leaving Syria. Lebanon and Jordan's policies towards Syrians were reflective of their past experiences with refugees. Both states took in considerable numbers of forcibly displaced Palestinian refugees after the mass exodus of 1948 and again after the 1967 war; more Palestinians came to Lebanon from Jordan after the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Jordan in 1970–1971. While Jordanians have tended to be concerned about Syrian refugees' impact on Jordan's national identity, the Lebanese were more concerned about the impact on Lebanon's sectarian balance and economy.[30] Such considerations of host governments still dictate their attitudes towards Syrians' presence in their countries and presents a push factor on a risky albeit present premature refugee return discourse.

Political alliances played a considerable role in choices of displacement locations, whereby Syrians who were more involved in revolutionary activities moved to Turkey where the climate was more supportive to their cause. In contrast, Syrians who chose Lebanon were far from being a homogenous anti-regime group, with the perceived potential to be mobilised by the Syrian regime.[31] Lebanon and Syria have a historical relationship, which has determined the porousness of the border. The birth and development of Lebanon itself is the result of a process whereby the country's territory was carved out a unified 'Greater Syria'. Because of the 1999 convention stipulating freedom of work and movement, Syrians already had networks in Lebanon, including many intermarriages. Syrians have also presented a reserve

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[27] Doocy, Shannon, Emily Lyles, Tefera Delbiso, and Courtland Robinson. "Internal Displacement and the Syrian Crisis: An Analysis of Trends from 2011-2014." *Conflict and Health* 9:33. 2015. https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s13031-015-0060-7

[28] UNHCR. "Fact Sheet: Timeline and Figures." 2013. http://www.unhcr.org/5245a72e6.pdf

[29] UNHCR. "Fact Sheet: Timeline and Figures." 2013. http://www.unhcr.org/5245a72e6.pdf

[30] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 12 https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[31] Dionigi, Filipo. "The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: State Fragility and Social Resilience." *LSC Middle East Centre*. 15 Feb 2016. p. 14 http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65565/1/Dionigi_Syrian_Refugees%20in%20Lebanon_Author_2016.pdf

of labour for the Lebanese economy for decades.[32] Prior to the war, about 600-800,000 unskilled Syrians were already working in Lebanon. Most of these workers were not actually settled in Lebanon but would move seasonally between the two countries; skilled workers in the 1970s would onwards move to the Gulf as a primary destination. The return decision of those displaced according to clear and vocal political affiliations will undoubtedly depend on the form of peace settlement and its political implications. As for the Syrians in Lebanon that already lived cross-border pre-dating the conflict, economic opportunities created through potential reconstruction or rebuilding, may or may not attract them back home. Who will return, as a consequence, will not be a homogenous group, neither will timing be common.

Other reasons facilitating refugees fleeing to Lebanon and Turkey were ease of entry at the time, and no need for visas, as well as the close geographical proximity to locations of the conflict inside Syria.[33] Many families chose to flee to neighbouring countries in the hope of returning soon after to their cities of original departure. Of the three main refugee host countries at that phase (Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan), Lebanon had the fastest growing Syrian population through 2013-2014: from January to May 2014 the UNHCR registered 65,000 refugees per month, on average.[34] UNHCR suspended registration in 2015, per the request of the Government of Lebanon, leaving the total number of registered Syrian refugees at 991,165.[35] Additionally, Syrians preferred the ability to freely enter and leave those two countries (up until 2015), in contrast to Jordan. Jordan confined refugees to isolated camps and had little prior links between refugees and local populations, making it an initially less attractive destination for many Syrians.

The third phase of displacement is characterised by a pattern of sieges followed by offensives, resulting in mass forced displacement of civilians. Homs and Aleppo are particularly emblematic of this phase, with Homs coming under siege in 2012 and retaken by the Syrian government in May 2014; and Aleppo falling to Syrian forces in the summer of 2016. In both cases, extreme shelling and looting by pro-government militias combined to leaving whole neighbourhoods uninhabitable, with buildings either levelled or completely looted.[36] By the start of 2017, there were over 5 million Syrian refugees outside of Syria.[37]

This phase also witnessed waves of re-displacement from inside Syria to neighbouring countries, and subsequently to Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians chose to put their

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[32] Dionigi, Filipo. "The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: State Fragility and Social Resilience." *LSC Middle East Centre*. 15 Feb 2016. pp. 30-31
http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65565/1/Dionigi_Syrian_Refugees%20in%20Lebanon_Author_2016.pdf

[33] Dionigi, Filipo. "The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: State Fragility and Social Resilience." *LSC Middle East Centre*. 15 Feb 2016. p. 12
http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65565/1/Dionigi_Syrian_Refugees%20in%20Lebanon_Author_2016.pdf

[34] UNHCR. "Inter-Agency Thematic Update: An Overview of Registration." 27 Jun 2018.
http://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/41299

[35] UNHCR. "Operational Portal, Refugee Situations: Syria". 2018.
http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71

[36] Syria Institute. "No Return to Homs: A Case Study on Demographic Engineering." Feb 2017.
http://syriainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/PAX_REPORT_Homs_FINAL_web_single_page.pdf

[37] UNHCR. "A year after key conference sought to boost resettlement targets for Syrian refugees, half of the 500,000 places sought have been achieved." 30 Mar 2017. https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/year-after-key-conference-sought-boost-resettlement-targets-syrian

lives at risk, fleeing by boat in seasonal phases, in the hopes of arriving and settling in Europe. In 2014 and 2015 the number of refugees arriving by sea spiked dramatically. Over 1 million refugees arrived to European shores in 2015, with Syrians comprising by far the largest group (followed by Afghanistan and Iraq).[38] By 2016, estimates put the number of Syrian asylum requests in Europe above 1 million. In response to the migrant crisis, many European governments enforced harsh border regulations or closed their borders entirely, in an effort to halt influx of refugees. In terms of arrivals by sea, between January 2017 and March 2018, about 2,300 Syrian refugees arrived in Spain and 12,300 in Greece.[39] In the first five months of 2018, according to UNHCR 4,151 Syrian refugees have arrived in Europe by boat.[40] In 2017 overall, 175,800 Syrian asylum seekers were granted protection in Europe, with 70 percent in Germany alone.[41]

Finally, the conflict entered a *fourth phase of displacement* during the first months of 2018, with a marked escalation in Eastern Ghouta and Afrin. More than 133,000 people fled Eastern Ghouta from early March to early April, with the last rebel forces leaving the area early April.[42] An ongoing Turkish offensive in Afrin has left 137,070 people displaced by the end of March 2018.[43] This renewed escalation has precluded the possibility of return and resulted in massive wave of internal forced displacement.

It is worth noting that many of the refugees have gone through one or multiple phases of displacement, before they arrived at their last refuge destination. The harder the path of displacement, the more difficult the integration process (both in terms of language, education or simply, reinventing their lives), the more complicated their decisions of return will be. All these complexities must be kept in mind when thinking about return strategies and support that Syrians need on the way back, and after their return.

In terms of the refugee situation today in numbers and demographics, Lebanon has an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees[44](some estimations reaching as much as 2 million), a majority of whom have been displaced multiple times within Syria before finding themselves

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[38] BBC. "Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts." 4 Mar 2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911

[39] UNHCR. "Desperate Journeys: January 2017-March 2018." Mar 2018. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63039

[40] UNHCR. "Operational Portal, Refugee Situations: Mediterranean." 29 May 2018. http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean#_ga=2.87977624.1022864057.1527596837-593764632.1520237422

[41] Eurostat. "Europe Migration Data 2017." 19 Apr 2018. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8817675/3-19042018-AP-EN.pdf/748e8fae-2cfb-4e75-a388-f06f6ce8ff58

[42] UNHCR. "UNHCR alarm at escalating Syria humanitarian needs." 10 Apr 2018. http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/4/5acc75974/unhcr-alarm-escalating-syria-humanitarian-needs.html

[43] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Syrian Arab Republic: Flash Update No. 2." 29 Mar 2018. https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-afrin-flash-update-no-2-29-march-2018-enar

[44] Government of Lebanon, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan: 2017-2020." 16 Jan 2017. https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2017-2020-enar

in Lebanon.[45] Lebanon is hosting the largest number of refugees per capita of any state in the world.[46] As of 2015, most Syrian refugees in Lebanon originated from the governorates of Aleppo (21 percent), Homs (21 percent), Rural Damascus (14 percent), and Idlib (13 percent).[47] Women and youth (under 18) make up the largest percentage of refugees in Lebanon: 53 and 55 percent, respectively. Close to 20 percent of refugee households are headed by females.[48]Considerations about the safety and conditions of those cities (non-assuming that refugees would ultimately all go back to the same cities of original departure, but that ultimately this would be their choice), as well as the legal support and livelihoods possibilities for youth and women must be considered when looking at return from the perspective of Syrians in Lebanon.

Most of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are from the Syrian south, and like Lebanon, the Jordanian government has opened its doors to large numbers of Syrian refugees, around 1.4 million, of whom 655,624 are registered with UNHCR.[49] Most refugees in Jordan (nearly 80 percent) live outside official camps.[50] And as of 2016, most refugees in Jordan originated from the governorates of Daraa (43 percent), Homs (16 percent), Rural Damascus (12 percent), and Aleppo (10 percent).[51] About half of Syrians in Jordan originate from areas in which the infrastructure and living conditions were heavily affected throughout the years, presenting a further challenge to their return. However, the presence of Syrians in Jordan has been more systematically managed and controlled by the government that the loose management policies in Lebanon, which will make return decisions more likely to be at the mercy of the government and international policy makers, and thus needs further attention and monitoring from civil society organisations and rights groups to ensure non-refoulement will be respected and return will be voluntary and safe.

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[45] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 25
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[46] Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, "Lebanon: Syria Crisis," European Commission, January 18, 2018, 1–3,
https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/lebanon_syrian_crisis_en.pdf

[47] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 28
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

[48] World Food Program, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and UNHCR, VASyR 2017: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. 15 Dec 2017.
http://documents.wfp.org/stllent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp289533.pdf

[49] Mourad, Lama. "Inaction as Policy-Making: Understanding Lebanon's Early Response to the Refugee Influx," POMEPS Studies no. 25 (March 2017): 49–55. https://pomeps.org/2017/03/29/inaction-as-policy-making-understanding-lebanons-early-response-to-the-refugee-influx/

[50] Jordan INGO Forum. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Protection Overview." Jan 2018.
http://testsite.jordaningoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf

[51] Dr. Yahya, Maha, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri. "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Go Home." *Carnegie.* 16 April 2018, p. 28
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf

Turkey currently hosts 3,586,679 registered Syrian refugees, with 90 percent living outside of refugee camps.[52] While data about the provenance of Syrian refugees in Turkey are not as readily available as it is for Jordan and Lebanon, most refugees are from northern Syria, with flows spiking in 2014 in tandem with the ISIS' expansion across north-eastern Syria. Syrian's situation in Turkey will be further explored in coming section, but it is overall, better than Jordan and Lebanon, with less push factors when it comes to return.

In addition, there was a small number of Syrians who moved to Egypt, totalling about 127,000.[53] An exceptional group of non-refugee migrants left Syria due to the conflict to find regular work and residence in other countries. This group consists mainly of middle-class professionals and wealthy Syrians who left early on during the conflict with the help of their means and connections.[54] This exodus of well-to-do and highly skilled Syrians mass made for significant 'brain drain'; this group reached 1.55 million people by the end of 2014, and will ultimately be the hardest sub-group to return.[55]

All in all, about 1 million displaced Syrians have moved to Europe as either asylum seekers or refugees. Within Europe, the vast majority of Syrians have been resettled to Germany, numbering 530,000 as of 2017. This is followed by Sweden, with 110,000, and Austria, with 50,000.[56] Other European states have taken in a negligible number of refugees: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Poland have all accepted fewer than 100 refugees -- of any nationality -- for resettlement from 2013-2017.[57] In addition, about 73,000 have been resettled in the U.S. and Canada. These numbers represent less than 10 percent and less than 1 percent, respectively, of the total Syrian displaced population.[58] These refugees have faced considerable hurdles to arrive, settle, and integrate in the new societies and countries. Language, employment, and social barriers had to be overcome. Most Syrians in these countries have an eye on the ultimate prize, a second citizenship, and are unlikely to return before they are naturalised. Hence, those Syrians will most likely not return in initial phases and may require different plans when it comes to their way back home.

