

Endless Refuge or Unsafe Homecoming



Refugee Protection
Watch Report 2022
refugeeprotectionwatch.org



**REFUGEE
PROTECTION
WATCH**

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Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) would like to thank all the individuals who took the time to participate in this research, without whose input we would not have been able to complete this report. We look forward to discussing the findings with them.

DISCLAIMER

Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) made all possible efforts to represent only accurate data, crosscheck all the information in this report, and translate all Arabic data obtained during the research phase into English as carefully as possible. This does not rule out the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which the team hereby expresses its regrets.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

After eleven years of revolution and war, Syria remains the world's second largest refugee crisis. Currently, about 6.8 million Syrian refugees are living outside Syria's borders. Syrian refugees make up one-fifth of the global refugee population. Additionally, another 6.9 million people are internally displaced within Syria. More than half of the Syrian population is still fleeing war and persecution.

Lebanon, as one of the countries neighbouring Syria, has been disproportionately affected by the Syrian forced displacement crisis. Lebanon is currently experiencing overlapping economic, health, and political crises, which have overwhelmed the country's limited resources and put a huge strain on people who live there. Meanwhile, humanitarian needs for refugees in host countries are at an all-time high, and conditions for safe and dignified return to Syria are still not in place.

Although the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return to Syria are not met, there has been a growing focus in returns programming across the UN – with the recent adoption of an “Area-Based Return Support” (ABRS) Roadmap – and an increasing pressure on Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return to Syria.

At the same time, harmful practices – such as pushbacks of displaced persons at European borders, forced deportations from host countries, and policies that deprive Syrian refugees of protection – are increasing. At the EU's borders, refugees from Syria, as well as from other countries, are often not welcomed nor treated humanely – in stark opposition to the ‘open border’ attitude adopted for Ukrainian refugees currently fleeing their own war with Russia.

It is within this context that, since 2019, the Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) coalition has been conducting longitudinal research into Syrian refugees' current living conditions, experiences and perceptions of return, and prospects for the future of Syrian refugees inside Syria and Lebanon in order to analyse whether safe, voluntary, dignified, and informed return to Syria is possible. Furthermore, RPW has been assessing the protection risks that returnees to Syria, and refugees in Lebanon, face. As a result, the coalition has advocated on related protection and other human rights issues.

RPW employs face-to-face interviews with returnees in Syria (in Damascus City, Rural Damascus and Homs) and also engages in online conversations with a large group of Syrian refugees and Lebanese from the host communities across Lebanon, leading to both qualitative and quantitative insights. The UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria (UNHCR Protection Thresholds) are used as the main analytical framework through which this research is conducted. RPW aims to assess and clarify respondents' current living conditions, experiences and perceptions of return, and prospects for the future.

This report summarises the findings of different research rounds in Syria and Lebanon that RPW conducted in the past 12 months. The Key findings are as follows:

- » A mere **2%** of Syrian respondents in Lebanon answered affirmatively when asked, in September 2022, whether they **plan to return to Syria** in the next 12 months.
- » **69%** of Syrian respondents in Lebanon reported in September 2022 that they are **planning to leave Lebanon, with the majority not having a clear plan**, in sharp contrast to the small number of Syrians who plan to return from Lebanon to Syria. The trend of Syrian refugees wanting to leave Lebanon for a third country has risen steadily, as the percentage grew from 27% in September 2020, to 47% in April 2021, and 69% in April 2022.
- » **49%** of Syrian respondents in Lebanon indicated they have **no access to reliable** information on the situation in Syria.
- » **61% of Syrian respondents in Lebanon reported to believe that tensions are rising** between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities over the past six months. **48% of Lebanese respondents also confirmed this.**
- » **Only 30%** of returnee respondents (people who already returned to Syria) answered affirmatively when asked **whether they would recommend someone else to return to Syria.**
- » Moreover, only around half of all returnee respondents reported that they would stay in Syria in the long-term, with the other half being unsure or wanting to look for other future prospects of leaving.
- » **30%** of returnee respondents answered affirmatively when asked if they knew of **people who had returned to Syria and then re-returned to Lebanon.**
- » **40%** of returnee respondents in Syria are concerned that either themselves or a relative or friend remain **at risk of forced conscription** into the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), despite having undergone a so-called "security clearance" process before returning.
- » With regards to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights in Syria, **35%** of returnee respondents stated in May- June 2022 that they **weren't able to return back to their own neighbourhood or house.**
- » **72%** of all returnee respondents reported that they were **not followed up by UNHCR** after their return to Syria.

The total lack of durable solutions has led an increasing number of Syrians to re-return from Syria to Lebanon, or to try to reach Europe irregularly through land and sea routes. In recent months displaced Syrians have increasingly tried to flee Syria and its neighbouring countries, with a variety of new irregular migration routes forming from the region towards Europe.

More urgent and ambitious action is therefore required to address the deteriorating situation for Syria's displaced people. It is essential that all actors recognise the continuing risks and pressures displaced Syrians face and, therefore, take ambitious steps – in close partnership

with local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs) – to ensure the implementation of a rights-based approach towards the Syrian forced displacement crisis.

As such, RPW issues the following recommendations to donors (including the EU and EU member states), the Government of Lebanon, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):

TO DONORS (INCLUDING THE EU AND EU MEMBER STATES)

General

- » Take an active leadership role – within national, European and international fora – in the development and implementation of a comprehensive and more ambitious strategy and response to the Syrian forced displacement crisis, which is based on the UNHCR framework of durable solutions.

Return policies

- » Re-confirm the position that Syria is not a safe destination of return, and that any (future) returns must be safe, voluntary, informed and dignified. In line with this position, the EU and its member states should not return people to Syria, and must immediately end policies and practices that remove refugee status or temporary protection status from Syria's displaced; halt the shift of national policies towards depriving certain categories of refugees from Syria of their protected status, or reverse this where they have already done so. This includes sending asylum seekers to third countries under bilateral asylum agreements (e.g. agreements with Rwanda on enhanced cooperation on asylum and migration).
- » Call for the establishment of an independent multi-stakeholder mechanism, with an international mandate, to monitor the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return to Syria (as outlined in the 2018 UNHCR "Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria").
- » Continue to use the 2018 UNHCR's "Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria," as issued by the UN in February 2018, as the basis and cornerstone for European and UN discussions on policies regarding refugees from Syria.
- » Urge UNHCR and other UN agencies to halt programmes that could incentivise premature and unsafe returns and that could contribute to processes of demographic engineering, such as the recently announced "Area-Based Return Support" (ABRS) Roadmap.

Protection space in Lebanon

- » In order to maintain and preserve the protection space for Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, start discussions with the Government of Lebanon aimed at the adoption of a joint "EU-Lebanon Durable Solutions Statement". Such negotiations should be based on the notion that once tangible progress has been achieved in the realization of a moratorium on summary deportations, the number of temporary legal residencies and the number of

work permits for displaced Syrians residing in Lebanon, the EU will mobilize additional funding to support vulnerable Lebanese host communities, resettle additional numbers of Syrian refugees, and launch an active discussion on ways to enhance Lebanon's export potential. In order to determine whether sufficient progress would indeed have been realized, the EU should create a Tracking Mechanism to monitor the number of summary deportations, issuance of temporary legal residencies and the number of work permits granted to displaced Syrians in Lebanon.

- » Request UNHCR to structurally document and monitor cases of forced deportation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in close cooperation and coordination with local rights groups, while also providing support to documentation efforts of such groups. In addition, step up efforts to provide legal aid to people at risk of forced return (including by providing financial support to legal aid programs by local CSOs), and intervene with local authorities to halt such practices.
- » Take all necessary measures to ensure that a diverse set of local CSOs is structurally included in, and have greater power in, discussions and decision making about refugee policies, including in the UN Durable Solutions Working Groups at regional and national levels. In this regard, also develop a regular dialogue track between local CSOs, European policy makers and other relevant stakeholders, that is regularly convened in between the annual Brussels Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region, and which takes stock of the implementation of policy and financial commitments outlined in the co-chairs statement of the Conference.
- » Actively encourage UNHCR Lebanon to review and improve its "Accountability to Affected Populations" (AAP) strategy and plan of action, in order to ensure that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are allowed to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of all UNHCR Lebanon's interventions, and are receiving communications on essential information in a transparent and two-way manner.¹ As part of such AAP efforts, actively encourage UNHCR to step up efforts to engage in meaningful partnerships with Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs).

¹ See in this regard also an upcoming RPW study, which will be published in the first quarter of 2023.

Funding policies

- » In light of the rapidly deteriorating socio-economic crisis in Lebanon, increase donor funding. While doing so, commit to accelerate the provision of predictable, flexible and multi-annual humanitarian, development and peacebuilding funding, taking into account the 2019 OECD DAC recommendation regarding the “triple nexus”, to refugees from Syria and host communities, through dedicated funding mechanisms. In this regard, consider providing financial support to locally-led initiatives that put the triple nexus logic in practice.²
- » Underline the importance of continuing to work with, and provide financial and technical support to, independent local civil society organisations working in Syria and neighbouring host countries. Explicitly commit to accelerate aid localisation efforts and commitments, by pledging more resources to humanitarian, development, human rights, and peacebuilding projects and programmes by local civil society organisations and Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs). As part of such localisation efforts, provide financial support to RLO initiatives, such as the Resourcing Refugees Leadership Initiative (RRLI) and its RLO-to-RLO fund.³
- » Abstain from shifting donor resources to programmes that could incentivise premature and unsafe returns and that could contribute to processes of demographic engineering, such as the recently announced “Area-Based Return Support” (ABRS) Roadmap.
- » Make more resources available for locally-led and locally-owned research efforts that document protection concerns in areas of return and in host countries.
- » Ensure that humanitarian organisations in Lebanon receive the full value of donor funding, so that they can carry out humanitarian efforts with the greatest reach possible. Ensure humanitarian organisations are able to access dollars or other foreign currency, as transferred by the donor.

