POLICY BRIEF

Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees: Safe, Voluntary Returns and Beyond

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2011, over 12 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced, constituting "the largest displacement crisis in the world" according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While close to 7 million Syrians are internally displaced, just over 5 million left their country and became refugees. The vast majority escaped to the neighbouring countries of Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

While some refugees went on to claim asylum in EU countries or were resettled in more distant countries, like the United States and Canada, more than 4 million Syrians remain in Lebanon and Türkiye without a durable solution. Resettlement to third countries has declined, and local integration has not been a policy priority for either Türkiye or Lebanon. In fact, barriers that prevent local integration have been implemented. Domestic pressures in both those countries, including economic decline and an array of political, natural and health crises are feeding growing hostile public attitudes towards refugees.

As a result, both Lebanon and Türkiye have chosen repatriation to Syria as their preferred solution despite the evidence that the conditions in Syria do not exist to provide safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable returns.

Impediments for safety, dignity and sustainability of returns include:

- absence of a political solution to the Syrian situation – the regime that caused the displacement is still in power
- decade-long human rights violations
- continued concerns about lack of security
- serious problems in the provision of health and education services
- limited livelihood and employment options
- severe financial problems including hyperinflation, and impeded flow of goods and capital.

Despite the impediments, some Syrians have returned to Syria. This raises the question as to how voluntary, safe and sustainable these repatriations actually are for Syrian refugees.

This brief provides a description of the durable solutions available to refugees, including voluntary repatriation, local integration, resettlement to third countries and complementary pathways, along with an analysis of, and recommendations for, their application to the Syrian refugee situation.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, over 12 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced from their homes. The UNHCR has called the situation "the largest displacement crisis in the world". While 6.8 million Syrians are internally displaced, 5.2 million left their country and became refugees. The vast majority escaped to the neighbouring countries of Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

As many as 1.2 million Syrians went on to seek asylum in European Union (EU) countries, with the majority moving to Germany. A limited number of the Syrians who first crossed into neighbouring countries have also been resettled in EU countries, the US, Canada and others. From 2016 to May 2023, only 37,560 of the Syrians who crossed into Türkiye were resettled in third countries. By 2019, some 100,000 Syrians were resettled from Lebanon to third countries. But since the pandemic, the number of resettled refugees has gone down significantly. As a case in point, in 2022, 13 countries resettled only 7,490 Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon.

Today, many displaced Syrians remain in neighbouring countries. Estimates place the number of Syrian refugees within Lebanese borders at 1.2 to 1.5 million, while officially there are 744,884 refugees registered with the UNHCR. Türkiye is still the top refugee-hosting country, with 3.2 million Syrians under temporary protection status.

Over the years, the United Nations' global migration management agencies: UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), have carried out essential roles in delivering humanitarian assistance in response to the Syrian displacement and to support the national efforts of host countries. As the primary donor, the EU provided substantial funding for development and capacity building after 2015. However, international support to date has not been adequate to meet the needs of the Syrian refugees or the interests of host countries.

So far, there have been insufficient efforts by the international community and host states to facilitate local integration and third-country resettlement, the critical durable solution objectives of the UNHCR and the Global Compact on Refugees. There has been no concerted effort to develop concrete measures for refugee self-reliance or to introduce complementary pathways identified in the Compact, such as labour migration, family reunification, study opportunities, community sponsorship or regularization.

Neither Türkiye nor Lebanon have made the local integration of Syrian refugees a policy objective, nor do they see any prospect of a significant increase in resettlement spaces for these refugees in third countries. Therefore, since 2019, Türkiye and Lebanon have urged the repatriation of Syrians as a solution. In 2022, Lebanon's Minister of the Displaced announced a government plan to begin repatriating 15,000 Syrian refugees to Syria each month, insisting that "the war is over and the country has become safe" despite evidence to the contrary. On several occasions, the Turkish governmental representatives, including the President and the Minister of the Interior, indicated that Turkish authorities had concrete plans to prepare conditions for the return of one million Syrians, particularly to Northwest Syria. The number of actual returns remains lower than the announced goals of these countries. The UNHCR, IOM, and the primary donor, the EU, have been publicly indifferent or silent about these countries' urge for repatriation. while there has been no genuine discussion on truly durable solutions.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Although there is no legal definition of the term 'durable solution' in either the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or the UNHCR Statute, the term has been used to refer to permanent solutions for refugees. The UNHCR and IOM have promoted and assisted governments to implement the three traditional durable solutions, namely:

1. voluntary return

2. local integration in the country of asylum, and

3. resettlement to a third country.

The Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2018, included these durable solutions with a slightly different framing, summarizing four fundamental objectives as:

a. easing the pressure on host countries of asylum

b. enhancing refugee self-reliance

c. expanding access to third-country solutions, and

d. supporting conditions in the origin country for returns that are safe and in dignity.

The Compact aims to provide a framework for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that refugees can lead productive lives in safety and dignity in countries of asylum, resettlement or return. This cannot be achieved without international cooperation in which the UNHCR and IOM play prominent roles in advocacy, monitoring, and facilitation of the three durable solutions for refugees and the achievement of the four key objectives of the Global Compact of Refugees. However, several barriers prevents them from doing so.

Refugees' local integration and enhancement of their self-reliance are often impeded by host states who fail, or act selectively, to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of asylum seekers and to offer them opportunities to integrate successfully. Discriminatory barriers are often put in place. These include limitations on the movement of refugees within the country, which prevents them from leaving refugee camps, moving to another city, or accessing stable livelihoods, education and health services. Host countries tend to offer very precarious and temporary protection frameworks, and then create hurdles to legalize formal residency status or to obtain relevant permits, leading to vulnerability and deportation instead of self-reliance and integration.

According to the UNHCR, resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another state that has agreed to admit them and allow them to eventually become naturalized citizens of the resettlement country. Resettled refugees and their dependants are ensured access to rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. In the largest resettlement countries, such as Canada, Sweden and the United States, governments and non-governmental organization partners provide services to facilitate the integration of refugees. However, there is a lack of available places for resettlement despite an increased need. Resettlement programs prioritize refugees who are at risk in their country of refuge or who have particular vulnerabilities that cannot be appropriately addressed there. Resettlement is therefore available to less than one percent of the refugee population and is declining because of the low quotas put forward by countries of resettlement. In the Syrian case, the UNHCR identified over 610,000 refugees in need of resettlement. However, based on the resettlement places offered by third countries, UNHCR could only submit 37,100 individual cases for consideration by the resettlement countries in 2022, of which only 22,800 refugees were resettled.

In addition to the resettlement programs, there are calls for complementary pathways in response to refugee situations. According to the UNHCR, "current complementary pathways include humanitarian admission programs, medical evacuation, family reunification, private sponsorship, and opportunities for labour mobility and education." To benefit from these pathways, refugees are typically required to meet particular eligibility/vulnerability criteria. These pathways have only been used to assist limited cases to date. The existing pathway programs could potentially be scaled up to aid more people in need of protection. This may require legislative, regulatory or operational changes to remove barriers. To be successful, these pathways also require the involvement of non-state actors such as civil society, institutions of higher education, employers, private donors and local community organizations.

REPATRIATION AS A PREFERRED SOLUTION OF HOST COUNTRIES OF ASYLUM

Particularly in the cases of protracted refugee situations, returns to countries of origin have emerged as the preferred solution for host countries. This has been observed for Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, for Bosnians/Kosovars in European countries, Somalis in Kenya, Burundians in Tanzania, and for Rohingyas in Bangladesh. While international organizations and states frequently emphasize that returns are 'voluntary', the reality is that the decision to repatriate is often the product of severe treatment and living conditions in the host country that make staying impossible. Currently, UNHCR lists 15 protracted refugee situations, including refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. Some of the refugee populations have already experienced multiple waves of coerced returns from the neighbouring host countries. The snapshots that follow of Afghans in Pakistan and Rohingyas in Bangladesh provide some insight into the complexity of returns.

Snapshot: Repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan

1993-1998: 100,000 Afghan returns were targeted annually via the Tripartite Agreement with the post-communist Afghan government, UNHCR and Pakistan on the Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan.

1999-2001: Pakistan selectively forced returns of approximately 100,000 Afghans, mainly non-Pashtun ethnic minorities.

