UNDERSTANDING THE NON-RETURN OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Evidence from Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut

(January 2026)







Saint Joseph University of Beirut
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ABSTRACT

This report examines the *determinants* of non-return among Syrian refugees in Lebanon a year after the regime change in Syria. The study analyses how demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, political and other structural factors shape refugees' *aspirations* and *capabilities* to return to Syria. The research is based on mixed-method fieldwork conducted in Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa in January 2026, including 537 surveys and 25 key informant interviews.

Findings indicate that a majority of Syrian refugee respondents did not intend to return to Syria at the time of the study. While security concerns remain an important determinant of return, they do not alone explain continued displacement. Rather, return perceptions are shaped by the interaction of multiple determinants operating in both Syria and Lebanon. Strong determinants include gender, parental status, perceived security risks, place of residence, relationships with host communities, confidence in Syria's transitional authorities, expected access to basic services and sectarian affiliations. Economic conditions, employment, education, housing, income and documentation-related factors influence return in more differentiated ways, sometimes shaping refugees' capabilities rather than their aspirations alone. The findings further reveal increasingly blurred boundaries between voluntary and indirectly pressured return amid growing precarity in Lebanon.

Overall, the study demonstrates that return cannot be understood through security or political change alone. Sustainable return policies require multidimensional approaches that address the diverse determinants shaping refugees' aspirations and capabilities, while placing refugee perspectives, experiences, and priorities at the centre of return programming.

May 2026



ABOUT

The Arab Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights (ArMA), coordinated by the Institute of Political Science at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, is an interdisciplinary postgraduate programme that combines academic scholarship with practical engagement in the fields of human rights, democratic governance and public policy across the Arab region. ArMA is one of the regional master's programmes of the Global Campus of Human Rights. Through its research-oriented and action-based approach, the programme equips students with both theoretical knowledge and applied professional skills, while fostering regional exchange and mobility through partnerships with universities across the Middle East and North Africa.

As part of ArMA's applied research in democracy and human rights curriculum, students undertake field-based research projects that allow them to apply quantitative and qualitative research methods to real-world policy and human rights issues.

This report presents the findings of a field research project conducted within this framework, involving ArMA students and their instructor in the design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of original research on contemporary issues affecting Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The views, findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of ArMA, the Institute of Political Science at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, its partner institutions, or any affiliated organisations.

May 2026



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Executive Summary



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background & Context

- The Syrian conflict generated one of the largest forced displacement crises of the twenty-first century, with Lebanon hosting around 1.5 million Syrian refugees, accounting for the world's highest refugee concentration per capita. Since 2011, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have gradually faced increasingly restrictive policies. More recently, Lebanon's socioeconomic collapse since 2019, then the Hezbollah–Israel war since 2023, and finally the December 2024 regime change in Syria have triggered the gradual return of thousands of refugees.
- Amid these transformations, the Government of Lebanon (GoL), together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), launched a voluntary return programme in summer 2025. However, by early 2026, official facilitation remained highly constrained due to restrictive administrative processing and acute funding deficits in both Lebanon and Syria. Later, the March 2026 escalations led to a sharp surge in returns under *force majeure*.

Research Design

- This study employed a cross-sectional comparative case study design examining Syrian refugees' perceptions of return to Syria more than a year after the fall of the Assad regime. Conducted in January 2026 across Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa, the research was grounded in the migration aspiration–capability framework, distinguishing between willingness to return (aspirations), practical ability to return (capabilities) and the determinants shaping both.

Research Question

- The study addressed the following question: *To what extent do different determinants affect the aspirations and capabilities underlying the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime?*
- Determinants included demographic, socioeconomic, geographic and structural factors influencing return decision-making.

Field Deployment, Analysis & Limitations

- Fieldwork was conducted over five days by a trained ArMA-USJ student research team following literature review, through quantitative surveys and qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Using purposive stratified sampling and NGO-facilitated access, the study collected 547 surveys and 25 KIIs across Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa, selected for their geographic, housing, and host community diversity. Following data cleaning, 419 Syrian refugee responses and 117 Lebanese host community responses were retained for analysis.
- The field preparation, data collection and preliminary findings' analysis were completed in collaboration with three partner NGOs: the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Tahaddi and Basmeh & Zeitooneh, who facilitated field access. Preliminary findings were presented to UNHCR for feedback. Findings should nevertheless be interpreted in light of temporal, methodological, and contextual limitations affecting representativeness and generalisability.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Main Findings

- One of the most striking findings revolved around overall return intentions. Data revealed that the majority of Syrian refugee respondents (64%) did not intend to return to Syria. Of those who did intend to return, almost half (45%) had taken that decision during the past year.
- Among respondents expressing unwillingness to return (64%), the most cited obstacles were linked to Syria's deteriorated economic (87%), housing (82%) and service conditions (62%), while children's education in Lebanon emerged as a major factor encouraging continued stay (30%).
- Results indicated a declining trend in intentions to return "within the next 12 months". This may reflect seasonal cross-sectional effects like winter, or be linked to perceptions of instability in Syria, particularly during the fieldwork period which was marked by clashes in Syria's Northeast. Also, most Syrian refugees remained uncertain about the timing of their return, reflecting persistent ambiguity in return planning.
- Concerning host community perceptions, while nearly half of the Lebanese respondents perceived the Syrian refugees' presence negatively (43%), the majority expressed either positive or neutral feelings (57%).
- That said, host community perceptions about Syrian refugees differed significantly across regions and sectarian backgrounds, with for instance Sunni Lebanese respondents in Central Bekaa expressing more positive perceptions than Christian respondents in Greater Beirut.

64%

Of refugee respondents did not intend to return to Syria

70% - 56%

Proportion of women/men respondents with no return intentions

Determinants of Return

- Empirical evidence indicated that return intentions are shaped by a multi-layered interaction of individual socio-demographic characteristics, household composition, social and spatial embeddedness in Lebanon, including the refugee-host community relationship, and perceptions of security, governance and service provision across both Syria and Lebanon.
- No single determinant was observed as operating totally independently. Rather, return aspirations and capabilities were produced through the cumulative and context-sensitive interaction of these various variables.
- However, findings suggested that some variables are operating as strong determinants of return, while others have moderate or weak effects on return aspirations and/or capabilities.
- Finally, some other structural and conditional variables were observed to operate as intermediary determinants, shaping return indirectly by enabling or disabling other strong or moderate determinants.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strong Determinants of Return

- Gender emerged as a major determinant, with women consistently expressing significantly lower willingness to return (30%) than men (44%) and adopting more cautious, longer-term return perspectives.
- Parental status also appeared as a strong determinant, with respondents with children showing significantly lower willingness to return to Syria (32%) than those without children (43%).
- Perceived security risks in Syria constituted a major determinant of return intentions, with 84% expressing unwillingness to return among those who beleived that returning to Syria would expose them or their family to security risks compared with 58% for those who did not hold that belief.
- Security concerns alone, however, could not fully explain non-return, as many respondents unwilling to return reported no direct security threats. These effects varied significantly by respondents' governorate of origin, adding a spatially differentiated dimension to security perceptions.
- Place of residence in Lebanon was also identified as a major determinant, reflecting the influence of localised host environments, sectarian contexts and differentiated trajectories of integration and displacement.
- Consequently, relationships with host communities constituted a strong determinant: higher levels of social hostility in Lebanon were associated with a significantly greater urgency to return to Syria, while positive relations correlated with lower return intentions.
- Perceptions of Syria's transitional authorities emerged as a key political determinant, with those expressing greater optimism about the new authorities strongly associated with higher willingness to return (72%) than those holding more negative views (36%).
- Similarly, projected confidence in access to basic services in Syria emerged as a major determinant, with 44% of those willing to return expressing confidence compared with 15% among those unwilling to do so.
- Sectarian affiliation also constituted an important and expected determinant of return, particularly through perceived safety, political exposure and fears of discrimination, although these dynamics were closely intertwined with regional origin and post-conflict local security conditions in Syria.
- Sociocultural and ethnic origins were found to be moderate-to-strong determinants, primarily through their interaction with political perceptions, regional dynamics and attitudes towards Syria's transitional authorities.
- Finally, UNHCR registration operated as an intermediary determinant, shaping return intentions indirectly through access to documentation, education and administrative precarity in Lebanon.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Moderate or Context-Dependent Determinants

- Economic conditions, education, housing and labour market positioning were identified as shaping return intentions in differentiated and often indirect ways, primarily influencing capabilities and constraints rather than producing uniform behavioural effects.
- Educational attainment appeared to be a moderate determinant, with more educated and technically trained respondents showing relatively greater openness to return compared to lower-educated groups.
- Housing conditions in Lebanon had a limited but discernible effect, with refugees in non-permanent shelters (such as tented settlements) expressing slightly higher willingness to return (37%) than those in more stable housing (32%).
- Income level functioned primarily as a determinant of return capabilities rather than aspirations, with higher-income respondents exhibiting greater capacity to consider return (43%) than those with lower-income (28%).
- Employment conditions operated in a differentiated and context-specific manner: employment status alone was not a significant determinant, but variations across employment sectors and levels of job stability indicated that more stable and regular employment was associated with lower willingness to return, while precarious work increased return aspirations.
- Length of stay in Lebanon did not show a consistent independent effect. Rather, it interacted with other structural, contextual and demographic determinants instead of shaping return intentions on its own.

Weaker Determinants of Return

- Several commonly assumed socio-demographic and institutional variables showed limited standalone explanatory power, with rather weak or inconsistent effects, often only observable in interaction with other variables.
- Age did not constitute a major determinant of return, although respondents in their forties and fifties showed slightly higher willingness to return, while qualitative findings suggested stronger reluctance among younger generations raised in Lebanon.
- Marital status did not significantly determine return intentions, although single respondents were comparatively more willing to return than married, divorced, widowed, or separated respondents.
- NGO assistance appeared to have a limited and highly localised influence on return intentions, with effects varying by region and type of support received, and did not therefore constitute a consistent determinant.
- Similarly, access to services in Lebanon influenced return decisions only indirectly and conditionally, functioning more as a stabilising or destabilising contextual factor rather than a direct determinant of return aspirations.
- Finally, legal residency status operated in an inverse way: respondents without valid residency permits expressed higher unwillingness to return (64%) than those with residency permits (52%) despite this heightened precarity, indicating that legal vulnerability does not translate straightforwardly into return intentions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessing the GoL–UNHCR Return Programme

- Findings indicated that the GoL–UNHCR return programme faced limitations in terms of awareness, credibility, sustainability and alignment with refugees' actual return decision-making processes and protection concerns.
- While many Syrian refugees reported having sufficient information about returning to Syria, awareness gaps surrounding the GoL–UNHCR return programme, launched in summer 2025, varied significantly across regions and age groups, highlighting the need for more targeted and localised communication strategies.
- Findings also suggested that the GoL–UNHCR return programme was widely perceived as insufficient for enabling sustainable return, particularly due to limited financial assistance, inadequate consideration of housing and livelihood conditions in Syria, and its inability to address broader structural barriers to reintegration.
- Moreover, findings revealed a major mismatch between refugees' need to assess conditions in Syria prior to return and the Lebanese policy framework, which prevents temporary "Go-and-See" visits and treats any border crossing as definitive return.
- Finally, while the GoL–UNHCR return framework was formally presented as voluntary, findings suggested that broader Lebanese policy measures and deteriorating living conditions were indirectly manufacturing coercive pressure to return through increasing precarity, insecurity and uncertainty among Syrian refugees.

Rights & Protection

- Rights and protection challenges remained deeply interconnected with refugees' socioeconomic vulnerability, legal precarity and uneven regional access to services, shaping both living conditions in Lebanon and perceptions regarding return to Syria.
- Access to education, healthcare and housing emerged as major rights and protection challenges throughout the study, shaped by economic vulnerability, documentation barriers, funding cuts and significant regional disparities in service accessibility.
- Findings identified major gaps between the nominal availability of legal services and refugees' effective ability to access and benefit from them in practice.
- Limited access to legal support appeared closely intertwined with broader protection risks and human rights violations experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including discrimination, intimidation, movement restrictions, detention and physical violence.
- In parallel, refugee women continue to face significant gendered vulnerabilities in Lebanon, particularly regarding economic exclusion, caregiving burdens, mobility restrictions and exposure to gender-based violence within broader conditions of legal and social precarity.
- Finally, child labour continued to emerge as a major protection concern throughout the field research, closely associated with economic vulnerability, school dropout and deteriorating living conditions, particularly among low-income households and in rural areas of Central Bekaa.

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Background & Context



THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: AN OVERVIEW

Violence and war in Syria caused one of the twenty first century's most significant forced displacement episodes, uprooting over two-thirds of the pre-war population within Syria and across the region.

- Fifteen years after the beginning of the unrest in Syria in 2011, the Syrian refugee crisis has shifted from an acute humanitarian emergency to a protracted situation.
- The war caused the displacement of around 13.8 million Syrians at its peak, including approximately 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 6.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023).
- The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees fled to neighbouring countries, particularly Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan.
- Syrian refugees have for decades faced vulnerability, precarity and marginalisation in most of these host countries.

> *Few have endured suffering as profound as the Syrians.*
>
> *Geir O. Pedersen, UN Special Envoy to Syria, 2025*

13.8 million
Syrian forcibly displaced since 2011

7.2 million
Internally Displaced Syrians (IDPs)

3.7 million
Refugees in Türkiye

1.5 million
Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

1.3 million
Syrian Refugees in Jordan



May 2026

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SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Lebanon has hosted approximately 1.5 million refugees – the highest per capita concentration globally – forcing displaced populations to navigate complex legal hurdles amidst Lebanon's own compounding domestic crises.

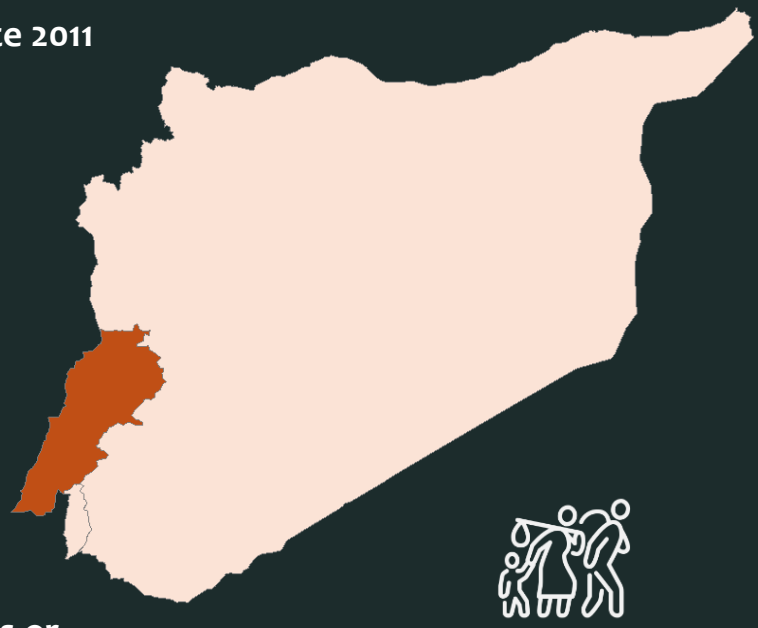
- Lebanon remained for more than a decade among the world's most impacted states, hosting over 1.5 million Syrian refugees on its territory. Combined with Palestinian and other displaced populations, one in three people residing in the country was a refugee (UNHCR, 2014).
- Numbers remained contested due to diverging estimates and political sensitivities. As such, UNHCR stopped new registrations in 2015 at the government's request, while many refugees also avoided registration because of various concerns.
- Syrian refugees were spread across the whole country, with the highest concentrations in the Bekaa (36%), North Lebanon (31%), and Beirut (23%), followed by other regions (UNHCR, 2026).
- The situation became increasingly protracted, with refugees navigating multiple challenges, including vulnerability, marginalisation and legal hurdles especially amid Lebanon's growing crisis since 2019, which severely affected livelihoods and access to services and rights (Dahrouge, 2025).
- In this context, most Syrian refugees lived below the poverty line, many accumulated debt to buy food, and large numbers resided in overcrowded or substandard shelters (VASyR 2023; World Bank, 2024).

1.5 million
Syrian Refugees in Lebanon since 2011

80%
Of them lack legal residency

90%
Were below the poverty line

52%
lived in overcrowded, dangerous or sub-standard shelters



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THE LEBANESE STATE RESPONSE

Between 2011 and 2024, the Lebanese state's response shifted gradually from a policy of "no policy" (2011–2014), to restrictive policies (2014–2016), to policies proactively pushing Syrian refugees to return (2016–2024).

- Lebanon's policy response has been marked by institutional ambiguity, relying on informal and ad hoc practices that left refugees in a constant state of uncertainty (Stel, 2020). During the early stages of the crisis, Lebanon did not adopt a comprehensive policy response, a stance commonly characterised as a "policy of no policy" (El Mufti, 2014).
- Between 2014 and 2016, the GSO introduced complex residency categories requiring non-UNHCR-registered Syrians to secure a Lebanese sponsor, while restricting Syrian labour primarily to construction, agriculture and other low-skilled sectors, significantly limiting labour integration (ICJ, 2020).
- After 2016, the Lebanese state started to proactively push for the return of Syrian refugees, amid broader political consensus and hostile media campaigns. But fragmented initiatives and political divergences limited its implementation, while still resulting in cases of deportation (Dahrouge, 2023; Sherry, 2026).
- Syrians without valid legal status remained vulnerable to exploitation and movement restrictions, facing risks of being arrested at checkpoints.
- At the local level, municipal practices such as curfews and rental bans in certain areas restricted mobility and security (Access Center for Human Rights, 2025). The forced dismantling of some informal settlements further compounded vulnerability (Access Center for Human Rights, 2025).

14,000
Syrian refugees deported in 2023

5,600
Syrian refugees deported in 2024

13,000
Syrian refugees deported in the first half of 2025

Lebanon's Legal Framework

Lebanon did not ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor its 1967 Protocol, and lacks comprehensive national refugee legislation.

Refugees are governed by the 1962 Foreigners' Entry and Exit Law, treating them as foreigners with limited status (UNHCR, 2020).

Both the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the GSO and UNHCR and the 2015 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) stated clearly that Lebanon was a transit country, not a country of asylum, a final destination, or a country of resettlement (Janmyr, 2017).

Lebanese authorities officially refer to Syrian refugees as "displaced" (*nazihun*) rather than "refugees" (*laji'un*).

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RECENT CONTEXTUAL SHIFTS

Three major contextual disruptions have profoundly reshaped the conditions and dynamics of Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Lebanon's socioeconomic collapse and overlapping crises since 2019, the Hezbollah–Israel war since 2023, and the regime change in Syria in December 2024.



Lebanon's Compounded Crises

- Lebanon's economy has contracted sharply since 2019. The GDP declined by 56% (World Bank, 2024), while the Lebanese Pound lost more than 98% of its value (Dandachi, 2025).
- As a result, social and political pressures intensified as households (including refugees) lost access to savings and basic services. By 2024, 44% of the population was living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2024).
- Reflecting deeper governance failures, Lebanon ranked 153rd out of 182 countries on the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (Dandachi, 2025).



The 2023–26 Israel–Lebanon War

- The war generated one of the most severe displacement crises in Lebanon's modern history, causing massive destruction in housing and urban infrastructure and leading Israel to establish a security buffer zone in the south (Chronicles of Displacement, 2026).
- During 2024, it disrupted Syrian refugees' safety and access to aid, with many facing discrimination in accessing shelter. As a result, around 97,000 Syrian refugees became secondarily displaced, while 330,000 returned to their country (Dahrouge, 2025).
- Since the March 2026 escalation, thousands more have returned under *force majeure*.



Regime Change in Syria

- The fall of the Assad regime had a twofold impact on the Syrian refugee situation in Lebanon. It prompted a wave of return but also caused a new wave of refugees escaping massacres and violence (Dahrouge, 2025).
- Lebanon had more than 100,000 new arrivals – mostly from religious minorities. Meanwhile, UNHCR reported the return of around 400,000 by the end of 2025 (L'Orient Today, 2025).
- In addition, in January 2026, Syria witnessed clashes between central authorities and Kurdish factions in the northeast (Lister, 2026).

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THE GOL–UNHCR RETURN PROGRAMME

Amid this context, the Government of Lebanon (GoL), in coordination with UNHCR and IOM, launched a return plan in 2025 to facilitate large-scale voluntary returns to Syria. However, by early 2026, implementation remained partial and faced several structural obstacles in both Lebanon and Syria.

Background

- In parallel with the regime change in Syria, international aid and assistance to Syrian refugees continued to undergo severe donor cuts.
- In 2025, cash assistance to refugees declined by 60%, while healthcare and education assistance were also significantly affected (Sherry, 2026).
- In June 2025, the GoL adopted the Syrian Refugee Return Plan, its first national return plan since 2014.
- In July 2025, the GoL and UNHCR formalised their operational agreement and launched the UNHCR-supported voluntary return programme (Sherry, 2026).

The Plan in Details

- The plan was structured around a preparatory phase including an outreach campaign on the procedures and tightening residency and labour regulations.
- This was followed by an implementation phase including advocacy for donor support and tighter border management preventing irregular re-entries (Sherry, 2026).
- Returnees were to receive USD 100 per person before departure, with vulnerable families receiving an additional USD 400 in Syria (UNHCR, 2025).
- Organised returns were also scheduled with the support and coordination of the IOM.

Expectations and Limits

- Lebanese authorities announced a target of 200,000 to 400,000 returns by the end of 2025 (Azhari, 2025).
- While many Syrian refugees had shown interest, the plan did not take into account the actual needs of potential returnees and the complex situation in Syria.
- By early October 2025, around 180,000 people had expressed interest and received counselling.
- By January 2026, however, UNHCR reported that only around 57,000 Syrian individuals had benefitted from the facilitated return programme.

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Methodology



RESEARCH QUESTION & DESIGN

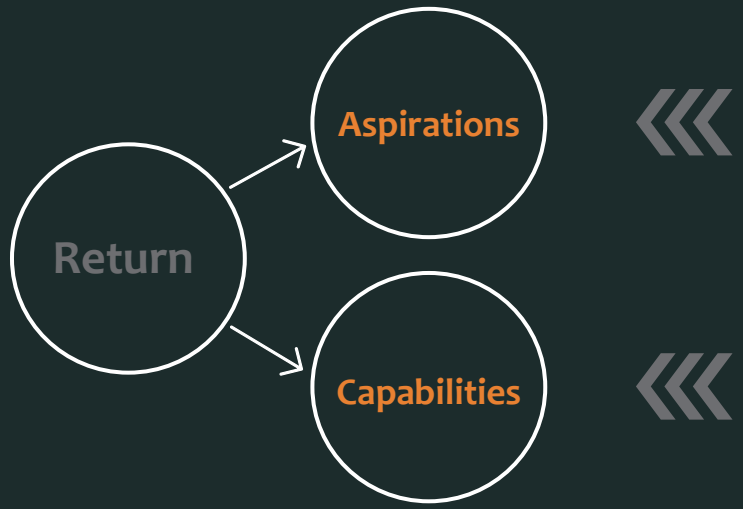
This study examined Syrian refugees' perceptions of return to Syria in Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime through the literature-informed concepts of migration aspirations, capabilities and determinants, which were operationalised in the research design.

- To understand refugees' perceptions of return, the research examined the extent to which different determinants affect their aspirations and capabilities regarding return.
- The research question is grounded in the aspiration-capability framework in migration studies, which distinguishes between the willingness to return (aspirations) and the practical ability to do so (capabilities). The former relates to refugee agency, while the latter reflects structural constraints (de Haas, 2021).
- Aspirations refer to the subjective desire to migrate (or not), shaped by perceptions of opportunities, constraints, and acceptable futures.
- Capabilities refer to the actual, structurally conditioned abilities to realise migration aspirations, shaped by various determinants.
- Determinants are the factors influencing aspirations and capabilities, such as age, gender, family networks and wider geographic or structural conditions (de Haas, 2021). In this study, they are examined in relation to their influence on refugee return.



MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION:

*To **what** extent do different **determinants** affect the **aspirations** and **capabilities** underlying the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime?*



Determinants Operationalised

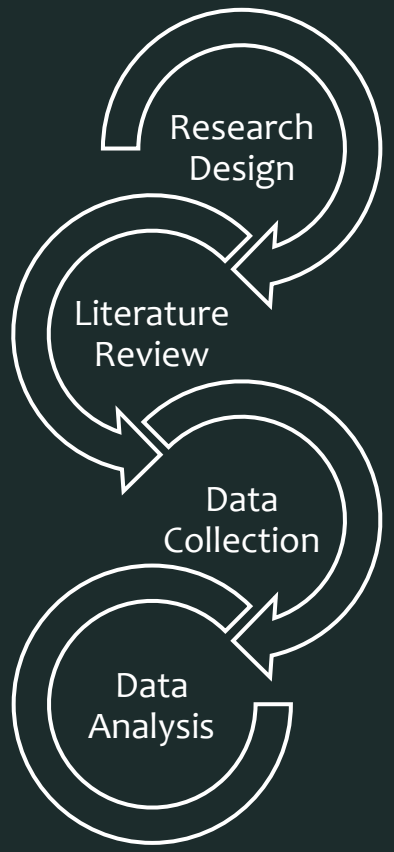
- Demography: gender, age, marital status, etc.
- Geography: places of residence and origin
- Perceptions: safety in Syria & Lebanon, host community perception, etc.
- Access to work, housing, services (education, healthcare, NGO services)
- Policy: GoL-UNHCR Return Programme

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METHODS & PHASES

This study is a cross-sectional comparative case study of Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa, using mixed methods and purposive stratified sampling. It was conducted in January 2026 through three different phases including literature review, data collection and data analysis.

- Following the research design, the study was conducted throughout January 2026 in three distinct phases.
- The first phase comprised an extensive literature, legal and desk review alongside parallel field preparation. This was followed by a field deployment phase, during which data were collected in Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut after a two-day pilot phase.
- The third phase encompassed data analysis and report writing. During this phase, preliminary findings were presented to UNHCR and partner NGOs for validation and additional insights.
- This cross-sectional comparative case study employed mixed qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and survey questionnaires with adult refugees and Lebanese host community members. Findings were corroborated by daily field observations.
- The survey questionnaire and interview guides were designed on the basis of the research design's analytical framework, operationalising the influence of different determinants on Syrian refugees' aspirations and capabilities.

