



## From Exile to Uncertainty: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Consider Returning Home

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Travelers walk on the Lebanese side of the Masnaa border crossing with Syria on December 9, 2024.  
(Photo by ANWAR AMRO / AFP)

**T**he fall of the Assad regime after almost 14 years of war has brought hope to many Syrian refugees that a long-awaited return home is possible. The shift also comes as welcome news for the governments of host countries—not least Syria's neighbor Lebanon, where politicians have long claimed that the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees places a heavy burden on scarce resources.

According to the United Nations' refugee agency, the UNHCR, over 400,000 out of a total of about six million Syrian refugees have returned to Syria since President Bashar Al-Assad's ouster on December 8, 2024.<sup>1</sup> Members of the Lebanese government and parliament have seized on this development to escalate their calls for Syrian refugees to return home.<sup>2</sup>

In his inaugural speech in January, President Joseph Aoun stressed the importance of "serious" dialogue with the new Syrian government, including to address the refugee crisis.<sup>3</sup> During a meeting with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees a few days later, the president requested support to facilitate the "swift repatriation of Syrian refugees," noting that the conditions that led to their displacement no longer existed.<sup>4</sup>

The Lebanese government has long called for Syrian refugees to return. Some politicians have blamed them for the country's economic and social challenges, citing the strain they have allegedly placed on the country's resources and economy.<sup>5</sup> In March 2025, a bloc of parliamentarians submitted a bill aimed at regulating the return of Syrian refugees.<sup>6</sup> The refugee issue has topped the agenda in recent meetings between Lebanese officials and Syria's new President Ahmed Al-Sharaa.<sup>7</sup>

These political pressures are compounded by multiple other push factors facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including a restrictive and ambiguous regulatory framework, the repercussions of the country's financial and economic crisis, and decreasing international aid, among others. Together, these factors are likely to pressure many Syrian refugees to return to Syria prematurely. Yet political, economic, and institutional challenges in Syria continue to hinder their mass return.

As the pressure grows on Syrian refugees to leave Lebanon, every effort must be made to ensure that repatriations remain safe, dignified, voluntary, and in line with international human rights conventions.<sup>i</sup>

## Facing Hostility in Lebanon

Lebanon continues to host a large number of Syrian refugees. While just over 750,000 were registered with the UNHCR as of December 31, 2024,<sup>8</sup> the government estimates that the actual number is significantly higher, at 1.5 million.<sup>9</sup> Despite the protracted nature of the crisis, Syrian refugees in Lebanon continue to face an uncertain status, given the government's fragmented approach to managing the refugee crisis.<sup>10</sup> In October 2014, in the face of an increasing number of refugees crossing the border to Lebanon, the government halted their registration with the UNHCR, adjusted entry categories and requirements, and introduced new rules for those renewing their residencies.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the Lebanese government and the General Security Office (GSO) have introduced a series of ad hoc, contradictory policies related to Syrian refugees, making it difficult for them to maintain their legal status and work in the formal sector. Other challenges include required documentation (for example, legal documents which may have been lost or are expensive to secure) and high fees required for obtaining permits.<sup>12</sup> As a result, by 2023, only about 20% of Syrians in Lebanon over the age of 15 held a valid residency permit,<sup>13</sup> while fewer than 2,500 work permits were issued to Syrian workers that same year.<sup>14</sup>

Tightened enforcement against Syrian refugees without the proper paperwork—through raids on tented settlements, detentions, and deportations—has impacted their freedom of movement and access to basic services, including healthcare.<sup>15</sup> The UNHCR reported that between January 1 and October 21, 2024, at least 5,600 Syrian refugees had been deported.<sup>16</sup> Across the country, municipalities have introduced security measures including curfews, while in some southern towns, municipalities asked Syrians not to return following the ceasefire with Israel, due to the lack of housing.<sup>17</sup>

i. This policy note is informed by an exhaustive desk review and consultative meetings with Syrian researchers, experts, and activists, including representatives from think tanks and non-governmental organizations in Lebanon, Syria, and abroad.