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[52] World Vision. "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs and How to Help." https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts

[53] World Vision. "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts. FAQ and How to Help." https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts

[54] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. 39 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

[55] Syrian Centre for Policy Research. "Alienation and Violence: Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2015." Mar 2015. p. 58 https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/alienation_and_violence_impact_of_the_syria_crisis_in_2014_eng.pdf

[56] Connor, Phillip. "Most Syrian Refugees are in the Middle East, and about a million are in Europe." *Pew Research Center.* 29 Jan 2018. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/

[57] Eurostat. "Resettled Persons: Annual Data." Updated May 2018. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00195&plugin=1

[58] Connor, Phillip. "Most Syrian Refugees are in the Middle East, and about a million are in Europe." *Pew Research Center.* 29 Jan 2018. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/

Finally, it should be noted that Syrian refugees have some important demographic differences as compared to the pre-crisis Syrians. The Syrian refugee population generally is younger; comprises more young children (ages 0-4) and single people-- most often female heads of households. Syrian refugees also have larger households, are less educated, and are more likely to be farmers, compared to the general pre-crisis population.[59] No precise data comparing the demographic and socio-economic backgrounds of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Europe and U.S./Canada to those in the neighbouring host countries. Still, those who have managed to leave the region fall into diverse and heterogeneous categories: those with relatively higher social or economic capital; those successfully selected for formal resettlement based on the UNHCR's 'vulnerability' criteria; and those who take informal pathways, either by land or sea, generally out of a perceived lack of other options. All those differences must be accounted for when looking at sub-groups of eventual returnees.

1. b. Return in the light of Service Delivery and Coping Mechanisms

in relation to Nexus 1. b. Local Response

Having looked the reasons, phases and locations of displacement of Syrians, and the relation that this holds to their potential return, it becomes important to examine how current local responses and service delivery where Syrians currently are affect how they may view return. This next section will examine what coping mechanisms displaced Syrians have developed over time, positive or negative, and to what extent those be relevant to their return decisions and coping mechanisms on the way back home. Due to the concentration of refugees mainly in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, this section will mainly examine those dimensions in these three countries.

Social Services Axis

In terms of access to social services, Turkey stands out as the strongest of the three neighbouring countries, followed by Jordan, with Lebanon performing worst. Health services are free for refugees in Turkey, and in cooperation with UNICEF, the Turkish Red Crescent is slated to provide child protection and psychosocial support (PSS) services to 150,000 vulnerable refugee, migrant and Turkish children in camps and host communities over the next year alone.[60] The educational system in Turkey is highly accommodating to refugees, with a majority of the nearly 900,000 school-aged Syrian children in school and no

[59] Verme, Paolo, Chiara Gigliarano, Cristina Wieser, Kerren Hedlund, Marc Petzoldt, Marco Santacroce. "The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon." *World Bank Group & UNHCR.* 2016. p. xv https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464807701.pdf

[60] UNICEF. "Turkey: Humanitarian Situation Report #19." Mar 2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Turkey%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2019%20-%20March%202018.pdf

requirement of ID or previous school transcripts for enrolment.[61] Other notable strengths of the Turkish system include a willingness to integrate Syrian students into state schools; an initial adoption of the official Syrian curriculum (minus state 'nationalism' courses) with Arabic-Turkish instruction in transitional educational centres (TECs); financial incentives for students with near-perfect attendance; and support in accessing Turkish universities.[62] Still, language barriers and discrimination against Syrian students and teachers present significant challenges. Additionally, TECs are being phased out, to push Syrian children into Turkish state schools, causing a spike in dropouts, particularly among children without strong Turkish skills and from the lowest socioeconomic levels.[63]

Meanwhile, in Jordan and Lebanon, families in both countries are worried about not being able to provide a quality education for their children: 72 percent in Jordan and 84 percent in Lebanon to be precise.[64] Around 34 percent of 220,000 school-aged Syrian children are out of school in Jordan; at least 60 percent of 488,000 estimated children are out of school in Lebanon.[65] Documentation, discrimination and harassment, as well as child labour present major challenges in Lebanon; students with certificates or diplomas from informal educational programmes also do not get formal recognition, making accessing secondary and university education extremely difficult. Additionally, in official schools open for Syrians, Syrian teachers remain locked out teaching, and are not given a central role in the educational process. Jordan has eliminated its documentation requirement for access to schools, but transportation barriers and the incidence of child labour remain significant. Psychosocial support is strong in Jordan, with over 240,000 girls and boys accessing PSS services in 2016.[66] UNICEF's 2018 target for PSS in Lebanon, in contrast, is only 11,000 children participating.[67]

In terms of healthcare, Turkey again leads the pack, followed by Jordan and with Lebanon coming in last. Syrian refugees in Turkey are guaranteed the right to national health coverage by the April 2013 "Law for Foreigners and International Protection."[68] This health coverage includes primary health care services, comprising family health care centres, mother and child health and contraceptive methods, counselling centres, tuberculosis dispensaries, and migrant polyclinics.[69] While not all Syrians are able to access services because of

[61] Qaddour, Kinana. "Educating Syrian Refugees in Turkey." *Carnegie Endowment.* 20 Nov 2017. http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/74782

[62] SETA. "Breaking Down Barriers: Getting Syrian Children into Schools in Turkey." 2017. https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2017/09/R90_BreakingBarriers.pdf

[63] Baijot, Julie. "Millions of Syrian Refugees Denied Education in Turkey." *SB Overseas.* 17 Nov 2017. http://sboverseas.org/2017/11/17/advocacy-education-turkey/

[64] Emre Cayhun, Huseyin. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Life on the Margins." *Arab Barometer*. p. 4 www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/AB4%20Syrian%20refugee%20report.pdf

[65] NRC. "Back to School?" https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/back-school-over-280000-refugee-children-remain-out-school-lebanon

[66] UN & Jordan Response Platform. "Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis: 2018-2020." 2018. p. 40 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/522c2552e4b0d3c39ccd1e00/t/5a76f05253450ac9095a00c9/1517744222852/JRP2018_2020.pdf

[67] UNICEF. "2018 Programme Targets." 2018. https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrianrefugees.html

[68] Martin, F. Deniz. "Right to Health and Access to Health Services for Syrian Refugees in Turkey." Mar 2017. https://mirekoc.ku.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/PB_Right-to-Health.pdf

[69] Martin, F. Deniz. "Right to Health and Access to Health Services for Syrian Refugees in Turkey." Mar 2017. https://mirekoc.ku.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/PB_Right-to-Health.pdf

transportation barriers or other challenges, and many do not have access to needed secondary health services, the formal guarantees provided by Turkey are stronger than in the other host countries.

In Jordan, the UNHCR provides health services across the official camps. For the majority (over 80 percent) living outside the camps, the fees associated with health services constitute a considerable barrier. As of 2012 any Syrian refugee registered with UNHCR was entitled to free access to Jordanian primary healthcare centres, but this policy was reversed in November 2014. Currently, registered Syrian refugees must pay a subsidised rate, the same used for Jordanians without government insurance, of between 35-60 percent of the full rate.[70] While offering a subsidised rate is better than nothing, the costs remain high enough to put health services out of reach for many. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees are not formally guaranteed access to health services, leaving it up to families to pay out-of-pocket for services, take on further debts, or access services provided by UNHCR and other INGOs and NGOs. UNHCR provided 1,683,918 subsidised consultations in 2017, of its target of 2,214,000 consultations.[71] According to UNHCR estimates, 11 percent of Syrian refugees were not able to access needed primary healthcare services in the last half of 2017, and 24 percent were not able to access needed secondary healthcare services.[72] These are conservative estimates, and do not capture the numbers of Syrian refugees who, because of cost barriers, are putting off primary medical care that is not yet urgent or life-threatening, but which may harm their long-term health.

In the recent years, support for Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries have plummeted: this is partly due to the decrease in funding dedicated for Syria, but also due to political attitudes towards refugees from some of the governments of host countries. However, examining the social services axis alone, it is clear that Syrians in Lebanon are faced with bigger push factors in terms of return as social services decrease and conditions worsen. Jordan follows, with Turkey coming last whereby Syrians have access to social services that will remain, for the coming few years at least, unattainable in the same way in their areas of origin inside Syria.

Housing and Infrastructure Axis

In all three countries, housing and infrastructure present significant challenges for both refugee and host populations. In Turkey, social tensions have resulted from refugees raising housing prices in low-income neighbourhoods. Increases in violence against refugees has been most prevalent in these neighbourhoods.[73] Jordan also exhibits similar challenges

[70] UNHCR. "Health access and utilization survey: Access to Health Services in Jordan among Syrian Refugees." Dec 2017. https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/health-access-and-utilization-survey-access-health-services-jordan-among-syrian-0

[71] UNHCR. "Lebanon: 2017 End Year Statistical Dashboard." 7 Feb 2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Interagency__Multisector_Dashboard_EOY2017.pdf

[72] UNHCR. "Lebanon: 2017 End Year Statistical Dashboard." 7 Feb 2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Interagency__Multisector_Dashboard_EOY2017.pdf

[73] International Crisis Group. "Turkey's Growing Refugee Challenge: Rising Social Tensions." 27 Oct 2017. https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkeys-growing-refugee-challenge-rising-social-tensions

regarding housing. 4 in 10 of Syrian refugees in a June 2017 CARE survey reported having been evicted or forced to leave their housing while in Jordan.[74] In Jordan 21 percent of Syrian refugees live in formal state-sanctioned refugee camps; the remaining 80 percent (around 530,000 registered refugees, plus an estimated 643,000 unregistered refugees) live outside the camps, primarily in northern urban areas.[75] In these urban areas, informal rental agreements leave Syrians vulnerable to rent exploitation and arbitrary evictions, compounded by rising rents across the board. 40 percent of those surveyed by CARE in 2017 had faced eviction.[76]

Lebanon's housing challenges are somewhat different, since refugees mostly live in either informal tented settlements (rather than official camps), or in urban areas. Most Syrians in informal rental arrangements do not have contracts, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and repeated eviction, which have massively in the last year alone. 73 percent of refugee households reside in residential buildings; 17 percent reside in informal tented settlements; and 9 percent reside in non-residential structures, such as garages, workshops, and construction sites.[77] 80 percent of Syrian refugees report paying rent, but only 6 percent have valid rental agreements, leaving the rest vulnerable to eviction and exorbitant rent increases.[78]

Water and sanitation (WASH) infrastructure has also seen increased pressure across the board, from Turkey to Jordan to Lebanon. Turkey's Crisis Response Plan aims to target nearly 2,340,000 individuals by end of 2018 for WASH.[79] UNICEF's WASH targets for 2018 stand at 252,000 people (Jordan) and 180,000 people (Lebanon) accessing safe water through improved water systems.[80] Despite these programmatic interventions, the needs still outstrip the resources allocated.