2003-2008: Further refugee repatriation occured via the second Tripartite Agreement between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and was signed by the UNHCR in 2003. The agreement coincided with restrictive regulations for registration in Pakistan (2004, 2006) that turned Afghan refugees into 'illegal immigrants'.

2016-17: 381,300 Afghans were coerced to return through cash incentives, restrictive registration and mobility in Pakistan, a rise in discrimination and harassment by police and security organizations, and the host communities' increasing rejection

2023-24: Pakistan introduces 'Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan to coerce "undocumented" Afghan refugees to leave or be subject to deportation, putting 1.4 million refugees at risk of detention, unlawful deportations, and increased harassment and hostility. Since then, 527, 981 Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan, leaving behind their homes, properties and community in Pakistan.

Snapshot: Repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar

1992-93: A bilateral agreement between Burma and Bangladesh resulted in approximately 20,000 Rohingya either being forced back to Burma by Bangladeshi authorities or having returned to Burma under UNHCR auspices.

1997: Over one hundred refugees living in two camps in Bangladesh were forcibly returned to Burma.

The 2000s: Burma's refusal to accept remaining Rohingya caused contention between the governments of Bangladesh and Burma.

2020-2021: Bangladesh attempted to repatriate hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who crossed into Bangladesh following a brutal military-led campaign in Myanmar in 2017. Bangladesh accepted Chinese mediation and monitoring by the international community of the repatriation of Rohingya to the Rakhine state of Myanmar.

2023: Bangladesh introduced a pilot repatriation project for 6,000 Rohingya to return to Myanmar.

THE SYRIAN CASE: RETURNS FROM TÜRKIYE AND LEBANON

Both Türkiye and Lebanon are experiencing politicization and instrumentalization of the presence of Syrian refugees. The return of Syrians to Syria is at the forefront of public discussions and election campaigns in relation to domestic pressures in both those countries. Economic decline and political, natural and health crises are feeding growing hostile public attitudes towards refugees. Both countries are experiencing increasing costs of living, particularly in rent and food prices. Additionally, Lebanon suffers from acute multidimensional crises aggravating extreme poverty and reducing access to health care for both nationals and refugees. Refugees have become an easy scapegoat for deeply rooted crises, resulting in anti-refugee rhetoric and discrimination. The most frequently voiced 'solution' offered by political elites and the public is the return of refugees to Syria.

Since 2018, Türkiye and Lebanon have adopted practices to encourage seemingly voluntary but, in effect, coerced returns of many Syrians. In December 2023, the Turkish Minister of the Interior announced that, between 2016 and 2023, 604,277 Syrians had returned to Syria from Türkiye (see also

this web page). These presumably include self-organized returns, because the number is significantly higher than what is reported by the UNHCR. For the same period (2016-January 2023), the UNHCR reported 391,4888 voluntary returns to Syria from all neighbouring countries as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Number of returns of Syrian refugees from neighbouring countries, 2016-2023, reported by UNHCR