² Within the course of an ongoing five-year programme (2022-2026) that is funded by the Belgian government, RPW member Alef is coordinating a new “Triple Nexus Platform” (TNP) that was established within the existing PASC Network. This TNP will serve as a structural platform for local CSOs working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon to conduct joint analysis; share reflections, lessons learnt and best practices; to organize regular exchanges and workshops with external experts, peers in other host countries and donor representatives; and to develop joint advocacy briefings with practical recommendations that can feed into international policy discussions around the triple nexus between humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding. Moreover, a small mechanism will also be included to fund two rounds of triple nexus pilot projects by TNP members, while TNP members will be able to make use of a digital platform to conduct regular nexus-specific digital surveys among Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon. The data gathered through these surveys will inform the design of pilot projects, while its digital platform will also be used to regularly gather feedback throughout the implementation phase, which can be further discussed with rights holders during workshops.

³ The “Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative” is a RLO coalition whose mission it is to resource RLOs to uplift communities and combat systemic exclusion within the refugee response sector. Already in its first year of operation (2021), RRLI generated concrete evidence that 1) RLOs are offering holistic programs that respond to the realities of refugees; 2) RLOs are unlocking long-term solutions for their communities; 3) RLOs are cost-effective in reaching large numbers of community members; and 4) RLOs create accessible programming and reach those with intersectional experiences of marginalization. See https://www.refugeeslead.org/_files/ugd/3caee8_0acfd563d4e24f34a1a1fdbba1251c542.pdf, p. 14, and www.refugeeslead.org/evidence

Resettlement to third countries

- » Increase resettlement numbers and other safe and legal routes to Europe for refugees from Syria; commit to improved responsibility-sharing between member states; and uphold the right to apply for asylum. To this end, immediately restart any asylum and resettlement procedures that have been halted due to COVID-19.

Respect for non-refoulement at the EU's borders

- » Fully respect the principle of non-refoulement, and immediately put an end to all practices of push backs of Syrians who exercise their right to apply for asylum, including push backs on all Mediterranean Sea routes, and on land routes to Europe. Increase search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean and provide predictable ports of safety to allow swift disembarkation of people rescued at sea.
- » Support the creation of an independent process to increase transparency and accountability, and monitor effective access to EU asylum procedures, respect for fundamental rights and respect for the principle of non-refoulement at the EU's borders; and ensure that any such process is truly independent from national authorities, and well-resourced. In case of violations, the European Commission must be able to take effective measures to ensure accountability for rights violations.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON

- » Uphold the right to asylum for refugees from Syria, and respect the principle of non-refoulement. Commit to a moratorium on summary deportations of displaced Syrians. In the event of any deportation procedures, ensure asylum seekers have access to full, independent, and impartial judicial case review as required by Lebanese law.
- » Repeal the 2019 decision to start deportations of Syrian refugees who have entered Lebanon "illegally" after 14 April 2019. Asylum cases must be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis, ensuring respect for the principle of non-refoulement.
- » Allow UNHCR to resume the registration of Syrian refugees.
- » Facilitate access to legal residency for refugees from Syria in Lebanon, and increase the number of residence permits available which include the right to work. Ensure that both refugees and immigration officials in Lebanon have increased clarity and awareness of the documents required to obtain legal residence. Reduce the financial and documentation burdens to obtaining legal residency, and increase the length of the residency permits.
- » Ensure full respect for Lebanon's responsibilities under the Convention against Torture (CAT), including article 3 of the Convention.

TO UNHCR

- » Re-commit to use the Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria, as issued in February 2018, as the basis and cornerstone for UNHCR policies regarding refugees from Syria. Ensure that the 2018 version of the Protection Thresholds is systematically included in the ongoing review of UNHCR's "Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria" (ROF).
- » Take an active role in the establishment of an independent multi-stakeholder mechanism, with an international mandate, to monitor the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return to Syria (as outlined in the 2018 UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria). Ensure that the updated ROF includes a clear commitment to start, in the short term, a work stream to identify concrete options and modalities for such a monitoring mechanism.
- » Halt the implementation of programmes that could incentivise premature and unsafe returns and that could contribute to processes of demographic engineering, such as the recently announced "Area-Based Return Support" (ABRS) Roadmap. At all times, ensure that any return assistance programming inside Syria does not come at the expense of humanitarian and development programming in neighbouring countries, recognising that the large majority of refugees will stay in the medium to long term if the political process following UN resolution 2254 remains stalled.
- » When engaging in General Security Office (GSO)-organised return convoys:
 - Demand from the GSO that the lists of individuals are shared well in advance, instead of the current 24-48 hours timespan, in order to allow for a proper outreach to individuals on such lists.
 - When contacting individuals on GSO-compiled lists, provide proactive counselling on protection issues and security risks inside Syria, and make explicitly clear that UNHCR does not consider conditions inside Syria conducive for safe, voluntary and dignified return. Explicitly make clear to individuals on GSO-compiled lists that receiving a security clearance from Syrian intelligence should not be considered as a safety guarantee.
 - Proactively monitor the protection situation of individuals who drop out of the return process (after having initially signed up for GSO-facilitated return and having received a security clearance from Syrian authorities), as this category of people might be at an enhanced risk of arrest, detention and forced deportation by Lebanese authorities.
 - Proactively monitor the post-return situation of returnees, and immediately open an investigation when reports emerged of people being arrested after their return to Syria. In case such security incidents occur, make sure to disseminate this information in counselling efforts to other individuals who are on GSO-compiled lists for future return convoys.

- » Start to structurally monitor and report on cases of forced deportation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in close cooperation and coordination with local CSOs and rights groups. In addition, step up efforts to provide legal aid to people at risk of deportation (including by providing financial support to legal aid programs by local CSOs), and intervene with local authorities to halt such deportations.
- » In order to promote the voluntary and informed character of any individual return decision, increase efforts to ensure that refugees from Syria who consider returning have sufficient access to objective, reliable and up-to-date information about current conditions in their area of return in Syria, including protection risks and information gaps about such risks. Such information could be offered during interviews, on a dedicated website that contains detailed information regarding the conditions for return, and through UNHCR Outreach Volunteers. When doing so, communicate clearly and unambiguously the position (as explicitly articulated in UNHCR's 2018 Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy) that "present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity."⁴
- » Ensure that a diverse set of local CSOs and RLOs is structurally included, and have greater power, in discussions and decision making about refugee policies, including in the UN's Durable Solutions Working Groups at regional and national level.
- » Make resources available for Syrian-led and Syrian-owned research efforts, which document protection concerns in areas of return, and with regard to protection in host countries.
- » Review and improve UNHCR Lebanon's "Accountability to Affected Populations" (AAP) strategy and plan of action, in order to ensure that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are allowed to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of all UNHCR Lebanon's interventions, and are receiving communications on essential information in a transparent and two-way manner.
- » Provide clarity on how UNHCR resettlement processes are carried out to both refugees and CSOs, and encourage third states to increase resettlement numbers, and other safe and formal routes for refugees from Syria.

TO THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION OF INQUIRY FOR THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

- » Start publishing regular stand-alone reports on the human rights situation of Syrian refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) returnees, while also continuing to pay strong attention to conditions for return in regular Commission of Inquiry reports.

TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

- » Start publishing regular reports on human rights violations and abuses against Syrian refugee and IDP returnees, and recommend, on the basis of these assessments, the appropriate follow-up for the UN system to consider.

⁴ See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63223>, p 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

The RPW coalition conducts research and advocacy on protection issues and living conditions for Syrians and host communities in Lebanon, and on the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return to Syria.

The coalition was formed in 2019 by ALEF – Act for Human Rights, Basmeh and Zeitooneh, PAX, Upinion, and 11.11.11. RPW utilises the knowledge and strengths of Lebanese, Syrian and European organisations, each working in the human rights, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian fields. The coalition’s research and reports aim to tackle the information gap that currently exists on protection and return dynamics in the context of the Syrian forced displacement crisis. RPW uses ongoing conversations with respondents to provide detailed, long-term and reliable information. The coalition specifically seeks to enhance clarity on how Syrian refugees (including Palestinian Syrians) and host communities themselves assess the protection situation and living conditions in Lebanon, the motivations and processes behind individual decision-making processes, and the reality of experiences on return to Syria.

RPW’s main analytical framework for research is the “Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria” (UNHCR Protection Thresholds), which were published by the UNHCR in February 2018.⁵ The UNHCR Protection Thresholds – the importance of which have been repeatedly reiterated during the Brussels Conferences on the Future of Syria and the Region⁶ – are the internationally accepted standard to assess whether conditions for a safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return of Syrian refugees to Syria are met.

As such, using the Protection Thresholds as guiding principles, RPW aims to provide answers regarding the following research questions:

- » What are the current realities of return for Syrian returnees from Lebanon, and for Syrian refugees in Lebanon?
- » To what extent can current refugee returns from Lebanon be considered safe, voluntary, informed and dignified?
- » What are the priority needs and concerns of Syrian refugee returnees from Lebanon?
- » To what extent are the UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria being met within Syria, and what are the main gaps experienced by refugee returnees?

⁵ See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63223>

⁶ See https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56061/20220511_chair_statement_v5.pdf, p 5.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to monitor changes in the refugee return context, RPW has adopted a longitudinal research approach (i.e. monitoring the same variables over a longer period of time), combining face-to-face interviews with Syrian returnees in Homs, Rural Damascus, and Damascus City) and online conversations (surveys) targeting over six hundred Syrian and Lebanese people across all governorates in Lebanon, leading to the generation of both quantitative and qualitative insights. Access and security considerations within GoS-held areas have limited the ability to conduct free and unhindered research.

This research strategy aims to analyse **the extent to which key UNHCR Protection Thresholds are being met**. Furthermore, this research provides additional insights on refugee protection and the particular impact of recent developments, with a specific focus on the protection and rights concerns for Syrians, including Palestinian-Syrians, inside Syria and Lebanon. As part of a longitudinal research project, this current report builds on previous cycles of research conducted within Syria and across Lebanon between 2019 and 2021, as reported in RPW's October 2020 and November 2021 reports.⁷

2.1 Monitoring the situation of refugee returnees inside Syria

As with previous rounds of research in Syria that were conducted in 2019-2021, RPW aimed to capture new refugee returnees' experiences, attitudes, current living conditions and perspectives on their future, by conducting face-to-face interviews with refugee returnees currently residing in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus in the past 12 months. All interviews were held in colloquial Arabic. Interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their answers, and that they could withdraw at any time if they would like not to answer a question.