The situation of housing and evictions presents a big source of insecurity for Syrians, again making refugees in Lebanon most vulnerable when it comes to this dimension. For refugees who live in formal camps in Jordan and Turkey, while the economic cost is not their primary concern, restriction on movement and isolation from host communities and the broader economy remains as a challenge. Those aspects all represent push factors that make return a potentially attractive option, unless Syrians will be faced with the same costs and hurdles

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[74] CARE. "Factsheet: Syrian refugee, other minority refugee, and Jordanian host households." Jun 2017. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017%20CARE%20Jordan%20Syrian%20refugees%20FACT%20SHEET%20%28revised%2916062017.pdf

[75] CARE. "7 Years into Exile: How urban Syrian refugees, vulnerable Jordanians and other refugees in Jordan are being impacted by the Syria crisis." Jun 2017. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017%20CARE%20Jordan%20Syrian%20refugees%20Summary%20final%20web%20%28revised%29%2016062017.pdf

[76] CARE. "Factsheet: Syrian refugee, other minority refugee, and Jordanian host households." Jun 2017. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017%20CARE%20Jordan%20Syrian%20refugees%20FACT%20SHEET%20%28revised%2916062017.pdf

[77] World Food Program, UNICEF, and UNHCR. "VASyR 2017." p. 52

[78] World Food Program, UNICEF, and UNHCR. "VASyR 2017." p.28

[79] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." 2017. https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[80] UNICEF. "2018 Programme Targets." 2018. https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrianrefugees.html

moving back to their areas of origin, which will not in this case offset the emotional and economic cost of yet another move.

Economic Activity Axis

Overall, the economic situation for refugees is least stable in Lebanon, and somewhat better in Jordan and Turkey; in all three countries, however, the situation is dire for many families.

Despite Turkey's economic opportunities for Syrian refugees being better than other countries, the situation has been far from perfect. The agricultural sector, for example, in which Syrians are permitted to work in Turkey presents high cost, while the returns are low. Furthermore, Syrians have no ability to compete with Turkish agricultural workers. It is also difficult for Syrians today to engage in the skilled labour market; their economic activity is limited to the light, unskilled labour. This is particularly true since middle-income people have lost their assets, and many former entrepreneurs have suffered the loss of factories, enterprises, and investments. All employment is subject to work permits, which has been more restricted in the last year.

Only 13 percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan report being able to cover their expenses without difficulties; 7 percent for Syrian refugees in Lebanon say the same.[81] Only a fifth of refugees in Jordan (21 percent) report that they work. Among those who work, 92 percent work in the private sector. Among those who do not work, nearly two-thirds are women. Slightly less than half of refugees in Lebanon (47 percent) report that they work. Among those who work, 94 percent in the private sector. Among those who do not work, 75 percent are women.[82] Besides a much lower participation in the workforce, Syrian women earn much less than men: a monthly average of $159 as opposed to $206, in 2017.[83]Moreover, working conditions are hard whereby Syrians are only allowed to work in professions that are deemed undesirable by the Lebanese (construction, agriculture and cleaning), with many pre-requisite requirements by the employer and employee. This led about 92% of Syrians who work in Lebanon to be working in the informal market.

Despite highly negative public perceptions of Syrian refugees' impact on the Lebanese economy, their presence also has important benefits, particularly in terms of filling low-wage positions that Lebanese workers do not want to take. What's more, since 2013, Syrian refugees have spent $900 million at Lebanese shops using credit cards distributed by the World Food Program.[84] However, such considerations are rarely acknowledged by the government of Lebanon, nor does it impact its decision to continue hosting or welcoming rrefugees orabstaining from pushing them to return.

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[81] Emre Cayhun, Huseyin. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Life on the Margins." *Arab Barometer*. p. 3 www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/AB4%20Syrian%20refugee%20report.pdf

[82] Emre Cayhun, Huseyin. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Life on the Margins." *Arab Barometer*. p. 16 www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/AB4%20Syrian%20refugee%20report.pdf

[83] World Food Program, UNICEF, and UNHCR. "VASyR 2017." pp. 57-59 http://documents.wfp.org/stllent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp289533.pdf

[84] Human Rights Watch. "'No Strangers in Our Homes': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *HRW.* 20 Apr 2018. https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities

Vocational training (VT) and job placement programming has fallen short in all three countries. In Turkey, only 16 percent of the 2017 target for VT has been reached.[85] Similarly, Lebanon only reached 18 percent of the 2017 VT target; Jordan came in at just 5 percent of the 2017 goal.[86] Job placement programmes have performed poorly as well. Only 7 percent of Turkey's 2017 target was reached: 923 of 14,000 goal of refugees and affected host community members were placed in jobs.[87] Jordan reached just 10 percent of 2017 target for work permits, issuing just 20,199 new work permits in 2017, of its 200,000 goal.[88]

In Jordan, additional provisions govern Syrians' access to work, education, and other services, and have had an impact on the complexity of matters for Syrian residents or their families trying to join their own. One example is the large, arable, non-agricultural land area directly in front of the Za'tari camp; Syrians are not allowed to work there. For Syrians in Jordanian refugee camps, there is no right to work, and the Jordanian government is empowered to closely regulate all economic activity.[89] However, under the February 2016 Jordan Compact, Jordan has committed to more inclusive livelihoods regulations for Syrian refugees, in return for concessional loans from the World Bank.[90] The terms included $1.7 billion in grants over three years to support infrastructure projects; a 10-year exemption from the EU tariffs for producers in Jordan who meet an employment quota of Syrian refugees; and a commitment from the government of Jordan to create 200,000 job opportunities for Syrians.[91] Unfortunately, over the past two years the Jordan Compact has failed to secure meaningful job creation for Syrians in Jordan. Lebanon, by contrast, agreed to its own Lebanon Compact, worth about $470 million in EU aid, but its terms were far vaguer and has seen even less follow-through.

The lack of sustainable economic pathways for youth, and income generating opportunities for Syrian families more generally, especially female heads of households represents a major push factor for Syrians when it comes to return. If Syria's return plans involve serious income generating and livelihood opportunities for Syrians, with subsidies to services and provisions diminishing poverty levels, many Syrians especially low skilled and highly vulnerable categories might be attracted to move back. Attracting those displaced by brain drain, will however, be a challenge of its own.

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[85] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." 2017. p. 26 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[86] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." 2017. p. 32 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[87] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." 2017. p. 26 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[88] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." 2017. p. 39 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[89] Collier, Paul & Alexander Betts. "Why denying refugees the right to work is a catastrophic error." *The Guardian.* 22 Mar 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/22/why-denying-refugees-the-right-to-work-is-a-catastrophic-error

[90] Refugees Deeply Quarterly. "The Compact Experiment: Push for Refugee Jobs Confronts Reality of Lebanon and Jordan." p. 2

[91] Refugees Deeply Quarterly. "The Compact Experiment: Push for Refugee Jobs Confronts Reality of Lebanon and Jordan." p. 2

Security & Social Cohesion Axis

The security and social cohesion dimensions remain a significant challenge for Syrian refugees living in displacement. In Turkey, Syrian refugees are not seen as a religious or sectarian threat, since both the Syrian and Turkish populations are majority-Sunni Muslim. Still, social cohesion is significantly hampered by the language barrier, as well as cultural differences, and as mentioned in the previous section, economic tensions are fuelling resentment and violence towards Syrian refugees. Turkey's Gaziantep municipality, followed by Adana and Izmir, have offered the most supplementary support to refugees. Both municipal-level party politics and business interests have also mattered, particularly in Gaziantep, where local entrepreneurs and chambers of commerce have played an important role in inclusion.[92]

As with Turkey, Jordan is majority-Sunni, as well as being an Arabic-speaking country, making social cohesion more straightforward to some extent. Still, the isolation of the official refugee camps, the lack of pre-war cultural and personal ties, and ongoing economic pressures for Syrians in both camps and urban areas inhibits the social cohesion. At the governorate level, Mafraq was relatively the most open to Syrian refugees, followed by Sahab and Zarqa. The role of tribal affiliation and the historical relationship between the area and Syrians has been influential. But so too have perceptions of economic opportunity and for local elites seeking resources from the central government.[93]

As discussed in depth above, Lebanon does have these cultural and personal ties with Syria, but the sectarian and demographic balance, as well as the scale of the pressure on infrastructure, education, and the economy, have negatively impacted security and social cohesion. While the vast majority of refugees in Jordan (98 percent) says their personal and family safety and security are ensured or fully ensured, less than half of refugees in Lebanon (47 percent) say the same.[94] In Lebanon, the Sunni municipalities have been the most welcoming to Syrian refugees, with Hezbollah-run Shia area the least welcoming.[95] Christian areas have ranged across the spectrum, with significant municipality-level variation. Confessionalism has mattered because Syrian refugees are assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be supportive of the Syrian Revolution by Hezbollah, which is allied to the Assad regime. Local attitudes have also shaped by class dynamics and importantly, the personalities of local political and religious leaders. Key sources of tensions centre on jobs, weak local infrastructure, access to healthcare and education.

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[92] Betts, Alexander, Ali Ali, and Fulya Memişoğlu. "Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon & Jordan." *Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.* 24 Nov 2017. p. 2 https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis-exploring-responses-turkey-lebanon-and-jordan

[93] Betts, Alexander, Ali Ali, and Fulya Memişoğlu. "Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon & Jordan." *Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.* 24 Nov 2017. p. 2 https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis-exploring-responses-turkey-lebanon-and-jordan

[94] Emre Cayhun, Huseyin. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Life on the Margins." *Arab Barometer*. p. 6 www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/AB4%20Syrian%20refugee%20report.pdf

[95] Betts, Alexander, Ali Ali, and Fulya Memişoğlu. "Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon & Jordan." *Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.* 24 Nov 2017. p. 2 https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis-exploring-responses-turkey-lebanon-and-jordan

The integration of refugees in neighbouring countries will thus play a very important role, as an increase in integration may stand in the way of return, whereas a lack of integration will present serious challenges to the everyday life of the refugees. For instance, Turkey has given nationality to some 12,000 Syrians with ten times this number who had already applied.[96] Naturalised Syrians are chosen only from those with the most qualifications, deemed beneficial to the Turkish economy. It will be hard to attract those Syrians back to Syria in the initial phases of return unless real tempting economic opportunities will arise. The efforts spent and obstacles overcome to achieve a certain level of integration both in neighbouring countries as well as in Europe will increase the opportunity cost of returning. However, all the axes must be looked at collectively, and not a single axis will, on its own, will affect Syrian's decisions to return.

Governance Axis: Aid, Sustainability and Capacity Building

In terms of the governance axis, a prolonged lack of adequate funding for the Syrian crisis response raises concerns about the scope and sustainability of current interventions. The 3RP -- the overall response plan for Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon -- has only received 49 percent funding: only $2.28 billion of $4.63 billion as of the end of October 2017.[97] Of these funds, 1.53 billion was allocated for the Refugee Component (56 percent funded); $751 million for the Resilience Component (39 percent funded; interventions for host communities and general state stability).[98]

Lebanon's national response plan—a joint initiative with the UN to address Lebanon's challenges related to the Syrian conflict—only received 54 percent of pledged funding in 2015, down to 46 percent in 2016 and 43 percent in 2017. Meanwhile, funding was raised for only 62 percent of Jordan's national response plan in 2016 and 65 percent in 2017.[99]
Turkey has received just $740 million, its of $1.69 billion requirement (44 percent funded).[100]

Overall, in Lebanon the absence of any indication of whether the return of Syrians to their homes is close or not, the continued shortfall of humanitarian aid, and the complex political, economic and social circumstances, have combined to cause a severe lack of capacity as Lebanon tries to manage the refugee crisis on its territory. Severe funding shortfalls have resulted in a service provision environment characterised by gaps and trade-offs. Services supporting basic needs are being cut back, from UNHCR medical services WFP food aid to

[96] http://harekact.bordermonitoring.eu/2018/02/02/on-the-issue-of-turkish-citizenship-for-syrians/

[97] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." Nov 2017. p. 4 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[98] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." Nov 2017. p. 13 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

[99] Marks, Jesse. "Pushing Refugees to Return." *Carnegie Endowment.* 1 Mar 2018. http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/75684

[100] UNHCR & UNICEF. "3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis: 2017-2020." Nov 2017. p. 22 https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53539

local-level programming. Additionally, the stricter measures imposed by host governments to ensure the sensitivities and tensions in host communities are kept in check are restricting access to essential services for refugees.