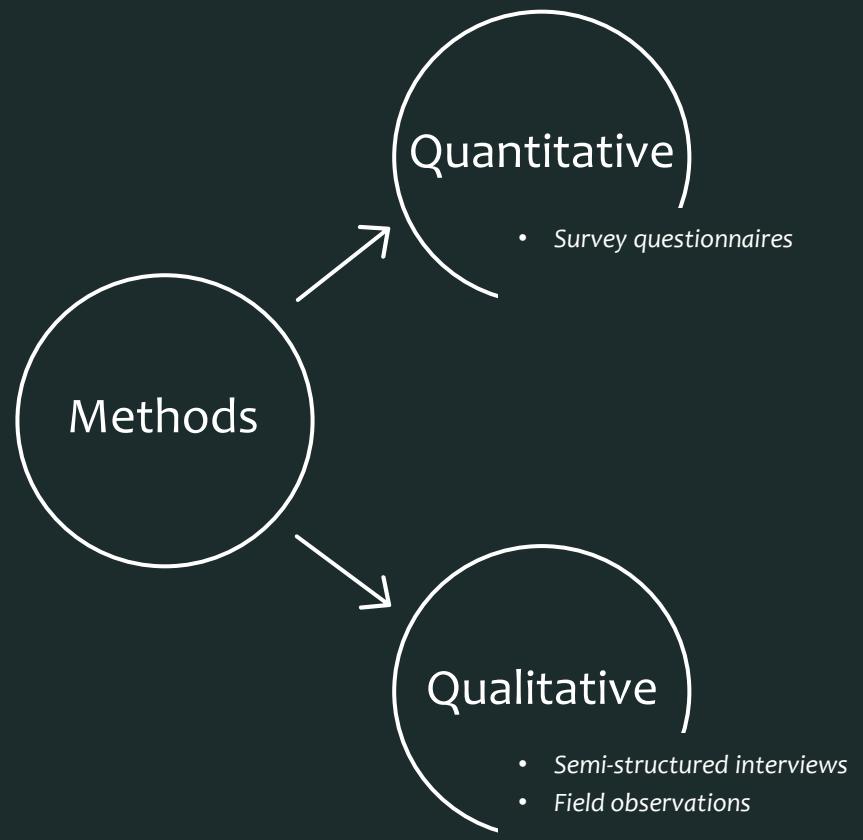


7-10 January

10-16 January

19-23 January

26-30 January



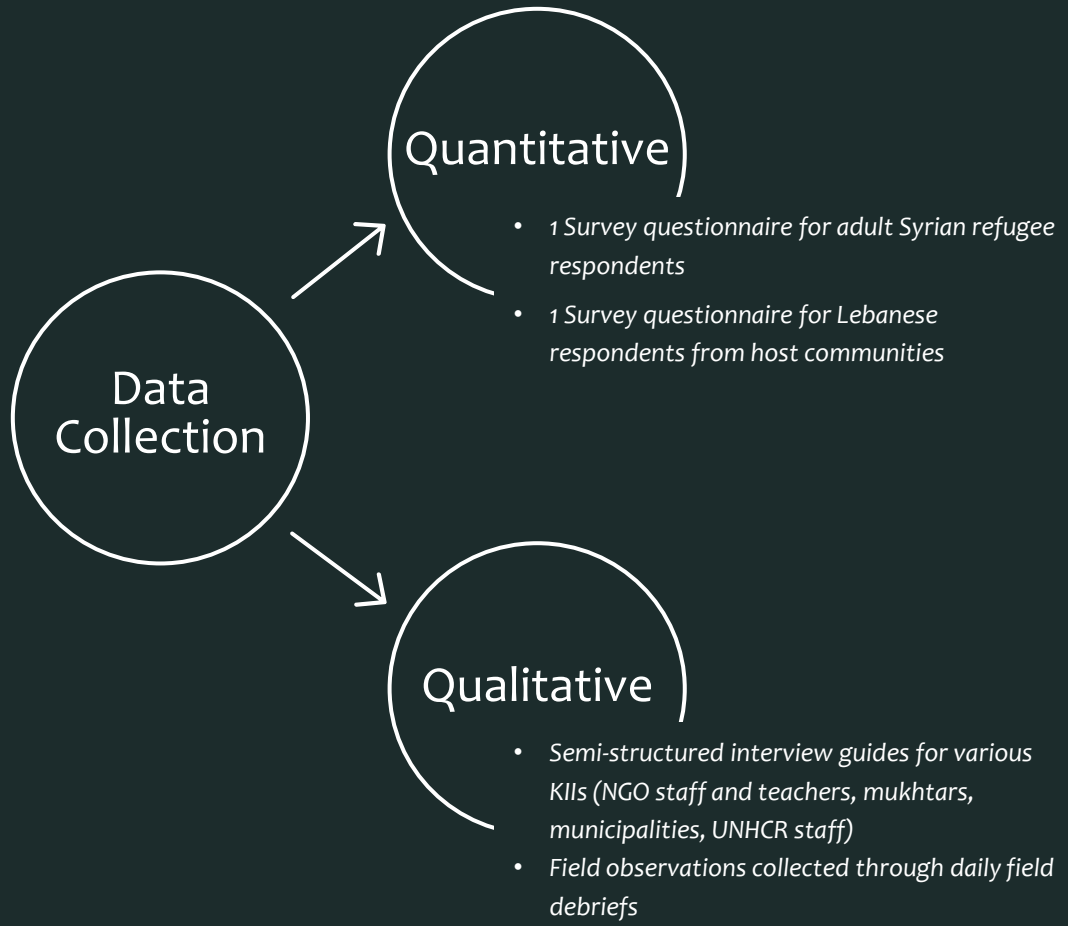
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DATA COLLECTION

To strengthen triangulation and comparative analysis, the study used multiple quantitative and qualitative tools tailored to refugees, host communities, and key informants.

- The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools in order to triangulate findings and capture different dimensions of refugee return perceptions.
- Two survey questionnaires were developed for the quantitative component: one targeting adult Syrian refugee respondents and another targeting Lebanese respondents from host communities.
- Following review and validation, both questionnaires were digitised using KoBo Toolbox for field deployment.
- For the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview guide was developed with a set of common comparative questions and additional actor-specific questions.
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were designed to be conducted with local NGO service providers and staff, teachers, mukhtars, municipal representatives, UNHCR staff and local community leaders.
- Following approval from the university ethics committee, all tools were tested extensively by the research team in classroom settings and during a two-day pilot phase before finalisation.
- Additional qualitative insights were collected through direct field observations and daily debrief sessions with research team members throughout deployment.



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FIELD DEPLOYMENT

Field deployment was conducted over five days across Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut by a trained research team, following ethical protocols and coordinated access arrangements, with structured team composition and NGO-facilitated entry to field sites.

- The field team consisted of 25 ArMA students who were trained on the final research tools and field procedures – including data privacy and security, informed consent and do not harm measures – prior to deployment.
- Student enumerators were organised into two-person teams, pairing one Arabic speaker with one non-Arabic speaker for data collection.
- Field deployment was planned and coordinated by the Lead Researcher and lasted five days, with the first three days conducted in Central Bekaa, primarily in Bar Elias and also Zahleh. The final two days were conducted in Greater Beirut, including Burj Hammoud, Nabaa and Hay el Gharbi (between Sabra and Sports City).
- After receiving access approval from relevant national security authorities, three partner NGOs facilitated entry to their beneficiaries and surrounding communities.
- The three partner NGOs were the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Basmeh & Zeitooneh for Central Bekaa and Bourj Hammoud/Nabaa, and Tahaddi for the informal settlement of Hay el Gharbi – next to Sabra, Greater Beirut. Each of these NGOs provided gatekeepers to help student enumerators in their outreach efforts.
- Data quality was ensured through daily iterative review and monitoring of collected responses to maintain consistency and alignment, with findings discussed during regular brief and debrief sessions with the field team to enable ongoing adjustments.

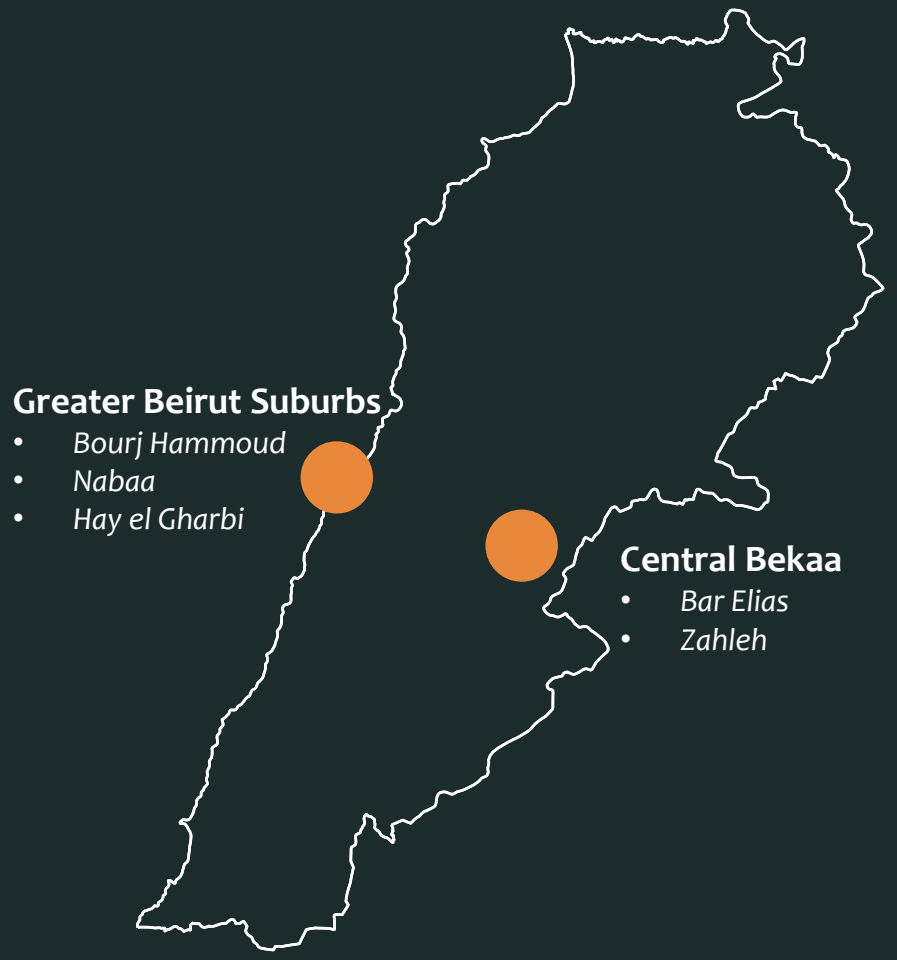


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SAMPLING

Fieldwork employed a purposive stratified sampling approach across Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut, combining NGO-facilitated access with targeted efforts to diversify respondents and locations. In total, 547 surveys were conducted alongside 25 Key Informant Interviews.

- Sampling was purposive and NGO-facilitated, while also stratified to ensure diversity across men and women respondents, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, tented and non-tented housing and rural and urban settings. Only one adult was surveyed per household.
- The sampling approach also sought variation across host community areas with Muslim-majority and Christian-majority populations.
- A total of 547 surveys were completed, including both Syrian refugee and Lebanese respondents.
- Following data cleaning, 419 out of 422 Syrian refugee responses and 117 out of 125 Lebanese host community responses were retained for analysis.
- A total of 25 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with a range of local actors and stakeholders.



422
Surveys filled with Syrian refugees

125
Surveys filled with Lebanese respondents

25
Key Informant Interviews conducted

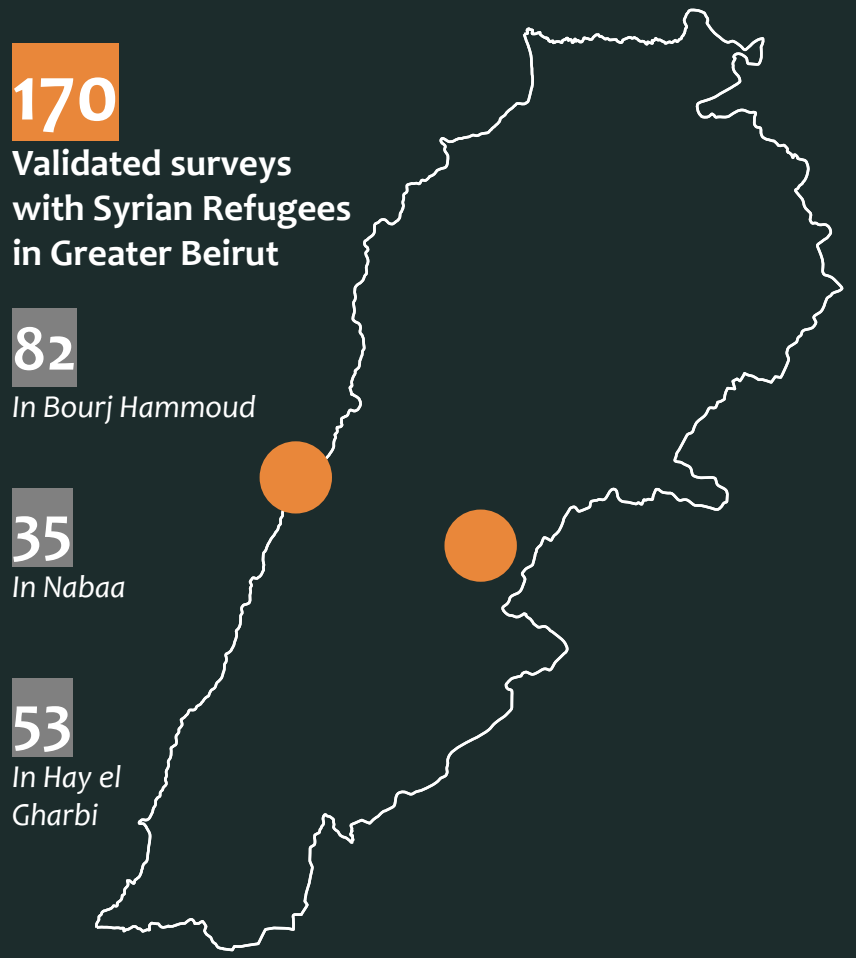
5
Daily debriefs to discuss and gather field observations

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BEKAA AND BEIRUT: SAMPLING RATIONALE

Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut were selected through a purposive comparative sampling strategy combining demographic relevance, geographic diversity, housing variation and differing host community contexts to analyse how different structural and social environments shape refugee return perceptions.

- The study focused on Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut due to their high concentration of Syrian refugees, with the Bekaa (36%) and Beirut (23%) among Lebanon's three most affected regions (UNHCR, 2026).
- The comparative design contrasted rural (Bekaa) and urban (Beirut) settings, tented (Bekaa exclusively) and non-tented housing, and differing contexts in access to services.
- Greater Beirut sites were selected in marginalised low-income suburbs hosting large Syrian refugee populations due to more affordable housing availability.
- Selected locations also reflected diverse host community and sectarian contexts, including Sunni-majority Bar Elias in Central Bekaa, Christian-majority Bourj Hammoud, mixed Shia-Christian Nabaa and mixed Sunni-Shia areas around Hay el Gharbi and Sports City.



- Hay el Gharbi (Sports City) additionally provided exposure to neighbourhoods historically shaped by earlier displacement dynamics, particularly long-standing Palestinian refugee presence in and around Sabra, Shatila and adjacent informal settlements.
- Although non-probabilistic, the 419 validated Syrian refugee surveys provide broad analytical coverage and a sample size broadly comparable to a ±4.8% margin of error under random sampling assumptions.

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PARTNER NGOS

The field preparation, data collection and preliminary findings' analysis were completed in collaboration with three main partner NGOs: the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Tahaddi and Basmeh & Zeitooneh, which are operating in Beirut and the Bekaa. These partners supported and facilitated field access for our research team during the data collection phase.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)

Inspired by the generous love and example of Jesus Christ, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is a global apostolate of the Society of Jesus with a mission to accompany, serve, and advocate the cause of forcibly displaced people, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future in community. JRS programmes are currently found in over 50 countries, serving refugees, other forcibly displaced persons and members of the host communities. JRS Lebanon responds to new and protracted displacement issues, education crises, mental health struggles, and a reduction in livelihoods, in a vulnerable Lebanese society where challenges are worse than ever.

Tahaddi

Tahaddi- meaning "challenge" in Arabic- is a Lebanese non-governmental organisation based in the informal settlement of Hay El Gharbi. Employing a community-based approach, Tahaddi empowers residents to overcome economic and social hardships and realise their full rights and potential. Its programs serve vulnerable Lebanese families as well as displaced, stateless, and migrant individuals, irrespective of nationality, religion, or social background. Tahaddi addresses the multidimensional needs of the community through four thematic centres providing education, primary health care, social services, and livelihood opportunities.

Basmeh & Zeitooneh

Basmeh & Zeitooneh started as a grassroots organisation in 2012 when a group of volunteers in Lebanon – driven by the plight of displaced communities – began a small relief operation. Today, Basmeh & Zeitooneh has grown into one of the largest and most established refugee-led relief organisations, responding to the acute needs of both the displaced and their host communities. We're proud to be founded by refugees, for refugees. We have aligned our efforts under six intimately connected programmatic pillars: Peacebuilding, Education, Protection, Food Security and Livelihood, Civil Society Enablement, and Research & Advocacy.

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MITIGATING FIELD CHALLENGES

Fieldwork faced operational, behavioural and access-related challenges that affected respondent engagement, availability and data collection conditions. These were mitigated through adaptive strategies to preserve respondent engagement, data quality, and ethical standards.

Reluctance and sensitivity of responses

- Some respondents were hesitant to participate due to fear or mistrust. In certain cases, refugee workers could not respond freely in the presence of their employers, while some Lebanese respondents refused participation. To mitigate this challenge, enumerators created private spaces where possible (such as temporarily separating respondents). One team member would take the respondent away from the crowd, while the second one would engage with the crowd to ensure confidentiality and reduce pressure.

Male respondent availability constraints

- Access to male respondents was limited during daytime hours due to work commitments, especially in the Bekaa. Women – particularly mothers with caregiving responsibilities – were more available for surveys.
- As a mitigation measure, the research team adjusted data collection timing, including after working hours where feasible and maintained efforts to ensure balanced gender representation.

Expectations of assistance

- Some participants expected aid or services despite clear communication of the study's purpose, especially when surveyed in NGO settings.
- To address this issue, the research team consistently clarified the academic and non-assistance nature of the study at multiple stages, including during consent and throughout the interview, to manage expectations and reduce response bias.

Survey fatigue

- Both the length of the questionnaire and prior recurrent exposure to similar studies contributed to respondent fatigue. As such, many were reluctant in providing clear and detailed answers.
- This challenge was mitigated through the active engagement of the enumerators who constantly monitored respondent engagement levels, allowed pauses or early termination when needed and prioritised respondent comfort while encouraging completion.

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LIMITATIONS

The study's findings should be interpreted in light of temporal, methodological and contextual limitations affecting representativeness, response reliability, and generalisability.

Cross-sectional design & temporal limitation

- The study provides a snapshot of perceptions at a specific point in time – namely in January 2026 – and does not capture changes in aspirations and capabilities over time.
- In addition, data were collected in January 2026, prior to the war and mass displacement that Lebanon faced again starting March 2026. These novel conditions may have altered refugee conditions, perceptions and return dynamics.

Self-reported data bias

- Findings rely on self-reported information, which may be subject to underreporting, like for instance income, access to services, or cash assistance.
- Self-reporting responses may have also caused overreporting of vulnerability, particularly where respondents perceived potential links to assistance, as presented under the study's challenges.

Seasonality and Generalisability

- Throughout the field research, many key informants indicated that return intentions might be fluctuating seasonally, with typically higher willingness in summer due to improved living and mobility conditions, and alignment with school calendars, limiting the generalisability of winter-collected data.
- Due to the purposive stratified sampling, the findings are not statistically representative of the entire population. Nevertheless, the surveys ensure a substantial depth for the studied areas.

Additional constraints

- The mixed-language research team required paired enumeration, which may have affected consistency in data collection despite mitigation measures. In fact, the team's Arabic-speaking student enumerators were from various Arab and non-Arab countries. Dialectal divergences may have impacted responses.
- The compressed fieldwork period required intensive data collection over a short timeframe, potentially affecting depth and coverage.

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Demographics and Profiles



SYRIAN REFUGEE RESPONDENT PROFILES

The Syrian refugee sample (n=419) reflected a geographically dispersed and gender-balanced population, with displacement primarily driven by conflict-related factors consistent with international refugee definitions.

- The sample included 419 validated Syrian refugee responses retained after data cleaning.
- The gender distribution showed a relatively balanced representation of man and woman respondents.
- Most respondents were aged between 25 and 44, followed by the 45-54 age group.
- Respondents were geographically distributed across Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut suburbs, reflecting the study's comparative design.

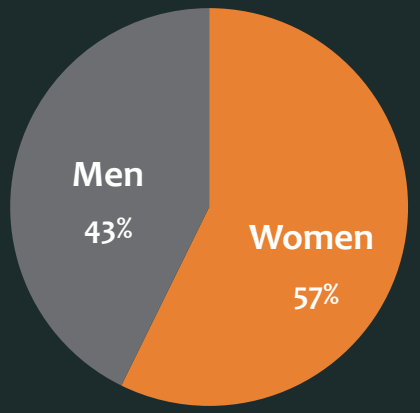


Fig. 1. Refugee Respondents' Gender

Fig. 2. Refugee Respondents' Age Distribution

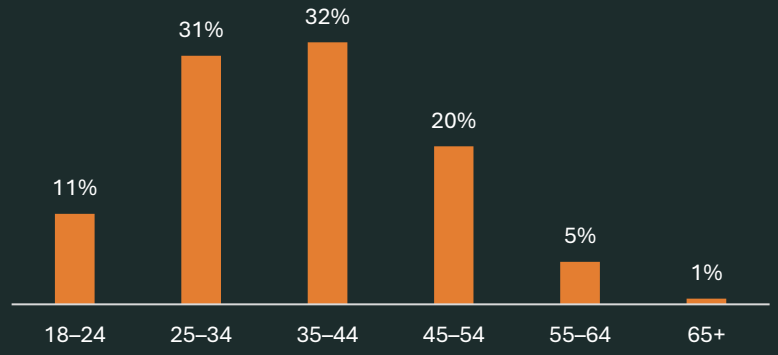
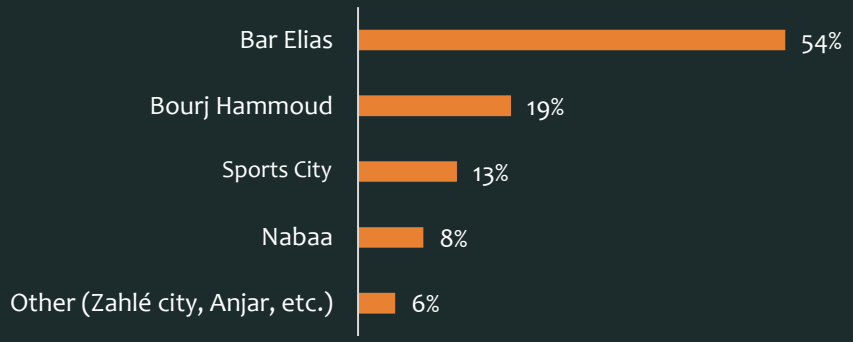
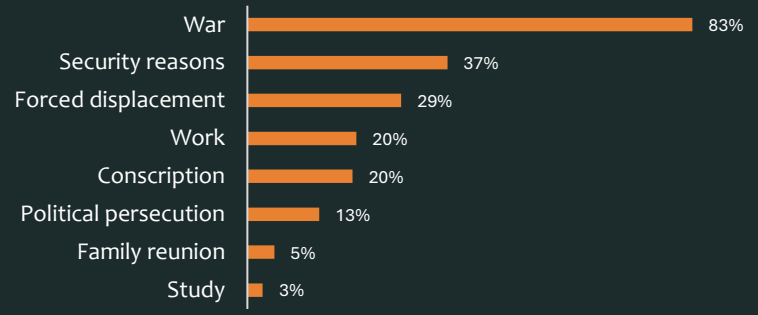


Fig. 3. Place of Residence



- Reported reasons for initial displacement were primarily conflict-driven, with 83% citing war and violence, 37% forced displacement, 20% conscription and 13% political persecution (multiple responses).
- These patterns confirm that the sample largely falls within internationally recognised grounds for refugee status.

Fig. 4. For what reasons did you first come to Lebanon (multiple choice)?



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LEBANESE HOST COMMUNITY RESPONDENT PROFILES

The Lebanese host community sample (n=117) reflected a gender-diverse population across the same geographic areas, enabling structured comparison with Syrian refugee respondents.

- The sample included 117 validated Lebanese host community responses retained after data cleaning.
- The gender distribution reflects representation of both man and woman respondents.
- Respondents were drawn from Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut suburbs, mirroring the geographic distribution of the Syrian refugee sample.
- This sample provided a comparative baseline for analysing host community perspectives in relation to refugee presence and return dynamics.