 **When mentioning the term “returnee respondents”, we refer to people who have returned within the past 6-12 months to the target areas and who have not been interviewed before.**

In following with the longitudinal setup of our research, then the second round of the year (in this case, round 7), is always done with people who had expressed that they would be willing to be followed up with (in this case, from the first round of 2022, round 6), and then rounding up the sample in round 7 with new returnees.

⁷ See <http://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/RPW-REPORT-FINAL-20211117.pdf> and <https://paxforpeace.nl/media/download/trapped-in-between-lebanon-and-syria.pdf>

2.2 Continuous dialogue with Syrian and Lebanese respondents in Lebanon

Since 2020, Upinion has engaged with a community of Syrian and Lebanese individuals residing in Lebanon, providing RPW with interesting insights into the priorities and needs of these groups. The respondents themselves also benefited from the exchange by receiving information on relevant services and hotlines in their area, policy updates, and awareness messages. The respondents joined the panel by clicking on targeted advertisements on Facebook, after which they received an explanation of the project to which they needed to consent, and were taken to a private chat mode outside the reach of Facebook, so that their privacy was ensured.

Thus far, 14 conversations have been held since February 2020 with the same group of respondents, allowing for the detection of patterns over time. Although the **findings presented in this report mainly focus on the most recent conversation in September 2022**, data from previous online conversations with the panel, as well as conversations with other communities in Lebanon⁸ is also referred to throughout the report to compare and draw similarities from. It must be emphasized that comparisons between RPW's conversations and data collected from other online conversations only allow for careful interpretation, since the panel's respondents and questions asked are not identical.

The most recent Upinion conversation (held between 9 and 30 September 2022) included **623 respondents**, of whom 582 respondents (210 Lebanese, 367 Syrians⁹) completed the entire conversation.

BOX 1: Continuous dialogue with Syrian and Lebanese individuals residing in Lebanon

Upinion has developed an online research platform that allows it to securely stay in touch with people in crisis and displacement-affected countries. The in-house developed platform makes it possible to have real-time conversations¹⁰ with communities in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, which are also widely used in Lebanon.

By making use of this methodology, Upinion, together with RPW partners, has been able to create a digital panel consisting of individuals from Syria and Lebanese host communities with whom they can frequently engage. While recruitment happens through social media, the actual conversations take place in a secure environment, beyond Facebook's reach. Through regular online conversations, the panel can self-report issues and, subsequently, insights can be iteratively gathered on the needs and concerns of both Syrian refugees/migrants and local residents in Lebanon.

⁸ These consists of a conversation with Upinion's CSO panel - including of 34 CSOs operating in Lebanon - which was consulted in August 2022, as well as conversations done in collaboration with the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (IOB), between July 2021 and January 2022.

⁹ The nationalities of the remaining five respondents are not indicated/indicated to be other than solely Lebanese or Syrian.

¹⁰ A conversation refers to an information exchange, in survey style, between Upinion and a panel of respondents.

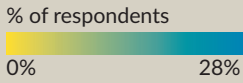
Respondents necessitate access to the internet and a Facebook account to join the online panel. Important to note is that this excludes people who cannot read and write, or who do not have access to the internet or social media. It must be further emphasised that these online conversations do not allow for a deep dive into issues that might be considered highly sensitive or traumatising by respondents due to the online nature of the engagement and the impossibility to provide (face-to-face) aftercare. However, Upinion's conversations are always an information exchange, and hence respondents receive information about relevant (NGO) services and hotlines in their area, awareness messages, data findings, and other potentially useful information after finishing a conversation.

Upinion has the ISO/IEC 27001 Certification, which is the international best practice standard for Information Security Management Systems (ISMSs), and follows GDPR regulations.

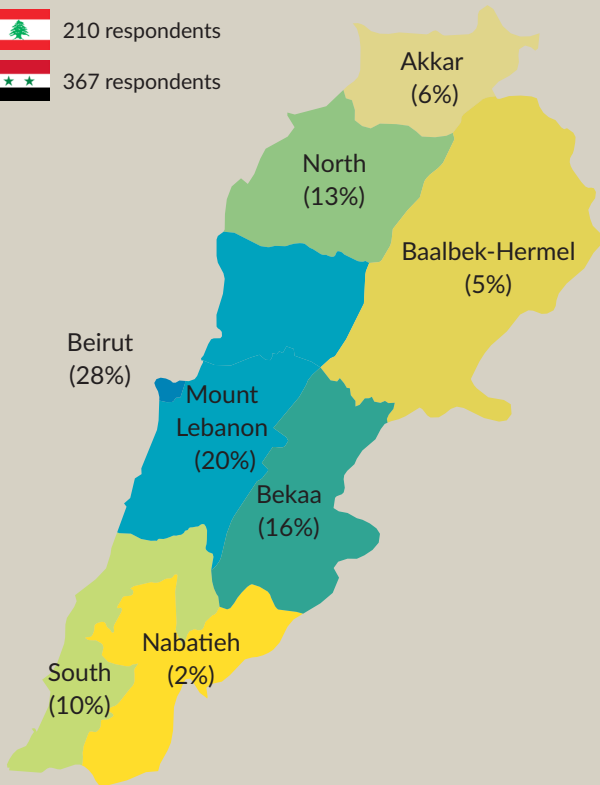


Lebanon

Online conversations
(see also box 1)



210 respondents
 367 respondents



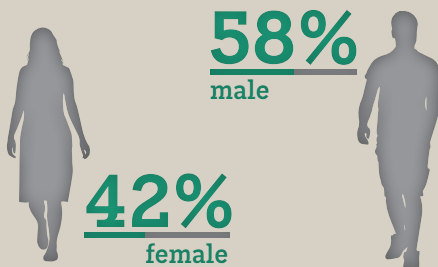
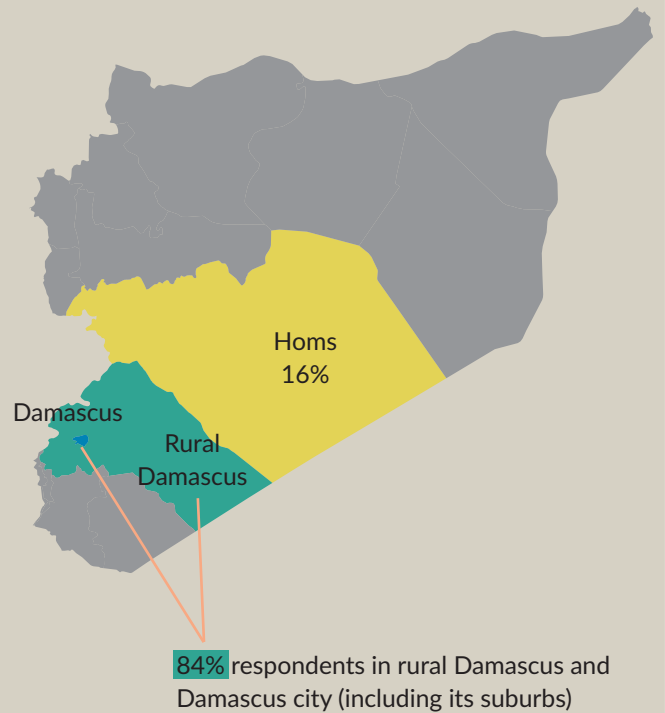
Syria



Face-to-face interviews

Round 6 (May-June 2022)
135 Respondents

Round 7 (Sep-Oct 2022)
122 Respondents,
99 follow up from Round 6



42
median age

No large differences between
Syrian and Lebanese respondents.

There is a **median range for the age** which is 42
for all areas in the two rounds conducted this year.

3. SETTING THE SCENE

3.1 Displacement facts & figures

Eleven years into a revolution that evolved into a war, Syria remains the world's second largest refugee crisis. Currently, about 6.8 million Syrian refugees are living outside Syria's borders. Syrian refugees make up one-fifth of the global refugee population. Additionally, another 6.9 million people are internally displaced within Syria. More than half of the Syrian population is still fleeing war and persecution.¹¹ According to UNHCR data, as of 31 August 2022 831,053 Syrian refugees are registered in Lebanon.¹² In reality, however, the number of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon is estimated at 1.5 million.¹³

Meanwhile, **humanitarian needs in host countries remain at an all-time high**. The United Nations requested a record amount of 10.5 billion USD for 2022, of which only 41 percent has been covered by pledges delivered to the recent Brussels VI Syria Conference (May 2022). 14.6 million Syrians living in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.2 million persons compared to 2021. With regards to the needs in the host countries, the UN has stated that "host countries face enormous pressures at a level not seen since the onset of the crisis."¹⁴

Faced with a total lack of "durable solutions" (safe, voluntary and dignified return; protection and local integration in the region; and resettlement or other legal pathways to third countries), displaced Syrians have **increasingly tried to flee Syria and its neighbouring countries**, with a variety of **new irregular migration routes forming from the region towards Europe**.¹⁵ In the first six months of 2022, the EU border agency Frontex recorded 114,720 "irregular entries" at Europe's borders, an 84 percent increase compared to the first six months of 2021. The number of "irregular entries" via the "Western Balkan route" increased by 191 percent (mainly Syrians and Afghans), while on the "Eastern Mediterranean route" (via Cyprus and Turkey, mainly Syrians, Nigerians and Congolese) there was a 125 percent increase.¹⁶

Yet, despite the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian and protection situation in neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon, the **number of Syrians choosing to return to Syria has remained very low**. According to UNHCR data, between 2016 and 15 October 2022, 344,133 Syrian refugees returned in a 'spontaneous' way to Syria. This includes 28,549 Syrians in 2016,

11 See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/6/62a9d2b04/unhcr-global-displacement-hits-record-capping-decade-long-rising-trend.html>

12 See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/95689>

13 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/unhcr-lebanon-fact-sheet-september-2022>

14 See https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RSO_8thMay2022.pdf, p 3.

15 For example between Lebanon and Belarus; Lebanon and Cyprus; Lebanon - Libya - Italy; Lebanon - Northern Iraq - Turkey - Greece; or Lebanon - Idlib (Syria) - Turkey - Greece See <https://www.achrighs.org/en/2021/12/16/12479/>