As this section has explored, situations differ across contexts. In Turkey, the situation of refugees is better than in Jordan or Lebanon in terms of housing, infrastructure, services, security, agriculture and employment opportunities. In all contexts, social and interpersonal relations have created a new social reality because of the new marriages of displaced persons. These new linkages may have a negative impact on the desire to return in the long-term, especially when host countries provide greater opportunities and a better standard of living than the areas of origin. But this does not mean that Syrian refugees, even in Turkey today, have no desire to return. In general, the situation of women and youth in all contexts remains the hardest. The protracted nature of the crisis further complicates the picture, since there is a need to provide more sustainable services and move beyond basic humanitarian aid. However, as the next sections will explore, the situation inside Syria has yet to stabilise. Push and pull factors may in some cases make refugees increasingly prone to return, even though the areas of their initial departure within Syria are not safe to return to.

2. Current Legal Frameworks influencing Return

in relation to Nexus 2. Current Situation and Policy Gaps in Building a Legal Framework and Institutional Rehabilitation

In addition to the local response, it is important to look at legal considerations that will play a major role on refugees' decisions to return to Syria, whether in terms of the legal frameworks that govern Syrians' stays in neighbouring countries, the broader international legal system, as well as legal considerations inside Syria today.

Legal Frameworks in Host Countries

With regards to legal obstacles faced by Syrian refugees outside Syria, refugees in Lebanon are worst-affected, but legal challenges are widespread across all three host countries. In Lebanon, only 23 percent of refugees over the age of 14 possess Syrian IDs.[101] According to the same NRC study, 17 percent of refugee households in Lebanon admitted that they have

[101] NRC. "Syrian refugees' right to legal identity: implications for return." Jan 2017. p. 1 https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/icla/final-syrian-refugees-civil-documentation-briefing-note-21-12-2016.pdf

had to obtain false documentation.[102] Further, 92 percent of refugees were unable to complete all the legal and administrative steps to register the birth of their children.[103]

In December 2014, Lebanese General Security introduced new regulations to restrict the entry of Syrians.[104] As of 2014 Syrians applying for, or renewing, residency permits were asked to pay an annual $200 fee, present a valid passport or identification card, and provide a document to the GS that is signed by a Lebanese national to affirm that he or she is sponsoring a Syrian citizen or household.[105] In February 2017, Lebanon lifted its $200 residency renewal fee for Syrians registered with UNHCR, which does not cover the entirety of the Syrian population in Lebanon. But while UNHCR estimates that around 320,000 registered refugees over the age of 15 are eligible to have the fee waived, only 20 percent of people who tried to renew free of charge were successful.[106]

Between January and March 2015, UNHCR reported an 80 percent decrease in registration, and by the end of July 2015, the percentage of Syrian households without a valid residency permit increased from 9 percent to over 61 percent.[107] 74 percent of Syrians in Lebanon do not have legal status, and 76 percent live below the poverty line.[108] Legal status is central to refugees' vulnerability. Evictions are a widespread problem for Syrian refugees living in host countries. In Lebanon, UNHCR has recorded about 10,000 Syrian evictions for various reasons, including failure to pay rent and other disputes with landlords, choices by landlords to use land for alternative purposes, and for reasons of 'safety and security.'[109]

Political rhetoric among high-level Lebanese politicians has also been a cause for concern, particularly as pertains to the prospect of refoulement of Syrian refugees. Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil in October 2017 asserted that "Syrian citizens—our brothers and sisters—only have one choice: to return to their country."[110] President Michel Aoun in October 2017 echoed this rhetoric, saying that Lebanon "can no longer cope" with the presence of Syrian

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[102] NRC. "Syrian refugees' right to legal identity: implications for return." Jan 2017. p. 1 https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/icla/final-syrian-refugees-civil-documentation-briefing-note-21-12-2016.pdf

[103] NRC. "Syrian refugees' right to legal identity: implications for return." Jan 2017. p. 2 https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/icla/final-syrian-refugees-civil-documentation-briefing-note-21-12-2016.pdf

[104] Janmyr, Maja. "Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35:4, Sept 2016. https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/35/4/58/2609281

[105] Amnesty International. "Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon." 2015. https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2417852015ENGLISH.PDF

[106] Howden, Daniel, Hannah Patchett, and Charlotte Alfred."The Compact Experiment: Push for Refugee Jobs Confronts Reality of Jordan and Lebanon." Refugees Deeply Quarterly. Dec 2017. pp. 16-17 http://issues.newsdeeply.com/the-compact-experiment

[107] Janmyr. "Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35:4, Sept 2016. https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/35/4/58/2609281

[108] World Food Program, UNICEF, and UNHCR. "VASyR 2017: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." http://documents.wfp.org/stllent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp289533.pdf

[109] UNHCR. "Evictions of Syrian Refugees in 2017." March 2018. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents

[110] France 24. "Lebanese leaders divided over fate of Syrian refugees." 16 Oct 2017. http://www.france24.com/en/20171016-lebanon-aoun-hariri-hezbollah-return-syrian-refugees

refugees and appealing to the international community for help to organise their return.[111] Finally, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in December 2017 advocated for returns, claiming that a "big part of Syria has become safe and quiet."[112]

Many Syrians in Lebanon have found themselves vulnerable to difficult living conditions for shelter, food and the ability to secure a living. Their daily lives are complicated by a widespread lack of official papers, whether personal or related to work or property, and without registration of cases of marriage, death, birth and other civil status changes. The ensuing economic pressure from irregular legal status has prompted many Syrian families to resort to negative coping mechanisms, including sending their children to the streets, marrying off their young daughters, and taking on high levels of debt.

In Jordan, every Syrian must register with the government, which in early 2015 began a process to re-register all Syrians in the country. As of October 2016, that process, known as the Urban Verification Exercise (UVE), is ongoing. The new Ministry of Interior (MoI) cards entitle the holder to move freely throughout Jordan. In the district in which the new MoI card was issued, it also allows the holder to access public services, such as health and education.[113] As of the end of August 2016, out of the 515,000 refugees registered with UNHCR as living outside the camps, nearly 363,000 had obtained new MoI cards and around 152,000 had not.[114] Birth registration presents problems in Jordan, too; Syrian children who do not have birth registration face severe challenges in getting residency permits (Ministry of Interior cards).[115]

Political rhetoric in Jordan has been less overtly hostile towards Syrian refugees as compared to in Lebanon. Jordan's King Abdullah II has not explicitly made calls for Syrian refugees to return, despite the ongoing practice of deportations. At the same time that King Abdullah has continually emphasised the generosity of Jordanians and the Jordanian state, he has held fast to the narrative of 'refugees as burden', citing that the Syrian refugee presence in Jordan constitutes "a tremendous drain."[116] Municipal leaders similarly tend to focus on the positive qualities of Jordanians in managing to shoulder the burden Syrian refugees. The Mayor of Sahab municipality, to the southeast of Amman, sums up this perspective: "It shows the

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[111] AP. "President: Lebanon 'Can No Longer Cope' with Syrian Refugees." 16 Oct 2017. https://www.apnews.com/fe52200a751e4

[112] Al-Monitor. "Hezbollah urges Lebanon plan for Syria refugee return." 2 Dec 2017. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/02/syria-conflict-lebanon-hezbollah-refugee.html

[113] NRC & International Human Rights Clinic. "Securing Status: Syrian refugees and the documentation of legal status, identity, and family relationships in Jordan." Nov 2016. p. 4 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/securing-status%5B1%5D.pdf

[114] NRC & International Human Rights Clinic. "Securing Status: Syrian refugees and the documentation of legal status, identity, and family relationships in Jordan." Nov 2016. p. 4 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/securing-status%5B1%5D.pdf

[115] NRC. "Syrian refugees' right to legal identity: implications for return." Jan 2017. p. 3 https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/icla/final-syrian-refugees-civil-documentation-briefing-note-21-12-2016.pdf

[116] King Abdullah II. "King delivers speech to World Class The Hague students." 20 Mar 2018. https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-delivers-speech-world-class-hague-students

strength of the culture here that we can absorb so many people."[117] The government has drawn a line at any access to the labour market that would potentially lead to competition with Jordanians for jobs. As one Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation official put it, "This is not possible, and it is not constructive to keep suggesting this."[118]

In Turkey, Syrian refugees report facing challenges in accessing identification documents, particularly in Gaziantep. Local officials are often overburdened, with reports that they have periodically stopped giving documentation to refugees. A respondent in a recent study by SeeFar said that officials took documentation from refugees leaving Turkey for Syria, and those they refused to re-issue documentation if refugees came back to Turkey (female, Turkman, Gaziantep).[119]

Political rhetoric in Turkey from 2011 until early 2018 was largely supportive of an open-door approach towards Syrian refugees. However, this rhetoric has recently undergone a substantial shift. In late February 2018, Turkish President Taya Endogen gave a speech asserting: "We'll solve the Afrin incident, we'll solve [Syrian opposition-held] Adlib, and we would like our refugee brothers and sisters to return to their own country."[120] This shift in Turkey's official stance has sparked concerns about the potential for future deportations and forced returns.

Legal considerations putting Syrians at risk of vulnerability, undignified treatment, evictions and detentions remain to be the biggest challenges faced by Syrians in neighbouring countries, and will have, along with education, the biggest impact on their life prospects back in Syria. Young men are the worst affected by lack of legal frameworks, suffering from limited mobility and difficulty in renewing their residencies and ultimately finding work, whereas women (especially female heads of households) are also badly hit by regulations relating to birth certificates and marriage in host countries. Those legal considerations are important factors to consider when looking at return push factors, but also, to devise appropriate legal support and solutions for the implications of the lack of documentations, birth and marriage certifications, and residencies as and when Syrians go back home.

International Legal Regimes

[117] Betts, Alexander, Ali Ali, and Fulya Memişoğlu. "Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon & Jordan." *Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford* . 24 Nov 2017. p. 13. https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis-exploring-responses-turkey-lebanon-and-jordan

[118] Betts, Alexander, Ali Ali, and Fulya Memişoğlu. "Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon & Jordan." *Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford* . 24 Nov 2017. p. 9. https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis-exploring-responses-turkey-lebanon-and-jordan

[119] See Far. "Return, Stay, or Migrate? Understanding the Aspirations of Syrian Refugees in Turkey." Mar 2018. p. 16 https://seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Syrians-in-Turkey.pdf

[120] Weis, Zia. "Syrian refugees in Turkey face calls to return as public mood changes." 27 Mar 2018. https://www.irinnews.org/feature/2018/03/27/syrian-refugees-turkey-face-calls-return-public-mood-changes

The variation across involved state actors -- Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon -- in terms of their adherence to legal conventions and regimes makes the legal landscape highly convoluted and inconsistent when it comes to Syrian refugees and IDPs. The differences in laws between different countries of refuge constitute a serious obstacle for the UN especially when it comes to putting a unified and independent mechanism to work with Syrian displaced or eventual returnees. Even agreeing upon a definition of terms relating to the problem of asylum in order to serve a coherent response within a coherent regional framework has been elusive, due to the politicisation of refugee and asylum issues.