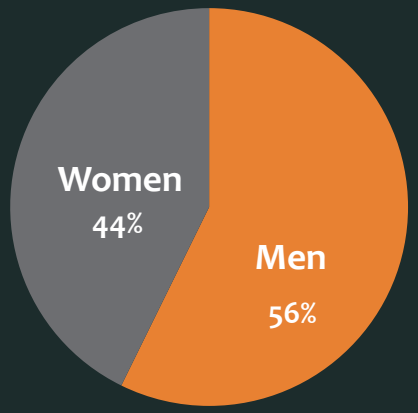


Fig. 5. Lebanese Respondents' Sex

Fig. 6. Host Community Respondents' Place of Residence

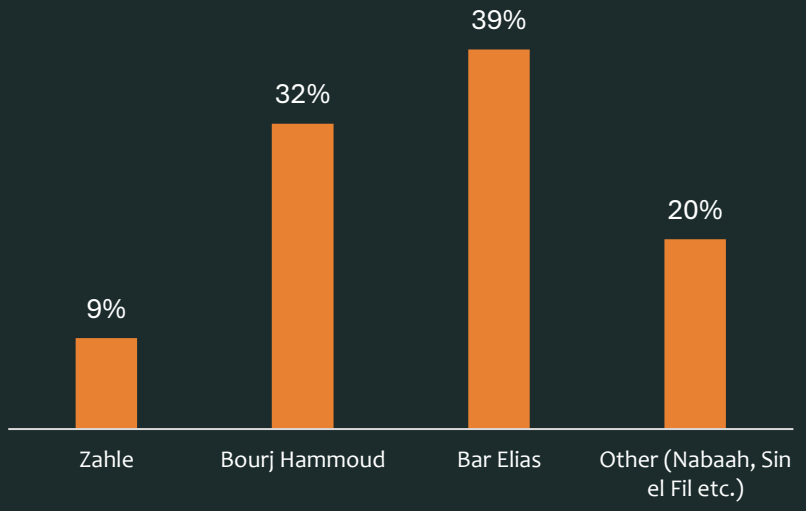
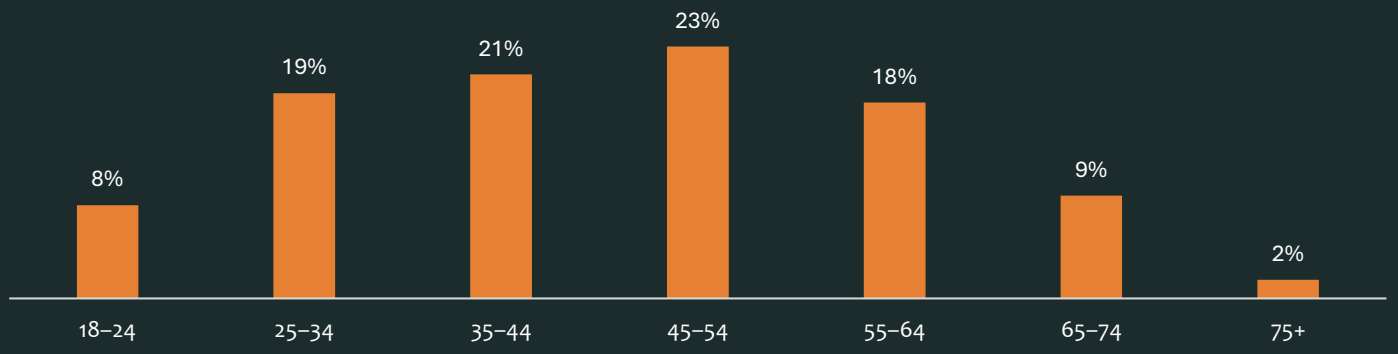


Fig. 7. Host Community Respondents by Age



- Age distribution was broad and multi-generational, with strongest participation among groups aged between 45 and 54.

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Main Findings



RETURN INTENTIONS

One of the most striking findings concerns overall return intentions. Data show that the majority of Syrian refugee respondents did not intend to return to Syria. Of those who did, almost half changed their minds during the last year.

- The decision-making process of Syrian refugees is complex, shaped by various drivers and determinants as exposed later throughout this study. Perceptions of return were not uniform across refugee respondents.
- Almost two-third of respondents expressed not intending to return to Syria (64%). Around 4% did not know if they intend to return. Of the remaining one-third (32%) who expressed willingness to return, almost half decided to do so after the regime change in Syria back in December 2024.
- Women expressed more reluctance to return (70% of negative answers compared to 56% among man respondents). The data show that this is largely due to concerns over reduced social freedoms, children education, as well as fears related to gender-based violence and early marriage in Syria.
- Men, who were often the primary decision-makers in the household, tended to prioritise employment opportunities and property considerations and were more frequently the first to consider or attempt return.



64%

Of refugee respondents **did not intend** to return to Syria



45%

Out of those who wanted to return in January, **did not want to do so** before December 2024



70%

Of **women** respondents **did not intend** to return



56%

Of **men** respondents **did not intend** to return

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REASONS FOR NON-RETURN

Among respondents expressing unwillingness to return (64%), the main obstacles were linked to Syria's deteriorated economic, housing and service conditions, while children's education in Lebanon emerged as a major factor encouraging continued stay.

- The most frequently cited obstacles to return were the economic situation in Syria (87%), lack of housing (82%), and deteriorated services (62%) and infrastructure (54%), highlighting the predominance of livelihood and living condition concerns in shaping reluctance to return.
- Security-related concerns nevertheless remained significant, with 53% of respondents citing insecurity in Syria and 31% expressing fear of persecution or arrest upon return, even after over a year since the regime change.
- Within the Lebanese context, children's school enrolment emerged as a major factor encouraging continued stay, cited by 30% of respondents unwilling to return.
- Qualitative findings reinforced the centrality of economic considerations, as respondents consistently compared relatively higher income opportunities in Lebanon with Syria's deteriorated economic situation and low wages, even among qualified professionals.
- Education also emerged as a key factor shaping delayed return strategies, with many parents expressing concerns regarding curriculum differences, educational continuity, and the perceived higher quality and recognition of Lebanese educational certificates.

TOP 3 OBSTACLES TO RETURN

87%

Economic Situation in Syria

82%

Lack of Housing in Syria

62%

Lack of Basic Services in Syria

ADDITIONAL OBSTACLES TO RETURN

53%

Security Concerns in Syria

31%

Fear of Persecution or Arrest in Syria

30%

Children Enrollment in Lebanese Schools

May 2026

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COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS FINDINGS

Compared to previous UNHCR findings, and while not fully comparable, the results indicate a declining trend in intentions to return within the next 12 months. This may reflect seasonal cross-sectional effects or be linked to perceptions of instability in Syria, particularly during the fieldwork period.

- A comparison with UNHCR findings suggests evolving patterns in how Syrian refugees articulate return intentions, with respondents increasingly expressing differentiated rather than binary positions regarding return.
- While long-term aspirations to return remained relatively consistent across UNHCR studies in 2025 – at 81% in February 2025 and 80% in June 2025 – this study found that 46% of respondents envisaged return only "someday, but were unsure when", reflecting greater temporal uncertainty regarding return planning.
- Intentions to return within the next 12 months appear to follow a declining trend over time. Whereas 24% of respondents in UNHCR February 2025 findings intended to return within one year, UNHCR June 2025 findings recorded 14%, alongside only 6% remaining unsure.
- The declining trend continued in this study, with 11% expressing intentions to return within the next 12 months, while only 4% remained undecided.
- The comparatively lower short-term return intentions observed in this study may reflect several factors, including continued instability and unrest in Syria during the January 2026 fieldwork period, seasonal effects linked to winter conditions, and the possibility that some respondents previously intending to return had already done so by the time of data collection.

Intentions to return to Syria within the next 12 months*

	UNHCR February 2025	UNHCR June 2025	USJ - ArMA January 2026
Yes	24%	14%	11%
Don't know/ undecided	21%	6%	4%

**Note: There is a slight methodological difference with UNHCR surveys. UNHCR asked, "Do you intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months?", whereas this study asked, "Do you intend to return to Syria?". Respondents who answered "yes" were then asked when they intended to return, including whether within the next 12 months. The 11% figure corresponds with this follow-up. Similarly, the "don't know/undecided" category in this study refers to all responses, whereas in UNHCR data it applies specifically to intentions within the next 12 months.*

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COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS FINDINGS

In line with Basmeh & Zeitooneh findings throughout 2025, results show that while many Syrian refugees expressed an intention to return, most remained uncertain about the timing, reflecting persistent ambiguity in return planning.

- Consistent with Basmeh & Zeitooneh (February, May and September 2025), the majority of Syrian refugee respondents who intend to return remain unsure about when they will do so.
- The next largest groups among those who reported intentions to return were those intending return within the next 12 months (33%) and within one to two years (16%), mirroring the distribution observed in Basmeh & Zeitooneh findings (2025).
- These patterns highlight persistent uncertainty regarding the timing of return, shaped by ongoing constraints and risks in both Lebanon and Syria.
- Overall, the findings underscore that while return aspirations are widespread, they are not yet matched by clear or immediate return plans.



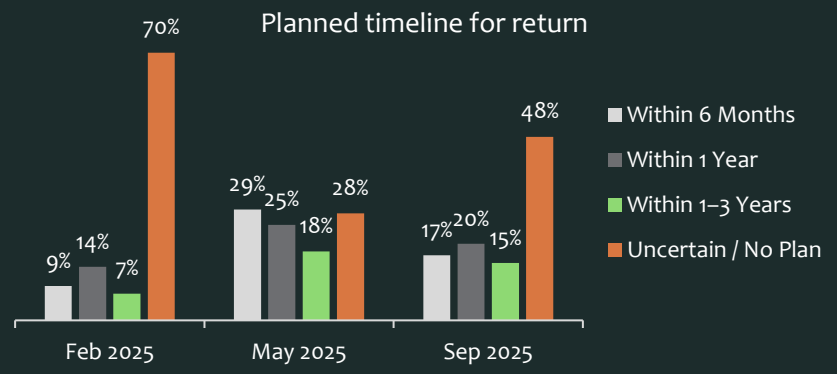


Fig. 8. Basmeh & Zeitooneh 2025

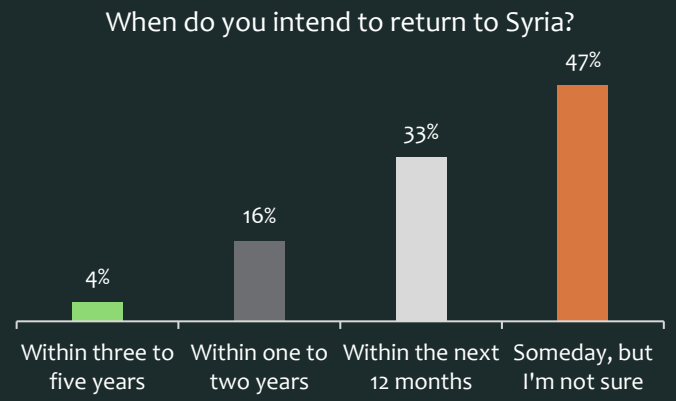


Fig. 9. USJ – ArMA January 2026

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HOST COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

While nearly half of the Lebanese respondents perceived the Syrian refugee's presence negatively, the majority expressed either positive or neutral feelings.

- The perception of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was very negative (20%) or negative (23%) in most of cases, though 30% of Lebanese respondents perceived their presence very positively or positively.
- These attitudes are shaped by a range of interconnected factors, including economic strain, competition over resources, and broader governance challenges.

> *"I am racist and I don't want Syrians in Lebanon."*
>
> *Host community member, Bourj Hammoud*

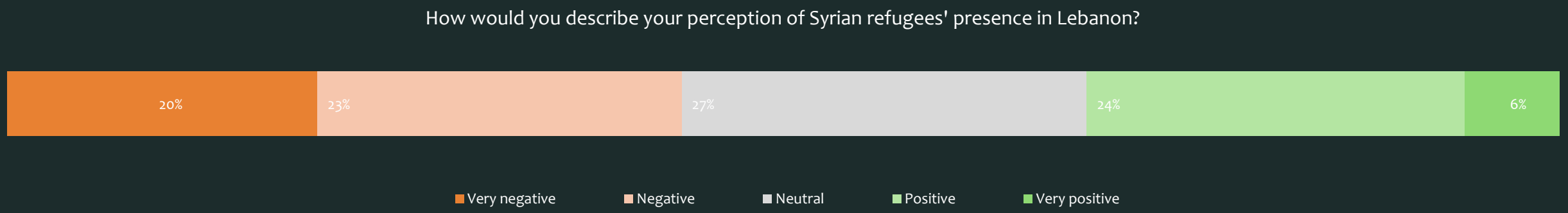


Fig. 10. Perception of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

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REGIONAL AND SECTARIAN VARIATIONS

Host community perceptions of Syrian refugees differed significantly across regions and sectarian backgrounds, with Sunni Lebanese respondents in Central Bekaa expressing more positive perceptions than Christian respondents in Greater Beirut.

- Significant regional variation emerged between Central Bekaa and Greater Beirut, with Lebanese respondents in Greater Beirut expressing more negative perceptions towards Syrian refugees.
- Sectarian differences were also evident, with the most negative perceptions recorded among Christian respondents (62%), followed by Shia (60%), and Sunni Muslim respondents being the least negative (20%).
- Respondents and key informants linked more positive perceptions in Central Bekaa to long-term coexistence, social familiarity, and shared economic interests between Lebanese and Syrian populations.
- Economic interdependence also shaped perceptions, as many Lebanese landlords and business owners relied on Syrian rental income and labour.
- By contrast, Greater Beirut's mixed sectarian environment was associated with higher levels of discrimination and stronger perceptions of economic competition, particularly in Christian- and Shia-majority areas where refugees were frequently blamed for pressure on jobs and services.

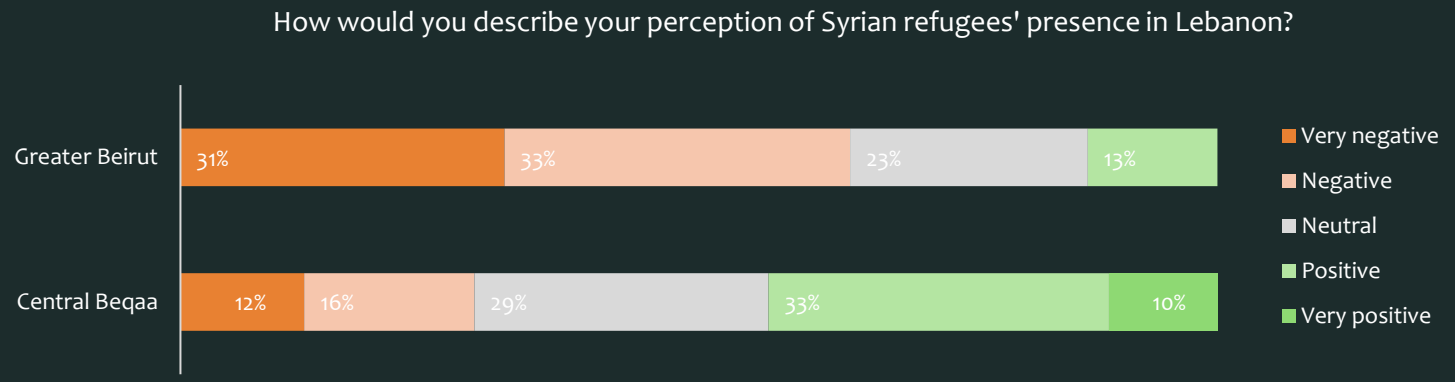


Fig. 11. Perception of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by place of residency

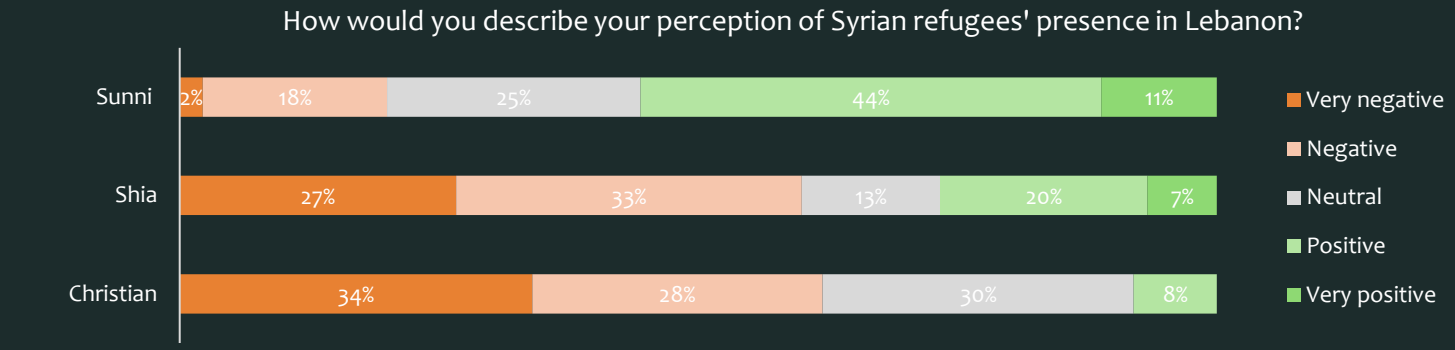


Fig. 12. Perception of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by sect

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HOSTS PERCEPTIONS ON RETURN

Host community perceptions of Syrian refugee return appeared highly complex and often contradictory, reflecting simultaneous concerns over labour competition, economic pressures and structural dependence on Syrian labour within various sectors of the Lebanese economy.

- Overall, host community perceptions appeared neither uniformly hostile nor supportive, but rather shaped by competing concerns regarding economic pressures, labour market dependence and the feasibility of sustainable return to Syria.
- The majority of Lebanese respondents preferred voluntary return frameworks, with 51% supporting incentivised voluntary return through financial assistance or organised programmes, followed by 27% supporting exclusively voluntary return. Meanwhile, 13% supported forced return and 9% supported return "through any possible means."
- When asked about the expected effects of Syrian return on Lebanon, 73% believed it would create more job opportunities for Lebanese, while 68% expected lower rental prices. At the same time, 65% believed Syrian return would generate labour shortages in Lebanon (fig. 13).
- Further reinforcing this complexity, 70% of respondents stated that they would employ Syrians if they owned a business, suggesting continued recognition of Syrian labour as economically necessary despite broader concerns regarding labour competition, particularly in sectors dependent on low-cost and informal labour.
- While 44% found Syria being adequate for living (fig. 14), Lebanese respondents identified the lack of employment opportunities in Syria (45%), Syria's security situation (44%), and economic instability (44%) as the principal obstacles for return.

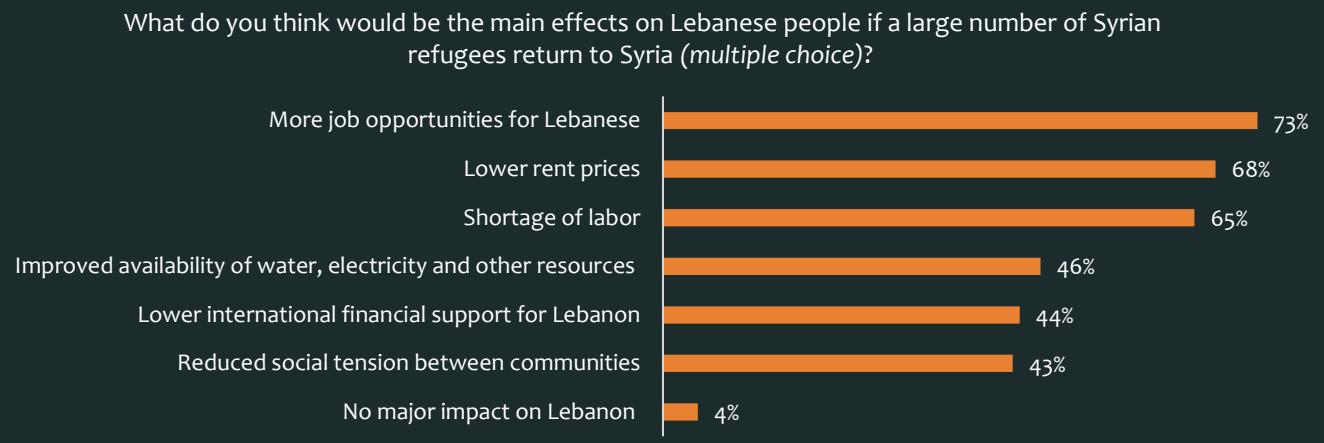


Fig. 13. Perceived impacts of large-scale Syrian refugee return on Lebanese communities

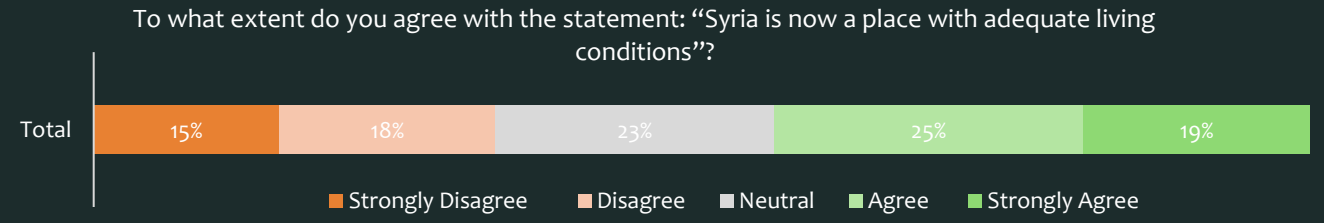


Fig. 14. Lebanese perceptions of living conditions in Syria

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Determinants of Return



GENDER AS A DETERMINANT

Gender emerged as a major determinant of return migration, with women refugee respondents expressing significantly lower willingness to return than men and adopting more cautious, longer-term return perspectives.

- One of the study's most significant findings is the marked difference in return intentions between men and women respondents, with 70% of women expressing no intention to return compared to 56% of men.
- Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that men are more likely to consider return and are widely perceived as primary household decision-makers regarding mobility and return strategies.
- By contrast, women tended to assess return more cautiously and over a longer time horizon, often prioritising children's education, family stability, and living conditions.
- Stakeholders framed women's reluctance to return differently depending on their professional background. NGO staff frequently emphasised protection concerns, gender-based violence risks and reduced rights in Syria, while teachers and local actors focused more on education continuity and household well-being.
- Men were often described as "move makers", either returning temporarily to assess conditions in Syria or remaining in Lebanon for work while other family members returned, reflecting phased and negotiated return strategies within households.



70%

Of **women** respondents **did not intend** to return



56%

Of **men** respondents **did not intend** to return

> *"In the end, I will be forced to leave by my husband, and not by the Lebanese government."*
>
> *Syrian Refugee woman, Bar Elias, Central Bekaa.*

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AGE AS A DETERMINANT

Age did not appear to constitute a major determinant of refugee return, although respondents in their forties and fifties expressed slightly greater willingness to return, while qualitative findings indicated stronger reluctance among younger generations raised in Lebanon.

- Age did not appear to play a decisive role in shaping return perceptions, as attitudes remained relatively consistent across most age groups (among adult respondents).
- Respondents in their forties and fifties expressed slightly greater willingness to return to Syria, with 35% return intentions, as they tended to express stronger emotional and social attachment to Syria.
- Qualitative findings nevertheless revealed a clearer generational divide, particularly among younger Syrians born or raised in Lebanon, who were widely described as more resistant to return.
- In line with Basmeh & Zeitooneh's (2025) findings, younger respondents were frequently reported as expressing stronger attachment to Lebanon due to schooling trajectories, social networks and future aspirations developed over years of displacement.

> *My child doesn't want to be considered Syrian but Lebanese.*
>
> *Syrian Refugee mother, Bar Elias, Central Bekaa.*

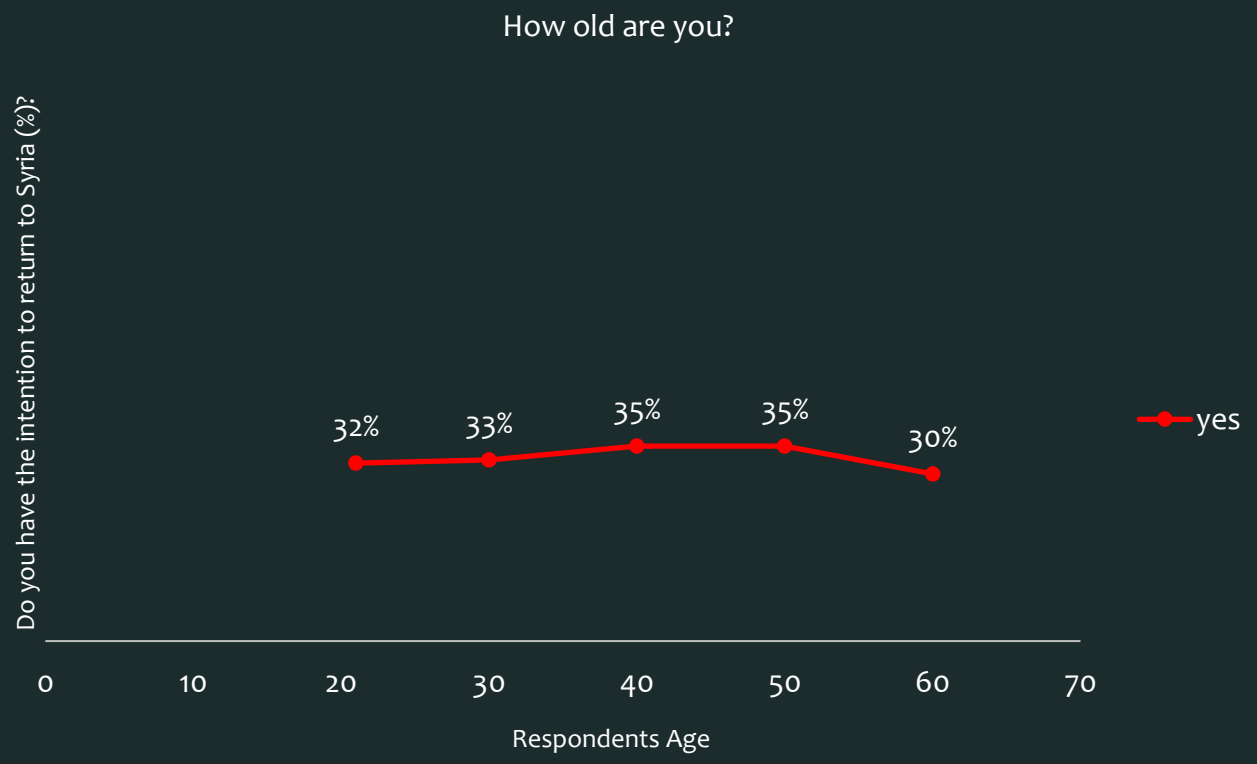


Fig. 15. Return intentions by age groups

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MARITAL STATUS AS A DETERMINANT

Marital status did not appear to constitute a major determinant of return migration among Syrian refugees. However, single respondents expressed comparatively greater willingness to return than married, divorced, widowed, or separated respondents.

- Across all marital status categories, most respondents expressed no intention to return to Syria, suggesting that broader structural and contextual factors outweigh marital status in shaping return perceptions.
- Single respondents expressed the highest return willingness (42%), possibly reflecting greater mobility, lower household responsibilities and fewer dependency-related constraints compared to other groups.
- By contrast, return intentions declined among married respondents (33%) and were particularly limited among divorced (15%), widowed (9%) and separated respondents (7%).
- The especially low willingness among widowed and separated respondents may reflect heightened socioeconomic vulnerability, caregiving burdens and reduced capacity to absorb the risks associated with return and reintegration.
- Overall, while marital status shapes certain patterns of vulnerability and mobility, differences between groups remain insufficient to suggest that it is a primary determinant of return intention.