In 2024, the Lebanese government and GSO also re-initiated a repatriation plan,<sup>18</sup> initially introduced in 2022, and supposedly intended to facilitate the “dignified and safe return” of Syrian refugees.<sup>19</sup> Under the new government, a Ministerial Committee on Syrian Displaced Persons re-affirmed the country’s “firm stance against resettlement in all its forms.”<sup>20</sup> These restrictive policies and deteriorating living conditions in Lebanon have increased the pressure on Syrian refugees to return.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, negative rhetoric by certain politicians, coupled with anti-refugee media campaigns, have also contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for Syrian refugees, including through misinformation and the fueling of social tensions between refugees and host communities. A survey of both Lebanese and Syrians’ perceptions of social tensions, conducted in October 2024—shortly after Israel’s escalation of hostilities across Lebanon—found that over 47% of participants perceived competition for services and utilities as a source of tension between the two communities.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, over 80% of respondents agreed or “strongly agreed” that Lebanese citizens had been neglected in international aid and assistance programs.<sup>23</sup>

The precarious conditions facing the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have only worsened since the onset of the country’s financial and economic crisis in 2019. In 2023, 76% of Syrian refugees lived under the minimum expenditure basket—the income threshold needed to cover essential needs. This forced many to rely on humanitarian aid and informal credit to meet their needs.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, international attention and funding to address the refugee crisis has been dwindling. The Trump administration’s freeze of US financial assistance is likely to impact support further.<sup>25</sup> In April 2025, the UNHCR informed beneficiaries that it would be reassessing its funding priorities to focus more on emergency and life-saving interventions and scaling down some services such as its cash assistance program.<sup>26</sup>

## Growing Intentions to Return

While deteriorating conditions in Lebanon are adding to the pressure on Syrian refugees to return home, their decision to do so also depends on the situation in Syria. Multiple challenges continue to hinder the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of Syrian refugees. A successful transition in the country hinges on stabilizing the security situation and overcoming political, economic, and institutional challenges, as well as addressing issues of transitional justice, reconciliation, and human rights.

In order to address some of these challenges, the transitional government organized a National Dialogue in Damascus at the end of February 2025. While the final statement did honor “the sacrifices of Syria’s...displaced individuals,” it did not specifically address the question of Syrian refugee return.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Syrian refugees had limited representation at the dialogue. Recent bilateral discussions between Lebanese and Syrian delegations indicate that there is a willingness to facilitate Syrian refugee return, but at the time of writing, the transitional government had not yet presented a concrete plan or strategy to enable this.<sup>28</sup>

Still, an increasing number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon intend to return. About 24% of Syrian refugees participating in a region-wide UNHCR Flash Survey on Perceptions and Intentions to Return, conducted in January 2025, reported that they intended to return to Syria in the next 12 months “to rebuild their lives,” the majority of them hoping to return to their place of origin. In comparison, only about 2% of respondents reported the same in April 2024. Furthermore, 56% of respondents reported that they intend to return within five years, while 81% hope to return someday.<sup>29</sup> Syrian refugees cited several factors in Syria as influencing their decisions to return, including the availability and status of housing and property (69%), availability of services (40%), safety and security (45%), and economic challenges (54%).<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Syrian refugees consider multiple factors as they decide when and whether to return to Syria.<sup>ii</sup> One key factor is whether family members and other community members have already returned or are planning to do so. The current state of their property and the conditions of their hometowns also play a significant role, as do the availability of housing and basic services, such as electricity, water, healthcare, and education—especially for refugee households with children. For the latter, potential challenges in transitioning to formal schooling in Syria are another factor. Some Syrian households have not been able to register their newborn children or marriages in Lebanon (for example, due to high fees or lost legal documentation) and fear facing legal difficulties once they return.

The current economic situation in Syria, including the high cost of living and lack of economic opportunities are also important factors, especially for those whose homes were destroyed or who are not able to go back to their place of origin. In these cases, the cost of rebuilding, repairing or renting homes are key considerations. Refugees' geographical origins within Syria are also decisive, as certain governorates have faced significantly more damage than others. Women and female-headed households have specific safety and protection concerns. Still, some Syrian refugees may opt to remain in Lebanon for various reasons, including having established businesses, bought homes, or wanting to avoid interruptions to their children's education.

Almost 61% of those surveyed reported an interest in undertaking "go and see" visits to Syria.<sup>31</sup> Those wishing to return have expressed the need for support from UNHCR, including for transport and cash grants to cover basic needs and rebuild their homes. To that end, in early 2025 the agency established an operational framework for the return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs),<sup>32</sup> and more recently a platform to help Syrian refugees make informed decisions about return. UNHCR support to Syrian refugee returnees

includes a one-time return and re-integration grant, some support for transportation, and limited housing assistance, including for moderate repairs. The transitional government has not made any announcements regarding setting up collective shelters.<sup>33</sup> Given the vast destruction in Syria, as well as the depleted state of basic services in some governorates, this support is unlikely to be sufficient.