That Syria and the receiving countries of refugees are not parties to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees is one of the most important obstacles to ensuring the guarantees of safe returns of Syrians to their country. Jordan's cooperation with UNHCR is based on a 1998 Moue, with official camps on land provided by Jordanian authorities.[121] The lack of clearly defined rights and responsibilities allows for flexibility, but it also presents challenges in terms of consistency of service provision and protection of Syrian refugees inside Jordan.

Lebanese authorities have given no official recognition of refugees and have taken a strong stance against setting up any official refugee camps. Lebanon does not employ a legal definition of refugee nor any legal framework whatsoever that could regulate their presence and status, it does, however, adhere to the 1991 Convention on Freedom of Movement. On paper, there is an inter-institutional committee tasked with political asylum requests, and political asylum is regulated by Title VIII of the 'Law Regulating the Entry to, Stay in and Exit from Lebanon' of 10 July 1962. However, this law's application is limited to requests for political asylum only, and its effectiveness with regard to protecting Syrian nationals has not materialised. In 2003 the Lebanese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding to address the status of refugees in Lebanon, but the legal status of Syrians in Lebanon currently remains caught in a grey area between 'alien', 'displaced' and 'de facto refugee.'[122]

Turkey is the only host country with a national law of asylum. Syrian refugees in Turkey are awarded temporary protection with no hard time limit, but there is no clear legal provision stipulating how this temporary protection can transfer to permanent legal status.[123] While the protections afforded by Turkey are more robust than in either Lebanon or Jordan, they are still far from comprehensive. The situation is different in European countries that have all signed the 1951 Geneva convention on refugees, but most refugee in Europe fall under the category of asylum, which might be revisited, if the situation in the country of origin changes.

Whilst all the above put Syrian refugees at a somewhat unstable situation legally, the principle of non-refoulement should essentially present the protection of refugees and asylum seekers against return to a country where a person has reason to fear persecution. It has a legal basis not only in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention but also in the United Nations Declaration

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[121] UNHCR. "UNHCR Global Appeal 2014-2015." 2014. http://www.unhcr.org/528a0a2c13.pdf

[122] Dionigi, Filipo. "The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: State Fragility and Social Resilience." *LSC Middle East Centre*. 15 Feb 2016. p. 23
http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65565/1/Dionigi_Syrian_Refugees%20in%20Lebanon_Author_2016.pdf

[123] International Crisis Group. "Turkey's Growing Refugee Challenge: Rising Social Tensions." 27 Oct 2017.
https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkeys-growing-refugee-challenge-rising-social-tensions

on Territorial Asylum which was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 1967.[124] This means that all efforts towards return strategies should ensure return is safe and voluntary, regardless of the differences in host governments' adherence to international law.

Legal Considerations inside Syria

Syria's seven-year conflict has left hundreds of thousands of citizens without valid civil documentation.[125] The majority of Syrian refugees – 70 percent – do not possess national ID cards. The loss of legal documentations is pervasive for Syrians, either because retrieving it would have presented a risk, because it was lost during shelling and displacement, or because people did not realise, they needed it before leaving Syria. When it comes to land and property, there are widespread cases where the property itself was damaged or destroyed, but also where other persons have occupied or looted it, and thus it will be almost impossible to get it back. There are a lot of cases whereby families have not able to secure documentation for their marriage, which has affected registration of new-borns, as well as deaths, which has further implications for inheritances. According to Syrian Civil Status Law, a marriage that takes place outside Syria needs to be registered with the Syrian Civil Registry through the Syrian Consulate or Embassy within 90 days from the date of the marriage.[126]

Additionally, apart from fear of forced conscription or legal prosecution, Syrian refugees in Europe may face additional legal threats upon their return. There is a risk that Syrians who have left Syria or who have claimed asylum elsewhere, regardless of escaping military service, will be considered a fugitive and will be imprisoned, and if a military, potentially sentences to death, under the military service law, and the legislative decree 30 for the year 2007 military service law, as well as articles 96, 99-103.

Gender also impacts access to legal documentation and legal claims. Many women who have either lost or been separated from their husbands may not be able to claim marital property without a marriage certificate to prove their relationship. In the case of female heads of households, there will be very big challenges for return as a challenge to prove ownership due to gender constraints in the law. Before 2011, women's access to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) in Syria was usually determined and limited by their relationship with a man, usually either their husband or father. An NRC survey of Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon found that only four percent of interviewees had property in Syria registered in their name.[127] With many women having lost their husbands, father or sons, this presents a bigger challenge to them accessing their properties, inheritances, or registering their own children.

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[124] UNHCR. "Note on Non-Refoulement (Submitted by the High Commissioner)." 23 Aug 1977. http://www.unhcr.org/excom/scip/3ae68ccd10/note-non-refoulement-submitted-high-commissioner.html

[125] UNHCR. "Lack of documentation poses extra risk to displaced Syrians." 13 Apr 2017. http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2017/4/58e7560b4/lack-documentation-poses-extra-risk-displaced-syrians.html

[126] *Syrian Arab Republic.* Article 14, Syrian Civil Status Code. 2007.

[127] NRC. "Briefing Note: HLP in the Syrian Arab Republic." May 2016. https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/housing-land-and-property-hlp-in-the-syrian-arab-republic.pdf

Syrian state legislation on HLP has served as a key obstacle to future return and reconciliation. Back in 2012 the government passed Decree 66, ostensibly to "redevelop areas of unauthorised housing and informal settlements."[128] In practice, it has been used to "target and expel" residents of opposition-held areas and subsequently destroy these properties, without due process or compensation.[129] Another law, Legislative Decree 63, gave the Finance Ministry the power to confiscate the HLP of anyone who falls under the Counterterrorism Law of 2012. This law uses an exceedingly broad definition of terrorism and has been widely condemned for serving to lend legitimacy to the criminalisation, without due process, of anyone the Syrian authorities decides to target.[130]

A recent piece of Syrian legislation, Law 10, stands to further transform the landscape of HLP access, potentially depriving millions of displaced Syrians of any legal claim to their land and properties. Law 10 requires Syrians to register their private properties with the Ministry of Local Administration within 30 days. Titleholders must either provide proof of ownership documents themselves, or ensure a relative does so on their behalf. Otherwise, they face having to relinquish their properties to the state.[131]

Taken together, these three laws -- Decree 66, Decree 63, and Law 10 -- constitute a grave threat to the rights of millions of displaced Syrians, inside and outside the country. They contribute greatly to fears of both refugees and IDPs regarding their rights to reclaim their HLP and are incompatible with an effort to equitably and inclusively rebuild Syria. Adding to that fears of persecution if considered having escaped military service, or claimed asylum, those legal considerations constitute perhaps the biggest obstacles to Syrians' return, as they may hinder safety even if return is voluntary and if shelling and violence have stopped. Syrians' return plans will require special legal support, awareness raising, and serious legal guaranteed to facilitate safe return and access to HLP, as well as the ability to register children and obtain IDs and legal documentations.

3. Reconciliation and Social Cohesion: Prerequisites for Return

in relation to Nexus 4. Current Situation and Policy Gaps in Reconciliation and Social Cohesion

Apart from legal and institutional fears, there remains clear fears that relate to reconciliation and social cohesion when it comes to Syrians considering return. Those can be linked to

[128] Rollins, Tom. "Decree 66: The blueprint for al-Assad's reconstruction of Syria?" 20 Apr 2017. https://www.irinnews.org/investigations/2017/04/20/decree-66-blueprint-al-assad%E2%80%99s-reconstruction-syria

[129] Human Rights Watch. "Q&A: Syria's New Property Law." 29 May 2018. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law

[130] Human Rights Watch. "Q&A: Syria's New Property Law." 29 May 2018. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law

[131] Al Jazeera. "Syria: 'Absentees law' could see millions of refugees lose lands." 7 Apr 2018. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-absentees-law-millions-refugees-lose-lands-180407073139495.html

dimensions already explored in previous sections such as protection, legal, and socio-economic concerns of Syrian refugees. This section will further highlight some of those that will present big obstacles to potential return.

Forcible Transfers & Deportation

Summary deportations and forcible transfers are well-documented in Jordan and, to a lesser extent, in Lebanon. Aid organizations in Jordan estimate that half of Azraq camp's 50,000 Syrian refugees were forcibly transferred from around Jordan.[132] This figure includes many refugees apprehended by Jordanian authorities without proper paperwork and those targeted for communication with family in Syria. Over the first half of 2017, Jordan deported around 400 Syrian refugees per month, with the majority being whole families, deporting at least 2,361 people over the whole year.[133]

Some voluntary returns continue to occur in Jordan. According to UNHCR, 8,037 refugees decided to return by themselves in 2017, a very slight increase compared to 7,100 returns in 2016.[134] The majority of returnees are from and returning to southern Syria (Dara'a).[135] For nearly 80 percent of these returnees, return is motivated by family reunification. This includes reuniting with a relative who was recently deported or relatives who could not seek asylum in Jordan because of the closed border. Perceived security improvements in Syria were the reason for only 4 percent of these returnees.[136] However, return is a one-way decision in Jordan; both Jordanian and UN officials have confirmed that refugees who go back to Syria will not be allowed back into the country.[137]

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Armed Forces recaptured Arsal from the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in July 2017, facilitating the 'transfer' of 10,000 Syrian refugees to Syria—without the oversight of the UNHCR.[138] Another, more recent case of a questionable 'forced' return occurred on April 18, 2018, when Lebanese state security arranged for 500 refugees in the Shebaa farms area to return to their villages in Beit Jinn, in western Syria.[139] The UN did

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[132] Marks, Jesse. "Pushing Refugees to Return." *Carnegie Endowment.* 1 Mar 2018. http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/75684

[133] Jordan INGO Forum. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Protection Overview." Jan 2018. p. 16 http://testsite.jordaningoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf

[134] *Al-Bawaba*. "8,037 Refugees Returned to Syria from Jordan in 2017: UNHCR." 8 Feb 2018. https://www.albawaba.com/news/8037-refugees-returned-syria-jordan-2017-unhcr-1085888

[135] Jordan INGO Forum. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Protection Overview." Jan 2018. p. 16 http://testsite.jordaningoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf

[136] UNHCR. "Durable Solution Technical Working Group Dashboard." Nov 2017. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60906

[137] Su, Alice. "Why Jordan is Deporting Syrian Refugees." *The Atlantic.* 20 Oct 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/jordan-syrian-refugees-deportation/543057/

[138] Marks, Jesse. "Pushing Refugees to Return." *Carnegie Endowment.* 1 Mar 2018. http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/75684

[139] Washington Post. "Seeking aid abroad, Lebanon uproots Syrian refugees." 24 April 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/seeking-aid-abroad-lebanon-uproots-syrian-

not participate in the operation, citing concerns about safety and conditions for return. As of 2017, at least 142 municipalities have imposed evening curfews on Syrian refugees, restricting their movements.[140] At least 3,664 Syrian nationals have been evicted from at least 13 municipalities from the beginning of 2016 through the first quarter of 2018.[141] Almost 42,000 Syrian refugees remained at risk of eviction in 2017.[142] The Lebanese army evicted another 7,524 in the vicinity of the Rayak air base in the Bekaa Valley in 2017 and 15,126 more Syrians near the air base have pending eviction orders, according to Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs.[143] Evictions of Syrian refugees from Lebanese municipalities have been recorded from as early as July 2014 and continued in 2016, the number of municipalities forcibly evicting Syrian refugees from their homes and expelling them from their localities increased in 2017 and the first quarter of 2018.[144]

It is important to highlight that the boundary between voluntary and forced return is not always clear-cut. For refugees left behind in a host country without a source of income after the deportation of a family member, following them may be an economic necessity, but it still may be registered as a 'voluntary' return.[145]

Securitisation & Military Operations

As discussed above, Lebanon has seen significant military involvement in refugee returns, as evidenced by summer 2017's military offensive in Arsal and subsequent transfer of 10,000 Syrian refugees. The Lebanese military and security forces are still treating Syrian refugees in and around Arsal as a security threat, leading to severe infringements upon their freedom of movement, even in cases of medical emergency.