Total Voluntary Refugee Returns (From 2016 to January 2023)
391,488
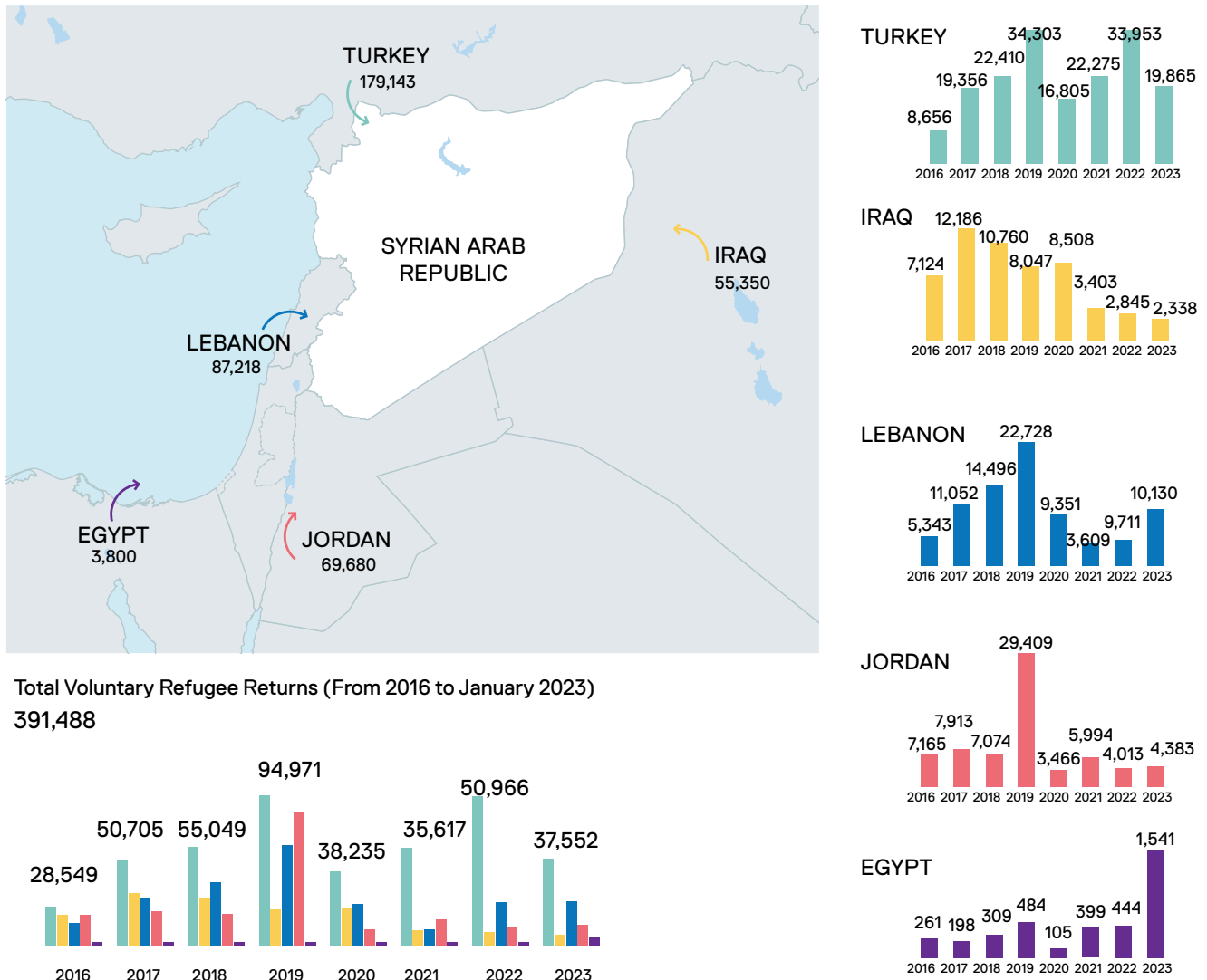
*The numbers reported are only those verified or monitored by UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of returns, which may be significantly higher.
**The General Directorate of the General Security of Lebanon (GSO) reported that an additional 103 individuals who were not known to UNHCR returned as part of the GSO-facilitated return movements.
***Since the re-opening of the border on 15 October 2018, the methodology for returns data was adapted. The return data after 15 October 2018 remains tentative and is undergoing validation and re-adjustments.

Source: 'Operational Data Portal' Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions. Last accessed 07 April 2024.

It is important to note that, even by 2022, many Syrian refugees did not want to return to Syria, raising questions about the extent that returns were acutally compliant with the UNHCR voluntariness principle. In June 2022, UNHCR's regional "intention to return" survey indicated that while 58% hoped to return to Syria one day (a decline from 70% in 2021), only 1.7% planned on doing so in the next 12 months (a decline from 2.4% in 2021). According to the respondents, the lack of safety and security, livelihood opportunities, housing, and essential services were critical barriers to return.

A more recent large survey of 3,500 displaced Syrians across Syria, Türkiye and Lebanon, conducted by a Syrian diaspora organization in 2024, offers striking insights about Syrians' aspirations. The survey report concludes that:

> The vast majority of all surveyed displaced Syrians, in all locations, don't feel settled in their current areas, do not have living conditions they would regard as worthy of a decent human life, but still would not consider returning under the rule of the Syrian regime...92% of the surveyed Syrians said that they will NOT go back to their original areas even if a full normalization by the international community takes place....The establishment of a safe environment in Syria remains a prerequisite for the return of 65% of the surveyed displaced Syrians. The issue of detainees remains a significant concern for the vast majority of displaced Syrians, with 61% thinking that revealing the situation of the detainees and forcefully disappeared people is a prerequisite to their return.