16 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/frontex-eu-external-borders-june-western-balkan-route-most-active>

50,705 Syrians in 2017, 55,049 in 2018, 94,971 Syrians in 2019, 38,235 Syrians in 2020, 35,680 Syrians in 2021, and 41,010 Syrians in 2022.¹⁷ In other words: in the past 3 years, less than 1% of the 5.7 million Syrian refugees living in host countries have returned spontaneously every year to Syria. According to UNHCR's most recent return intention survey (conducted in June 2022), a mere 1.7% of displaced Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months.¹⁸

According to the draft Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) of 2022-2023, levels of return to Syria are also expected to remain relatively low. The plan states that "continued low levels of IDP returns (250,000 IDP returnees) are expected in 2022", with most returns expected in the following Governorates/Districts: Idlib, Aleppo, Dar'f'a (for the biggest part returns following localised and temporary displacements due to conflict) and to a lesser extent in Deir- ez-Zor, Hama, Homs and Rural Damascus. Furthermore, the draft HRP states that "refugee returns are expected to remain low".¹⁹ The UN also estimates that

*"up to 700,000 people may be newly displaced in 2022, with particularly high numbers projected in the following Governorates/Districts: Idlib, Aleppo, Dar'a, and to a lesser extent in Al-Hasakeh and As-Sweida."*²⁰

Finally, it should be emphasized that the Syrian forced displacement crisis is having a **particular impact on women and girls**. Forcibly displaced Syrian women and girls have been subjected to many rights violations before their displacement, and continue to live in challenging and abusive situations. They are often suffering from trauma and lacking documentation, which constrains movement and access to basic services. Moreover, many refugee women lack documents that limit their ability to generate an income, forcing them to adopt dangerous coping mechanisms. In addition, the lack of documentation puts women at risk of being detained or deported and makes them vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Most forcibly displaced women have also lost the social networks, and lack the support and tools to advocate for their rights at local and international level.²¹

17 See https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions (data as of 31 August 2022)

18 See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/93760>.

19 The draft HRP also says that "for planning purposes an estimated figure of up to 250,000 returns in 2022 will be considered." It is however unclear on which specific numbers this estimate is based, given that it far exceeds the annual return numbers since 2016. Even if one would assume that the 2.4 percent of the Syrians surveyed in UNHCR's 2021 intentions survey (covering Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt) would indeed return in the next 12 months, that would only result in the return of approximately 45.900 people.

20 Draft UN Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023, p 30.

21 <https://women-now.org/report/Position-paper-on-Perspectives-of-Forced-Displaced-Syrian-Women-on-their-Conditions,Rights,and-Demands.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1AR103sSKqALpOLSGBL4INM3dIDQytTqDpZqRK8KFCCc8d4kdiYr1x1IY>

3.2 UNHCR's Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy (2018)

The UNHCR's overall approach towards Syrian refugees is anchored in a **Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy** (CPSS) for the region, issued in February 2018, which is still in place.²²

Within the CPSS, UNHCR emphasised that “present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity”. The CPSS stated that UNHCR's role in facilitating return movements in “phase 1” (the current, ongoing phase according to UNHCR as of December 2022) would be limited to “planning, monitoring, counselling, advocacy, and ongoing analysis of obstacles to and conditions necessary for return, and identifying the necessary actions to address them. Self-organised returnees are assisted through ongoing humanitarian programmes.” The 2018 version of the CPSS further stated that “UNHCR will not provide individual return packages for spontaneous refugee returnees during this phase.”²³ UNHCR added, at the same time, that in phase 1 of the plan it could “exceptionally facilitate the return of individuals or small groups (in terms of providing limited assistance), on a case-by-case basis where refugees express a strong desire to return, UNHCR is assured of the voluntary character, and refugees are well-informed, even to areas where conditions may not yet be conducive for return.”²⁴

Importantly, in both the 2018 version of the CPSS and the “Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria” (ROF, issued in September 2019)²⁵, UNHCR outlined **three criteria that need to be met inside Syria before UNHCR could move from “phase 1” to “phase 2” returns programming**, the phase in which UNHCR could start ‘facilitating’ large-scale voluntary return. Those criteria are as follows:

- » Legal frameworks, guaranteeing rights of returnees and unhindered access to them as well as return areas, must be in place.
- » There is clear evidence that a list of 22 “protection thresholds” are being met in the place of return.
- » Refugees actively request support from UNHCR to return, “in large numbers”.

In terms of **monitoring of returns**, the 2018 CPSS stated explicitly that “planning should be based on an objective assessment of conditions in return areas”, **and that UNHCR has the “responsibility” to provide “up-to-date and objective information to refugees and the international community on conditions in these areas, including determining whether conditions meet protection thresholds.”**²⁶ In this regard, it is also important to keep in mind that UNHCR's Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, which sets global guidance and defines UNHCR's role in return activities, states that “all refugees who repatriate can benefit from UNHCR's role in returnee monitoring. This includes not only returnees who have repatriated in the framework of bilateral, tripartite or other repatriation agreements which include

²² See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-protection-and-solutions-strategy-protection-thresholds>

²³ See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>, p 2, p 10.

²⁴ See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>, p 10.

²⁵ See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71524>

²⁶ See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>, p 3, p 4.

a formal monitoring role for UNHCR, but also returnees whose repatriation is facilitated in the absence of such agreement, as well as those who return on their own without UNHCR's direct involvement.”²⁷

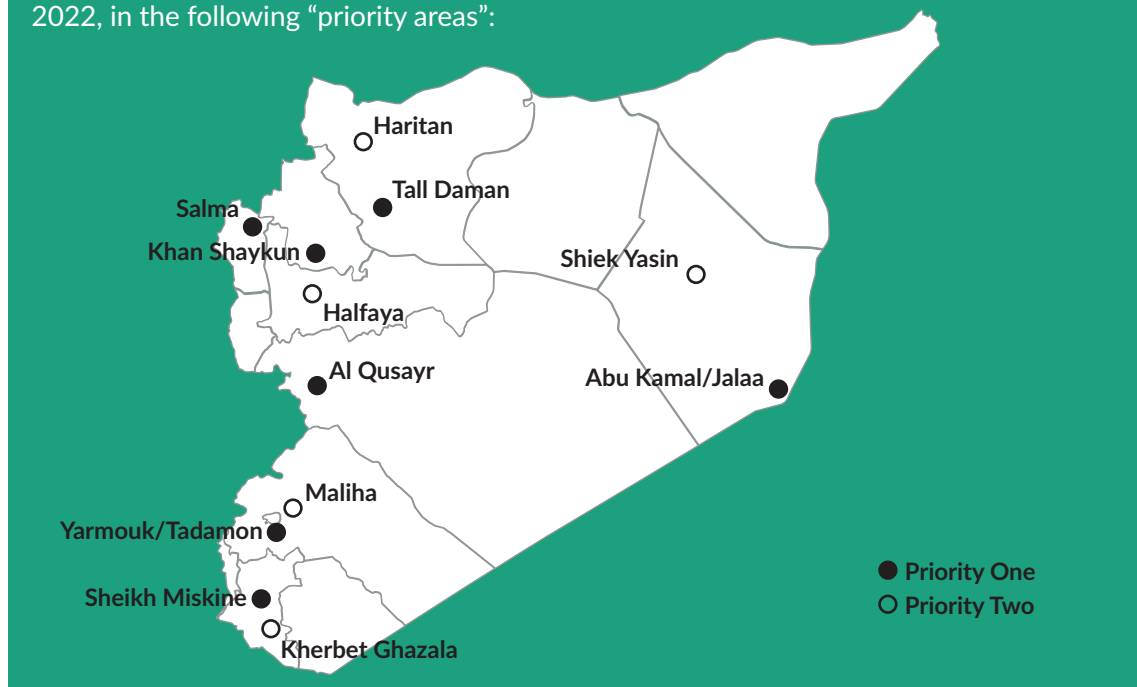
3.3 Shifting UN policies on return

Worryingly, UN discussions on return programming have significantly intensified in recent months, despite the fact that refugee return numbers (both actual returns, intentions to return and return predictions) continue to be very low, and that UNHCR is not structurally monitoring its own protection thresholds.

Currently two main review processes on UN return policies are ongoing: a Damascus-based discussion on “Area-Based Return Support” (ABRS), and a review of UNHCR’s “Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria” (ROF). Meanwhile, UNHCR’s 2018 “Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy” (CPSS) is still in place. Both the ABRS approach and the reviewed ROF risk to undermine and contradict key elements and principles outlined in this CPSS, and further risk to result in a gradual shift towards de facto “phase 2” UNHCR return programming – at a time when conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return are clearly not in place in Syria. In addition, UNHCR says it is unable to conduct regular monitoring against their own Protection Thresholds or protection monitoring of returnees. As such, the circumstances in which to begin undertaking large-scale returns programming do not yet exist.