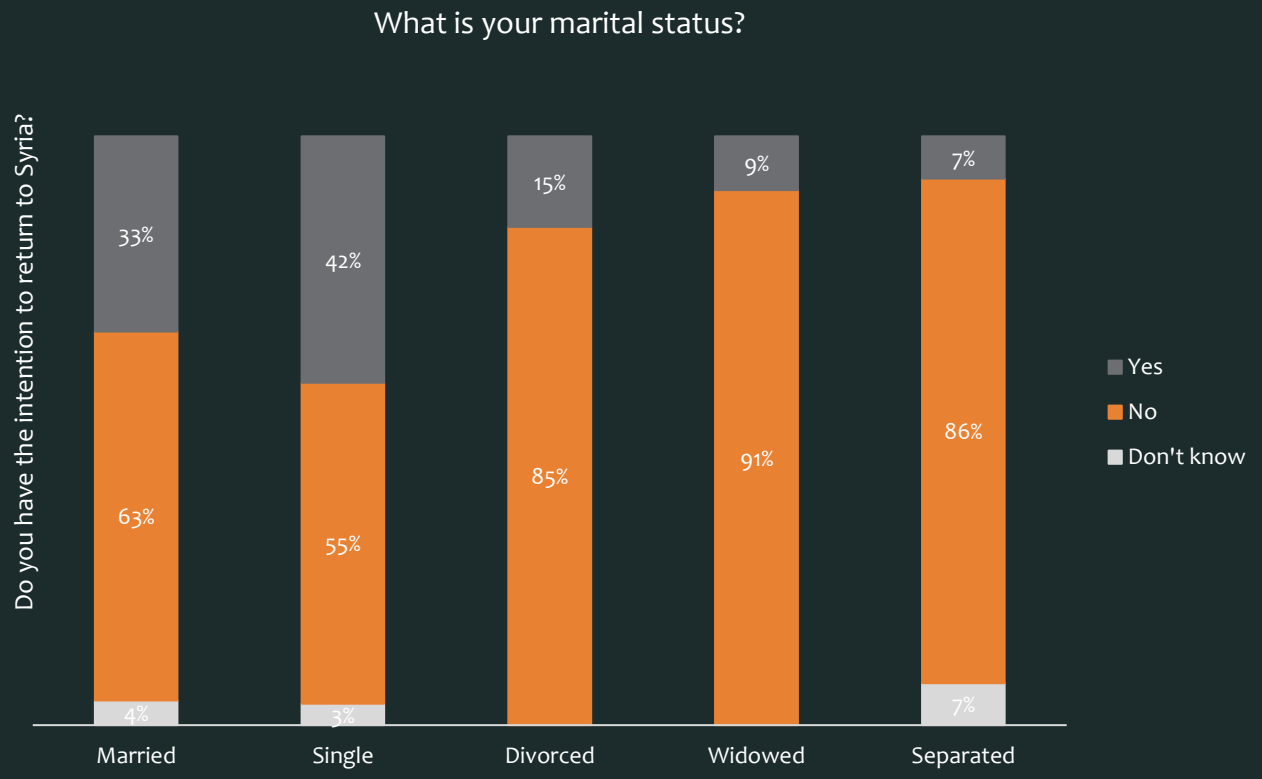


Fig. 16. Distribution of respondents' intention to return to Syria, disaggregated by marital status

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PARENTAL STATUS AS A DETERMINANT

Parental status appeared to constitute a comparatively strong determinant of return migration, with respondents with children expressing significantly lower willingness to return to Syria than those without children.

- Most respondents in the sample reported having children (85%), making parental status a significant demographic characteristic in this study, with related responsibilities emerging as a central factor shaping return perceptions and decision-making.
- Respondents with children expressed substantially lower willingness to return, with 68% indicating no intention to return compared to 32% expressing return intentions.
- Among respondents without children, attitudes towards return were more balanced, with 57% expressing no intention to return and 43% considering return.
- The findings suggest that the presence of dependent children significantly widens the gap between intentions to stay and return, indicating that family-related concerns strongly shape mobility decisions.
- Qualitative findings further explain this trend, as parents frequently framed return decisions through a "future-first" assessment centred on children's safety, education, stability, and long-term prospects.
- Concerns repeatedly raised by respondents included insecurity, kidnapping, criminality and future military conscription, all of which contributed to greater reluctance towards return among households with children.

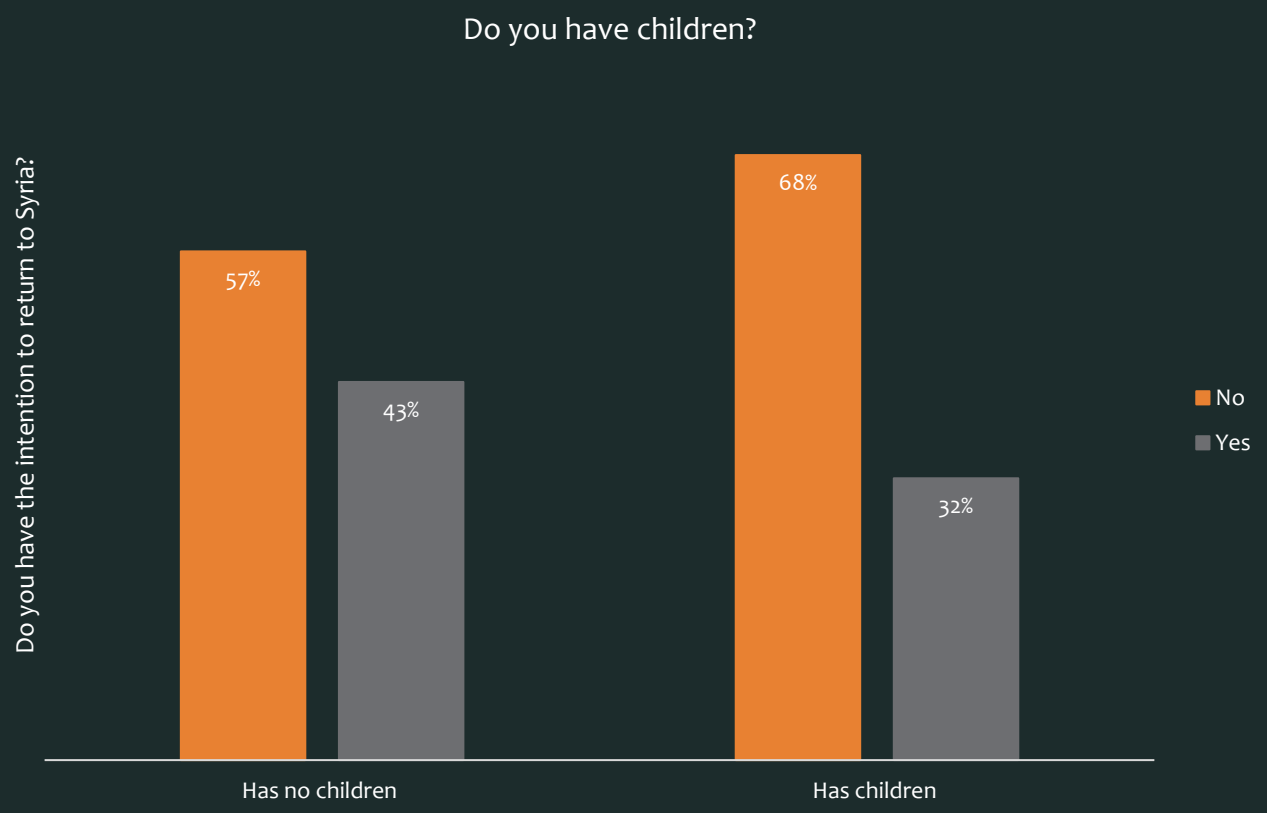


Fig. 17. Distribution of return Intentions to Syria by presence of children in the household

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EDUCATION AS A DETERMINANT

Educational attainment appeared to be a moderate determinant of refugee return, with technically trained and more educated respondents expressing relatively greater openness towards return compared to lower-educated groups.

- Return intentions remain relatively low among respondents with lower educational attainment, with 68% of primary school respondents and 66% of illiterate respondents expressing no intention to return.
- Return willingness increased moderately among respondents with secondary education, where 36% expressed an intention to return compared to 64% who did not.
- Respondents with university education also showed comparatively higher openness towards return, with 40% expressing return intentions. This may indicate that individuals with higher education feel slightly more confident in their ability to reintegrate or secure opportunities upon return.
- The highest return intention appears among respondents with technical or vocational training, where 45% expressed willingness to return. This could suggest that practical skills are perceived as more transferable and in demand in Syria's reconstruction or labour market.
- Overall, the findings suggest a moderate relationship between educational profile and return intentions, with technically skilled and more educated respondents appearing to hold relatively higher return capabilities than lower-educated groups.

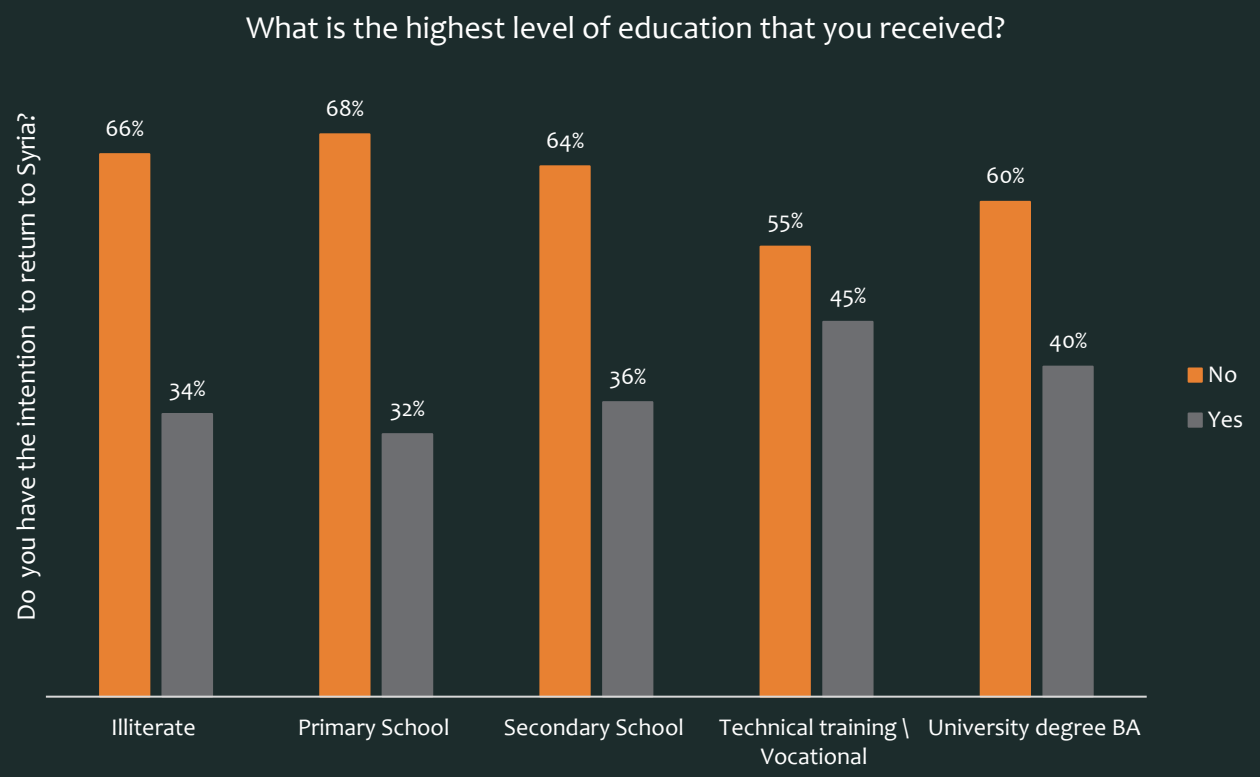


Fig. 18. Return Intentions by level of education

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TIME AS A DETERMINANT

Length of stay in Lebanon did not appear to follow a consistent pattern in predicting return intentions, suggesting that displacement duration interacts with other structural and demographic determinants rather than independently shaping return aspirations.

- Return intentions fluctuated considerably across years of stay in Lebanon, with the proportion of respondents expressing no intention to return ranging from 50% among those displaced for six years to 85% among those displaced for nine years, without a clear linear trend.
- Higher levels of reluctance towards return were observed among respondents displaced for eight to ten years (75%–85%) and among those who arrived approximately three years ago (80%), potentially reflecting the traumatic conflict dynamics surrounding their displacement, including the violent fall of major opposition-held areas such as East Aleppo, Damascus suburbs and Daraa.
- Among respondents with the longest displacement trajectories (14–15 years), the proportion expressing no intention to return declines to 58%–54%, possibly indicating stronger emotional attachment to pre-war Syria and longer-term aspirations for eventual return.
- Qualitative findings suggest that return decisions are shaped less by duration of displacement itself than by broader factors such as education, place of origin and perception of safety. Key informants also noted stronger reluctance among younger generations raised in Lebanon, compared to older generations who expressed greater attachment to Syria.

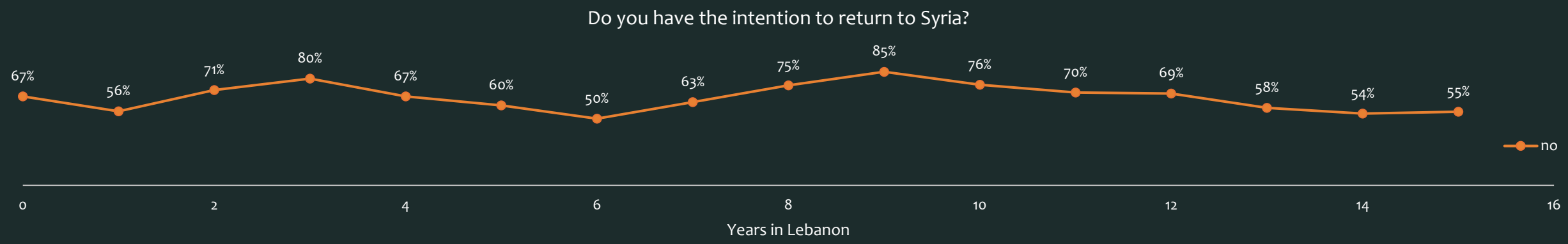


Fig. 19. Return intentions by years of stay in Lebanon

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PLACE OF ORIGIN AS A DETERMINANT

Return intentions appeared partially influenced by respondents' pre-displacement place of residence in Syria, reflecting uneven security, economic and infrastructural conditions across Syrian governorates.

- Findings are based on respondents' place of residence in Syria prior to displacement rather than familial place of origin or civil registry affiliation.
- Higher levels of reluctance towards return were recorded among respondents from Deir ez-Zor (73%), Aleppo (72%) and Rif Dimashq (69%), while respondents from Idlib expressed comparatively lower reluctance (53%).
- The comparatively higher reluctance among respondents from Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor may reflect continued instability in northern and eastern Syria, particularly ongoing clashes involving Syrian authorities and SDF forces during the January 2026 fieldwork period.
- By contrast, respondents from Idlib appeared relatively more open towards return, potentially reflecting comparatively improved perceptions regarding Syria's new political setup.
- Respondents from Rif Dimashq frequently associated return with attachment to property and local belonging, although many still expressed reluctance due to housing destruction, economic deterioration, insecurity, and limited services.
- Qualitative findings further highlighted stronger reluctance among respondents originating from areas experiencing continued violence like the Northeast, Coastal Syria and Suwayda, or by the Israeli occupation like Quneitra.

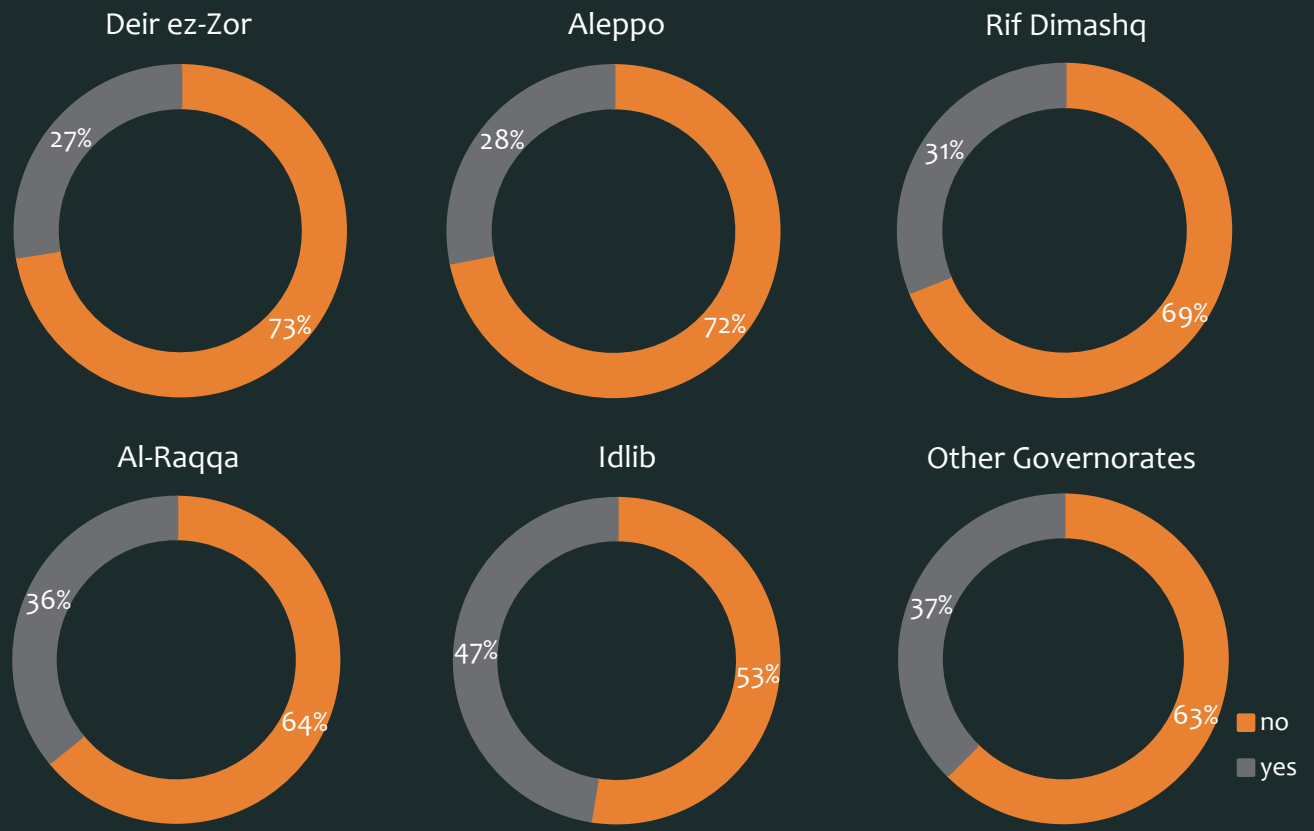


Fig. 20. Return intentions according to pre-displacement residence in Syria

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PERCEIVED SECURITY RISKS AS A DETERMINANT

Perceived security risks or threats in Syria emerged as major determinants of return intentions. However, the findings also suggest that security factors alone are insufficient to explain non-return, as many respondents unwilling to return reported perceiving no direct security risks or threats.

- Among respondents perceiving personal or household security threats in Syria, 84% expressed no intention to return, confirming that perceived insecurity functions as a major barrier to voluntary return.
- Nevertheless, 16% of respondents perceiving security threats still expressed intentions to return, suggesting that pressures experienced in Lebanon may lead some refugees to consider return despite ongoing insecurity concerns.
- Crucially, even among respondents who reported perceiving no direct security risks in Syria, a majority (58%) still expressed unwillingness to return, compared to 42% who intended to return.
- These findings suggest that while security remains a necessary condition for return, non-security factors increasingly shape refugees' decision-making regarding return aspirations.
- Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern, as NGO and UNHCR staff consistently identified economic collapse, lack of housing, unemployment and weak access to basic services in Syria as outweighing security concerns among many refugees unwilling to return.

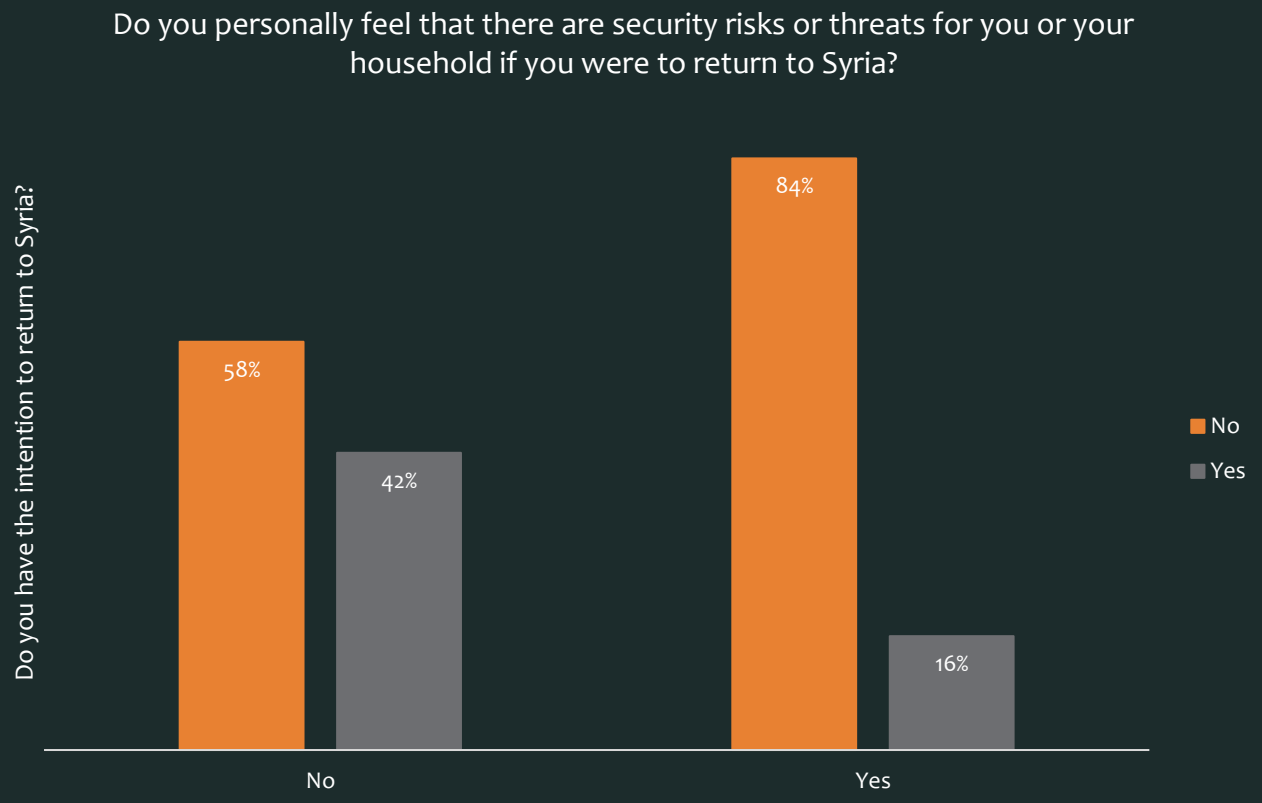


Fig. 21. Return intentions according to perceived security risks or threats in Syria

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PERCEIVED REGIONAL RISKS AS A DETERMINANT

Further disaggregating perceived security risks by respondents' regions of origin adds an additional analytical layer to previous findings, showing that the relationship between security perceptions and return intentions varies significantly across Syrian governorates.

- Among respondents from Idlib who reported perceiving no direct security threats, a slight majority (52%) expressed intentions to return, reinforcing earlier findings suggesting comparatively improved perceptions regarding Syria's new political setup in the region.
- By contrast, respondents from Deir ez-Zor remained significantly more reluctant towards return despite perceiving no direct threats, with 64% still expressing unwillingness to return.
- These findings suggest that security perceptions interact differently with local conditions across Syrian regions, rather than shaping return intentions uniformly.
- The comparatively stronger reluctance observed among respondents from Deir ez-Zor appeared consistent with earlier findings regarding continued instability in northern and eastern Syria, particularly ongoing clashes involving Syrian authorities and SDF forces during the January 2026 fieldwork period.
- The findings therefore reinforce earlier results showing that place of pre-displacement residence constitutes an important determinant of return intentions, particularly when cross-tabulated with regional security perceptions.

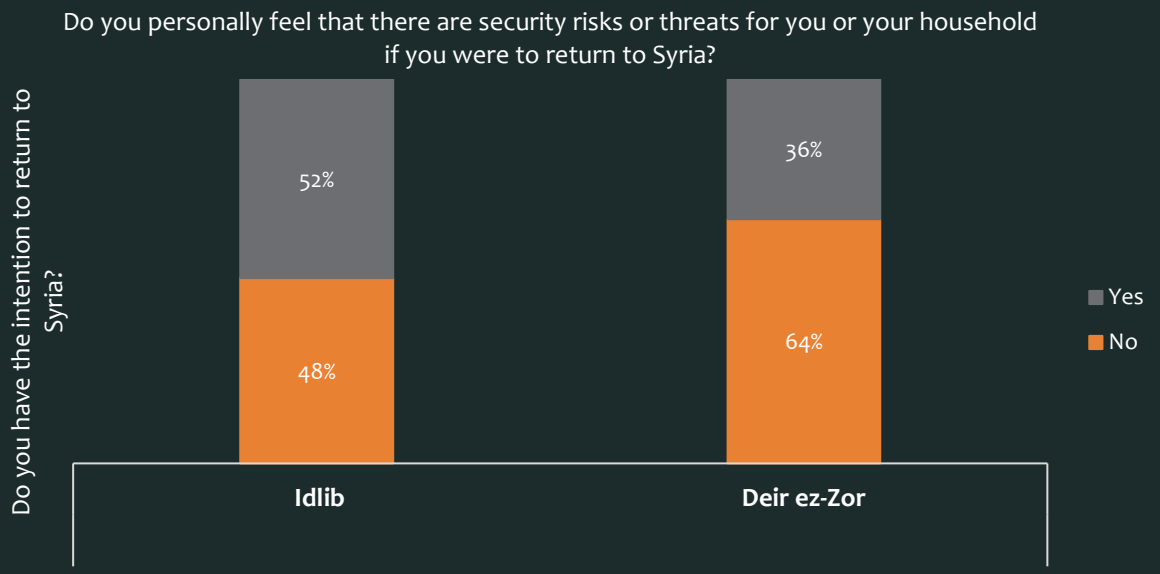


Fig. 22. Return intentions according to perceived security risks or threats in Syria

> *"The war in Syria has just started now!"*
>
> *Syrian Refugee from Deir ez-Zor, Bourj Hammoud.*

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PLACE OF RESIDENCE AS A DETERMINANT

Place of residence in Lebanon also emerged as a major determinant of return intentions, probably reflecting the influence of local host community dynamics, sectarian environments, and differing histories of displacement and integration across regions.