The Jordanian government has instituted tough measures to contain the impact of the crisis on Jordan and stop the movement of displacement. Jordan has moved in recent years, and particularly since 2016, towards a security-based refugee response, motivated by a fear of

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refugees/2018/04/24/6fe7da82-47d8-11e8-8082-105a446d19b8_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.085188bd579b

[140] Mourad, Lama. "Inaction as Policy-Making: Understanding Lebanon's Early Response to the Refugee Influx," POMEPS Studies no. 25 (March 2017): 49–55. https://pomeps.org/2017/03/29/inaction-as-policy-making-understanding-lebanons-early-response-to-the-refugee-influx/

[141] Human Rights Watch. "'No Strangers in Our Homes': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *HRW.* 20 Apr 2018. https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities

[142] Human Rights Watch. "'No Strangers in Our Homes': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *HRW.* 20 Apr 2018. https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities

[143] Human Rights Watch. "'No Strangers in Our Homes': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *HRW.* 20 Apr 2018. https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities

[144] Human Rights Watch. "'No Strangers in Our Homes': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities." *HRW.* 20 Apr 2018. https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities

[145] Su, Alice. "Why Jordan is Deporting Syrian Refugees." *The Atlantic.* 20 Oct 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/jordan-syrian-refugees-deportation/543057/

radicalisation. These national security-centric motivations have proved stronger than the negative socio-economic implications of isolating and excluding refugees.[146] Syrian refugees are highly concentrated in Jordan's most impoverished and resource-poor communities, and the state is concerned about the potential for marginalised Jordanians to be mobilised by Syrian refugees' calls for increased access and rights.[147] Framing the issue in terms of security has served as a justification for restricting refugees' movements deporting an increasing number of Syrians.[148] Jordan first instituted strict border restrictions in 2013, but after a suicide car bomb killed six Jordanians near a border crossing in June 2016, it fully closed the border.[149] This closure has left 40,000-50,000 people – 70-80 percent of whom are women and children -- trapped in a demilitarised zone called 'the berm' in Rukban, between Jordan and Syria.[150]

Turkey has used the return of refugees as political coverage for military operations in Syria. Following the conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield in March 2017, Turkey reported the return of nearly 140,000 Syrians to areas it captured over the last year. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hailing these returns as justification for its ongoing Operation Olive Branch in Afrin.[151]

Such securitisation measures are expected to increase in the coming months, and will play a big push factor, risking refugee's security and may lead to forced or borderline 'involuntary' return, as well as justify political rhetoric normalizing the issue of return before the war ends and a political solution is in place.

Situation at Areas of Origin

The present situation of areas of original departure, in terms of security, infrastructure, and the presence of services is a key determinant of return. The condition of original areas of departures of refugees vary according to the length of the active conflict there, as well as the fact that some of these areas are still until today seeing ongoing violence and shelling. In some areas, the damage is minimal, whereas others are totally destroyed, with a complete lack of buildings, hospitals, roads, electricity infrastructure, water infrastructure, and schools. For these areas there is currently no way to return as there is no support for even basic needs.

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[146] Collier, Paul & Alexander Betts. "Why denying refugees the right to work is a catastrophic error." *The Guardian.* 22 Mar 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/22/why-denying-refugees-the-right-to-work-is-a-catastrophic-error

[147] Francis, Alexandra. "Jordan's Refugee Crisis." *Carnegie Endowment.* 2015. p. 3 https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_247_Francis_Jordan_final.pdf

[148] Su, Alice. "Why Jordan is Deporting Syrian Refugees." *The Atlantic.* 20 Oct 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/jordan-syrian-refugees-deportation/543057/

[149] Jordan INGO Forum. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Protection Overview." Jan 2018. http://testsite.jordaningoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf

[150] Jordan INGO Forum. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Protection Overview." Jan 2018. p. 4 http://testsite.jordaningoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf

[151] Marks, Jesse. "Pushing Refugees to Return." *Carnegie Endowment.* 1 Mar 2018. http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/75684

Conditions in areas of original departure of the majority of refugees in the region are overwhelmingly unsuitable for return. In terms of infrastructural damage, the areas of original departure of most Syrian refugees -- East Aleppo, Homs, Rural Damascus, and Raqqa -- are still largely uninhabitable. After the devastating 2016 siege of Aleppo, the formerly-rebel-held eastern part of the city remains in ruins, with large swathes completely uninhabitable. Homs was one of the most affected governorates, with extensive fighting and infrastructural damage from the start of the Syrian crisis. Rural Damascus, too, particularly Eastern Ghouta, has seen widespread destruction of infrastructure. Dara'a, in the south, also saw heavy bombardment by Syrian government forces. Raqqa, in the northeast, was largely destroyed over the course of the military offensive to expel ISIS.

In all of these areas of origin for Syrian refugees and IDPs, extensive destruction of residential buildings, hospitals, schools, and WASH infrastructure has left them in unsafe condition for return, from both a security and a public health and services perspective. Looting has also had a significant impact, with buildings stripped by militias of everything but the walls, down to the copper wiring. In terms of schooling and healthcare, specifically, these areas of original departure do not currently provide adequate, or sometimes, any, support.

Idlib remains under opposition control and has absorbed very high numbers of IDPs from Afrin and Eastern Ghouta over first months of 2018, with resources spread very thin and significant concerns about the eventuality of a new government offensive on Idlib. Idlib currently stands as the largest cluster of IDPs in the world, with over 300,000 newly displaced people arriving in Idlib since August 2017.[152]

As such there are questions to be asked and assessments that need to be made about the areas of original departure of Syrian refugees. Even if the war were to end today, or in x numbers of years, what kinds of targets must be hit before people decide they can go back, in terms of infrastructure and services? What must happen in terms of the political and security situation -- would a general armistice be sufficient? Educational services and job opportunities also play an important role in families' calculus on returns. What is the minimum necessary in terms of economic opportunities or educational provisions?

There are cases of youth who have been out of school for over seven years, or who having studied curricula that are not officially recognised or are not coordinated with Syrian curricula. These educational barriers may prevent Syrian families from wanting to return so as not to disrupt their children's education or have them start their education over. The challenge of finding work is particularly acute now that 4 out of 5 Syrians are living under the poverty line. This is compounded by the fact that many were not able to finish their education and were displaced before being able to acquire professional skills, making it even harder to find work.

[152] Wintour, Patrick. "UN warns Idlib could be next Syrian disaster zone in 'marathon of pain.'" *The Guardian.* 25 Apr 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/top-un-officials-voice-fears-of-new-aleppo-in-syrias-idlib-province

Health services matter, too. Physical injuries and psychosocial trauma resulting from the conflict has left a lot of people with chronic health conditions, special needs, and disabilities that require special treatment. There is the problem of the lack of health services and vaccines for children, which will cause and has already caused the spread of diseases. Moreover, a great deal of medical workers and doctors have either left the country or been forcibly disappeared or killed. In Syria, a severe lack of hospitals available persists, precluding service provision in many areas.

Social divisions and fears are another important factor. Fear of revenge is widespread, with the media increasing sectarian and communitarian social tensions. A great deal of Syrian refugees today fear returning to the areas that they have left from, because in many cases it has become of different sectarian, religious, or political character. Others are concerned about the changes in the demographic makeup of the country, particularly Syrians from minority groups. Torture, killings, kidnappings and other violations have become very frequent in areas. Cases relating to gender-based violence, such as the cases related to rape, sexual trafficking, as well as child labour and forced conscription, all create and sustain real fears of return from the society that often places disproportionate blame on women. Women heads of households with children, especially undocumented children, will fear return because of fear of stigmatisation or lack of rights.

Overall, all of these circumstances are not necessarily factors that push the Syrians out of host countries. On the contrary, today's indicators show us that the potential benefits of return are still less than the likely consequences of return, taking into account the absence of the necessary political, justice, infrastructural, economic and social conditions.

4. The Way Back Home: A Phased Framework for Return

in relation to Nexus 4. Current Situation and Policy Gaps in Rehabilitation of Physical and Social Infrastructure

Previous sections looked at the root causes of the Syrian uprising, the reasons, phases and places of internal and external displacement, as well as the standing local responses in places of refuge and the legal frameworks influencing refugees' living conditions and rights, both in host communities, inside Syria and internationally. It examined concerns when it comes to

reconciliation and social cohesion, as well as the current situation at the areas of original departure, and the minimal services and conditions that would be expected to consider return. This section will look at the needs of refugees from today throughout the way back home. It examines potential return through three phases: the first phase, or preparation phase, in displacement and refugee hood areas; the second phase, looking more closely at the road to return, and what is needed throughout it for refugees to make it safely; and the third phase, arrivals and settlement. In each phase, recommendations and pointers are provided throughout the five axes that were previously examined: social services; housing and infrastructure; economic activity, livelihoods and vocational training; security, reconciliation and social cohesion; as well as governance, aid, sustainability and capacity building.

First Phase: In displacement and refugeehood areas

As mentioned, we have already witnessed instances of both forced and voluntary returns. However, those were not many, and were not accompanied by intentional supporting policies or programmes. While large scale returns will take time and require a lot of preparation, emergency return will continue happening in the coming years. Preparations for organised return, however, should begin, for those that will decide when conditions are safe, to voluntarily return. In the meantime, Syrians should continue to be supported in their area of refuge. Below are recommendations for this phase.

Social Services Axis

- Develop a unified healthcare system inside Syria to cater for the healthcare needs of internally displaced Syrians and refugees who will return. Efforts should be put in place to organise and centralise health records inside Syria. Efforts to train needed healthcare workers inside Syria and in neighbouring countries to manage the high influx of returnees. Healthcare organisations and healthcare workers should also work to establish a database of diseases encountered in refugee communities, in addition to continuing to ensure access to vaccines, securing health service channels and working to overcome health barriers in neighbouring countries

- Ensure continued service provision to refugees in neighbouring countries and inside Syria including of humanitarian assistance, while moving from solely relief, to development, and guaranteeing justice in the distribution of assistance through a needs based rather than access based approach

- Support programming geared towards increasing the resilience of refugees wherever they are living, thus preparing them for their eventual return, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable individuals including women, youth, and people with disabilities and special needs

- Ensure gender mainstreaming in all programming, whilst also working with men, who have been amongst the least supported throughout the last 7 years

- Continue to provide integrated psychosocial support programmes and protection programming to Syrians through a holistic approach. Such projects must be led by the

communities themselves, thus increasing their capacities, and harnessing positive social relations amongst refugee communities and facilitating future return

- Address sexual and gender-based violence and support programming that increase women's resilience, as well as the protection of young women from forced and child marriage, and ensure their access to education and livelihood opportunities

- Raise awareness around the fact return will be experienced differently by women who have become heads of households, and prepare targeted projects for women in neighbouring countries around return

- Ensure children continue to have access to quality education, through increasing the capacity and enhancing the quality of education in formal public-school systems in neighbouring countries, as well as increasing non-formal education outreach to the most vulnerable and out of school children, and encouraging vocational training as pathways to formal education for youth

- Increase the support for Syrian teachers to ensure their participation and centrality in the education process, and preparing them to take on genuine educational roles upon their return to Syria

- Ensure child protection mechanisms are in place through referral pathways made available, as well as through harnessing inclusive and safe environments and institutions

- Ensure the registrations of Syrian Civil Society organisations that have emerged after 2011 inside Syria, without imposing changes on their governance, sector or areas of operation

Housing and Infrastructure Axis

- Create personal and secure databases of displaced persons that are linked to comprehensive survey systems of their areas of origin, their HLP situation, whether they have documentation guaranteeing their property in preparation for eventual return

- Assess the extent of damages, as well as the need to rebuild housing, schools and hospitals in areas of origin inside Syria, and establish alternatives to social services for the transitional stage, enabling the returnees who have decided to return to be housed

- Devise ways to ensure the basic WASH and infrastructure services are in place to ensure the needs of the returning population are being met including access to gas, electricity, water, etc.