At the same time, the Syrian regime does not seem ready to welcome all Syrian refugees to all places nor to ensure their safety, given the fact that quite a large number of refugees are considered dissidents by the regime. Therefore, the conditions conducive and necessary for a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of Syrian refugees do not yet exist. Although the main host countries prefer it, return at this time is only a desired 'solution' for a limited number of Syrians refugees.

> **The vast majority of all surveyed displaced Syrians, in all locations, don't feel settled in their current areas, do not have living conditions they would regard as worthy of a decent human life, but still would not consider returning under the rule of the Syrian regime.**

COERCED RETURNS?

The line between voluntary and forced returns is very blurred for Syrians. "Voluntary returnees" refer to those Syrians returning of their own will without being detained or deported by host state authorities. However even this "voluntariness" can be questioned. Evidence suggests that most returnees did not 'wish' to return but were coerced in one way or another. The distinction between voluntary and forced returns is not a dichotomy but rather contains elements of both on a continuum of motivations. These could include despair with one's situation in the host country due to limited livelihood opportunities, precarious legal status, and shrinking protection space.[1] In previous research conducted by the author, Syrians who formally fell under the voluntary return category because they were not deported explained their reasons for returning from Türkiye to Northern Syria. These reasons include both pull and push factors. On the one hand, partial security in their hometowns and reuniting with family in Syria are strong motivators to return to Syria, and on the other hand, deteriorating living conditions, difficulty finding work, and rising discrimination in Türkiye motivated them to leave that country. One interviewee summarized the situation this way:

> "Our return is voluntary and, at the same time, forced. It is voluntary because no one forced us, but we have to return due to the hardship of life in Türkiye—not being able to make adequate income to live in peace."

The temporary and precarious status that Syrian refugees face in neighbouring host countries often leaves them no other option but to return to Syria.

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1   See forthcoming article, "Coerced Return: Formal Policies, Informal Practices and Migrants' Navigation" co-authored by Anna Triandafyllidou and Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek to be published by Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies's special issue on Governing Transit and Irregular Migration: Beyond Formal Policies and Informal Practices, edited by Maria Koinova.

It is well documented that Turkish and Lebanese state authorities create hurdles for the legalization of Syrians' formal residency status, making them irregular and exposing them to arrest, detention and deportation. For example, Turkish authorities impose significant barriers to the renewal of residency permits when Syrians move from one city to another, particularly to the cities offering job opportunities like Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa and Antalya. These regulations and practices deprive refugees of freedom of movement within the country and access to formal employment. When attempts to regularize their status intersect with increased security checks in public places, detention and coerced returns of Syrian refugees result, as confirmed by several interviews the author conducted with Syrians and refugee lawyers in Istanbul in April 2024. According to [media reports](#), in the month of July 2023 alone, at least 950 Syrian refugees were deported to northern Syria from Turkey, with many claiming they were forced to sign documents consenting to their 'voluntary' return. Syrians say they are either being misled about the "voluntary return" forms they are being told to sign, or they are being forced to sign them, through intimidation and threats. Those returned Syrians who are able to re-migrate to Türkiye by paying smugglers, lose their temporary protection status because of 'illegal entry', putting them back in jeopardy. As for deportations from Lebanon, [Amnesty International](#) reported in May 2023 that the Lebanese Armed Forces have recently and summarily deported hundreds of Syrians back to Syria. Deportees indicated that they were not allowed to speak with a lawyer or the UNHCR, and they were not afforded the right to challenge their deportation and argue their case for protection.

THE LACK OF MONITORING OF PRE AND POST-RETURN CONDITIONS IN SYRIA

Very limited pre- and after-return monitoring occurred to ensure the voluntariness, safety and dignity principles were followed. Regardless of the claims from Turkish and Lebanese officials that return to Syria is safe, the UNHCR has an official mandate and responsibility to monitor the situation. However, the return processes of Syrian refugees, including information provision and voluntary return signing procedures observed by the UNHCR remain very limited. Also, more information needs to be provided about what happens to returnees after their return to Syria. Serious concerns about the lack of guaranteed safety have already been raised in some [reports](#) and [media accounts](#), despite the efforts of the UNHCR to advocate for legal, administrative and other measures to address obstacles to return. While the UNHCR also assists close to 400,000 registered returnees in areas such as shelter, protection services, legal aid and civil documentation, distribution of relief items, and restoration of essential services, this leaves out more than a quarter-of-a-million returnees who are not registered.