- Return intentions varied significantly across areas of Syrian refugees' residence in Lebanon, with the highest levels of reluctance towards return recorded around Sports City (83%), followed by Central Bekaa (63%), Bourj Hammoud (59%) and Nabaa (51%).
- The exceptionally high reluctance observed around Sports City may reflect stronger social integration within areas historically shaped by overlapping migration and displacement dynamics and long-standing Palestinian refugee presence around Sabra and Shatila, where refugee communities have historically coexisted and developed informal support networks.
- The second-highest proportion of reluctance towards return was recorded in Central Bekaa. This may be linked to the area's Sunni-majority host environment, geographic proximity to Syria, stronger social and economic interdependence – including reported intermarriages and Syrian-owned businesses – and longer histories of coexistence between Lebanese and Syrian populations as highlighted in qualitative findings.
- The findings also align with broader host community perception patterns identified in the study, whereby Christian- and Shia-majority areas in Greater Beirut expressed comparatively more negative perceptions towards Syrian refugees (62% and 60% respectively) than Sunni-majority areas (20%).

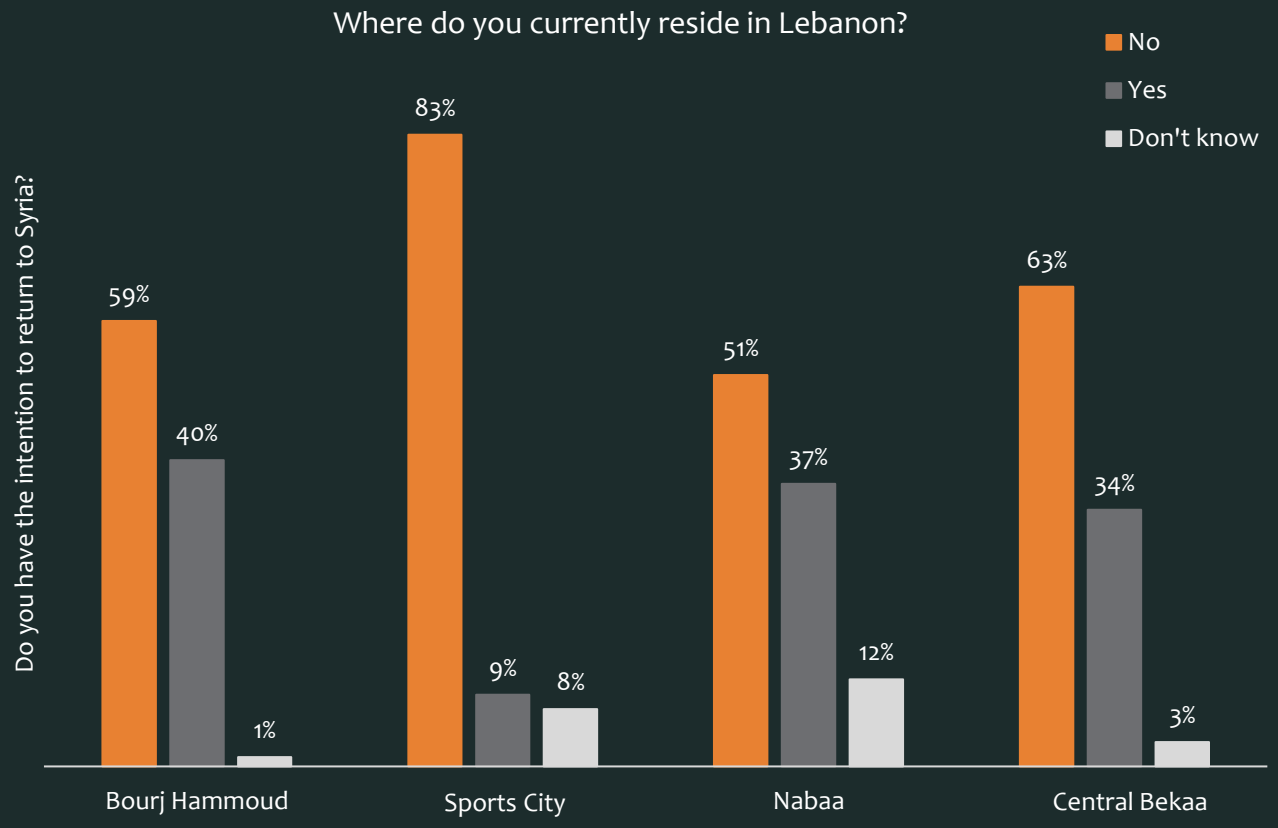


Fig. 23. Return intentions according to place of residence in Lebanon

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REFUGEE-HOST RELATIONSHIP AS A DETERMINANT

Building on the previous finding, refugees' relationship with the host community appeared to constitute a strong determinant of return migration, with respondents experiencing higher social hostility expressing a significantly higher urgency to return to Syria than those experiencing positive relations.

- Perceptions of social cohesion varied noticeably between regions, aligning with the localised host community dynamics identified across Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa.
- In Central Bekaa, a significant 66% majority of respondents evaluated their relationship with the host community positively (37% good, 29% very good), reflecting stronger social interdependence in this Sunni-majority area.
- Conversely, Greater Beirut exhibited heightened social friction, with 10% reporting a bad or very bad relationship with the host community, mirroring the more negative host perceptions in Christian- and Shia-majority neighborhoods as presented earlier.
- The relationship with the host community appears to act as a powerful determinant of return migration that directly shapes refugee calculations. Among respondents reporting positive integration (good or very good), these relationships are largely viewed as not influential in their migration calculus (55% and 42% respectively), meaning their choice to remain is anchored by other structural factors.
- However, as relations degrade into bad or very bad categories, an extreme behavioural shift occurs: a staggering 88% and 75% majority reported that host community friction is a highly influential factor determining their return decision.

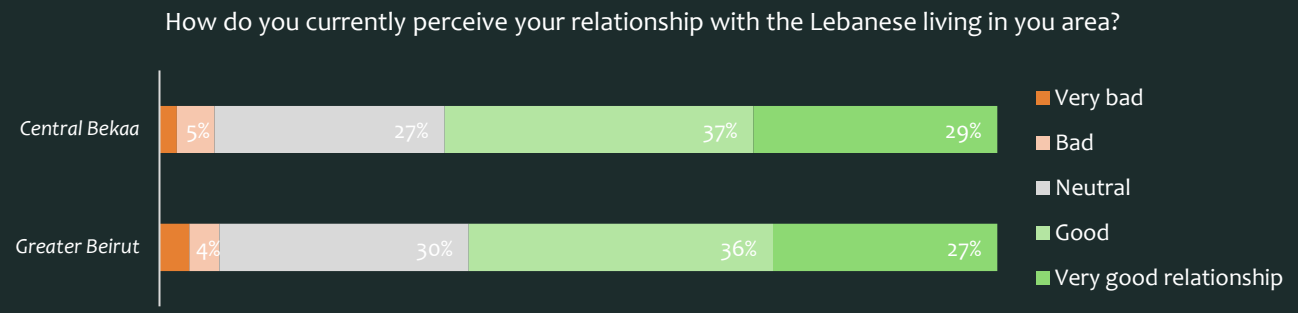


Fig. 24. Perceived social relations with the host community

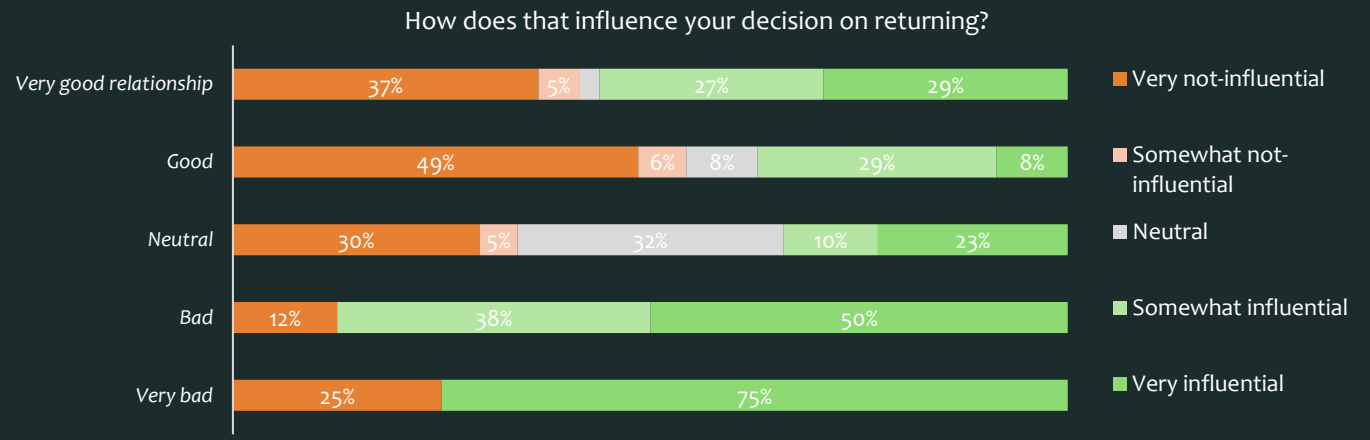


Fig. 25. Impact of perceived host community relations on return Intentions

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HOUSING AS A DETERMINANT

Housing conditions in Lebanon appeared to slightly influence return intentions, with refugees living in non-permanent shelters – like tented settlements –expressing comparatively higher willingness to return than those residing in more stable residential housing.

- Refugees living in non-permanent shelters expressed comparatively higher return intentions (37%) than those residing in residential housing (32%), suggesting that greater housing stability in Lebanon may reduce incentives to return.
- Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern, as respondents frequently associated stable housing and employment in Lebanon with reduced willingness to return despite ongoing hardship and precarity.
- At the same time, many respondents described housing conditions in Syria as an even greater obstacle to return, particularly due to widespread destruction, unaffordable rents and risks of homelessness upon return.
- The findings therefore suggest that housing insecurity operates in both directions: precarious shelter conditions in Lebanon may encourage return aspirations, while the absence of viable housing in Syria simultaneously constrains the practical possibility of return.
- In Central Bekaa's tented settlements, qualitative findings additionally pointed to exploitative power relations involving *shawishes*, particularly regarding labour mediation, mobility control and access to assistance, further shaping refugees' everyday precarity and dependency structures: thus, affecting return aspirations.

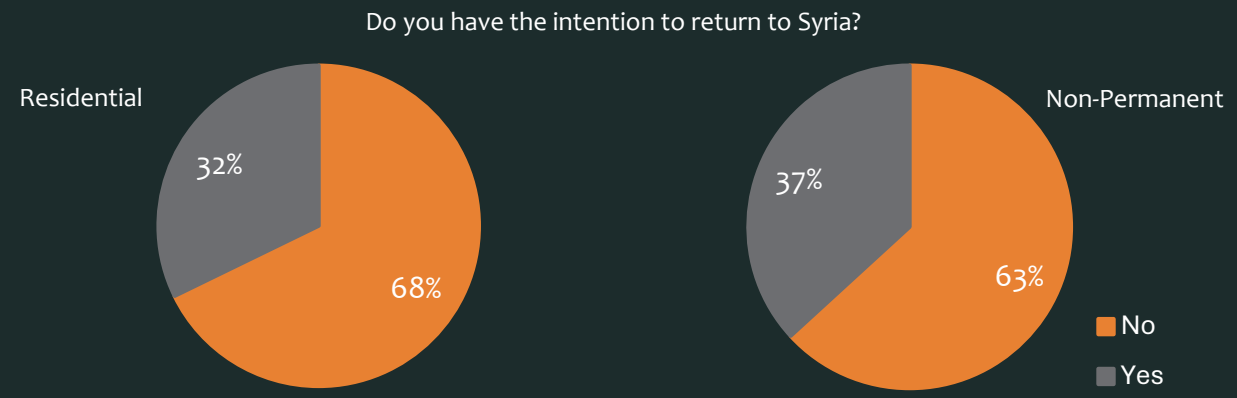


Fig. 26. Return intentions and type of housing

> *"At least here I have a tent. If I go back to Syria, I don't have anything. Why should I go back?"*
>
> *Syrian Refugee man, Bar Elias, Central Bekaa.*

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PERCEIVED SAFETY AS A DETERMINANT

While most respondents reported feeling generally safe in Lebanon, refugees expressing return intentions reported comparatively higher levels of perceived insecurity, suggesting that safety perceptions in Lebanon may contribute to return aspirations.

- Regardless of their return intentions, the majority of respondents reported feeling either "very safe" or "somewhat safe" in Lebanon, accounting for 70% of those intending to return and 72% of those unwilling to return.
- Nevertheless, respondents expressing return intentions reported comparatively higher perceptions of insecurity, with 23% of those intending to return describing themselves as feeling unsafe in Lebanon compared to 13% among those not intending to return.
- These findings suggest that insecurity and instability experienced in Lebanon may function as contributing determinants of return aspirations despite ongoing challenges inside Syria.
- Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern, with several respondents associating insecurity with army raids, deportation fears, changing residency regulations and broader perceptions of discrimination and hostility towards Syrians in Lebanon.
- The findings align with existing literature arguing that exclusionary policies and hostile social environments in host countries may increase aspirations to return, even when conditions for sustainable return remain uncertain.

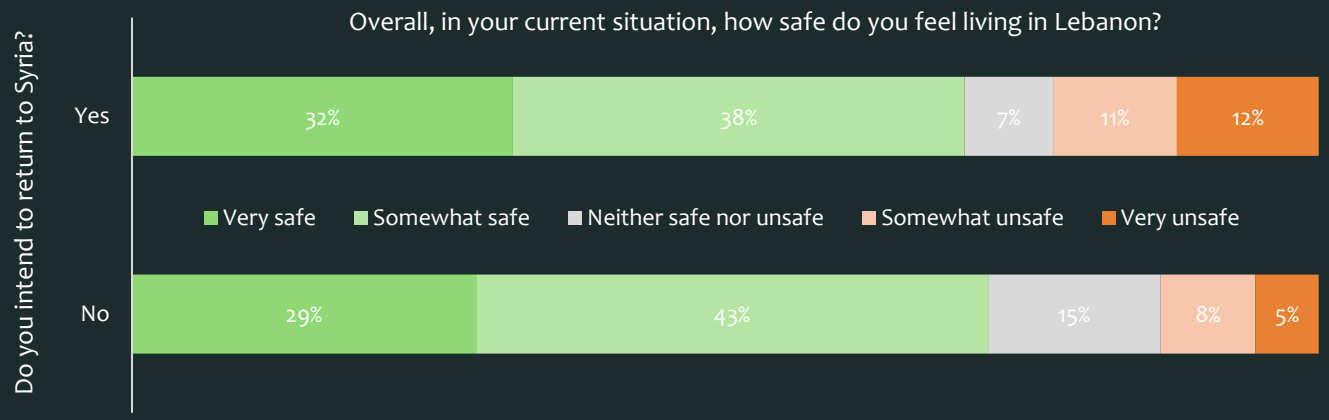


Fig. 27. Return intentions and safety perceptions in Lebanon

> *Even if they were to give me all of Syria, I wouldn't go back!*
>
> *Syrian Refugee woman, Bar Elias, Central Bekaa.*

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PERCEIVED SAFETY AS A GENDERED DETERMINANT

Women Syrian refugee respondents reported feeling comparatively safer in Lebanon than men, suggesting that gendered perceptions of safety, protection, and social stability may partially explain women's lower intentions to return to Syria.

- The majority of both women (74%) and men (65%) reported feeling generally safe in Lebanon, although women expressed comparatively higher levels of perceived safety.
- Women were more likely to report feeling "very safe" in Lebanon (35%) compared to men (23%), while perceptions of insecurity remained comparatively higher among men.
- These findings may partially explain why women expressed lower intentions to return to Syria compared to men respondents throughout the study.
- Qualitative findings suggest that women associated safety in Lebanon with greater personal freedom, access to services, educational continuity and protection mechanisms perceived as less accessible in Syria.
- Respondents also frequently associated safety with social belonging, stable community relations and the absence of active large-scale conflict in Lebanon during the January 2026 fieldwork period.

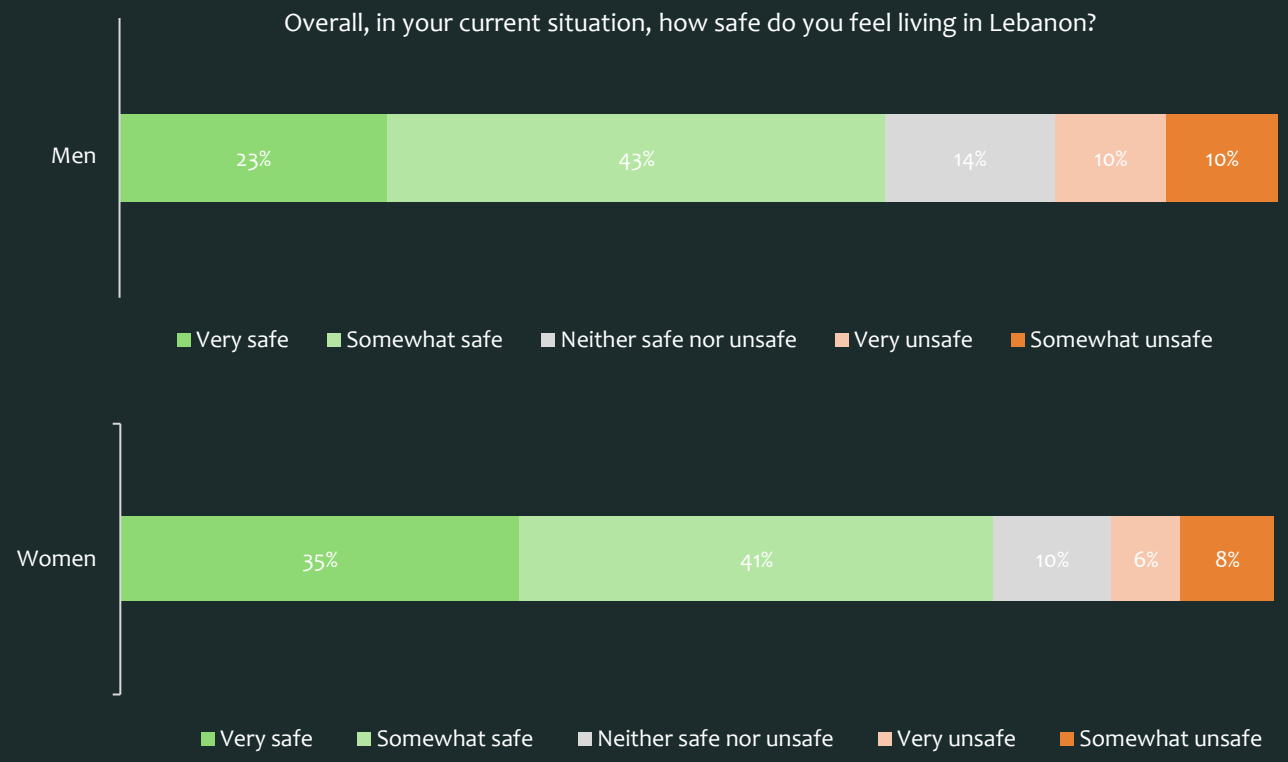


Fig. 28. Perceptions of safety in Lebanon according to respondents' sex

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POLITICAL OPTIMISM AS A DETERMINANT

Perceptions of Syria's transitional authorities emerged as an important political determinant of return intentions, with respondents expressing greater optimism in the new authorities being comparatively more willing to return.

- The findings suggest that political perceptions and trust in post-Assad governance structures play an important role in shaping return aspirations alongside security and socioeconomic considerations.
- Respondents intending to return generally expressed comparatively higher levels of optimism in Syria's transitional authorities (72%), while respondents unwilling to return were less likely to express positive feelings (36%) and more neutral (37% compared with 19% for those intending to return).
- Qualitative findings indicate that initial optimism following the fall of the Assad regime had partially moderated by the January 2026 fieldwork period, particularly among refugees reporting deteriorated security and living conditions, weak economic opportunities, and limited services in Syria.

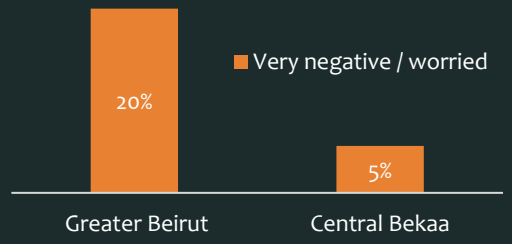


Fig. 30. Proportion of negative perceptions about the transitional authorities in Syria

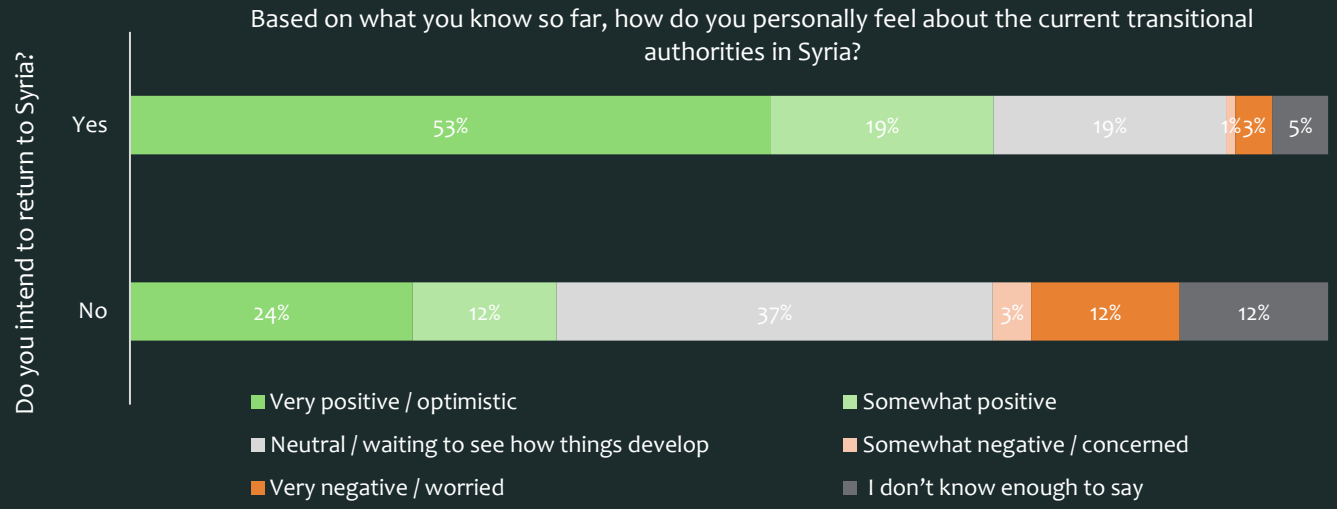


Fig. 29. Return intentions and perceptions about the transitional authorities in Syria

- Regional differences were also evident, with respondents in Greater Beirut expressing comparatively more negative perceptions towards the transitional authorities (20% being worried) than respondents in Central Bekaa (5%). Qualitative findings suggest that these differences may partly reflect sectarian and political alignments linked to the Syrian conflict and refugees' stances towards the new Syrian President.

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INCOME AS A CAPABILITY DETERMINANT

Income level appears to function more as a determinant of return capabilities rather than return aspirations, as respondents with comparatively higher incomes expressed greater willingness to return.

- Return intentions increased progressively with income levels, with the proportion of respondents intending to return rising from 28% among lower-income groups (with monthly incomes of less than USD 100) to 43% among comparatively higher-income groups (USD 600).
- Conversely, reluctance towards return decreased from 72% to 57% as income levels increased, suggesting that greater financial resources may facilitate refugees' perceived ability to organise and sustain return.
- These findings indicate that higher income does not necessarily anchor refugees in Lebanon. Rather, financial stability may provide the practical means required to consider return as a realistic and manageable option.
- Qualitative findings strongly reinforced this pattern, as key informants frequently described return as financially demanding, particularly given high transportation, housing, and reintegration costs inside Syria.
- In this respect, several key informants noted that successful return often requires personal savings covering at least six months of living expenses in Syria, while UNHCR financial assistance for return was widely described as covering only approximately 20 days of costs.

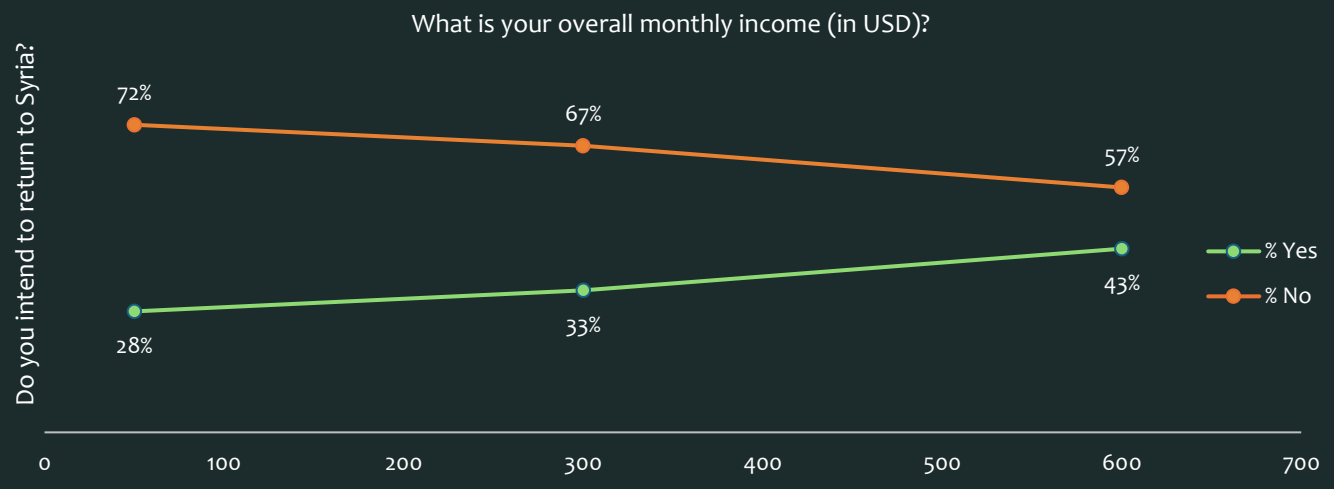


Fig. 31. Return intentions and personal income

> *I can't go back to Syria because I can't even afford a tent there.*
>
> *Syrian Refugee man, Central Bekaa.*

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NGO ASSISTANCE AS A LOCALISED DETERMINANT

Quantitative findings revealed that NGO assistance appears to play a limited and highly localised role in shaping return intentions, with its impact varying according to region and type of support received.