BOX 2: Area-Based Return Support (ABRS) Roadmap

In April 2022, UNHCR Syria and UNDP Syria organised a two-day workshop in Damascus, where an “Area-Based Return Support” Roadmap was validated. According to this Roadmap UN agencies will start implementation of a range of ABRS pilot projects, before the end of 2022, in the following “priority areas”:



²⁷ See <https://www.unhcr.org/3bfe68d32.pdf>

The list of locations and the ARBS approach, in general, raise many questions. It appears that the roadmap strategy will partially draw on work and resources from agencies' core funds, surging an area-based approach that doesn't necessitate a discussion with donors about the broad approach and rationale. The Roadmap indeed acknowledges that "for some donors, red lines may clash with ABRS objectives and modalities."²⁸ Moreover, the Roadmap agreed on during the April 2022 workshop seems to be giving the Government of Syria (the same government that is responsible for the displacement of millions of Syrians) a central role to dictate how return assistance should be implemented. According to the ABRS Roadmap, ABRS "requires the buy-in and support of national authorities from the start (...) ABRS plans should be owned by all stakeholders, including national authorities who may have responsibilities in implementing plan priorities."²⁹

The increased focus on the ABRS was also featured in the draft UN HRP 2022-2023 and the new UN Strategic Framework for 2022-2024:

- » In the draft UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) 2022-2023 it is stated that "the Area-Based Return Support (ABRS) approach, developed in the context of the Syria Return and Reintegration Working Group (RRWG), foresees the design and implementation of "packages" of prioritized and sequenced, complementary interventions in selected return areas". The document also stated that such ABRS will be provided to "both refugee returnees and IDP returnees", in "high and potential return areas."³⁰

The draft HRP further stated that "within the framework of the HRP, and in cooperation with the Government of Syria and other relevant actors, response for returnees (both refugee returnees and IDP returnees) in Syria will focus on addressing the immediate protection and assistance needs of returnees and their communities, while fostering early recovery, resilience, and social cohesion in order to ensure the sustainability of return and reintegration at the community level. Activities will also continue to focus on advocacy and interventions to address actual and perceived barriers to return, including through the distribution of relief items to address immediate needs, the implementation of shelter and infrastructure projects, including the rehabilitation of housing as well as health, education and WASH facilities to ensure access to basic rights, the rehabilitation of civil registries and cadastral offices to support access to civil registration and documentation, including housing, land and property documents and rights, the rehabilitation of economic facilities and implementation of livelihoods projects to enhance food security and self-reliance, and the delivery of community-based protection services, including child protection, GBV and MHPSS as well as legal aid, to enhance recovery in particular of vulnerable groups."³¹ **Note that this closely resembles, or even goes beyond, the description of "phase 2" activities outlined in UNHCR's 2018 Comprehensive Protection and Solution Strategy:** "initial reintegration activities, focusing on specific areas, including shelter, social infrastructure, multipurpose cash, civil documentation and protection services – including legal counselling, support to persons with specific needs, livelihoods support and community mobilization."³²

28 "Area-Based Return Support (ABRS) Co-Design Workshop. Summary report for the attention of the Return and Reintegration Working Group", p 4.

29 "Area-Based Return Support (ABRS) Co-Design Workshop. Summary report for the attention of the Return and Reintegration Working Group", p 3.

30 Draft UN Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023, p 31.

31 Draft UN Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023, p 31.

32 See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>, p 13.

- » Although the draft HRP states that ABRS interventions “will be designed and implemented in a context and conflict-sensitive manner, with due consideration to do no harm”, and that ABRS “should avoid creating pull factors for premature or involuntary returns”, it offers no details on how such safeguards will be put in place.³³
- » The new **UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024** includes a separate programme pillar (III) on “enabling environment for a resilient return.” The framework mentions several times that

“working on enabling conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons is among the stated priorities of the future plans of the Syrian government.”³⁴

It emphasises that outcomes under pillar III will use an “inclusive area-based approach”, which will “serve to enhance the resilience of internally displaced people, Syrian refugees who have exercised their right to return voluntarily, returning Palestinian refugees and that of their communities.”³⁵ The Strategic Framework does not refer to the existence of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds, or any effort/intention to start monitoring conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return (either in specific areas of high return, or across the whole of Syria).

The ongoing shift towards ABRS presents **a number of important risks and challenges:**

- » If implemented, the consolidation of any such ABRS Roadmap would be a new step in the **gradual shift towards de facto “phase 2” return programming**, which already started in 2019. Given that none of the three UNHCR criteria to formally shift from phase 1 to phase 2 (legal frameworks, guarantees and unhindered access to returnees; sufficient progress in meeting the UNHCR Protection Thresholds; refugees “actively” requesting UNHCR support to UNHCR “in large numbers”) have been met, such development would undermine, and contradict, key elements and principles outlined in UNHCR’s own Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy.
- » Moreover, once consolidated as a formal policy, it is not hard to imagine how such ABRS Roadmap will be (further) gradually expanded in the coming months/years, with the gradual addition of new “areas of high/potential return”, a gradually increased focus on refugee returnees, and a further expansion of specific return assistance activities. As such, the international community could find itself, in one or two years’ time, in a reality where formally speaking UNHCR still considers itself to be in “phase 1”, but where in reality it would be extremely hard to make a meaningful difference between the then reality on the ground and a “phase 2” situation. At that point, it is very likely that conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return will still not be in place, and that no international mechanism to monitor progress towards the UNHCR Protection Thresholds will be put in place. In other words: there would be a phase 2, without any of the formal UNHCR requirements for a shift to phase 2 being met.

³³ Draft UN Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023, p 32.

³⁴ See UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024, p 4, p 7, p 23.

³⁵ See UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024, p 23.

- » Such development risks contribute to an (unintended) **incentivisation of premature return**. This risk is also explicitly recognised in the draft UN HRP 2022-2023, which states that ABRS “should avoid creating pull factors for premature or involuntary returns”. As also stated in UNHCR’s own 2018 Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy, such premature return, induced by negative push and pull factors, could “have a devastating impact on refugees and further destabilize Syria and the region.” The 2018 CPSS therefore states that any return assistance should be “based on careful analysis so as to not incentivize returns or create pull factors.”³⁶ To date, such “careful analysis” has not been undertaken.
- » The shift towards ABRS could further strengthen an ongoing dynamic of **“re-returns”**, in which people return to Syria, only to find themselves in a situation where conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return are not in place, as a result of which people flee Syria another time.³⁷ However, as neighbouring host countries have adopted stricter policies and closed their borders in recent years, such “re-returnees” would find themselves in an even worse situation than before they returned to Syria, and would likely find themselves at the whims of human smugglers.
- » Importantly, as UNHCR is claiming that it does not have the access or ability to monitor spontaneous returnee movements, it remains unclear as to how UNHCR could assure that “spontaneous” return movements are not of a premature nature. Absent the creation of a monitoring mechanism, the question should be asked how UNHCR could put in place concrete mechanisms that would ensure that ABRS is not creating pull factors for premature return.
- » In addition, such a de facto shift towards “phase 2” programming runs the risk that **host country governments in the region, in particular Lebanon and Turkey, would seize upon it to further advance/accelerate their return agenda**. In a context where host country governments have repeatedly talked about the organisation of an international conference on returns, the roll-out of an ABRS Roadmap could further strengthen the (false) narrative that (parts of) Syria are safe for return.
- » **The ABRS list of “priority areas” contains contentious places**, which have a history of government atrocities, such as Qusayr and Khan Shaykoun. It also includes unstable border trading posts such as Kherbet Ghazala and Abu Kamal, areas undergoing recent government ‘reconciliation’ such as Sabka (arrests of reconciled persons have been documented by SNHR), and formerly besieged areas such as Tadamon/Yarmouk. In each case, this will require an extremely careful approach to conflict-sensitive context analysis in advance of work beginning, in order to avoid the risk of contributing to the destruction of war crime evidence and destruction of proofs of property, and with a particular focus on avoiding to **contribute to, or indirectly entrench, social and demographic engineering practices**. Such caution would also be in line with the Chair’s Statement of the Brussels VI Syria Conference (May 2022), which states that return assistance “should not contribute to demographic engineering.”³⁸

³⁶ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-protection-and-solutions-strategy-protection-thresholds>, p 2.

³⁷ See for example <http://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/RPW-REPORT-FINAL-20211117.pdf>, p 62-65.

³⁸ The statement also states that “assistance shall be gender-responsive, conflict-sensitive, be based on independent and unhindered needs assessments and monitoring, shall in no way benefit or assist parties who have allegedly committed war crimes or crimes against humanity and shall not condone, or indirectly entrench, social and demographic engineering.” See https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56061/20220511_chair_statement_v5.pdf

3.4 Resumption of return convoys in Lebanon

Against the background of rapidly deteriorating social relations between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, and an uptick in anti-refugee rhetoric by state officials corresponding to more frequent restrictive measures and discriminatory practices (such as local curfews, raids and other restrictions)³⁹; in June 2022 the Lebanese government announced a major return initiative which provides for the return of 15,000 Syrian refugees per month. According to Issam Sharaf El-Din, Lebanon's minister for displaced persons, "the war in Syria is over and Syria is safe." The Lebanese government also indicated that such plans will be closely coordinated with Turkey, Jordan and Iraq.⁴⁰

A few months after the announcement, the Government of Lebanon declared the resumption of the so-called return convoys, which started in 2018 but were halted in 2020 after the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. Such convoys were organised on 26 October and 5 November 2022, when a total number of approximately 850 individuals returned.⁴¹ Although the Government of Lebanon has insisted that these returns are voluntary, rights groups have sharply criticized the resumption of the convoys. According to Amnesty International,

*"it is well established that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not in a position to take a free and informed decision about their return due to restrictive government policies on movement and residency, rampant discrimination, lack of access to essential services as well as unavailability of objective and updated information about the current human rights situation in Syria."*⁴²

Local rights groups such as the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH) and the Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) have, meanwhile, warned that the pace of forced deportations has sharply increased in recent months, with ACHR documenting over 140 cases of Syrian refugees being forcibly deported since the beginning of 2022.

In statements to the media, UNHCR has stated that it is "not facilitating or promoting the large-scale voluntary repatriation of refugees to Syria", that its role in the returns is limited to "reaching out and counselling refugees, when possible, and being present at the departure points" before they leave, and that it will "will continue to engage in dialogue with the Lebanese Government, including with the General Security Office in the context of GSO-facilitated return movements."⁴³ In practical terms, the Lebanese General Security Office (GSO) compiles lists of people who they said have signed up for return, which are then shared with Syrian intelligence services. The list of individuals who received a security clearance from Syrian intelligence, is then shared by the GSO with UNHCR for voluntariness verification.

39 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/protection-monitoring-findings-lebanon-2nd-quarter-2022#:~:text=This%20quarter%20there%20has%20been,collective%20evictions%20in%20most%20regions.&text=An%20uptick%20in%20anti%2Drefugee,curfews%2C%20raids%20and%20other%20restrictions.>

40 See <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/551702/president-aoun-briefed-by-minister-charafeddine-on> . See also <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/06/forced-return-syrians-lebanon-unsafe-and-unlawful?s=09>

41 See <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1315821/first-repatriation-buses-take-off-wednesday-morning-for-syria.html> and <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1317032/roughly-350-syrian-refugees-repatriated-in-second-convoy-from-lebanon.html>.

