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Irresolvable Dilemmas? The Prospects for Repatriation for Syrian Refugees

The Syrian conflict has entered its second decade, and while fighting has subsided, the prospects for an inclusive settlement remain grim. With 6.7 million registered refugees, Syrians constitute over 25% of the global refugee population. Another 6.6 million are internally displaced (12% of the global total). The majority are hosted in neighboring countries – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in particular – where conditions have deteriorated rapidly and pressure for return is mounting. Yet, over the past five years, only 268,000 “voluntary returns” have been registered, and the pace is not picking up. Doors to other countries are also largely shut. Syrian refugees find themselves in a bind, between staying on in increasingly skeptical host communities or returning to an insecure future.

Brief Points

- In all of the major host countries for Syrian refugees – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – hospitality is wearing thin, while an increasing share of refugees face economic deprivation.
- Openings for third country resettlement have shrunk significantly, as have possibilities for onward migration.
- Returning to Syria is fraught with risks – economically, socially and in terms of security – and rates of return, despite mounting pressure, have recently declined.

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Introduction

In protracted conflicts, patterns of displacement are oftentimes complex, with multiple rounds of migration, households splitting up, and simultaneous out-migration and return migration. Syria is no exception. If anything – with its complex conflict dynamics – it is an extreme. Whereas most Syrians have been affected by migration in one way or another, the patterns of migration are so variegated that any attempt to capture them entails a grave risk of oversimplification. This is a challenge, not only to analysis, but also to policy development.

Wartime Migration

In Syria, there have constantly been multiple conflict zones, each with their own set of actors. While the composition of these zones has shifted over time, we can – for our purposes – apply a north-south and an east-west matrix.¹

The country's north, with its large Kurdish population, became the scene of radical Sunni Islamism, eventually including the Islamic State (IS), with intensive fighting and repressive rule that drove migration. The main destination for refugees was Turkey, where the Free Syrian Army (FSA) recruited actively in the early years, but where Islamists soon became the main militant actors. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPG) has actively fought for an autonomous entity along the Turkish border, triggering a Turkish response as the YPG has advanced. Noting the close relation between the YPG and its domestic Kurdish opposition, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Turkey's fear of a Kurdish-dominated area on its border – as well as a wish to stem refugees – motivated its several interventions, including the one in 2019, which also aimed at creating a safe zone for the repatriation of refugees.

For those fleeing the south, the main refugee destination was Jordan. Here, the FSA's so-called Southern Front was the central opposition to the Syrian government – supported, and allowed to operate, by Jordan. For the host state, Jordan, the wish to at least constrain the flow of refugees was part of the reason it encouraged FSA warfare against the Syrian government to be low-intensity only.²

Syria's western parts, which host its main population centers, were also the areas where the

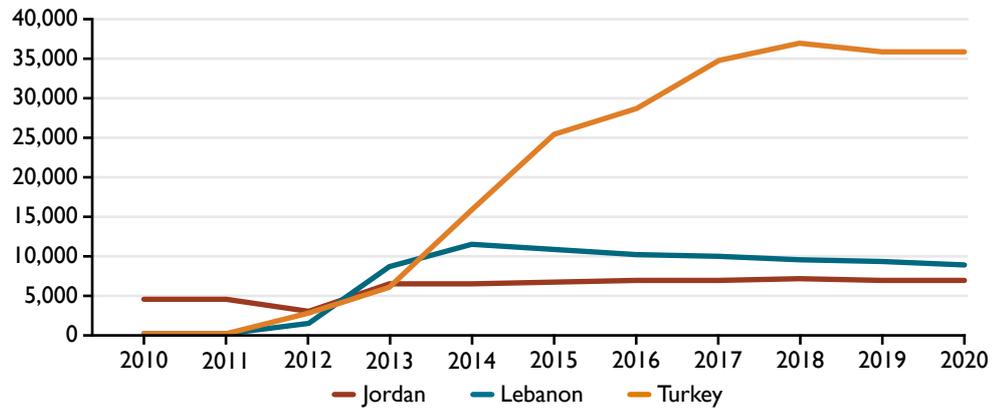


Figure 1: Total registered refugee population (end of year). Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

Assad government maintained a strong position throughout the war. The Syrian-Lebanese border is porous, not only in terms of how it is policed, but also in terms of the dense networks that crisscross the border. And while Western Syria has both a northern and a southern part, Lebanon has been a main destination for refugees. The thinly populated east is important for agricultural production and hydrocarbon exploitation. Opposition groups – and eventually the IS – have held a strong position.

Within Syria, the number of internally displaced is at the same level as the total refugee population. The International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimate, by end of 2020, was just short of 6.6 million.³ Of these, over 1.8 million were displaced in the course of the year. A government offensive in Idlib caused close to 1 million new displacements – of these, more than half had been displaced before, and new rounds of flight seem likely. While figures are hard to find, there is every reason to believe that a large share of the refugees have been internally displaced. Similarly, today, many would-be refugees end up as internally displaced due to the eroding support in prospective host countries.