Since 2021, [international organizations](#), [human rights groups](#) and [research institutions](#) have provided ample evidence about systemic impediments to return, contradicting the principle of safe returns. For example, [The Global Protection Cluster's analysis](#) reveals significant challenges in Northwest Syria and regime-controlled areas, including human rights abuses, gender-based violence, and barriers to basic rights and services, making the region unfit for returns.

The lack of safety as an impediment to return is understandable because the root causes of the conflict remain in place in Syria and no clear-cut conflict resolution process has occurred. The [UNHCR reports](#) evidence of arbitrary detentions, lack of legal status, and restricted access to employment. Returnees face significant risks of violence and persecution, notably in regime-controlled areas. The widespread poverty and lack of essential services exacerbate the challenges returnees face.

Mounting economic deterioration and the collapse of public services, often take years to address adequately and returns add to these humanitarian challenges.

Coerced returns should not be an option for all the reasons stated above. A combination of durable solutions such as local integration in host countries, resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries, while simultaneously easing pressures on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, and supporting the conditions necessary in Syria for voluntary returns in safety and dignity, is therefore essential.

The following recommendations address these objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Listen to refugees

It is critical to recognize that refugees are the primary stakeholder when determining durable solutions. They want to be informed, self-reliant, and actively involved in decisions about their futures. To this end, more structured channels are needed to bring their voices into collaborative efforts with host and resettlement countries, the UNHCR and IOM to ensure that the solutions determined are both durable and responsive to their needs. Syrian diaspora organizations can play an important role as well.

2. Support host governments and communities to facilitate local integration

In protracted refugee situations, when it becomes clear that going home to their country of origin is not an option, most refugees see local integration and eventual naturalized citizenship as their preferred durable solution. The international community can assist host countries to make this a reality by providing development funding to increase the capacity, services and infrastructure necessary to assist both the vulnerable local population of host states and refugees. The financial assistance of the international community should be designed to facilitate the removal of barriers to local integration and to contribute to the self-reliance of refugees

and the local population. For example, long-term investments into integrated education and vocational training programs that prepare participants for secure employment opportunities would be more effective than short-term projects. Positive media, including social media campaigns that emphasize the contributions that refugees make to the local economies, civil society and culture can reduce the public's anti-refugee attitudes.

3. Increase spaces for resettlement in third countries

Resettlement is a vital durable solution for refugees whose protection, safety, or fundamental rights are at risk in their first country of asylum. The EU and other countries (e.g. Canada, the US, Arab Gulf states, Australia and New Zealand) must take concrete steps to reintroduce resettlement for Syrian refugees as a priority. This would require the UNHCR to work with resettlement countries and the now sizable Syrian diaspora communities in those countries, to develop refreshed resettlement programs with government and community support for effective integration.

4. Develop and expand complementary pathways

Third countries should be encouraged to resettle more Syrian refugees from current host countries by developing and expanding complementary pathways. These include family reunification and community sponsorship programs, as well as providing education opportunities for refugee students and work opportunities for refugees who can fill labour shortages in countries of resettlement. Syrian diasporic communities in countries of resettlement should be involved in the development, implementation and expansion of complementary pathways in collaboration with governments, employers, universities, colleges and community organizations to facilitate the selection, entry and supports necessary for the successful integration of refugees. In this way, displaced people's human and social capital can be promoted, supported and utilized to benefit all stakeholders. Some initiatives could begin while refugees are still in host countries, such as occupational training and pre-arrival orientation. Models exist and pilots are in place in a few countries, but they need to be ramped up dramatically in order to have the impact that is necessary.

Examples of Canadian complementary pathway models

- Canada has a private sponsorship model to complement its traditional government sponsorship of refugees for resettlement. In 2018 and 2019, Canada resettled more refugees than any other country, replacing the US in this leading position, largely as a result of private sponsorship. In this pathway, refugees are sponsored by community groups who provide financial and human support to them for one year, resulting in more arrivals, less cost to government, and a lot of community involvement and support which lead to better outcomes. This model, which takes a variety of forms, is being emulated by a number of countries,such as Argentina, Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand and Spain. For the year 2024, the target for privately sponsored refugee admissions to Canada has been set at 27,750, compared to 21,115 government sponsored refugees.