- Overall, NGO-supported respondents expressed slightly lower return intentions (30%) than non-supported respondents (36%), suggesting that assistance is a relatively limited determinant of return.
- Nearly half of surveyed refugees (46%) reported receiving some form of NGO assistance, with access being comparatively lower in Greater Beirut (39%) than in the Central Bekaa sample (50%).
- Regional disparities were significant. Respondents in Sports City reported the highest levels of assistance access (71%), followed by Central Bekaa (50%), Nabaa (29%) and Bourj Hammoud (23%). These patterns broadly align with previously analysed regional non-return trends, particularly in Sports City (90%), Central Bekaa (65%), Bourj Hammoud (59%) and Nabaa (58%), suggesting that assistance may operate as a localised determinant alongside other contextual factors.
- Respondents receiving only service-based assistance (such as healthcare, education, or counselling) expressed return intentions identical to non-supported respondents (36%), although this category remains analytically limited given that different services were grouped together despite education previously emerging as a determinant.
- Cash assistance displayed comparatively stronger associations with non-return, with return intentions dropping to 24% among respondents receiving irregular cash support and 29% among those receiving regular cash assistance, compared with 36% among respondents receiving no assistance.

46%

of the respondents expressed receiving some kind of NGO support or assistance

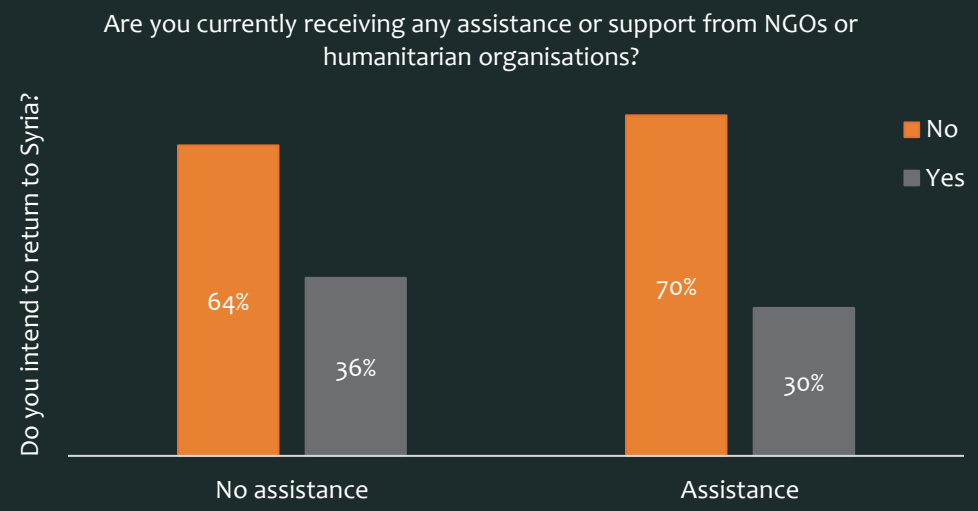


Fig. 32. Return intentions and NGO assistance and support

> *I prefer to die here with my family rather than go back to Syria.*
>
> *Syrian Refugee man, Sports City, Greater Beirut.*

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ACCESS TO SERVICES AS A CONDITIONAL DETERMINANT

Qualitative findings suggest that access to services in Lebanon influences return decisions in indirect, conditional, and sometimes contradictory ways, functioning less as an independent determinant and more as a stabilising or destabilising factor shaping refugees' perceptions of future viability.

ACCESS TO NGO ASSISTANCE

- NGO assistance was widely described by informants as a stabilising mechanism enabling continued stay in Lebanon, particularly amid economic collapse and limited service availability in Syria. However, informants consistently framed humanitarian assistance as insufficient on its own to shape return decisions independently from employment, housing, and security conditions.
- Funding cuts and declining assistance nevertheless emerged as indirect destabilising pressures. Rather than directly causing return, reductions in aid appeared to weaken refugees' coping capacities and increase vulnerability, particularly for households already facing precarious employment and housing conditions.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

- Healthcare similarly operated less as an independent determinant than as part of a larger survival mechanism. Medical needs, disabilities, psychological trauma, and reliance on humanitarian healthcare services were repeatedly identified by NGO staff and UNHCR informants as factors postponing or complicating return.
- Access to healthcare was also described as highly unequal and increasingly exclusionary. Informants referred to barriers to hospital admission, rising medical costs, reliance on local dispensaries, and cases where refugees holding only UN documentation were reportedly denied access to healthcare facilities.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

- Access to education emerged as one of the most significant service-related determinants, particularly for households with children. Teachers, NGO staff, and social workers repeatedly described Lebanese education as "strong and effective," encouraging many families to remain in Lebanon amid uncertainty regarding the continuity and quality of education in Syria. This was confirmed by the survey, as 60% of respondents considered education in Lebanon to be better than in Syria. At the same time, education was consistently described as secondary to core concerns such as livelihoods, housing, and safety.
- Nevertheless, access to education functioned as a contradictory determinant. Structural barriers including documentation requirements, limited public-school capacity, linguistic and curricular differences, and restricted access for out-of-school children often transformed education from a stabilising factor into a source of exclusion encouraging return considerations.
- The findings suggest that children's access to education influences return primarily through long-term future calculations rather than immediate survival needs. While livelihoods, housing, and safety remained dominant concerns, education increasingly shaped family-level assessments regarding children's mobility, social integration, and future opportunities. Several respondents explicitly described delaying return until children completed certified schooling in Lebanon.

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PROJECTED ACCESS TO SERVICES IN SYRIA

Projected confidence in accessing basic services in Syria emerged as an important determinant of return aspirations, with uncertainty and low confidence strongly associated with reluctance towards return.

- Respondents unwilling to return expressed significantly lower confidence in being able to access basic services in Syria upon return, with 57% reporting being not confident compared with 40% among respondents willing to return.
- By contrast, confidence in future service access was substantially higher among respondents expressing return intentions (44%) than among those unwilling to return (15%), suggesting that perceived service availability constitutes an important enabling condition for return aspirations.
- Uncertainty also emerged as a significant factor, with 21% of respondents unwilling to return reporting that they did not know whether services would be accessible in Syria, compared with 11% among those willing to return.
- These findings align with qualitative interviews presented earlier, highlighting widespread uncertainty regarding healthcare, education, infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance in Syria, particularly amid uneven reconstruction and continuing regional disparities in service provision.

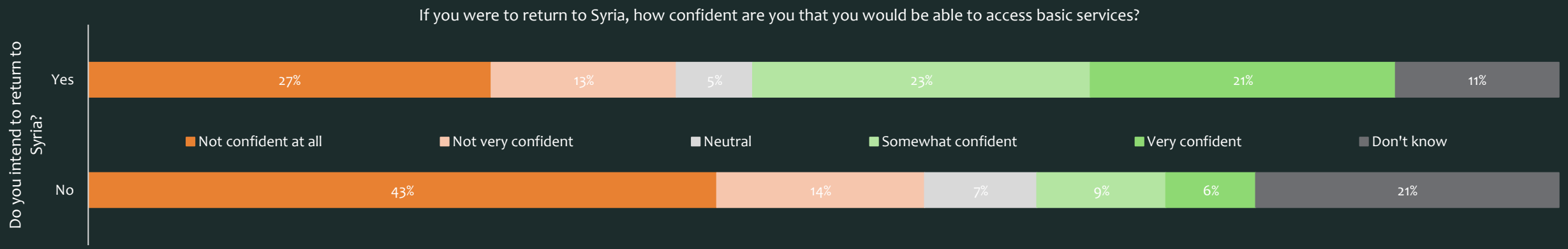


Fig. 33. Return intentions and confidence about access to basic services in Syria

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EMPLOYMENT SECTOR AS A DETERMINANT

Employment status alone did not appear to significantly shape return intentions. However, important variations emerged across employment sectors, suggesting that labour market conditions function as context-specific determinants of return aspirations and capabilities.

- Employment status in itself does not appear to be a determinant of return, with similar return intentions expressed by employed and unemployed respondents (34% and 33% respectively), supporting findings that conditions in Syria play a more decisive role in shaping return intentions than host-country conditions (Arar et al., 2023).
- However, significant differences emerged across employment sectors, indicating that the nature and stability of work influence return perceptions more than employment alone.
- In this respect, respondents working in construction expressed the highest return intentions (57%), potentially reflecting stagnation in Lebanon's construction sector amid limited reconstruction spending amid continuing economic uncertainty (World Bank, 2026).
- These were followed by respondents working in services, including retail (43%), low-skilled services such as cleaning and restauration (30%), and skilled services including teaching and accounting (27%).
- Those working in agriculture seemed the least willing to return with 79% not wanting to return. Qualitative findings from Bar Elias in Central Bekaa suggest that agriculture remains heavily dependent on seasonal Syrian labour amid widespread informality and reported exploitation linked to the role of *shawishes* in employment access. Key informants consistently identified stable employment in Lebanon as a major reason for staying, in opposition with the prevailing situation in the agriculture sector.

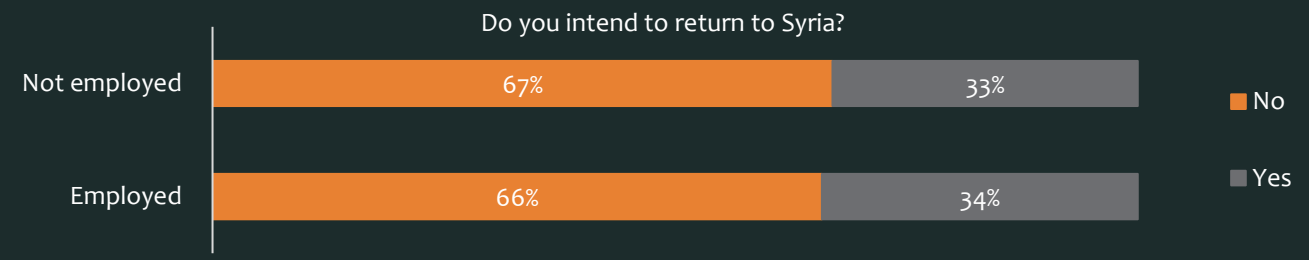


Fig. 34. Return intentions and employment

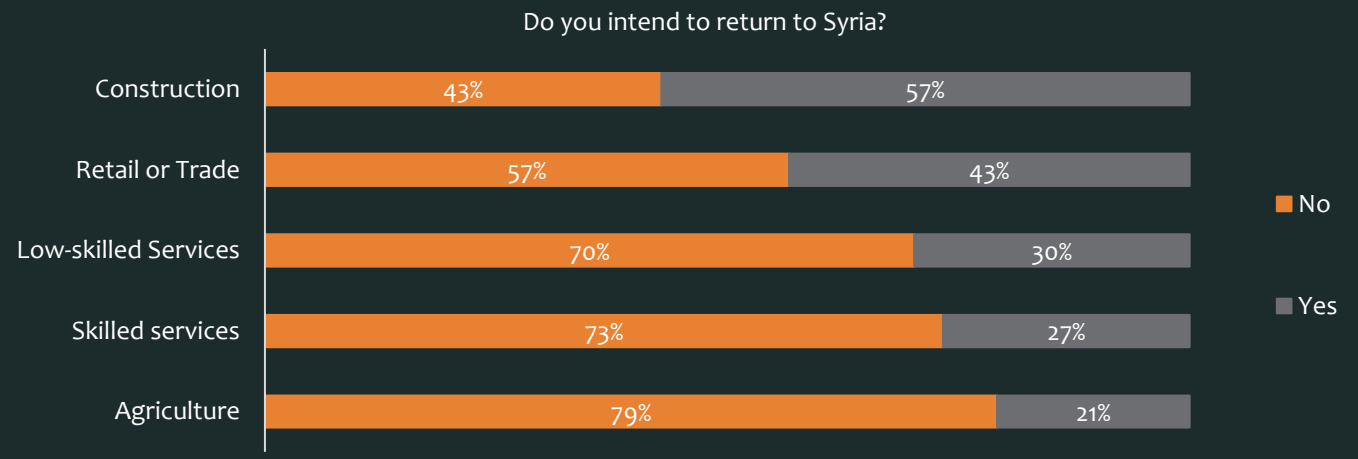


Fig. 35. Return intentions and employment sector

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EMPLOYMENT STABILITY AS A DETERMINANT

As with employment sectors, employment stability and work arrangements appear to shape return aspirations, with respondents engaged in more stable and regular employment showing comparatively lower willingness to return than those in precarious work arrangements.

- Survey findings revealed that respondents engaged in permanent and regular work arrangements (55% no intention to return) were comparatively less willing to return than those engaged in seasonal (60% no) or daily and irregular work arrangements (71% no).
- This trend may reflect the heightened livelihood insecurity associated with seasonal and irregular employment, where unstable income and limited future predictability reinforce economic precarity and uncertainty regarding long-term stay in Lebanon.
- Unlike income level – where higher earnings appeared to increase return capabilities – employment type seems to operate through labour instability and weaker economic integration within Lebanese labour markets.
- In parallel, 59% of working respondents stated that working conditions and labour environments in Lebanon influence their decision-making regarding return compared with conditions in Syria.

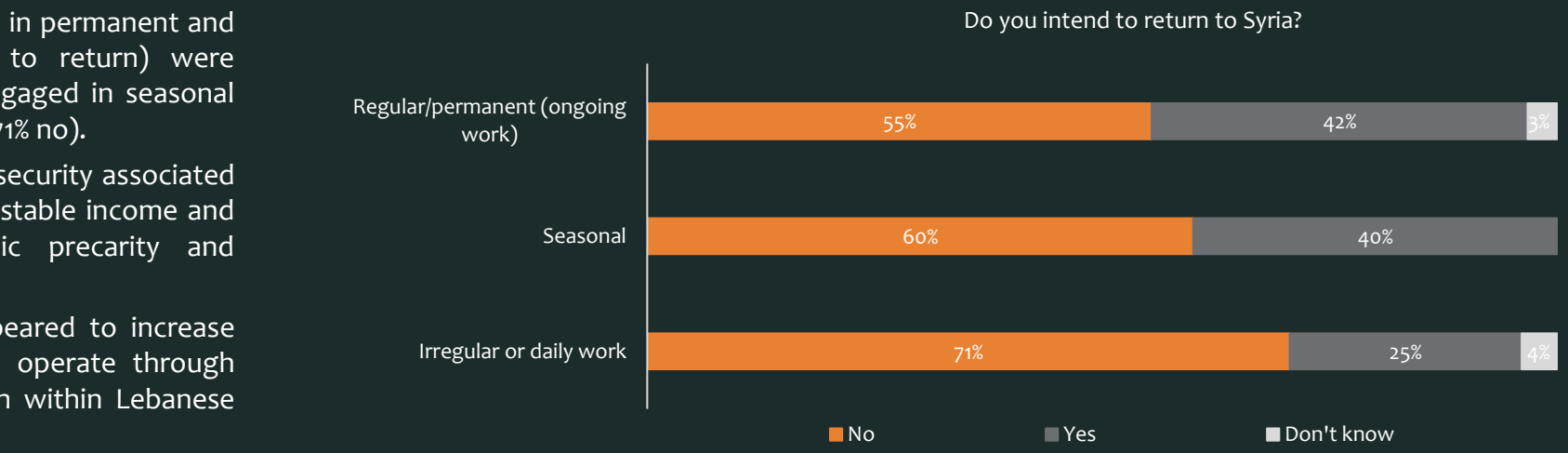


Fig. 36. Return intentions and employment type

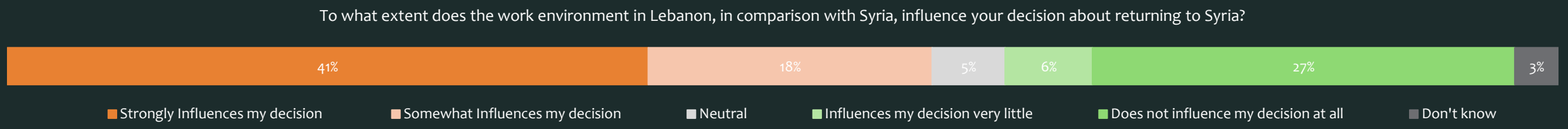


Fig. 37. Work environment's influence on return decision-making

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LEGAL RESIDENCY AS AN INVERTED DETERMINANT

Legal residency appeared to function as an inverted determinant of return intentions, as respondents without valid residency permits expressed comparatively lower willingness to return despite heightened precarity and exposure to legal and socioeconomic vulnerabilities in Lebanon.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents in the sample (94%) reported lacking valid legal residency in Lebanon, a proportion higher than commonly cited estimates of approximately 80% (VASyR, 2023).
- Counterintuitively, respondents without valid residency expressed lower willingness to return, with 64% reporting no return intentions compared to 52% among respondents holding legal residency permits. This suggests that legal precarity alone does not necessarily translate into stronger return aspirations.
- Qualitative findings indicate that legal status interacts with multiple determinants shaping refugees' daily lives in Lebanon, including access to education, housing, civil registration, mobility, and protection from deportation.
- Key informants described increasing administrative restrictions and procedural complexity regarding residency renewal, birth and marriage registration, school enrolment and documentation requirements. While some NGOs previously facilitated documentation processes more easily, these procedures had become increasingly costly, restrictive, and subject to frequent policy changes. A Mukhtar in Bourj Hammoud reported that municipalities increasingly require landlords to report Syrian tenants and verify their legal residency status, with financial penalties as high as LBP 13 million imposed for non-compliance.

94%

of the respondents expressed not having a residency permit

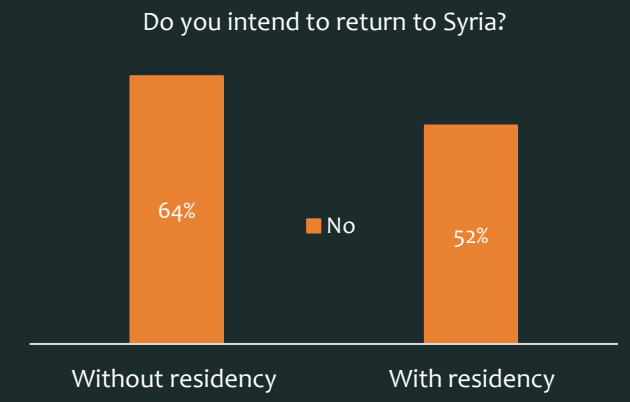


Fig. 38. Non-return intentions and residency permits

- Respondents and key informants also linked army raids, threats of deportation, border restrictions, and evolving documentation requirements to broader state pressures encouraging return. Many argued that these measures increasingly blur the line between voluntary and forced return.
- Legal residency was also reported to directly affect access to education, increasingly functioning as a MEHE prerequisite for school and university enrolment.
- However, despite these pressures, the findings suggest that legal insecurity may produce heightened immobility rather than increased willingness to return.

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SECTARIAN AFFILIATION AS A DETERMINANT

Sectarian affiliation emerged as an important determinant of return perceptions, particularly regarding perceived safety, political exposure, and fears of discrimination. However, these perceptions are closely intertwined with regional origin and localised security dynamics in post-Assad Syria.

- The overwhelming majority of respondents who disclosed their religious affiliation (n=380) identified as Sunni Muslims (94%), while the remaining 6% were distributed among Alawite, Shia Muslim and Christian respondents, broadly reflecting estimates regarding the composition of protracted Syrian refugee populations in Lebanon.
- Non-Sunni respondents expressed comparatively stronger reluctance towards return, with 83% (n=19) reporting no intention to return compared to 65% among Sunni respondents. However, the very limited size of the non-Sunni cohort (n=23) requires cautious interpretation.
- Qualitative findings suggest that sectarian and religious affiliation shape perceptions of safety, discrimination and political exposure upon return for certain respondents, but rarely operate as independent determinants detached from broader contextual factors.
- In four Key Informant Interviews – including local Mukhtars, NGO staff members and teachers – region of origin was described as implicitly linked to sectarian and political dynamics, shaping perceptions of risk and potential persecution upon return.
- These perceptions were particularly associated with respondents originating from politically and militarily sensitive regions, including Syria's coastal areas, Suwayda, and parts of Quneitra.

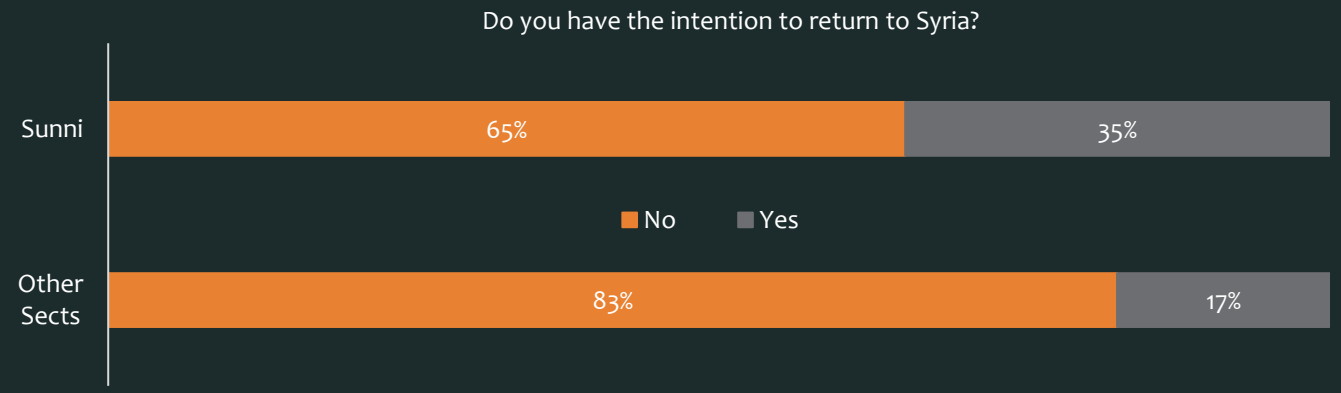


Fig. 39. Non-return intentions and sectarian affiliation

- Respondents and key informants frequently associated Sunni refugees with comparatively greater confidence towards return, while Alawite respondents were more commonly described as fearing return due to insecurity concerns and perceived political exposure.
- Overall, the findings suggest that sectarian affiliation interacts with regional origin, political perceptions, personal histories and localised security conditions rather than independently determining return intentions
- These findings align with broader contextual shifts observed following the fall of the Assad regime, where changing political and security dynamics appear to be generating new patterns and drivers of migration from and towards Syria (cf. Dahrouge, 2025).

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SOCIOCULTURAL ORIGINS AS A DETERMINANT

Sociocultural and ethnic origins appeared to function as moderate determinants of return aspirations and capabilities, particularly through their interaction with political perceptions, regional dynamics, and attitudes towards Syria's transitional authorities.

- Respondents with rural origins (65% no intention to return) appeared slightly more willing to return than those with urban origins (70% no), suggesting that sociocultural background may shape perceptions of reintegration and livelihood opportunities upon return.
- Respondents self-identifying with specific sociocultural groups, particularly Bedouins, expressed comparatively higher return intentions (42%) than other Syrian respondents (31%). By contrast, all respondents identifying as Kurdish (n=10) expressed unwillingness to return, reflecting on the specific political and regional contexts related to this subgroup.
- Similar to sectarian affiliation and place of origin, sociocultural and ethnic origins appear to operate in interaction with other sociopolitical and contextual determinants such as political perceptions towards Syria's new transitional authorities. In this respect, respondents of Bedouin origin expressed comparatively more positive perceptions of Syria's transitional authorities (56%) than the broader sample (46%), while positive perceptions among the few Kurdish respondents remained extremely low (1 out of the 10 respondents).

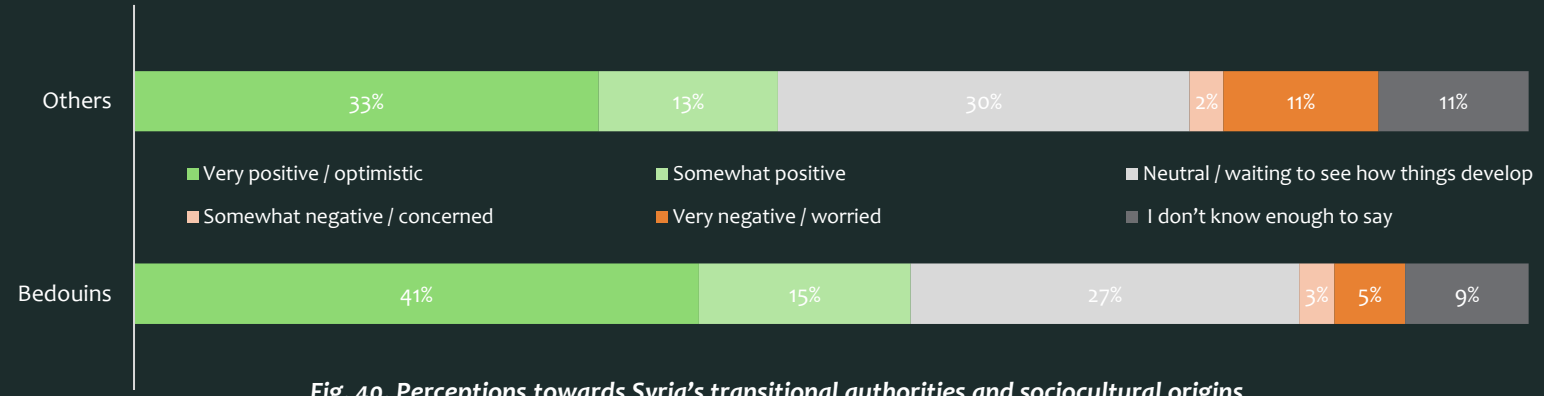


Fig. 40. Perceptions towards Syria's transitional authorities and sociocultural origins

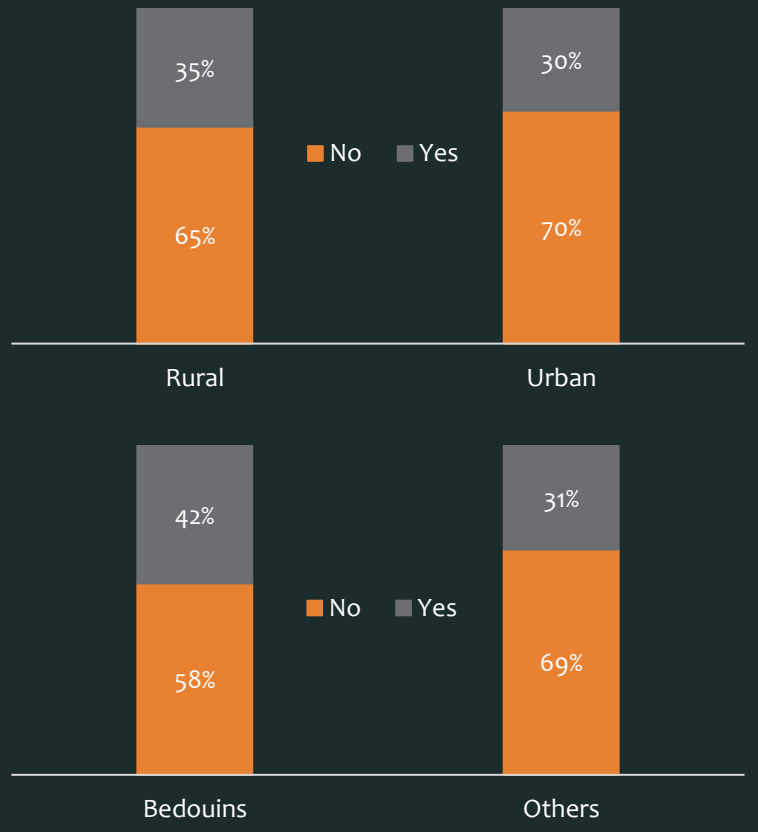


Fig. 41. Non-return intentions and sociocultural origins

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UNHCR REGISTRATION AS A DETERMINANT

UNHCR registration appeared to function as an intermediary determinant of return intentions, particularly through its interaction with access to education, legal documentation and administrative precarity in Lebanon.