42 See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/lebanon-stop-the-so-called-voluntary-returns-of-syrian-refugees/>

43 See <https://apnews.com/article/health-business-syria-lebanon-4a9a471a5098c97987faed72eb0a5a83> and <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314385/unhcr-reiterates-it-is-not-part-of-plans-to-return-refugees-to-syria.html>

When assessing the convoys that took place in October and November 2022, a number of unanswered questions and issues stand out:

- » So far, the GSO has shared the lists of returnees only 24-48 hours in advance with UNHCR, which leaves insufficient time for UNHCR to reach out to the hundreds of persons on such lists, and assess whether these returns can be considered truly “voluntary”.
- » Moreover, the limited timespan that UNHCR has to reach out to individuals on such lists raises serious questions as to whether UNHCR officers are providing proactive counselling on protection issues, conditions for return inside Syria, and on the security risks in Syria that they might face after return.
- » According to reports, out of the approximately 2,400 individuals who initially signed up for the first return convoy, only around 1,400 people received a security clearance by Syrian intelligence. From this group, 750 people ended up on return lists but only around 500 people did return in the end, raising serious questions on the fate of the approximately 900 individuals who backed out at the last minute and who might be at an enhanced risk of being arrested, detained and forcibly deported by the GSO.
- » UNHCR is currently not proactively monitoring the post-return situation of individuals that were in the first two return convoys, whereas reports have already emerged about people in the convoys who were arrested or disappeared after their return.⁴⁴

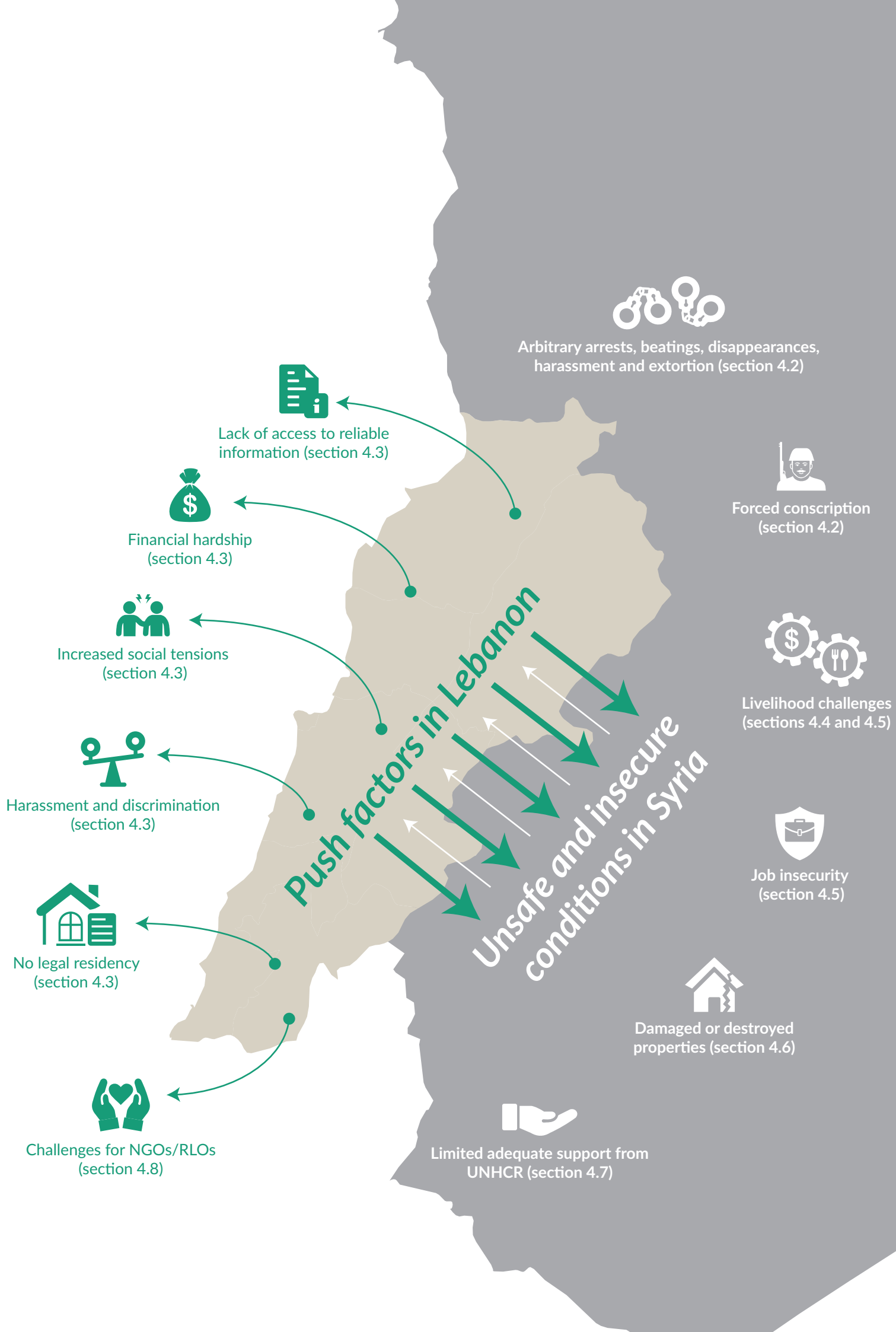
⁴⁴ See https://damascusv-com.translate.google/archives/47481?_x_tr_sl=ar&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp

4. MAIN DATA FINDINGS

This section presents the results from RPW research in Syria and Lebanon. Overall, findings suggest that UNHCR's own Protection Thresholds for Safe Return to Syria remain largely unmet. As such, international organizations and governments should refrain from considering Syria a safe country to return to.

Data findings are structured as follows. Firstly, [section 4.1](#) presents data collected among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and returnees inside Syria, about their prospects on return to Syria, re-return from Syria back to Lebanon, and movement towards third countries outside the region. Secondly, a number of key thresholds are analyzed, and relevant RPW data findings are presented under each UNHCR Protection Threshold in [sections 4.2 - 4.7](#). Finally, [section 4.8](#) concludes by briefly presenting data about the lack of meaningful engagement between international organisations and community-based initiatives.

As a coalition, we are aware that our sample bias – meaning people who are actually able to return and do not face many obstacles in the process – contributes to a specific type of dataset. While we acknowledge our sample bias, it is important to note that the data we do collect – both within Lebanon and in Syria – is the result of a comprehensively structured methodology and approach deployed in order to view the situation in both countries from a nuanced and holistic perspective. We always aim to go beyond the raw data to the real human stories that underlie the process of return to Syria, and to people's on-the-ground experiences of displacement within Lebanon.



4.1 Prospects on return and movement

Contrary to what has increasingly been portrayed in Lebanese national media and political debate, and despite a rapidly deteriorating situation in Lebanon, the majority of Syrians in Lebanon do not consider the situation safe for return to Syria. The trend of Syrian refugees wanting to leave Lebanon for a third country has risen steadily, as the percentage grew from 27% in September 2020, to 47% in April 2021, and 69% in September 2022 (presented in infographic). The unwillingness to return stems from Syrians' fundamental security fears, as well as the lack of essential services and guarantees for a dignified life. In all cases, the decision of refugees to return to Syria should not be based on push factors in the country of displacement, but rather on positive pull factors stemming from the country of origin.

Do you have concrete plans to leave Lebanon in the next six months?

Syrian respondents (n=371)



4.2. Safety and Security

UNHCR Protection Threshold 3: The government / actors in control of the return area provide genuine guarantees that returnees will not face harassment, discrimination, arbitrary detention, physical threat or prosecution on account of originating from an area previously or currently under de facto control of another party to the conflict; for having left Syria illegally; for having lodged an asylum claim abroad, or; on account of any (individual or family) diversity characteristic.

The continued risk to get arrested, detained, tortured or forcibly disappeared has been repeatedly emphasised by international and local organisations, including Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF), Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International.⁴⁵

Most recently, the UN Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) has stated that “cases of arbitrary arrests, beatings, disappearances, harassment and extortion, including of returnees, continued to be documented. The risk of being detained, and subsequently ill-treated and tortured, remained pervasive for many Syrians (...) The Syrian Arab Republic is still not a safe place to return.”⁴⁶ When launching the most recent UN COI report (September 2022), COI chair Paulo Pinheiro added that

“in government-controlled areas, torture and ill-treatment in detention and enforced disappearances remain systematic, and extends also to displaced Syrians who sought to return home. Heinous acts of torture may well be occurring as we speak to you here today.”⁴⁷

Additionally, when asked by RPW data collectors “are you concerned that you, or a relative or a friend remain at risk of forced conscription”, in May – June 2022, **40% of returnee respondents in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus City are concerned that either they themselves or a relative or friend remain at risk of forced conscription into the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)**. This despite the fact that men who are within the age of conscription and have been allowed to return (through security clearance procedures) have either settled their files in some way, already underwent their service prior to the outbreak of conflict, or have paid the exemption fee in order to be able to return.

Moreover, **18%** of returnee respondents (n=122) in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus reported (September 2022) that they have been **interrogated by security forces after returning**, for different reasons including: an interrogation about the reasons for leaving Lebanon, follow-ups on the exemptions of military service, and interrogation about family members in Lebanon or other countries.

45 See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/20/syria-returning-refugees-face-grave-abuse>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/syria-former-refugees-tortured-raped-disappeared-after-returning-home/>; <https://syacd.org/what-needs-to-happen-before-voluntary-safe-and-dignified-return-to-syria-is-possible/>; <https://snhr.org/blog/2022/11/05/most-notable-human-rights-violations-in-syria-in-october-2022/>; and <https://voicesforsyrians.org/is-syria-safe-for-return-returnees-perspectives/>

46 See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/463/09/PDF/G2246309.pdf?OpenElement>, p 4, p 1.

47 See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/09/statement-paulo-pinheiro-chair-independent-international-commission>

BOX 3: TESTIMONIES

“There is a lot of tension. People have changed, their souls have changed, and everyone has become the enemy of all.” Man, Homs

“The general situation is tense. Electricity comes an hour a day and people cannot find a living and everyone hates each other.” Woman, Homs

4.3. Voluntary and informed return

UNHCR Protection Threshold 4: Every individuals' decision to return is informed and genuinely voluntary, without any coercion.