Syrians in Jordan

Both the Jordanian state and its population have been relatively welcoming of Syrian refugees. In recent years, with mounting scarcity of jobs, resources, and welfare provisions, hospitality has subsided, although Jordanians tend to blame the government rather than the displaced Syrians. A Syrian population estimated at some 1.3 million, close to double the figures of registered

refugees, constitutes 13% of the total population of Jordan. Some one-fifth of the Syrians in Jordan reside in camps, and there are restrictions on mobility.

Generally, access to formal jobs for Syrians in Jordan have been limited to only select types of jobs in primary sectors. This was the background for the ambitious Jordan Compact (see Box 1). A recent economic downturn, worsened by the Covid epidemic, has further limited job opportunities, and the vast majority of Syrian households now struggle to meet basic needs, such as food. However, access to welfare services has been comparatively generous for Syrians in Jordan. Some 95% enrollment in primary education is reported, although reportedly of comparatively poor quality. Refugees have had full access to Covid-related health services.

The current return pressure in Jordan is modest, in part because the country's leadership have insisted that Syrians still need protection, and the population blames the government – not the Syrians – for their ills. Yet, long-term integration of Syrians has no appeal, in part because it is seen by many as an additional burden on the state, and in part because of the experience with integrating the Palestinian refugees who now constitute 70% of Jordan's population.

Syrians in Lebanon

Globally, Lebanon is the country that hosts the most refugees per capita. There are 890,000 registered refugees and an estimated 1.5 million Syrians in total, corresponding to 22% of the population. The experience hosting Palestinian refugees and their political organizations has

played directly into Lebanon's own delicate identity politics. These experiences have made Lebanon wary of receiving Syrians. The situation in Lebanon has deteriorated over time, particularly as a result of a sustained governance crisis that causes great misery among Lebanese citizens as well as among Palestinian and Syrian residents. Refugees in Lebanon are not allowed to set up camps, so most either rent or live in informal settlements. Barriers to obtaining residency documentation mean that many refugees become trapped in cycles of eviction and dislocation, deepening the rift between Lebanese and Syrian communities.

Access to employment has been restricted to a few select jobs in Lebanon, causing many to search for informal employment. With the dramatic downturn in recent years, economic conditions – for Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens alike – have become unbearable. A June 2020 survey by the World Food Program (WFP) found that over 50% of the Syrian households (and 22% of Lebanese) were seriously concerned about food. Access to education, in some form, has also been limited to some 40% of children. Lebanon's health system is struggling, which has also affected the Covid response, with only a limited number of vaccines going to refugees so far.

The call for a return of Syrians has been consistently high over a number of years. Commonly stated arguments focus on the economic burden, upsets in the sectarian balance, fears of radicalization or other security concerns. Lebanese authorities have sought support for a return program, even suggesting return by

force. Despite the close ties that many Syrians have to Lebanon and its citizens, naturalization seems an increasingly slim prospect. The pressure to return remains high, and most observers believe it will either stay that way or increase further.

Syrians in Turkey

The Turkish state, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in particular, has generally been very welcoming of Syrian refugees. Over the past few years, however, the public sentiment has grown more hostile, and the Syrian refugees are blamed for contributing to unemployment, lowering wages, and other ills. In response, the government has modified its stance. The 2019 military intervention into North-East Syria, for example, was partly justified by the desire to set up a safe zone allowing refugee return. By end of 2020, almost 3.6 million Syrian refugees were registered, corresponding to just over 4% of the population in Turkey. While a strict camp regime characterized the early years of the Syrian war, a general drawing-down of the camp regime has resulted in roughly 98.5% of refugees residing outside camps as of 2021.⁴

Syrians in Turkey get work permits and are free to seek employment, albeit there are restrictions (such as a quota on employers to not employ more than one Syrian for every five Turkish workers). As the Turkish economy has contracted, the comparative advantage of being willing to work at low wages has whittled away, and informal employment is increasingly becoming the norm.⁵ Despite the welcome of

the state, and the relative liberty to seek jobs, a good share of the Syrians in Turkey struggle economically. One investigation found that 64% of Syrian households lived below the poverty line, with 18.4% in extreme poverty.⁶ Access to state services, in principle promoted by the regime, has been mixed. Some 64% of children are reported to have access to education, and there has been relatively good access to health-care, also throughout the Covid pandemic.

In Turkey, the call for refugee return has become increasingly loud in recent years, threatening AKP dominance as the electorate sours on their welcoming policy. The economic contraction, the demands on welfare provisions, and the sense that the Syrian conflict is not going to be resolved anytime soon have all contributed to this. From Turkey's perspective, its deal with the EU on preventing migration to Europe has been high-cost but low-gain. The 2019 intervention in Syria succeeded neither in laying the foundations for large-scale repatriation, nor in dampening criticism from Turkish citizens. Turkey as a state is much more involved in the conflict in Syria than any of the other main host states, but if popular resentment continues to increase, this may result not only in public protest, but also in much stronger return pressure from the government's side.

Moving On?