- The majority of the sample's respondents (80%) reported being registered with UNHCR, among whom 70% expressed no intention to return to Syria.
- Reluctance to return was comparatively lower among respondents previously registered with UNHCR (54%) and among those never registered (53%), suggesting that current registration status may contribute to maintaining access to coping mechanisms and services in Lebanon.
- Qualitative findings indicate that UNHCR registration is closely intertwined with broader determinants linked to legal precarity, documentation, education access and administrative restrictions, as previously presented in the current study.
- Respondents and key informants repeatedly described increasingly restrictive and changing documentation requirements in Lebanon, including the growing importance of UNHCR registration and legal residency for school enrolment, mobility, and access to services.
- The findings particularly suggest that UNHCR registration interacts with education as a determinant, as access to public schools for refugee children remains constrained by documentation requirements (often including being UNHCR registered), limited capacity, and administrative barriers affecting Syrian refugee households.

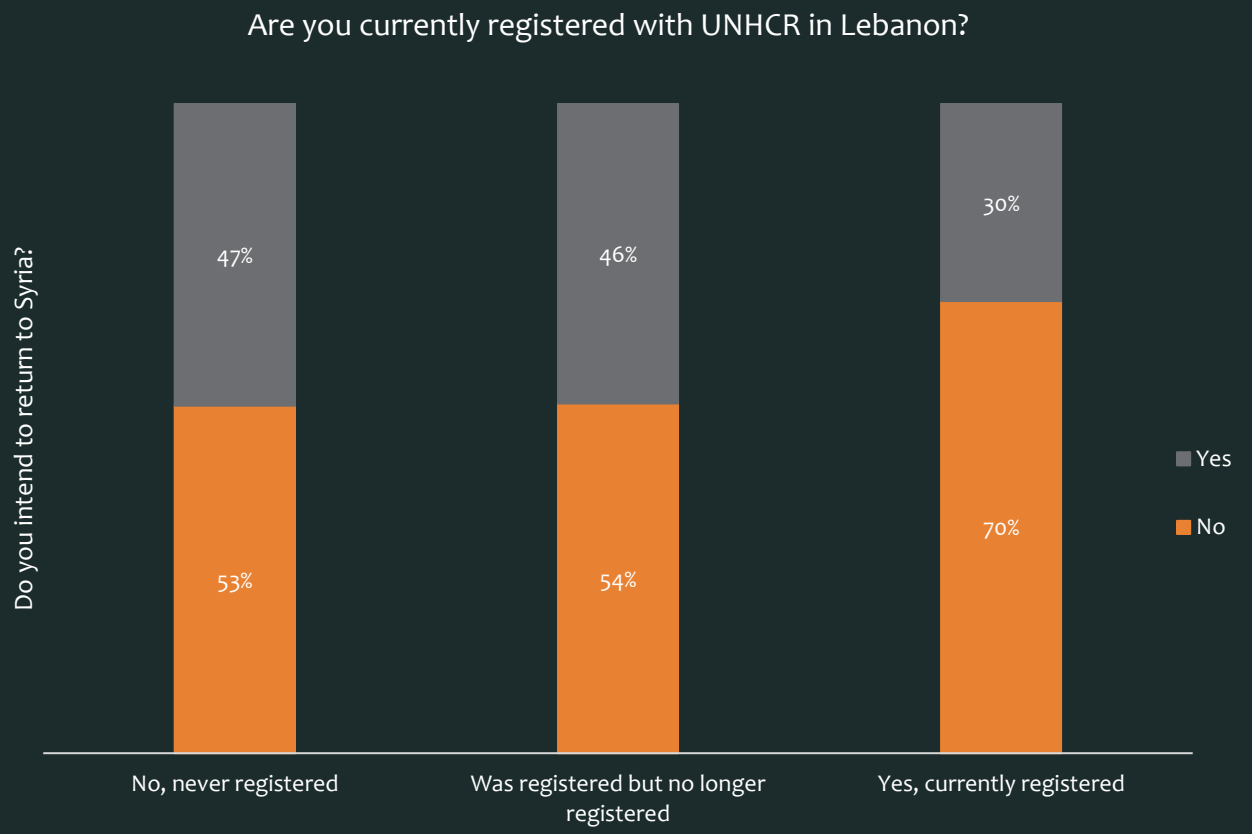


Fig. 42. Non-return intentions and UNHCR registration

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Assessing the Return Programme



ASYMMETRIES IN PUBLIC AWARENESS

While many Syrian refugees expressed having sufficient information regarding return to Syria, awareness gaps regarding the GoL–UNHCR return programme launched in summer 2025 varied highly across regions and age groups, highlighting the need for more targeted communication strategies.

- While a majority of respondents (62%) expressed having sufficient information to make decisions regarding return, a considerable proportion (30%) reported limited or insufficient information, highlighting persistent information gaps affecting return decision-making.
- Overall, 75% of respondents reported awareness of the return programme. Awareness was substantially higher in Central Bekaa (86%) than in Greater Beirut (60%), potentially reflecting stronger community and social information networks in rural settings compared to urban environments.
- Younger respondents, particularly those aged 18–24 (44%), expressed significantly lower awareness levels than older groups (78%–82%), suggesting that existing communication channels may not adequately reach younger refugee populations and may require adaptation.

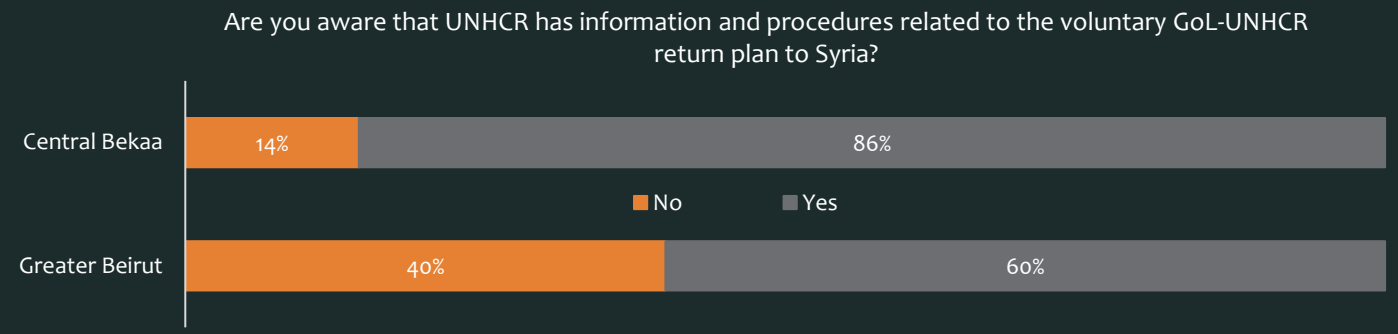


Fig. 43. Regional awareness regarding the return plan

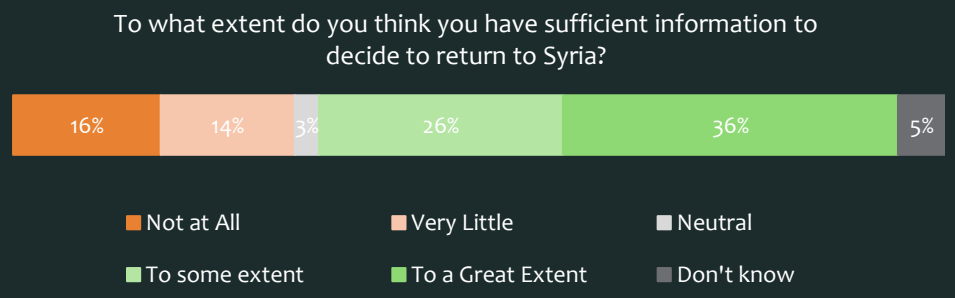


Fig. 44. Information regarding the return to Syria

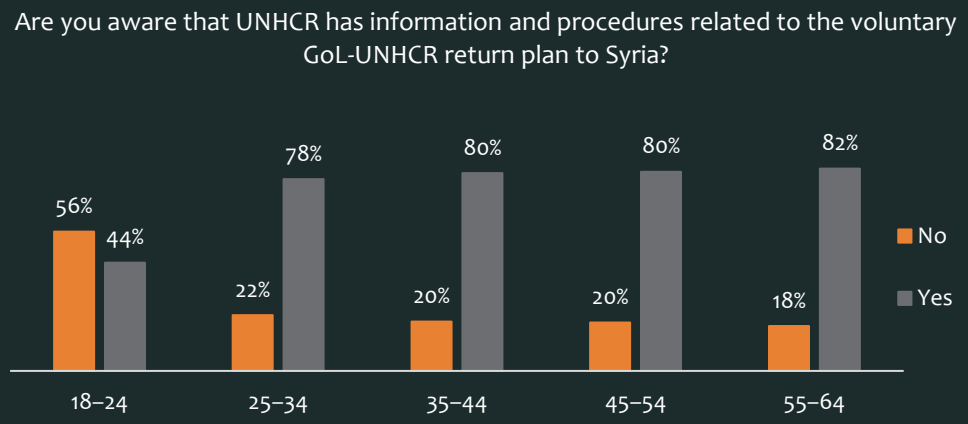


Fig. 45. Awareness of the return plan by age group (%)

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INSUFFICIENT INCENTIVES

Findings suggest that the GoL–UNHCR return programme is widely perceived as insufficient for enabling sustainable return, particularly due to limited financial support, inadequate consideration of housing and livelihood conditions in Syria, and its inability to address broader structural barriers to reintegration.

- Among respondents aware of the GoL–UNHCR return programme, 92% considered its incentives insufficient, while 51% stated that the programme does not adequately address the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon or current conditions inside Syria (46%).
- Qualitative findings consistently suggest that the programme mainly facilitates return for refugees already willing and financially capable of returning, rather than generating new return aspirations or enabling vulnerable households lacking resources to reintegrate sustainably.
- Respondents, Mukhtars and NGO staff repeatedly identified housing as a central prerequisite for return, with families lacking intact housing options in Syria generally unwilling to consider return regardless of available incentives.
- Mukhtars in both Bar Elias and Bourj Hammoud, alongside NGO staff in Bar Elias, described current financial assistance as insufficient for long-term reintegration. Several respondents noted that the USD 600 return grant reportedly covers only a few weeks of living expenses, while successful return often requires personal savings or family support sufficient for several months.
- NGO staff and teachers in Bar Elias additionally reported cases of refugees returning through the programme before re-entering Lebanon irregularly, reinforcing concerns that existing incentives may facilitate short-term movement rather than durable return outcomes.

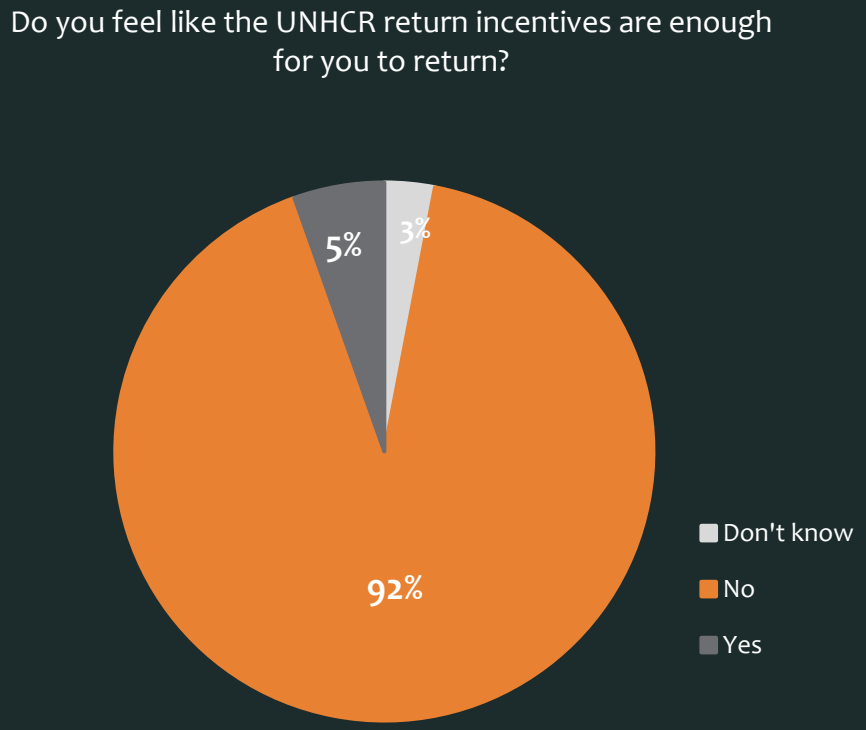


Fig. 46. Perceptions on return incentives

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THE GO-AND-SEE IMPASSE

Findings reveal a major mismatch between refugees' need to assess conditions in Syria before returning and the Lebanese policy framework, which prevents temporary "Go-and-See" visits and treats any border crossing as definitive return.

- While UNHCR globally recognises "Go-and-See" visits as standard practice for informed voluntary return decision-making, the Lebanese authorities prohibited such mechanisms by treating any crossing into Syria as definitive return and triggering file closure.
- Unlike Türkiye's temporary verification model – allowing heads of households to cross multiple times over several months – Lebanon provides no legal framework for exploratory visits, leaving refugees unable to assess conditions in Syria without risking loss of legal stay and assistance in Lebanon.
- UNHCR informants confirmed that refugees are warned that any return movement, even if temporary or exploratory, results in their files being updated and closed to reflect departure from Lebanon.
- Quantitative findings nevertheless showed strong refugee demand for "Go-and-See" mechanisms, with 48% considering such visits "very important" before deciding on return and an additional 14% considering them "important."
- The absence of formal temporary visit mechanisms therefore appears to reinforce uncertainty regarding housing, safety, livelihoods, and access to services in Syria, while also increasing reliance on informal and potentially risky cross-border movements, as previously detailed in this study.

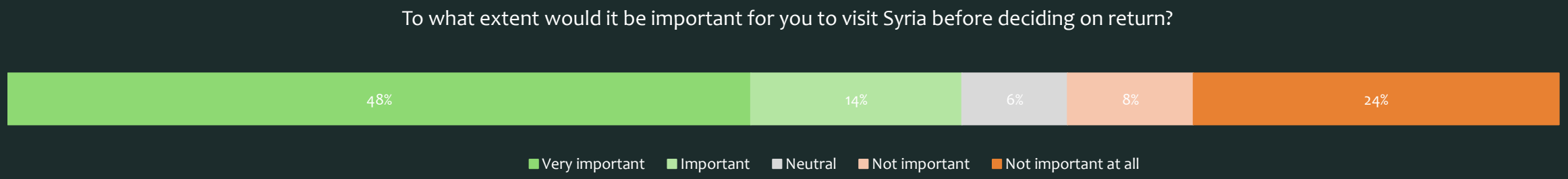


Fig. 47. Importance of "Go-and-See" visits

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MANUFACTURING RETURN

While the GoL–UNHCR return framework is formally presented as voluntary, findings suggest that broader Lebanese policy measures and deteriorating living conditions are indirectly manufacturing coercive pressure to return through growing precarity and uncertainty.

- Qualitative findings repeatedly highlighted coercive pressures surrounding return, particularly through continued raids on informal settlements, camp closure threats, tightening legal restrictions and reductions in humanitarian assistance and financial aid. These factors interact cumulatively – and ambiguously with the return programme – to increase refugees' sense of insecurity and uncertainty in Lebanon.
- NGO staff described how funding cuts increasingly deepen household vulnerability, forcing refugees into severe coping mechanisms including burning plastic for heating during winter in the Bekaa and withdrawing children from school to enter the labour market, as witnessed during fieldwork.
- When asked directly, the majority of respondents (54%) expressed experiencing increased pressure towards return, including 48% reporting clear pressure and 6% reporting pressure "to some extent." Among respondents perceiving pressure, 22% identified the Lebanese state as the primary source, followed by the Syrian refugee community itself (19%) and Lebanese host communities (9%).
- While the UNHCR programme itself remains formally voluntary, several informants argued that broader Lebanese policies – such as camp closures and administrative restrictions – increasingly blur the line between voluntary and coerced return.

During the past 12 months:

23%

Witnessed or experienced arrest or detention

18%

Witnessed or experienced physical violence

16%

Witnessed or experienced deportation

Have you felt increased pressure to return in the past year?

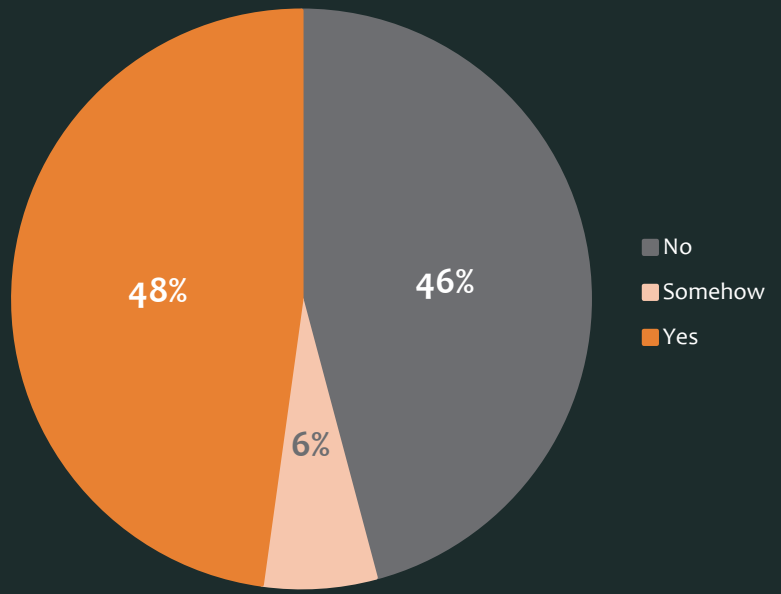


Fig. 48. Perception of increased pressure to return over the past year

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Rights & Protection



ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Access to education emerged as a major protection and rights challenge throughout the study, shaped by economic vulnerability, documentation barriers, and significant regional disparities in service accessibility.

- More than half of respondents with children (51%) expressed facing difficulties or being unable to access education services for their children when needed, while 45% reported being able to access them and 3% expressed uncertainty.
- Significant regional disparities emerged, with respondents reporting inability to access educational services reaching 61% in Bourj Hammoud, 60% in Sports City, and 56% in Nabaa, compared with 47% in Central Bekaa.
- According to the survey, the primary reason for non-enrolment cited by respondents with at least one child out of school was child labour linked to household survival needs (36%).
- Financial barriers (including school fees, transportation and educational materials) constituted the second most cited obstacle (30%), followed by lack of required documentation (25%), particularly following stricter enrolment requirements in 2024 and 2025.
- The findings additionally revealed notable risks of educational disruption, with at least 16% of households reporting school dropout cases among children.
- Field observations further identified widespread informal educational arrangements, with many Syrian refugee children attending NGO schools as "listeners" without obtaining formal certification due to missing official documentation.

Main reasons for children's non-enrollment in school:



36%

Because of work



30%

Financial constraints



25%

Lack of documentation

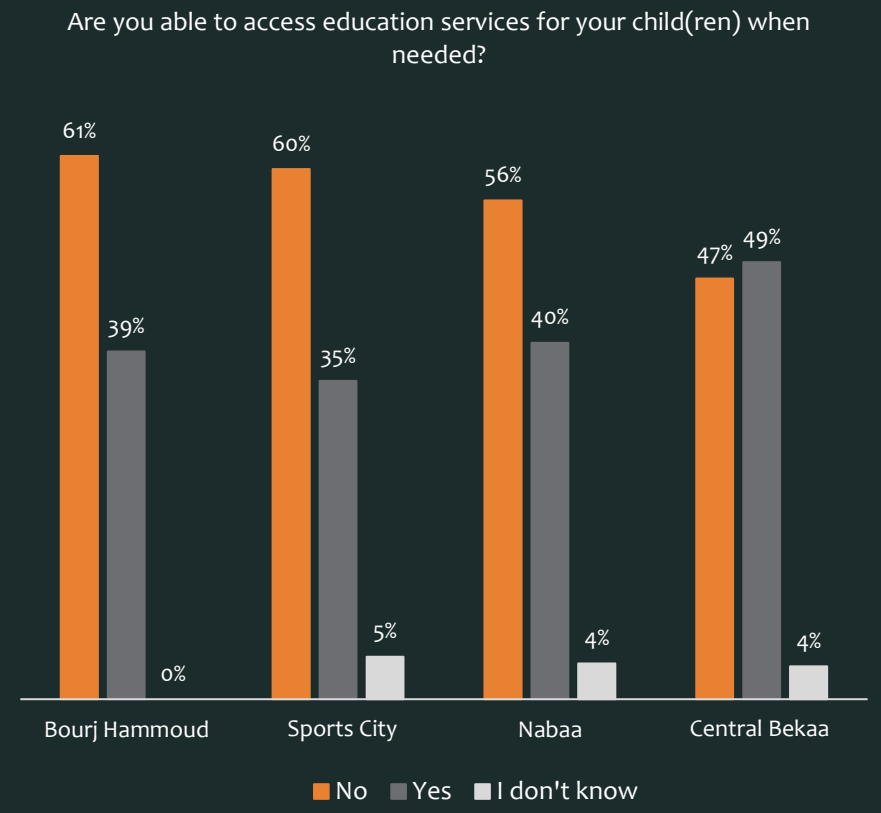


Fig. 49. Access to education per region

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ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Access to healthcare emerged as a major vulnerability throughout the study, shaped by financial barriers, unequal regional accessibility, and increasing exclusion risks linked to funding cuts and documentation constraints.

- Overall, around one fifth of respondents expressed being unable to access healthcare services or humanitarian health support when needed, highlighting persistent barriers to healthcare accessibility among Syrian refugees.
- Regional disparities were also evident, with Nabaa showing the highest levels of healthcare inaccessibility (26%), followed by Sports City (21%), Bourj Hammoud (18%) and Central Bekaa (17%).
- Qualitative findings suggest that healthcare access increasingly relies on basic and localised coping mechanisms. A Mukhtar in Bar Elias reported that while medication remains accessible through dispensaries, broader hospital-based healthcare services remain highly limited.
- NGO staff additionally highlighted growing exclusion risks within the healthcare system, including reports that some hospitals no longer accept refugees holding only UN documentation, effectively restricting access to healthcare services for vulnerable households.
- These findings align with broader structural healthcare challenges in Lebanon, where Syrian refugees remain dependent on low-cost primary care and subsidised services while continuing to pay significant out-of-pocket costs for treatment (Yamout, 2023). The situation further deteriorated following 2025 funding cuts, which led UNHCR to discontinue parts of its healthcare programme for approximately 45,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2025).

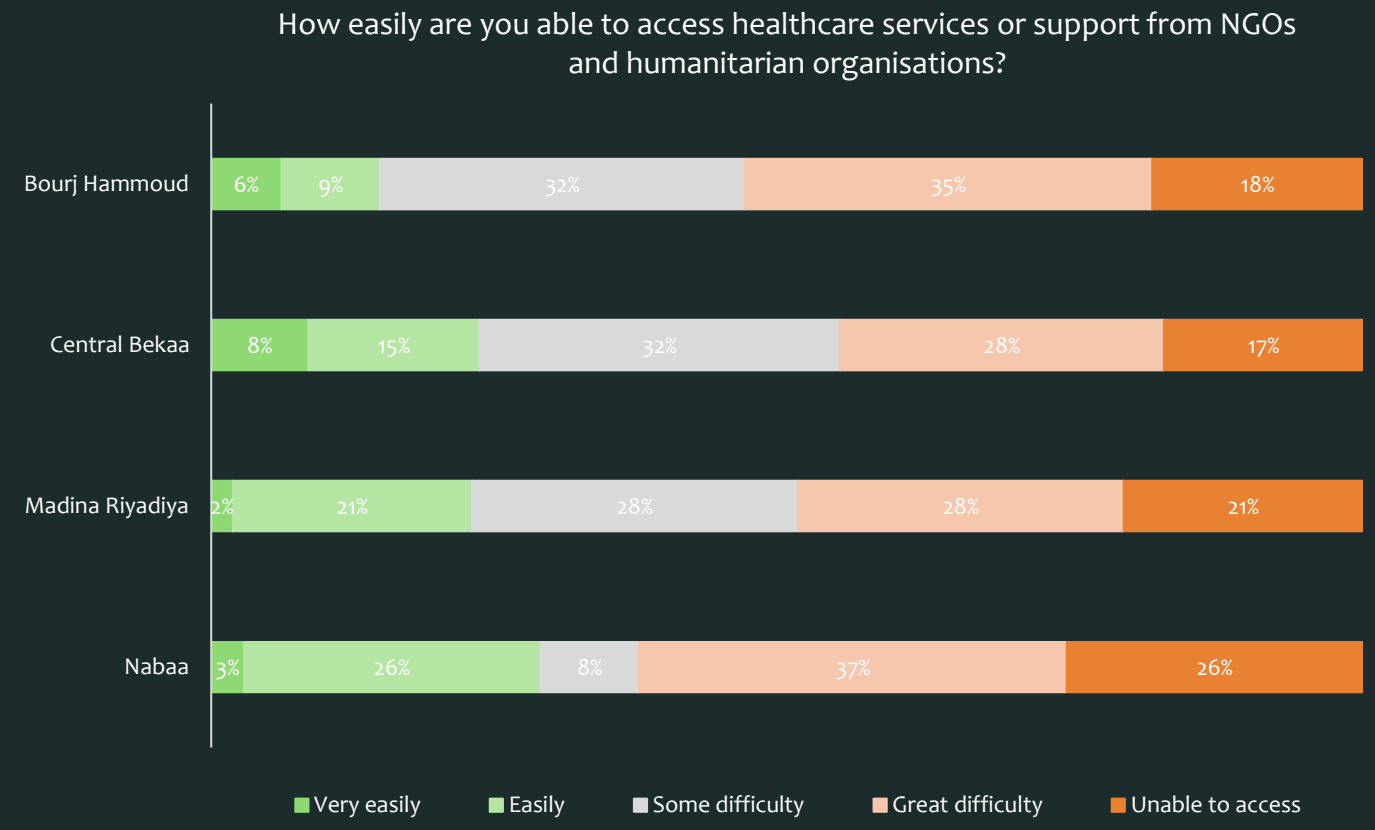


Fig. 50. Access to healthcare support from NGOs or humanitarian organisations per region

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ACCESS TO HOUSING

Access to housing also emerged as a major challenge throughout the study, shaped by eviction risks, deteriorating living conditions, and growing pressures linked to economic vulnerability and security measures.