The extent to which the international community is willing to support Syria's transition remains unclear, particularly as sanctions continue to have their impact. Despite the positive effect of the European Union's easing of sanctions in some key economic sectors (such as infrastructure development), as long as American financial sanctions remain in place, the Syrian banking system will not be able to engage with the international banking system and support trade.<sup>34</sup> Despite Trump's recent announcement that the U.S. would be lifting all sanctions on Syria, the process is likely to be lengthy and complicated.<sup>35</sup> Until then, sanctions will continue to impact the ability of the transitional government to revive the economy and begin recovery and reconstruction efforts, while hindering it and other actors, such as international donors, from providing much needed aid and basic services to the population—including returnees. The effects of the Trump administration's cuts to USAID have also been felt in Syria. A survey of 16 U.S. aid grantees in Northwest Syria found that the cuts have impacted programming across sectors, including food assistance, protection, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), and healthcare.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, in March 2025, Syria witnessed its deadliest clashes in years—a reminder of how fragile the country remains. The violence between government-linked security forces and Assad loyalists in the country's coastal areas of Latakia, Jablah, and Baniyas resulted in the former's killing of over 1,000 civilians, mainly from minorities.<sup>37</sup> While some Syrian refugees have begun returning to Syria from Lebanon (both by choice and by force), close to 30,000 Syrians have fled to Lebanon since the

ii. The factors outlined here and in the next paragraph are drawn from the consultative meetings.

clashes began.<sup>38</sup> Ongoing hate speech and clashes inside Syria, most recently in Druze-majority areas south of Damascus,<sup>39</sup> have highlighted the country's fragmentation and the government's limited control over certain regions.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Despite the fall of the Assad regime, the return of Syria's refugees will be a long process—one that hinges on multiple factors both in Lebanon and Syria. Efforts to enable return should be a key component of Syria's transitional phase. Above all, in line with international humanitarian principles, refugee return should remain safe, dignified, and voluntary, while host countries, including Lebanon, must respect the principle of non-refoulement.

To be able to make informed decisions, Syrian refugees should be able to go back to their hometowns to assess the situation with a guarantee that they will be allowed re-entry into Lebanon. Türkiye has already allowed such "go-and-see" visits,<sup>40</sup> and in Lebanon, the UNCHR is already discussing similar arrangements with the Lebanese government. As an initial step, and as part of a broader set of efforts, such visits are important not only for Syrian refugees to assess the situation back home but also to allow them to initiate the necessary arrangements for a longer-term return when conditions permit.

Facilitating such visits would address fears among Syrian refugees of being denied re-entry into Lebanon—particularly for those without a valid residency permit—if they conclude that the situation in Syria is unsuitable for return, or if it were to deteriorate. Guaranteeing re-entry into Lebanon is key to ensuring that Lebanon respects international conventions and upholds the principle of non-refoulement.<sup>iii</sup> Facilitating these visits will require the easing of current restrictions and requirements for the issuance and renewal of residency permits (such as exempting some of the required documentation or waiving some of the related fees), as Syrians sometimes avoid approaching the GSO out of fear of being deported or detained. It will also necessitate coordination among multiple actors, including the Lebanese government, the GSO, the Government of Syria, and the UNHCR, including for the arrangement of transportation and facilitating border crossings.

The international community also has a key role to play here, in line with global sharing of responsibility for refugees. The UNHCR, donors, the EU, and regional actors must continue supporting host countries such as Lebanon in responding to local refugee needs (for example, through continued financial and technical assistance). In parallel, international and regional actors—including the Lebanese government—must support Syria's recovery and the conditions necessary for Syrian refugees to return home in safety and dignity.

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iii. In a statement shortly after Assad's fall, the UNHCR called for "all States to allow civilians fleeing Syria access to their territories, to guarantee the right to seek asylum, and to ensure respect for the principle of non-refoulement at all times," further stating that it "does not consider that the requirements for cessation of refugee status for beneficiaries of international protection originating from Syria have been met." See: UNHCR, "UNHCR Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic," December 2024, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2024/en/149254>.

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