- Ensure any development of house and infrastructure is locally owned by the original inhabitants of the areas, building on existing local governance bodies when possible,

and that no widespread and systematic reconstruction efforts start before a political agreement has been signed

- Ensure funding towards housing and infrastructure is monitored to guarantee transparency and prevent corruption, warlordism and crony capitalism

- In neighbouring countries, ensure vulnerable refugees and those living under the poverty line continue to have access to housing and WASH services

Economic Activity, Livelihoods and Vocational Training Axis

- Civil society organisations and international organisations working in neighbouring countries should survey human capital in host communities, determining gaps that need vocational and technical training and strengthening in preparation for eventual return, with a particular focus on sectors that will be necessary in the reconstruction phase

- Create safe living and working conditions as well as entry-level opportunities in the labour market in areas of origin, and subsidies to those internally displaced to reduce further displacement and not to counterbalance the forces of return. Ensure women have equal access to jobs and pay

- Differentiate between rural and urban populations in terms of human capital and training needs, and eventual job creations

- Propose and develop programmes for Syrian businesses to support vocational rehabilitation and training in coordination with the relevant authorities

- Support the rebuilding of the agriculture sector and focus on training farmers and increasing their capacities

- Invest in areas that provide sustained economic growth in neighbouring countries and provide job opportunities for Syrian refugees as well as host communities, while making permits available

- Include persons with disabilities in any livelihoods planning, as to ensure their independence and inclusion in society

Security, reconciliation, social cohesion, and population length Axis

- Continue to advocate for resettlement from neighbouring countries that bear the bulk of the responsibility of refugees

- Push host and local governments to renew residency permits for refugees, make civic documentation available, as well as ensure a safe environment through abolishing curfews, evictions, and confiscation of legal papers

- Ensure the continuation of issuing of new civil status documentation, birth certificates, marriage registration, and other legal papers

- Work with refugees before return to understand their requirements of return, as well as manage their expectations by being transparent and finding reliable and exact information about the situation in areas of origin they will be returning to, and guaranteeing that the decision to return is independent and voluntary

- Respect the principle of non-refoulement and adhere to international law and humanitarian principles when speaking of return, which should be safe, dignified and voluntary

- Continue to create cross line and cross border networks among Syrians through social cohesion programming, in preparation for eventual return and a restoration of the Syrian social fabric. Work with Syrians within Syria around accepting differences and finding common interests within their communities

- Deal with issues arising from laws such as Decree 66, Decree 63, and Law 10, including loss of documentation, unregistered civil and real estate cases while taking into account legal property rights through creating legal consulting agencies to facilitate legal advice for those returning as well as conducting awareness sessions on legal issues, particularly around registration and citizenship, land and property rights, etc.

- Initiate and plan a comprehensive transitional justice programme to guarantee the rights of eventual returnees, as well as to ensure that there are no cases of retaliation and protection of victims of violence and sexual violence

- Raise awareness among refugees on the need to comply with the laws of host countries as well as benefiting from the safe environment abroad in order to promote basic principles of democracy and values of citizenship

- Start participatory planning with refugees on return so to achieve ownership and self-determination

- Train local community leaders on dealing with social and reconciliation problems that may arise from return, both inside Syria as well as in neighbouring countries

- Consider lessons learned from previous experiences of return, such as supporting families and host communities throughout the return process to reduce pressure and congestion, and avoid a relapse into conflict

- Devise programmes that link Syrians in neighbouring countries with social networks in areas where they plan on returning to facilitate eventual return and ease the transition and strengthen social cohesion

Governance, aid, roles, sustainability and capacity building Axis

- Enhance communication between governments, UN organisations, Civil Society and local communities within Syria and outside it to coordinate the preparation for a possible return

- Activate the role of old and news networks and social networking sites in the provision of information and ensuring the involvement of the media in the planning process

- Create a framework for the work of civil society organizations in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, as well as ensuring the role of civil society inside Syria, especially local groups that have been most active in the past years

- Continue to involve civil society in a monitoring role in all plans for return, and in the political process to guarantee the rights of the Syrian people

- Focus on the importance and role of local councils and legitimate governance structures that were developed throughout the years, build on their experiences, and encourage their decentralised model. Promote women's participation in them

- Establish mechanisms or technical bodies tasked with monitoring, evaluating and producing periodic reports on return and the situation of those who have returned

- Continue to build capacity of Syrian civil society organisations as well as that of local governance structures to allow them to cope with returns

- Recognize that different areas will have very different needs throughout reconstruction, in addition to the fact that they will have varying numbers of refugees returning to them. Areas that were originally agricultural, will require less costs for reconstruction unlike more industrial areas that will require extra costs for the reconstruction of factories, roads and infrastructure

- Ensure multi-year funding continues to be provided both for humanitarian assistance but also to build resilience of refugee communities, while ensuring transparency, localisation and more efficient implementation of programming

Second Phase: The Road to Return

After return has been planned and the political, protection and social conditions for a safe, dignified and voluntary return are in place, we can start looking at the road to return for those who wish to do so. Surely, large-scale return is linked to the work of governments in Syria and

host countries, where the most important challenge is to activate their roles through tripartite agreements between them, international organizations and civil society. Managing expectations around return, as well as ensuring good access to information around it are key to prevent refugee and internal host community frustration, anger and negative reactions that may hinder a dignified and smooth road to return. Below are a few recommendations for the second phase again according to the five axes used throughout this paper.

Social Services Axis

- Perform major stakeholder and actor mapping on who will provide social services throughout the road to return as well as determine the conditions of the health, social and educational services at the time of return

- Provide necessary psychosocial support for eventual returnees and host communities

- Design accompanying programmes to the returnees to ensure a smooth way back home, and give civil society a central role in such programming

- Acknowledge, identify and address institutional weaknesses in healthcare and education in particular, in preparation to the massive influx of refugees

- Prepare schools and teachers for the eventual return of students, as well as allow civil society organisations to play a role in non-formal education for the children who will not be able to access education upon arrival due to capacity restrictions

- Continue supporting and building the capacity of social workers, healthcare workers, and teachers for them to cater for the needs of Syrians returning, as well as strengthening the institutional capacities across sectors and ensure efficiency, transparency and justice in social service provision

Housing and Infrastructure Axis

- Make data housing and infrastructure in areas of original departure available and plan out provisional housing for those who will return, as well as the rehabilitation of housing that was destroyed

- Determine the responsible parties for the reconstruction of housing and the rehabilitation of infrastructure, with the involvement of civil society and local governance structures

- Be prepared to respond to mobility challenges, particularly for returning families

- Put in place support mechanisms to solve HLP disputes, and provide legal support to families returning to their areas of origin, as well as real estate and housing support for those who are choosing new locations to come back to

Economic Activity, Livelihoods and Vocational Training Axis

- Determine what the minimum standard of living that should be provided to returnees is in the transitional stage

- Work to secure income opportunities for returnees as an incentive to return, and identify the entities that will provide funding and training to facilitate the return process and determine the economic leverage available

- Build on the experiences of Syrian civil society organisations who have been working in vocational training, livelihoods, and income generating programming in neighbouring countries to transfer their knowledge and skills inside Syria

- Work to prevent further brain drain and attract lost social capital especially youth through providing them with protection guarantees, financial help, accommodation and other incentives to take up jobs inside Syria, especially related to reconstruction and local response in the initial phases of return

- Ensure that aid distributed within Syria are composed of Syrian products procured from businesses that are not complicit in human rights abuses in order to help build the local economy and encourage agriculture

Security, reconciliation, social cohesion, and population length Axis

- Continue to provide adequate information for returnees around the environment of return including security, housing and the guarantee of ethnic and racial protection, as well as build on the successes of return cases from the first phase and warn from possible obstacles

- Determine the responsible parties for providing safety and protection guarantees, as well as providing returnees with the documents and reassurances required on the way back in order not to face prosecution, detention, or other protection violations, as well as to define the role of the state and civil society in the protection of the returning groups

- Ensure the safety of roads through demining, creation of safe spaces, as well as setting a plan against retaliation, kidnappings, looting and assaults

- Think about the possibility of return in phases: the first, exploratory, potentially from those internally forcibly displaced into their areas of original departure, and the second ensuring stability, and encouraging the return of the majority

- Work efficiently with border control in host countries to follow institutional guidelines and reduce the security regulations at border control taking into account the challenges of civil documentation returnees may have

- Ensure freedom of movement is upheld by the host countries as well as the local authorities during return

Governance, aid, roles, sustainability and capacity building Axis

- Determine the role of the states, UN organisations, civil society and international organisations during return, with the establishment of monitoring mechanisms

- Insure flexibility of organizations locally and internationally, as well as effective coordination between the host countries and international organizations, as well as local councils and civil society with the aim of providing essential services all throughout and supporting the returnees

- Allow the autonomy for local committees and governance structures to manage communities during phases of return, especially through identifying and providing an assessment of possible sectarian, religious, tribal and other sensitivities that may arise

- Acknowledge that there will be a percentage of the population that will not return due to various reasons, and find ways to continue supporting them to integrate in their new countries

- Recognise that a percentage of the population will be weary of return, such as those who may not trust the process, or fear returning due to the circumstances of their leave such as ideological opposition to the authorities who may remain within Syria

Third Phase: Arrivals and Settlement

The third phase after having returned from neighbouring countries, Europe, or from internal areas of displacement is arriving into the new locations (whether it is the areas of original departure, or areas that the refugees deem best to return to) and settling in those location. Here, families and communities are set to reinvent a new life, and to re-integrate in an area that was, or perhaps wasn't, once their own. This phase for individuals is the one where they will aim to ensure the education of their children, the return of their properties, finding decent income generating activities, and settling down in adequate housing. Institutionally, this phase is characterised by a focus on recentralising service provision and strengthening institutions, as well as focusing on refreshing the economic wheel and rebuilding or reforming economic sectors and institutions. Below are some recommendations for this phase according to the five axes previously explored.

Social Services Axis

- Ensure educational systems are capable of reintegrating returning students into their schools and have the capacity to absorb all returnee children and provide a welcoming environment. Rebuild the educational system in a non-politicised way with more flexibility that seeks to unleash and enhance the talents of Syrian children

- Understand the educational levels and context of returning children, particularly those who have not had access to education for numerous years. Ensuring teachers have the training needed, the staff required, and the basic facilities and resources to cope with this influx

- Devise social protection programmes that serve the most affected of returning population and provide relevant psychological support training as well as training psychologists to provide advice and support for schools and communities during the post-return period, with special attention to GBV and violence against women and girls

- Ensure health services are provided to returnees such as minimal preventive medicine, as well as primary health care and follow-up, particularly for chronic diseases, and work on centralizing the healthcare system

- Consider environmental needs and increase awareness to avoid the continuation of the destruction of the environment post-war

- Ensure access to social services and support is even to all Syrian areas without discrimination

Housing and Infrastructure Axis

- Map existing housing projects and link them with the needs of returnees, as well as ensure that the needs are being met

- Identify the most and least advantaged cities and create a regional balance in the distribution of infrastructure support

- Ensure temporary residence is provided for those who require it pending stability in the target area or availability of permanent housing

- Prevent gentrification of old areas or the rebuilding of areas without the presence of their initial populations

- Link any real and serious reconstruction efforts to the political agreement, transitional justice, and the fate of the disappeared and detained

- Ensure legal support is given for Syrians to be able to access their HLP rights and solve disputes

Economic Activity, Livelihoods and Vocational Training Axis

- Determine, through surveys, the state of available human resources capable of implementing reconstruction

- Plan the size of investments and funding needed and available for each region, while ensuring economic activity is triggered in sectors that are strong suits of those areas

- Place focus on economic planning which can create a rapid economic impact to begin recovering and moving the economy forward, while ensuring that institutions and jobs can absorb the social capital available, as well as to provide subsidies and support to the most vulnerable

- Support youth and facilitate their entry into livelihoods and income generating activities

- Devise large scale vocational and technical trainings, as well as encourage Small and Medium Sized enterprises, and entrepreneurship projects

- Making sure that any proposed investments and economic activity does not support those who have committed war crimes, and that the businesses engaging in such activities have not contributed, supported or been complicit in human rights breaches. Those businesses should additionally have grievance and complaints mechanisms available for the returnees to have recourse to.