- Overall, 22% of respondents reported facing actual eviction threats from their place of residence during the previous 12 months, while almost two thirds (62%) expressed concern about the possibility of forced removal.
- Housing insecurity appeared comparatively higher in Greater Beirut, where 25% of respondents reported eviction threats compared with 18% in Central Bekaa. The main reported drivers were inability to pay rent alongside pressures from landlords and local authorities.
- Around 31% of the sample's respondents reported living in tents within informal tented settlements, all located in Central Bekaa. While respondents in these settlements did not generally report direct eviction threats, they consistently referred to recurrent raids by security forces.
- Field observations highlighted extremely precarious housing conditions across both informal and permanent shelter types. In Bekaa, tents were frequently observed as poorly insulated and unfit for winter conditions, where temperatures regularly dropped below zero degrees at night.
- Similarly, many permanent housing arrangements were characterized by overcrowding, poor hygiene conditions, and limited access to water and electricity, reinforcing broader patterns of structural precarity among refugee households.

22%

Faced eviction threats during the last 12 months

31%

Lived in tented settlements in Central Bekaa

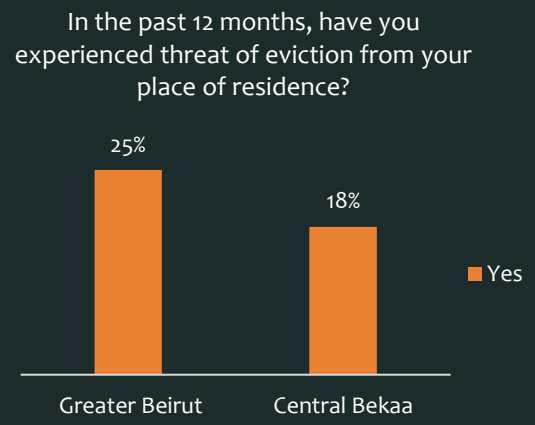


Fig. 46. Threat of eviction per region

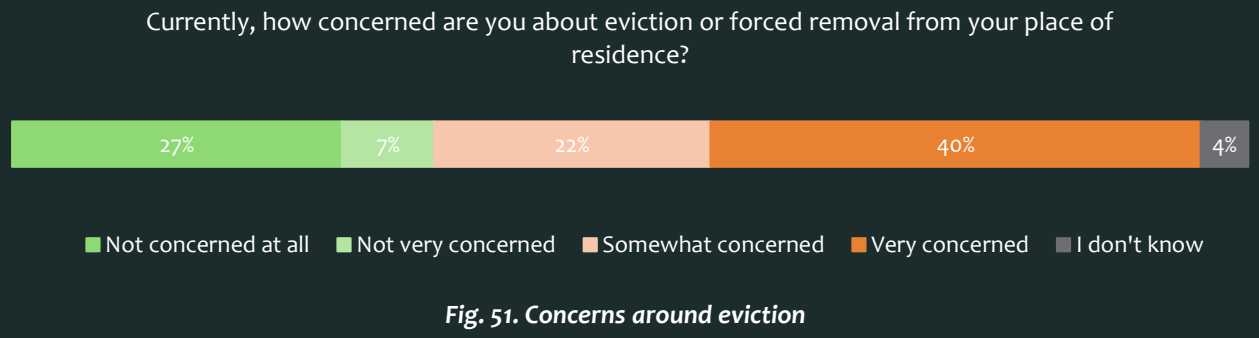


Fig. 51. Concerns around eviction

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ACCESS TO LEGAL SUPPORT

Although legal assistance mechanisms for Syrian refugees formally exist across Lebanon, findings suggest major gaps between the availability of legal services and refugees' effective ability to access and benefit from them in practice.

- Syrian refugees in Lebanon have access to free legal assistance through UNHCR and partner NGOs, including support for residency procedures, civil documentation, detention cases, housing disputes, and protection-related issues.
- Despite this formal availability, survey findings revealed major accessibility barriers, with 22% of respondents reporting difficulties accessing legal services and 40% describing them as effectively unattainable.
- These findings reinforce earlier results throughout the study highlighting increasing legal and administrative precarity among Syrian refugees, particularly regarding residency renewal, documentation requirements, school enrolment and mobility restrictions.
- As presented earlier in this study, 92% of the sample respondents declared not currently holding a valid residency permit in Lebanon. Meanwhile, 79% reported being registered with UNHCR, while 10% stated that they had previously been registered but were no longer registered.
- Qualitative findings additionally pointed to constantly changing administrative requirements, rising procedural complexity, and growing costs associated with legal regularisation, limiting refugees' ability to effectively benefit from existing legal support mechanisms.
- In sum, the existence of legal services alone does not guarantee effective legal protection, particularly amid broader structural barriers and restrictive administrative practices affecting refugees in Lebanon.

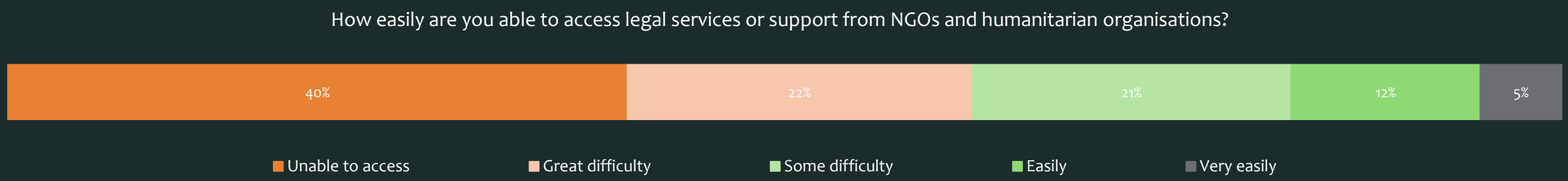


Fig. 52. Access to legal support from NGOs or humanitarian organisations

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PROTECTION RISKS AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Limited access to legal support appears closely intertwined with broader protection risks and human rights violations experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including discrimination, intimidation, movement restrictions, detention, and physical violence.

- As reflected throughout the report, Syrian refugees continue to face multidimensional protection risks and various forms of violence, discrimination and human rights violations in Lebanon.
- In this respect, 38% of respondents reported witnessing or experiencing discrimination based on nationality during the previous 12 months, while 26% reported harassment or intimidation and 23% reported movement restrictions.
- These findings add to other protection concerns already identified throughout the study, including witnessing or experiencing detention or arrest (23%), physical violence (18%) and deportation incidents (16%).
- Raids and security operations targeting places of residence were particularly prevalent in Central Bekaa, where 45% of respondents reported such incidents during the previous 12 months, compared with 36% across the overall sample.
- Together with previous findings concerning legal precarity, residency insecurity, and barriers to services, these results highlight the heightened and multidimensional protection vulnerabilities experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

During the past 12 months:

38%

Witnessed or experienced discrimination based on nationality

26%

Witnessed or experienced harassment or intimidation

23%

Witnessed or experienced restriction of movement

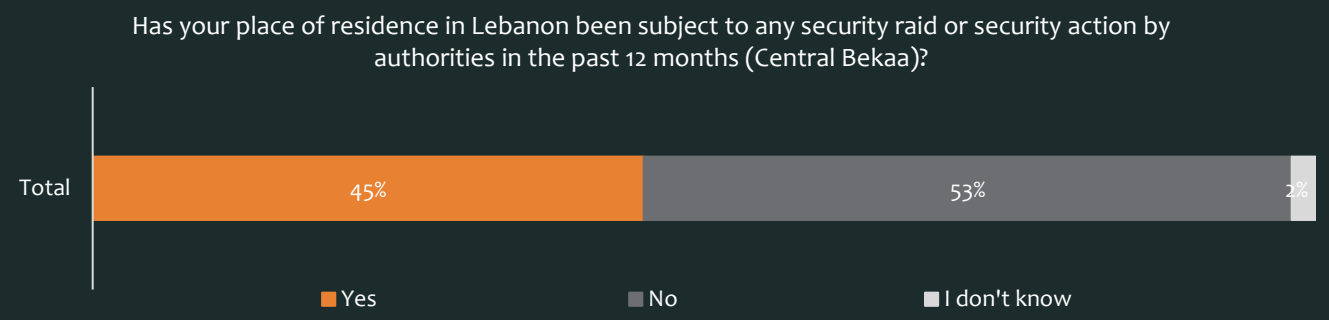


Fig. 53. Security raids or actions against Syrian refugees in Central Bekaa

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WOMEN'S PROTECTION CHALLENGES

Findings reveal that Syrian refugee women continue to face significant gendered vulnerabilities in Lebanon, particularly regarding economic exclusion, caregiving burdens, mobility restrictions and exposure to gender-based violence amid broader conditions of legal and social precarity.

- Women respondents reported significant gender-related barriers to livelihoods and opportunities, with 33% expressing difficulties accessing work opportunities due to their gender and 69% reporting being prevented or significantly constrained from pursuing work or other important opportunities because of caregiving responsibilities.
- Protection concerns also remain substantial, with 16% reporting mobility restrictions imposed by family or household members, 14% reporting experiences related to early marriage affecting themselves or their daughters, and 13% reporting sexual harassment in public spaces or workplaces.
- Qualitative findings, field observations and existing literature consistently highlighted that some men have returned to Syria while women remain as heads of households in Lebanon, heightening their economic vulnerability and exposure to gender-based violence, particularly in informal labour environments (GBV Working Group – Lebanon, 2025).
- As findings suggested earlier, the widespread lack of valid residency and legal documentation among Syrian refugees structurally limits women's effective access to justice and protection mechanisms in cases of abuse, exploitation, or violence. This is also reinforced by persistent patriarchal norms and gendered social expectations observed throughout the fieldwork.

33%

Of women faced difficulty accessing work opportunities due to gender

16%

Of women faced restrictions on mobility imposed by family or household members

14%

Of women faced early or forced marriage for them or their daughters

13%

Of women faced sexual harassment in public spaces or the workplace

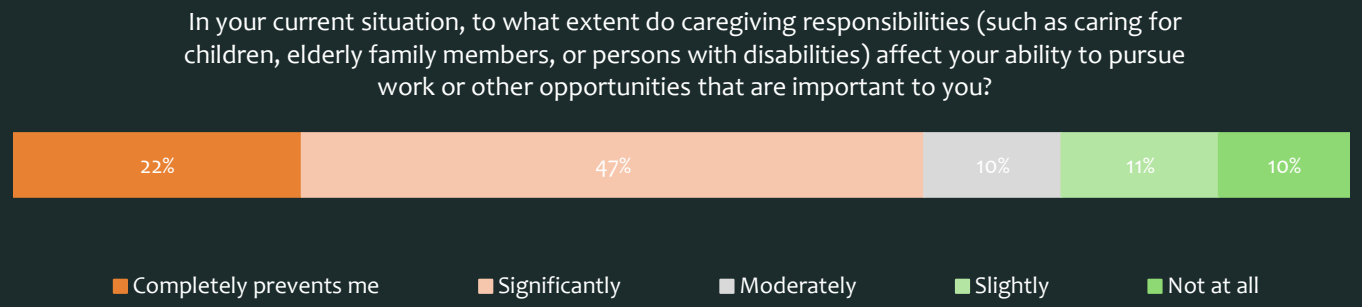


Fig. 54. Caregiving and access to work for women respondents

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CHILD LABOUR

Child labour continued to emerge as a major protection concern throughout the field research, closely linked to economic vulnerability, school dropout and deteriorating living conditions, particularly in low-income households and rural areas of Central Bekaa.

- Field research consistently revealed heightened exposure of Syrian refugee children to child labour and related protection risks, particularly among low-income households and within the rural context of Central Bekaa.
- While VASyR estimated child labour among Syrian refugee children at 7% in 2023–2024 and 5% in 2025 (VASyR, 2023; VASyR, 2025), this study identified at least one child dropping out of school to work and support the household in 36% of surveyed cases in the sample.
- The findings particularly concentrated in Central Bekaa, suggesting heightened regional economic vulnerability, with 66% of households of low-income (0–500 USD) reporting having working children.
- In Greater Beirut's suburbs like Bourj Hammoud and Nabaa, children were frequently observed by the research team collecting plastic and recyclable materials for household income generation. Tahaddi key informants in Hay el Gharbi (Sports City) similarly reported widespread child involvement in hazardous informal work exposing children to injuries and health risks, making child labour a significant community problem.



36%

Of surveyed households have at least one child who dropped out of school because of work

66%

In households of low-income of Central Bekaa (<USD 500/month)

23%

In households of low-income of Greater Beirut (<USD 500/month)

> *"I send my son to collect plastic to burn for heating the tent. Wood is too expensive."*
>
> *Syrian Refugee Parent, Bar Elias, Central Bekaa.*

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LABOUR EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Access to dignified and safe employment emerged as a major challenge throughout the study, with many Syrian refugees facing labour exploitation, informality, and abusive working conditions that further increase their socioeconomic vulnerability.

- Survey findings revealed widespread labour exploitation during the previous 12 months in the sample, including longer working hours without compensation (37%), delayed or unpaid wages (28%), workplace discrimination or harassment (22%), job loss (17%) and reduced working hours (12%).
- Qualitative findings further highlighted the highly informal nature of refugee labour conditions in Lebanon, with respondents repeatedly linking it to restrictive and costly residency and work permit requirements. Several respondents noted that work permits costing around 1,000 USD remain unaffordable for most Syrian refugees.
- Income levels also reflected severe economic precarity, with 39% of working respondents earning between 251–500 USD monthly, 25% earning below 251 USD and 33% reporting unstable income with significant month-to-month fluctuations.
- Across all surveyed regions, access to employment remained a central survival mechanism despite exploitative conditions, as many respondents considered even precarious work opportunities in Lebanon more viable than current economic conditions and livelihood prospects in post-Assad Syria.
- As a result, many refugees remain trapped in low-paid, insecure, and exploitative labour environments that are insufficient to ensure long-term financial stability yet remain necessary for household survival.

During the past 12 months:



37%

Experienced longer working hours without compensation



28%

Experienced delayed or unpaid wages



22%

Experienced discrimination or harassment at work

> *I have to breastfeed my child while working.*
>
> *Syrian Refugee Woman, tented settlement, Central Bekaa.*

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Conclusions & Recommendations



CONCLUSIONS

General Overview

- This study examined the perceptions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon regarding return to Syria following the fall of the Assad regime through the analytical lens of migration aspirations, capabilities and determinants. It asked *to what extent different determinants shape the aspirations and capabilities underlying the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime*.
- Based on fieldwork conducted in Greater Beirut and Central Bekaa in January 2026, the findings demonstrated that while most Syrian refugees remained unwilling to return to Syria, return aspirations and capabilities cannot be understood through simplistic or single-factor explanations. Rather than being shaped by a single determinant, return intentions emerged from the complex interaction of security perceptions, household vulnerabilities, socio-economic conditions, political attitudes, legal precarity, and refugees' lived experiences in both Lebanon and Syria. Return therefore remains a deeply conditional, differentiated and context-dependent process shaped simultaneously by conditions in the country of origin and by refugees' evolving realities within the host country.
- At the same time, host community perceptions revealed important complexities and contradictions. Lebanese respondents simultaneously perceived Syrian refugees as economic competitors and as an essential labour force sustaining sectors dependent on low-cost and informal work. Although many respondents supported incentivised voluntary return, most also recognised the structural barriers preventing sustainable repatriation, particularly the lack of employment opportunities and continuing instability in Syria.

Challenging Reductionist Assumptions

- The findings challenged reductionist assumptions considering that improving security conditions or political change in Syria would automatically generate large-scale voluntary return of refugees from Lebanon. In this respect, the majority of the surveyed refugees were still unwilling to return to Syria (64%), even more than a year after the fall of the Assad regime.
- While perceived insecurity and threats in Syria continue to constitute important deterrents, the study demonstrated that security considerations alone were insufficient to explain return and non-return dynamics. A considerable proportion of refugees unwilling to return reported not perceiving immediate security threats, suggesting that other determinants played an equally central role in shaping return aspirations and capabilities.
- Refugees' decisions were also strongly shaped by confidence in Syria's transitional authorities, perceived access to housing, livelihoods, and basic services, as well as fears of discrimination, instability, and uncertain reintegration prospects.
- Simultaneously, conditions within Lebanon (including social hostility, economic deterioration, legal uncertainty, restricted access to rights and services, and growing protection concerns) played a major role in shaping refugees' perceptions of both present viability and future alternatives.

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CONCLUSIONS

Various Determinants of Return

- The findings demonstrated that return aspirations varied significantly across demographic, regional, sectarian and socio-economic categories.
- Women, households with children, and respondents with stronger social integration in Lebanon generally expressed lower willingness to return, while experiences of hostility and unstable employment often increased the urgency of return aspirations. These findings underline the importance of avoiding homogeneous representations of Syrian refugees and instead recognising the differentiated nature of return decision-making processes.
- The study additionally revealed significant regional divergences in return perceptions. Place of origin emerged as a strong determinant of return intentions, particularly through its interaction with localised security and political dynamics across Syrian governorates. For example, refugees originating from Idlib generally expressed greater openness towards return than respondents from Deir ez-Zor, who remained significantly more reluctant due to continuing localised instability and uncertainty.
- Similarly, sectarian and socio-cultural origins influenced return perceptions, particularly regarding fears of discrimination, political exposure and violence in post-Assad Syria, although these factors remain strongly intertwined with regional origin and personal experiences rather than operating independently.
- Economic and capability-related determinants consistently emerged as central factors shaping return feasibility. Refugees with higher and more stable incomes appeared better positioned to consider return, particularly when possessing financial reserves, housing options, or support networks in Syria. Conversely, precarious employment arrangements, exploitative labour conditions and structural informality in Lebanon increased vulnerability while simultaneously anchoring refugees in displacement due to the absence of sustainable alternatives in Syria. These findings reinforce the importance of distinguishing between willingness to return and the practical ability to do so.
- The study also highlighted the contradictory role of access to services. Education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, and NGO support simultaneously functioned as stabilising mechanisms encouraging temporary stay and as indicators of vulnerability when access became restricted. Education emerged as a particularly important yet understudied determinant, especially for families with school-aged children. While the perceived quality of Lebanese education encouraged some families to remain, structural barriers (including documentation requirements, limited capacity, transport costs, and child labour pressures) transformed education into a return factor for others. Similar contradictions emerged regarding healthcare access and humanitarian assistance, particularly amid funding reductions and increasing precarity.

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CONCLUSIONS

Assessing the Return Programme

- The study highlighted important limitations within the current GoL–UNHCR return framework. While formally presented as voluntary, many refugees perceived existing return mechanisms as insufficient for enabling safe, dignified and sustainable return, particularly given limited financial assistance, inadequate consideration of reintegration conditions inside Syria, and the absence of mechanisms allowing them to assess conditions before definitive return.
- Findings demonstrated major gaps between institutional assumptions and refugees' lived realities. Although awareness of the programme was relatively widespread, most respondents considered the incentives insufficient and disconnected from actual conditions in Syria. Financial assistance alone could not ensure sustainable return in the absence of housing, employment opportunities, basic services and long-term stability. The prohibition of "Go-and-See" visits by Lebanese authorities reinforced uncertainty among refugees by preventing temporary exploratory return, despite respondents emphasising the importance of verifying conditions in Syria before making definitive return decisions.
- More broadly, and in line with existing literature, the study raised important concerns regarding the blurred boundaries between voluntary and coerced return in Lebanon. Lebanese policy measures (like restrictions on residency or camp raids) contributed to a wider environment of uncertainty and structural pressure. While the programme itself remains formally voluntary, many refugees experienced political and socio-economic conditions as indirectly coercive, thereby limiting the meaningful voluntariness of return decisions.

Rights and Protection

- Across the study, rights and protection concerns emerged not as secondary humanitarian issues but as central structural dimensions shaping refugees' lives and return perceptions. Limited access to education, healthcare, housing, legal protection and dignified employment continued to expose Syrian refugees to multiple forms of vulnerability, while women and children remained disproportionately affected by economic insecurity, exploitation and protection risks. These conditions not only affect present living standards but also shape refugees' calculations regarding safety, stability and future prospects.

Sustainable Return Starts with Refugee Voices

- Overall, sustainable return cannot be reduced to physical movement across borders. Return is a multidimensional process requiring meaningful guarantees of safety, legal protection, socio-economic reintegration and access to basic rights and services. Policies centred primarily on pressure, deterrence, or deteriorating host-country conditions risked producing premature, coerced, or unsustainable returns that could further exacerbate vulnerability.
- Finally, placing refugee voices at the centre of both academic research and policymaking revealed to be highly important. Their perceptions and experiences exposed realities that diverged from institutional narratives and simplified policy assumptions. Safe, dignified, and sustainable return cannot be reduced to political declarations or financial incentives alone, but requires addressing the structural conditions shaping both refugees' aspirations and capabilities.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Government of Lebanon *(including ministries and security institutions)*

- Adopt evidence-based return policies that move beyond security-centred approaches and recognise both refugees' willingness and practical ability to return, while safeguarding access to basic services that shape sustainable return.
- Allow and facilitate "Go-and-See" visits, enabling refugees to assess conditions in Syria and make informed decisions regarding their return prospects.
- Develop differentiated return and protection strategies that take into account the heterogeneity of the Syrian refugee population and the varying determinants shaping return decision-making.
- Strengthen policy coordination with Syrian authorities, UNHCR, IOM and other partners to support safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable return.
- Maintain and expand access to education, healthcare, civil documentation and other basic services through the relevant ministries (MEHE, MoPH and MoSA) and relevant partners, particularly for children, women, and vulnerable households. Preserving access to essential services can reduce harmful coping mechanisms and improve long-term conditions and sustainable return decisions.
- Review restrictive residency, documentation and administrative requirements that increase precarity and informality without demonstrably facilitating sustainable return.
- Halt arrest campaigns, raids, and other security measures that are inconsistent with protection principles and contribute to indirect coercion, heightened vulnerability, and uncertainty among refugee populations.

International Organisations *(including UN agencies and donors)*

- Rebalance return programming away from an overreliance on short-term financial incentives and towards addressing the structural barriers identified by refugees themselves. Return assistance should prioritise sustainable reintegration conditions rather than transportation or cash grants.
- Strengthen coordination between operations in Lebanon and Syria to improve refugees' access to reliable information on housing, services, livelihoods, documentation procedures and security conditions in areas of return.
- Expand targeted outreach and communication strategies, particularly among younger refugees and households with limited awareness of available programmes
- Advocate for the establishment of a formal "Go-and-See" mechanism with the Lebanese authorities that enable refugees to undertake first-hand evaluations of return conditions before making definitive decisions.
- Protect funding for essential services, particularly education, healthcare, legal aid, child protection and gender-focused programming. Sustained support is critical to reducing negative coping mechanisms.
- Increase investment in housing rehabilitation, infrastructure restoration and community-level recovery initiatives in areas of return, which are likely to have a greater impact on sustainable return than narrowly focused return incentives.
- Strengthen partnerships with universities, research centres, and independent research organisations to generate evidence-based knowledge that can better inform programming, policy development and return governance.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

NGOs and Civil Society Organisations

- Prioritise vulnerability- and needs-based programming tailored to household-specific circumstances rather than assuming uniform pathways towards return or local integration. Programming should remain responsive to refugees' expressed priorities, aspirations, capabilities and evolving needs.
- Strengthen interventions addressing child labour, school dropout, labour exploitation, gender-based vulnerabilities and barriers to legal documentation, particularly amid declining assistance and limited livelihood opportunities that increase reliance on harmful coping mechanisms with long-term consequences for children and vulnerable adults.
- Expand support for formal education pathways, recognised certification, vocational training and livelihoods programming. Greater emphasis should be placed on educational and skills-development interventions that provide meaningful long-term opportunities and enhance future reintegration prospects for those who eventually return.
- Increase legal awareness and documentation support, particularly for households lacking residency papers, civil documentation, birth registration, or educational records, to reduce vulnerability and improve access to rights and services.
- Strengthen partnerships with universities, research centres, and independent research institutions to generate evidence-based knowledge and ensure that programming remains responsive and flexible to changing displacement and return dynamics.

Academia and Research Institutions

- Promote analytical approaches that move beyond simplistic push–pull models and better capture the complexity, multidimensionality, and non-linearity of refugee return dynamics.
- Continue generating longitudinal evidence on the determinants of return aspirations and capabilities, with particular attention to how they evolve in response to changing political, economic and security conditions in both Lebanon and Syria, especially under the current circumstances.
- Place refugee perspectives at the centre of research and policymaking to better understand the interaction of individual, household, structural, and contextual factors shaping return decision-making and to challenge top-down assumptions.
- Evaluate the long-term outcomes of return programmes, including the sustainability of return, access to livelihoods, housing conditions, educational continuity, protection outcomes, and risks of secondary displacement. Further evidence is needed to assess whether current return interventions effectively address the barriers identified by refugees themselves.
- Promote participatory, engaged, and rights-based research that places refugees at the centre of knowledge production. Research should combine academic rigour with social responsibility, uphold the highest ethical standards, support evidence-informed policymaking and avoid practices that objectify displaced populations or overlook their agency and lived experiences.

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GLOSSARY

ArMA: Arab Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights

GBV: Gender Based Violence

GoL: the Government of Lebanon

GSO: the Lebanese General Security Office is the official state agency responsible for overseeing national security, immigration, borders, and citizenship affairs.

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

IOM: International Organization for Migration

JRS: Jesuit Refugee Service

KIIs: Key Informant Interviews

LBP: Lebanese Pounds

LCRP: Lebanon Crisis Response Plan

MEHE: Ministry of Education and Higher Education

MoPH: Ministry of Public Health

MoSA: Ministry of Social Affairs

MoU: Memorandum of Understanding

Mukhtar: an elected local official in Lebanon who serves as the primary administrative link between citizens and the state.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

Shawish: an informal camp leader or supervisor who acts as the primary gatekeeper and manager of Syrian informal tented settlements in Lebanon. He is usually an intermediary between refugees and landowners, employers or local authorities.

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USD: United States Dollar

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My condition for returning to Syria would be to have a society open to women's rights.

Syrian Refugee Woman, Lebanon.

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