As stated in the UNHCR Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, the principle of voluntariness “must be viewed in relation to both conditions in the country of origin (calling for an informed decision) and the situation in the country of asylum (permitting a free choice)”. The UNHCR Handbook further emphasises that:

“the issue of voluntariness as implying an absence of any physical, psychological, or material pressure is, however, often clouded by the fact that for many refugees a decision to return is dictated by a combination of pressures due to political factors, security problems or material needs”⁴⁸

In other words: in order for this UNHCR threshold to be met, Syrian refugees must have **1)** sufficient access to reliable information about conditions for return inside Syria, while **2)** it should have been demonstrated that the positive pull factors in Syria are an overriding element in the refugees' decision to return rather than possible push factors in Lebanon or negative pull factors inside Syria (f.e. the threat of losing your property).

Apart from overt coercion (i.e. forced returns), the (lack of) legal status of refugees in Lebanon is also an important factor in assessing the voluntary nature of return movements, the UNHCR Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation emphasises:

“One of the most important elements in the verification of voluntariness is the legal status of the refugees in the country of asylum. If refugees are legally recognized as such, their rights are protected and if they are allowed to settle, their choice to repatriate is likely to be truly free and voluntary. If, however, their rights are not recognized, if they are subjected to pressures and restrictions and confined to closed camps, they may choose to return, but this is not an act of free will.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3bfe68d32/handbook-voluntary-repatriation-international-protection.html>

⁴⁹ See <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3bfe68d32/handbook-voluntary-repatriation-international-protection.html>

As shown below, RPW findings in both Lebanon and Syria indicate that this threshold is not met, given the lack of reliable information about conditions for return and the many “push factors” at play in Lebanon:

- » Amongst the mere 2% (n=371) of people of the Upinion panel who indicated they plan to return to Syria in the next 12 months, **only two people out of these six** reported they have sufficient accurate information to make an informed decision about whether or not to return.⁵⁰
- » **Nearly half of the Syrian respondents in Lebanon (49%)** (n=365) indicated they have **no access to reliable information on the situation in Syria**. This percentage has been relatively stable (40%) since February 2020 and does not directly seem to be correlated with the area of origin in Syria of respondents. Hence, it can be considered a concerning trend of lack of access to accurate information, which renders the voluntariness of the decision to return questionable.
- » From the Syrian respondents in Lebanon who indicated they had access to reliable information, **the vast majority (79%, n=145) get their information from friends and family**, followed by social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (49%). Other sources, including UNHCR, are only marginally mentioned.⁵¹ **Inside Syria, 21%** of returnee respondents (n=212) also reported to **not have had sufficient access to all necessary information** about conditions for return. This shows how access to reliable information is not guaranteed for all returnees, subsequently affecting the voluntariness in their decision to return to their home country.

BOX 4: TESTIMONIES

“I thought I had all the information but it wasn’t completely correct” Woman, Damascus

“Not all the information was reliable because we were surprised by several things that we did not know about upon return” Man, Damascus

“Yes we thought we had all the information we needed, but it was inaccurate because we were surprised by how much worse the situation was than we expected” Woman, Rural Damascus

“I felt like I had all the information but it was inaccurate” Man, Rural Damascus

“We thought we had enough information, but we were surprised that it was incorrect” Woman, Damascus

⁵⁰ It should be noted that n-values for this question are low, but that this finding is still considered important as having access to sufficient and reliable information is crucial for safeguarding the voluntariness of return to one’s home country.

⁵¹ Respondents were able to select multiple answer options.

In addition to a lack of reliable information, **RPW findings in both Lebanon and Syria also confirm the many “push factors” at play in Lebanon**, placing a question mark on the “voluntary” nature of these returns. “Push factors” are also felt by local residents in Lebanon. To recognize that “push factors” experienced by both Lebanese and Syrian communities cannot be considered as separate, as well as to depict the overall worsening situation in Lebanon, data from the Lebanese respondents of Upinion’s panel are also presented:

» **Financial hardship:**

Findings from both RPW’s qualitative and quantitative data collection efforts reveal that financial hardship is one of the main issues compelling Syrians in Lebanon to return to their home country.

When asking returnee respondents in Syria about what the biggest push factors for their return to Syria were, **26% of women respondents and 50% of men respondents** (n=122) mentioned the **economic hardships faced in Lebanon**, preventing refugees from securing financial stability due to the high cost of food, rent, and medical supplies. This is a slight increase from RPW’s 2021 findings, when 72% of new returnee respondents reported that the difficulties of living in Lebanon were the main reason that directly or indirectly pushed them to go back to Syria.

Financial and economic challenges were also emphasised in Upinion’s conversation in Lebanon (April 2022), where **76%** of Lebanese (n=95) and **70%** of Syrian respondents (n=181) residing in Lebanon indicated they are **not able to guarantee their basic needs**. Repeated Upinion conversations show how respondents have been in need of support mostly with regard to food and house rent since July 2020. This is despite the fact that, as highlighted in the September 2022 online conversation, respondents currently spend more than two-thirds of their household income on electricity and house rent alone. These numbers are striking, especially when considering that it is generally desirable to spend no more than 30 to 40% of household income on housing.⁵²

Findings from Upinion’s conversation in April 2022 also reveal how almost none of the Syrian and Lebanese respondents had steady work or permanent or fixed job. **64%** of Syrian respondents (n=175) and **58%** of Lebanese respondents (n=99) answered that they **don’t have a job** (although they want to work). When disaggregating the data by gender, it should be noted that **73% of women respondents** of the online panel (both Syrians and Lebanese) indicated they **did not have a job but wanted to work**. Key reasons given for not having a job by both Lebanese and Syrian individuals (both women and men) during the conversation in April 2022 were: lack of available job opportunities; discrimination and employers preferring to employ Lebanese nationals; insufficient wages that don’t even cover the cost to go to the workplace; and disabilities preventing people from finding jobs that they are able to perform. Besides this, according to the findings of the study done by Upinion and IOB, refugees from Syria were found to perceive “discrimination”, “harassment”, and “unreliable salary payments” considerably more of an issue than Lebanese respondents.

⁵² Percentage generally recommended by budgeting experts and known in forms of 30% rule, or calculated as housing cost overburden rate (such as by the OECD in 2022, see <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/HC1-2-Housing-costs-over-income.pdf>).

» **Increase in social tensions:**

When asked in September 2022 whether they perceived an increase in tension between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities over the past six months (since April 2022), **61% of Upinion's panel of Syrian respondents (n=367) reported to believe that tensions are rising, while 48% of Lebanese respondents (n=210) confirmed this.** There seems to be no correlation between respondents' area of residence in Lebanon and their answers to this question. When asked to explain, in an open-answer question, how these tensions are manifesting themselves, respondents mainly brought up discrimination, theft, and verbal and physical abuse among communities.

Upinion's study with IOB also reveals how **socio-economic deterioration is seen by both communities (n=488) as one of the main reasons for the increased social tensions** between refugees and local residents. This was emphasised by people who reported the bread crisis as a source of increased tension.

Furthermore, the Upinion IOB study showed how both Lebanese and Syrian communities highlighted the imbalance in aid provided to Syrian and Lebanese people to be one of the main factors that is negatively impacting social cohesion. Meanwhile, Upinion's September 2022 online conversation showed how this imbalance in aid is only increasing, with **75% of Lebanese respondents** reporting they had **not received any aid since April 2022**. This is a 58% increase since April 2021, and a number that is significantly higher than the 36% of Syrian respondents who said they have not received aid since April 2022.

Moreover, **over half of the Syrian panel said they received food assistance like WFP electronic food cards, compared to only 17% of Lebanese respondents.** Findings further highlight that half the Syrian respondents in the panel who received support since April 2022 (n=251) have received it more than five times, either in the form of cash assistance or food and electronic card. This is in contrast with Lebanese respondents (n=55), of which a plurality indicated to have received aid only once during the past six months, which implies they rely on less, or a different type of support.⁵³

» **Harassment and discrimination:**

When asked what were the reasons that pushed them to return to Syria, **14%** of all refugee returnees in Syria (n=212) mentioned that harassment and discrimination against them in Lebanon were among the main reasons pushing them to return back to Syria.

⁵³ The same respondents, part of the IOB panel, were additionally asked whether international donor/NGO support contributed to increased peaceful cohabitation and good relations between refugees and host communities in the period of 2016-2021. Findings reveal that, overall, the plurality of respondents (31%, n=708) reported that donor interventions have had an adverse effect on cohabitation of both groups, with local residents and older cohorts being more negative than refugees from Syria and younger groups. Particularly, the lack of long-term vision of international donor programs was frequently mentioned for the limited positive effect of donor support. When asking those who said that donor/NGO support had improved peaceful cohabitation, how such support had had a positive influence, the following examples were often mentioned: projects and initiatives that focused on peacebuilding; projects that provide job/financial opportunities; and projects focussing on awareness and social cohesion. Among those respondents who had witnessed a significant contribution from donors, nearly half pointed to programs and projects that were provided to both refugees and host communities. This sentiment is well-illustrated by the following quote of a Syrian refugee residing in Lebanon: "The poorest groups in the host communities must be supported, because in light of the economic crisis that affects the whole country, when the residents of the host communities see refugees queuing in front of one of the ATMs, they become very hostile and think that this money should be theirs, so I heard a lot about attacks on ATMs recently."

The general lack of protection from violent situations seems to be felt by both Lebanese and Syrian communities, as additional results of Upinion's study with IOB reveal that over 50% of both Lebanese and Syrian refugees (n=393) do not feel protected from exploitation, coercion, and threatening (i.e. by authorities, civil servants, community members, or gangs). "Protection" here means knowing where to seek help, safety, or redress, and being confident in actually obtaining this help. When women and those who answered "other" to the question with which gender they identified were asked **whether they felt generally protected from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), the majority of respondents responded 'no' or 'a bit'** (63%, n=170). Disaggregation shows that more Syrian refugees (41%) indicated they did not feel protected from SGBV, than Lebanese residents (28%). Important to note, however, is that almost half of Lebanese respondents indicated to either feel only a bit safe or preferred not to answer the question.