Security, reconciliation, social cohesion, and population length Axis

- Ensure returning refugees are not treated as internally displaced persons by guaranteeing the right of return to their area of origin

- Maintain social diversity, foster reconciliation and achieve legal justice in all regions

- Monitor the safety and security of those who returned and make sure that the protection guaranteed prior to their return are being respected and upheld

- Put mechanisms in to ensure there is no relapse into conflict and that there is substantive engagement on security issues (mine action and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants and their dependants), and that there is a respect for the rule of law and human rights

- Provide compensatory programmes for returnees to provide an incentive for them to settle

- Take advantage of previous Syrian experiences of return to learn what best practices and procedures are when it comes to return

- Ensure the fate of the forcibly disappeared and abducted is known

- Ensure the participation of all Syrians in any reform or legal initiatives or constitutional reform

- Develop guidelines for the protection of the legal status of returnees, including data protection by various institutions such as the army, and civil and criminal offenses

- Prevent appraisals based on areas where Syrians have sought refuge

Governance, aid, roles, sustainability and capacity building Axis

- Determine the responsible government bodies for overseeing the situation post-return as well as the criteria and mechanisms used to evaluate its work and ensure transparency and accountability

- Establish key mechanisms to ensure transparency and financial accountability of institutions

- Reform local governance structures as well as ensure they are working closely with local committees, communities, and civil society

- Focus on the decentralization of programmes particularly any work around early recovery and returns

- Create an umbrella alliance for the efficient coordination of aid, as well as ensuring equal access and participation of all regions

- Guarantee that there is an even reconstruction process upheld and carried out by the authorities, with no room for the punishing of certain areas and advantaging of others

- Ensure the unity and strength of the Syrian civil society and prevent any attempts to weaken it by authorities or aid and development monopolies

Conclusions

For each Syrian displaced belongs a different story. Those stories, together, form a collective nostalgia of the Syria that was left behind and a vision of the Syria to return to.

Millions of return stories

This paper started with premises that it tried to gather evidence for throughout its sections and explorations: that stories of return will mirror those of displacement in their diversity and heterogeneity; that Syria today still lacks the conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return; and that Syrians expect some sort of guarantees before they consider going back. Such guarantees range from the need for safety and protection, a minimal access to justice, HLP rights, and a political transition. These also include real guarantees of non-persecutions and conscriptions as well as the ability to return to their original areas of departure. It is also the acceptance that not everyone will do so: some originally rural communities who have experienced urban life in refugeehood, may want to go back to living in cities, and others may

choose to stay outside. This paper also explored the tensions between what is to be considered 'safe' and 'voluntary' and 'dignified', between host countries plummeting services, heightened racist discourse, legal difficulties both outside and inside Syria, and fears of loss of house and property rights.

Solving for the root causes, and accepting that not everyone will return

The root causes for the uprising listed at the outset of the paper looked at what drove people to leave. The lack of political freedoms, social and economic exclusions, bad governance and institutions unable to cater for the needs of the people, among others. Many of those factors still exist, with the added complexity that most refugees have started new lives in the areas where they settled. Together, those two dimensions may well mean that not every Syrian may wish to return. Businessmen and families with capital that have moved their work to countries like Turkey and Egypt may not return, or at least not in the preliminary phases. The same applies to Syrians who have been naturalised and have integrated into new social and economic structures, and whose children are in different educational systems to what Syria will offer. Young men and women who left through brain drain to Europe, learned a new language and built new lives, will need more incentives to want to go back home. Even for Syrians in neighbouring countries, who maintain higher networks with their families and are more prone to return, it is expected that some will not be willing to return. Standing in this space of accepting the multitudes of return scenarios, one can start devising frameworks to think about and prepare for eventual return.

A Syrian-centred, phased return framework

Any return framework should be first and foremost, Syrian-centred: tackling individual fears as well as collective grievances arising from lost loved ones, multiple displacements, non-dignifying experiences, and the emergence of new identities. Return plans that don't address those underlying concerns at both levels will be fragile and top-down. They will leave the space for warring parties and host governments to decide how and when return should happen, and for international actors to dictate the return paces, paths, and destinations. To avoid this and a possible relapse into conflict, return frameworks must be participatory, guaranteeing inclusivity and consultation.

Return, like displacement, will most likely happen in waves. A phased framework for return, includes an initial preparation phase, a phase for the way back home, and an arrival and settlement phase.

Understanding return, preparing for it, and building resilience

T**he first phase** is characterised with a number of refugees voluntarily returning, and others 'pushed' to return, in rather small numbers compared to the millions of Syrians outside Syria. During this phase, efforts from donors, host countries, international and local organisations should be put to continue increasing resilience, skills and standards of dignified living for refugees in the region. It should also allow for policy makers and practitioners to examine and learn from the return experiences happening, and to prepare and plan the next phases of secure returns, while ensuring non-refoulement principles are being respected, as well as

equality and non-discrimination are at the core of return practices. In parallel, advocating for resettlement schemes must continue.
The official role of UN organisations in the initiation and coordination of return should only begin effectively once the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees declares Syria as 'safe' for return, through studies of the situation at the country of origin (Country of Origin Information), with clear metrics on what safety means. Considering general protection concerns have been resolved, some areas of refuge will become safe and ready before others, and hence, some returns will happen before others. Throughout this phased approach to return, there is a need for a high coordination between host governments, UN institutions (especially the UNHCR and OCHA), and local governance structures and authorities to ensure policy, programmes and laws are in place to facilitate return. Civil society organisations should play a central role in coordinating and monitoring efforts, linking refugees with social networks in areas they wish to return to, providing information about conditions in areas of departure, as well as bridging the refugees' experiences with policy.

During this initial phase, it is important to push for further qualitative and ethnographic research that looks at what does it really mean to return, how does the path to return look like, and what actual obstacles (legal, services, social, protection) do refugees face in the process? What are refugees and internally displaced persons' fears and thinking processes as they return back home? Such localised and in-depth studies should ideally be conducted by civil society who have gained the trust of Syrians throughout the years and will help devise better programmes and provide the right support and preparations for eventual large-scale returns, if and when they happen.

Comprehensive return strategies: basic services, housing, and livelihoods

The second phase is the actual way back home. When conditions of return are met, return will be split between spontaneous and organised, and should become a regional process, giving host governments and UN organisations the responsibility of its arrangement and coordination, while monitoring and holding them accountable to international legal and human rights standards.

Mechanisms and comprehensive strategies should already be in place to address fears and concerns of Syrians. A minimum access to services, offsetting what refugees living in neighbouring countries already receive should be ensured. Word of mouth from Syrians who already returned will spread about the ease of access to services such as health, education, and the availability of livelihoods opportunities which will be major determinants for return, especially for families with children, those with disabilities, diseases and who require special medical care. Such services should exist for the whole of Syria, based on need as not to replicate and deepen social and economic exclusions that existed pre-2011 and further exacerbated over the years. Transitional housing should be made available in areas of origin, as well as legal support to just access HLP and reclaiming of properties, documentation and certifications. This can happen through training and preparing paralegals, judges, and specialized lawyers to deal with those matters.

During this phase, an awakening of a locally owned economy should start. The lack of institutional pathways for social capital as well as economic exclusion played a big role in the

uprising and subsequent displacements. There needs to be a regional and decentralised economic strategy focusing on relevant sectors (agriculture, industry, construction), with a gender and youth lens. While humanitarian assistance is important, this phase should witness increased collaboration between agencies and stakeholders to move to a holistic early recovery plan for areas, rather than premature reconstruction. All rebuilding efforts should work to strengthen local economies, with local governance structures and civil society at their heart. Opportunities for highly skilled Syrians should be created, offering them incentives to come back and reclaim the development of their country, rather than it happening through crony capitalists and warlords, before a political, justice-centred solution has been achieved. Efforts should be put in place so that transparency, accountability and the rule of law would govern old and new institutions during this phase.

Preventing a relapse into conflict, and increased capacity building

Given the structural nature of violence in Syria today, efforts during this phase should ensure there is no relapse into conflict through a substantive engagement on security issues (mine action and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants and their dependants), and a respect for human rights. Transitional justice is a key component of any return strategy, notably thinking of the 'return' of the disappeared, the abducted, and the detained. Not least, civil society organisations as well as UN organisations and donors should continue to follow up and monitor Syrians' protection situation, even after their return. They should ensure return continues to be voluntary and be the bridge between local responses to return and a national vision for return, as well as between Syrians outside Syria, and information about their areas of origin.

Hence, donors must continue to build the capacity of and support civil society who will play a major role all throughout the process, as well as ensure that there will still be space for them to operate in neighbouring countries and operate legally inside Syria no matter the political settlement, especially civil society organisations that were most active in the past seven years.

Socio-economic strategies, institutional strengthening, social cohesion and transitional justice

The third phase is about arrival and settlement and should be addressed from individual and institutional perspectives. Economic growth at a local level, poverty decrease through subsidies, agriculture, education should be the pillars of this era. Real efforts should also be put in place to strengthen institutions, unify health care records and services, as well as revise and unite educational curricula. At a community level, this phase should focus on social cohesion, between those who stayed inside Syria and the newly arrived, the rural and urban, the areas that were previously characterised as politically different, as well as ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities and special needs. Special attention should be given to children's schooling, elderly care, youth with high social capital, women, especially single women or female heads of households and families who would have decided to 'split' with some returning and others staying behind. Housing, full access to HLP rights, livelihood and vocational opportunities, as well as access to healthcare and education should be ensured. All the above should be in an effort to retain returnees.

Civil society, local governance structures, and religious and community leaders should be given a central role in developing a national vision of Syria: unified, strong and inclusive, and in addressing arising sensitivities. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that political reconciliation, forgiveness and restorative justice continue to be core components of this phase, through qualified paralegals and judges as well as a network of trusted community mediators.

A long-term process of reintegration

The approach to return should overall be characterised with pragmatism and flexibility, while safeguarding human rights and values. All actors must continue to trust local leaders, civil society, and ultimately Syrians throughout the whole process. Those recommendations constitute only a first step towards the re-emergence of a strong Syrian social fabric and a unified Syria inhabited by Syrians. We must remember that return and eventual reintegration is not simply, the reversal of displacement. Reintegration is a dynamic and long-term process that happens at individual, community, societal and institutional levels. Years spent away from home mean the formation of new identities, and the development of new fears and visions. Hence, 'return,' in its broader meaning (physical return with a sense of belonging and a dignified life) will only be gradual and should be sustainable. We must believe in people's abilities to rise again, and carve out, collectively, new spaces of existence at social, economic, civil, political and cultural levels, as proactive members in larger communities.

In the spirit of the NAFS programme, this paper believes that despite the challenges, Syrians are able to return to and rebuild their country once inclusive peace is reached.