As the hospitality in the main host states has declined, the opportunities for moving on to a third country have been severely restrained. This has been the preferred alternative for

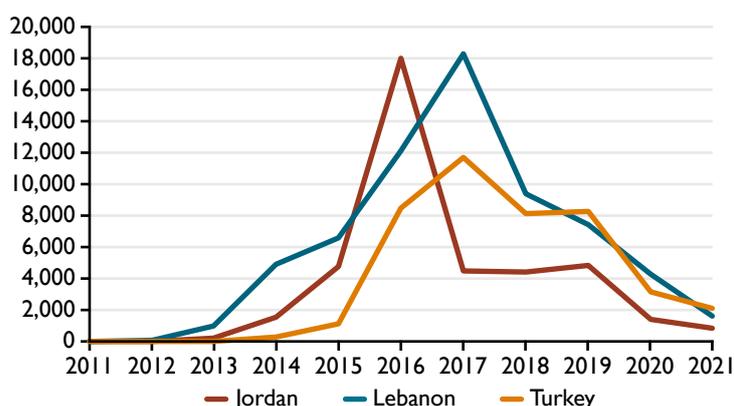


Figure 2: Resettlement to third countries. Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

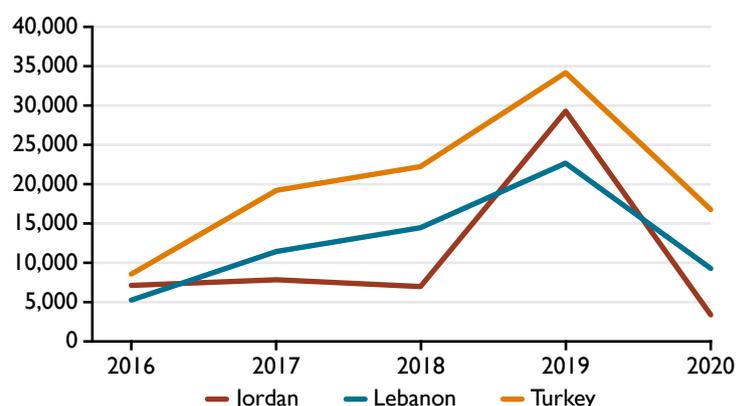


Figure 3: Registered 'voluntary refugee returns'. Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

many refugees, but for those who may consider onward migration, it has become less and less realistic. The new restraints with which Western countries responded to the 2015 peak in migration have effectively closed this window for most.

Resettlement – one of the UNHCR’s three “durable solutions” for refugees (the two other being voluntary repatriation and integration in host state) – has served as an important safety valve for Syrian refugees. Resettlement (see Figure 2) reached a record 38,494 in 2016, fell to 20,559 in 2019, and declined further to 8,829 in 2020 (with 2021 figures by June at the same level).

The other avenue to gaining protection in a third country is entering through irregular channels and then seeking asylum. This has become increasingly difficult. Focusing on EU countries as a destination, border controls are tightened. The EU has entered into agreements with the main transit countries – Libya and Turkey – to prevent migration, entering negotiations with third-party states like Morocco to act as holding stations for asylum seekers. For those who make it to Europe, the chances of gaining permanent residence are slim as temporary protection has increasingly become the norm.⁷

Moving “Home”

With opportunities for onward migration eroding, and both the hospitality and the living conditions in the host countries deteriorating rapidly, Syrian refugees feel the pressure to return “home.” The challenge for most of them is that there is little to return to. The Syria that was once home no longer exists, the exile has lasted long enough that a new generation barely knows what Syria was like, and many risk returning to locations within Syria that are foreign to them.

The economic conditions in Syria are not conducive to return. The war has exacerbated the institutional erosion that was already set in motion through liberalization. Welfare institutions – such as schools or clinics – are often out of operation. Also, the infrastructure – roads, water and sanitation – is either out of work or entirely crushed. Housing equally so, with an estimated third of housing destroyed by war.⁸ What infrastructure remains is being sold to an emerging conflict elite; the marketization of the national infrastructure reduces revenue and policy space for the Syrian regime as the war winds down. External support for reconstruction is becoming increasingly critical, but is contingent on major donors coming to terms with the regime in Damascus, which seems unrealistic in the foreseeable future.

Security is also a major concern. The Syrian conflict is not resolved, even if the Assad government has consolidated its grip on large parts of the country. A good share of the refugees left because they were fundamentally opposed to the regime (or to one or more opposition groups). Some left in order to avoid military conscription, and face fines and imprisonment upon return. Many have been politically active in exile, some engaging in militant movements opposed to the Assad regime. They return to a scene of total social dislocation, with no social safety net and competition over scarce resources. All of this makes return extremely unattractive to the refugees, and under the present political circumstances, it makes any form of pressure to bring about return very problematic.

Even so, there are some who return. A UNHCR overview over “voluntary refugee return” shows a peak in 2019, when almost 95,000 returned from the host states in the region, with a drop to 38,000 in 2020 (and some 14,800 by 20 June 2021, indicative of a further decline). Unfortunately, monitoring of how the returnees are

faring is wanting, and other refugees contemplating return depend entirely on their own networks and on rumors. In the absence of a political settlement of the conflict, and a major reconstruction effort with international support, large-scale return is simply not realistic. ■

Notes

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THE PROJECT

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