BOX 5: TESTIMONIES

"The difficult situation in Lebanon, there isn't much work, and the lira has collapsed."
Woman, Homs

"Conditions were bad in Lebanon and we felt discriminated against all the time. I couldn't wait for the return." Woman, Homs

"The Lebanese people accused the Syrians with all the problems that they are exposed to from thefts, rewards, and weakness in the economy, and a lack of basic materials such as food, water, electricity, etc., and they commented that without the presence of the Syrian refugees on their lands, this would not have happened.... [they do this] without considering refugees and creating problems without any reason, especially if the other party is Syrian."
Syrian man, Baalbek

"The economic conditions went very bad in Lebanon, especially after the Corona pandemic, the prices increased and many Syrian labourers lost their work." Man, Rural Damascus

» Lack of legal residency:

More than two-thirds (66%) of the Syrian panel (n=383) that joined Upinion's September 2022 conversation **did not have legal residency in Lebanon**. The situation with legal residency has slightly deteriorated since Syrian respondents were asked about it in June 2020, when 58% of Syrian respondents (n=597) stated they did not have legal residency. According to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, published by the United Nations in January 2022, the number is even higher, with 84% of individuals aged 15 years and above not holding legal residency.⁵⁴

Moreover, when Syrian refugee respondents of the panel part of Upinion's study with IOB were asked about the impact of missing civil documentation, half of the respondents (n=101) indicated "inability to move around freely", followed by "inability to regularise status with authorities" and "vulnerability to detention". Hence, this clearly shows the impact of missing legal documentation on the protracted situation and vulnerability of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

⁵⁴ See <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90589>

4.4. Freedom of movement

UNHCR Protection Threshold 5: Acceptance by the government / entity in control of the return area of returnees' free choice of destination and place of residence and right to freedom of movement.

As shown by RPW data, returnee respondent's freedom of movement is hampered by the existence of multiple checkpoints across these areas. **15%** of all returnee respondents in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus (n=122) mentioned that they were unable to move freely and they have **faced some obstacles and felt uncomfortable at checkpoints**, particularly because they feared being arrested or detained, were afraid of being conscripted in the military, or because they did not have all their civil documentation – mainly the military service booklet and their IDs.

4.5. Physical, legal and material safety in Syria

UNHCR Protection Threshold 6: The physical, legal and material safety of refugees and returnees is ensured.

When asked in Round 6 of the research in May- June 2022, **37%** of returnee respondents in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus (n=94) said they have **not been able to secure a job after their return** to Syria. The livelihood challenges mentioned by returnee respondents included the fuel crisis (which has particularly impacted people with small businesses), in addition to poverty, devaluation of the currency, low income, high market prices/fluctuation of prices of goods and services, and medical issues.

When asked how respondents are coping specifically with the rising prices of goods in their area (where they were able to select multiple answers), the **main coping strategy** reported was buying cheaper products (**87%**), a change in eating habits (**72%**), buying less quality products (**63%**), food assistance/aid (**44%**), and borrowing food from others in the community (**12%**). Among the respondents of the seventh research round (September 2022), 65% reported that there are aid programs operating in their area – mainly in Rural Damascus, and mainly the delivery of food baskets.

63% of all returnee respondents depended on work as their main source of income (most reporting full-time work, with a minority of those reporting informal and/or casual work). The majority of Homs respondents, specifically, reported that their sources of income are not sufficient to cover their basic needs, whereas Damascus and Rural Damascus respondents mentioned that it is mostly sufficient in covering their needs, but not fully.

23% of all returnee respondents mention that cash support from their families in Syria is considered their main source of income. Among women respondents specifically, the main sources of income were overwhelmingly reported as being cash assistance from relatives, and to a lesser extent casual/informal work, as well as relying on their spouse's income.

4.6. Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights

UNHCR Protection Threshold 17: The Government sets up efficient, accessible, and affordable mechanisms to address housing, land and property (HLP) issues and to provide for property restitution and compensation in line with international law. Particular attention needs to be paid to the rights of returnee women heads of households and the rights of secondary occupants of refugees' property.

When asked, in the sixth research round in May- June 2022, if they were able to return to their neighbourhood of origin and their own houses, **over one third (35%) of returnee respondents in Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus (n=94) mentioned that they weren't able to do so**, mainly because their houses are either destroyed or damaged and they are unable to reconstruct the properties themselves at their own expense. Respondents have also reported not receiving aid or government subsidies to rebuild.

In this case, the majority of respondents reported that they either went to a relative's house or rented a house to compensate for the loss of their main dwelling. Respondents mainly reported that their houses were occupied by relatives or destroyed. A few respondents mentioned that their houses were used by unknown people or members of the Syrian army. **When asked in the most recent round of research (September 2022) if they (n=122) would feel confident requesting the government property restitution or compensation, 58% indicated they preferred not to answer, and 36% answered negatively.** When asked further why they wouldn't ask for restitution from the government, respondents noted that it might even be dangerous to their personal safety to do so, and there is no precedent of the government compensating any returnee for damaged property.

Finally, it should be noted that HLP-related risks for displaced Syrians have been repeatedly emphasised by the UN Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic. Most recently, when launching its September 2022 report, Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro warned that displaced Syrians

"were prevented from returning by the lack of guarantees that they would be able to enjoy their housing, land and property rights upon their return."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/09/statement-paulo-pinheiro-chair-independent-international-commission>

4.7. UNHCR access to returnees

UNHCR Protection Threshold 19: “UNHCR’s supervisory responsibility, which includes but is not limited to monitoring the voluntariness of the repatriation, the reintegration of returnees, and all interventions aimed at ensuring repatriation in safety and dignity, is respected.”

UNHCR Protection Threshold 22: “UNHCR is granted free and unhindered access to all refugees and returnees to monitor the conditions of reception and reintegration. Similarly all refugees and returnees, wherever located, including in detention centres and prisons (in liaison with ICRC), have access to UNHCR.”

In Round 6 of data collection efforts inside Syria (conducted in May- June 2022), **72%** of all returnee respondents (n=135) reported that they **were not followed up by UNHCR**, and 82% of the respondents are not willing to contact the UNHCR in case of any incident. When asked why they would not want to contact UNHCR, all respondents who answered no to the previous question reported their mistrust of UNHCR capabilities in addressing their specific issues.

In the most recent round of research (September 2022), returnee respondents (n=122) were also specifically asked to rate UNHCR services in their areas. While only **15%** of returnee respondents reported having **accessible UNHCR offices** in their area, their **services were rated as “bad” by 52% of them**, and a further **28% reported their services as “average”**, at best.

4.8. Challenges for community-based initiatives and organisations

In the protracted humanitarian situation that Lebanon has been faced with – in which reliance on NGOs for virtually all facets of life is widespread – local NGOs and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) are still insufficiently recognized. They are often not properly involved in the planning and conceptualization phase of the crisis response.⁵⁶ They lack sufficient direct and longer term donor funding. The amount of donor funding directly allocated to local NGOs and RLOs has consistently been below 5% of overall donor funding, ten times as low as the funding allocated to UN agencies and INGOs, and far below the targets set in the Grand Bargain.⁵⁷

Such challenges are also highlighted by the CSOs surveyed by Upinion, who are **consistently indicating difficulties in obtaining funding and establishing contacts with larger donors (89%, n=34), followed by 37% that faced challenges related to authorities in the areas in which they operate and/or restrictions.**

⁵⁶ See <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2021/11/29/lebanons-deepening-crisis-the-case-for-a-sustainable-aid-response>

⁵⁷ See www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_Lebanon_Localisation.pdf

The priorities of the CSOs/RLOs of Upinion's panel revolved around receiving funding for projects in education, community building, and basic necessities like food and rent. The latter seems directly related to the community's needs and ideas on what is missing in terms of assistance and small initiatives in their immediate surroundings. CSOs/RLOs participating in Upinion's panel further pointed out the need for international organizations and donor governments to consult local organizations in a more meaningful and frequent way, as these organizations are the ones who know best the needs of local communities.

ANNEX:

My version of the truth - a story of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon

*A real story. Some details have been altered to maintain the confidentiality of the individual.

My name is Adam and I am 28 years old. I grew up in Homs, Syria. Growing up, my interests were a bit different than other boys in my family. Instead of obsessing over football, I was very interested in watching movies with my mum. I liked to sing and act out scenes from shows we watched. With my mum, we would have our own inside jokes from old movies, plays, and musalsalat (tv shows). We must have watched 'El eyal kebret' over 100 times. I was always very close to my dad and we used to go on lots of walks together. He really encouraged me to pursue my passion of acting and singing.

When the war started, my father was killed and suddenly I felt empty. I knew that I did not want to serve in the army. I know people say young men are fine with picking up a weapon. This is not true. I did not want to hurt anyone. I waited as long as I could and then at the start of 2020, I fled to Lebanon. I had to leave my mother behind. It broke me to leave her, my best friend, but I had to. I could not fight back using violence and murder, just like many other young men who fled.

Now in Lebanon, I work as an actor and I sing. I love making people smile and specifically children laugh with my skits. Although I make others happy, I am in constant fear and can't move around freely. I am one out of the many Syrians who do not have legal residency. In one of the crackdowns the Lebanese police did in the area I live in, the police took me in and I faced a terrible interrogation. The police took my information and my papers. They told me I would get my papers back, but I never did. I am so scared to be stopped by the police because I do not want to be deported. I can't return to Syria in any way. I am even scared to give my personal information to NGOs in my area, because I do not want to reappear on the government's radar.

If I return to Syria, yes, I will be able to see my mother who I miss more than anything. But, I have no idea what will happen to me once I am detained by the security forces and that thought alone is so scary. I prefer living in Lebanon without papers and in constant fear than going to Syria with my own two legs.

I want to stay in Lebanon. Through my art I want to change how we, Syrians, are seen. The Lebanese people say that we have no shame and are always ready to take handouts. But, I do have pride and I work for my money. They just take a few bad cases and make us all seem that we are ruining Lebanon. What I hope for is to be heard and seen. At least for now, I am making children, who see me for who I am, smile through my art.





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