- Canada launched the Economic Mobility Pilot Program (EMPP) in 2018 for refugees who arrive as economic immigrants with jobs waiting for them. Employers work with NGOs and the UNHCR to recruit refugees with the skills the employers need. To date urban and camp-based refugees in the Middle East and Africa with high and intermediate skills have been targeted. For example, refugee healthcare workers have been recruited from camps in Kenya to fill acute labour shortages in nursing homes in a Canadian province, and pre-arrival orientation and training has been provided to them in the camps. As of October 2023, 195 refugees and their family members have arrived in Canada under this program. Although the numbers are small, the survey results of EMPP alumni conducted by the UNHCR shows that the program has promise.

5. Ensure safe, voluntary and dignified returns

Immediate monitoring needs to take place by the UNHCR, IOM and donor countries to ensure that conditions for voluntary and safe returns exist at the pre, during, and post stages in both host countries and in Syria. The EU has significant domestic and foreign policy interests in Syria and the countries of first asylum because any instability in the region would affect Europe directly, including the onward 'irregular migration' of Syrians towards its member states. Therefore the EU should work closely with the UNHCR, the IOM, Türkiye and Lebanon to build capacity and set up tracking mechanisms to ensure that all the parties concerned respect the voluntary nature of return and that the actors involved in pre-return procedures provide the information required for informed decision-making by refugees. The UNHCR should urge host governments to stop coerced returns/deportations to Syria.

Ideally, the terms and conditions of returns should be outlined in a formal, written, multilateral repatriation agreement signed by the host and home country and the UNHCR, which has a mandate in repatriations. The UNHCR is also mandated to raise and allocate funds to support governments' repatriation and reintegration programs and to coordinate NGO assistance, keeping short- and long-term needs in mind. This could include funding to reconstruct public service infrastructure in health, education and work, for example. Planning processes to prepare for refugee returns should be transparent and inclusive, involving government agencies and NGOs.

In the post-return stage, the UNHCR and IOM should monitor the re-integration of repatriated refugees and work with the Syrian government and NGOs to ensure that the terms of the multilateral repatriation agreement are honoured. For the well-being of returnees and the sustainability of returns, returnees need conditions conducive to rebuilding their lives in Syria and to accessing livelihoods and essential services.

6. Open dialogue channels with the Syrian regime

The Syrian government has not yet demonstrated significant improvements in the conditions that would enable a return that provides safety and dignity for the majority of refugees. Nor has the Syrian government yet provided adequate legal guarantees for the returnees. For example, the housing, land and property (HLP) rights of returnees require guarantees. The UNHCR could take an active role in this regard, but due to the continued persecution of the Syrian population, many Syrian diaspora organizations oppose communication with the Syrian regime regarding the return of refugees.

However, to ensure the safety and well-being of those Syrians who have already returned and continue to do so, pragmatic diplomatic dialogue with the Syrian regime is necessary. Given the Syrian regime's longevity and consolidation of power, the international community, in particular the EU and UN organizations, may need to work with the regime instead of continuing its long-term disengagement strategy. Similarly, both Lebanon and Türkiye need to seek improved diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime. Formality and transparency in multilateral and bilateral diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime may help to ensure that pre- and post-return conditions conditions are conducive to the security, safety, and dignity of returnees.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the twelve-year-long protracted Syrian refugee situation on neighbouring host countries has led them to focus on returns to Syria as the preferred "solution" with little regard for the UNHCR's voluntariness and safety principles for repatriation, or for the readiness of the Syrian regime to receive them. This has put the refugees at further risk.

Until the necessary conditions exist in Syria to make voluntary returns both safe and sustainable, the international community must step up to put in place other durable solutions. Implementing the recommendations in this brief will lead not only to more effective durable solutions for Syrian refugees, such as local integration, and resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries, but will also ease the pressure on Türkiye and Lebanon, enhance Syrian refugee self-reliance, and support conditions in Syria for the right to return in safety and dignity.

Suggested Readings

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