



SHRINKING HORIZONS FOR HOPE



Save the Children

Syrian refugees reflect on their priorities on durable solutions after a decade in displacement

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Laura Kivela and Anya Cowley.

Cover photo: Lina,* 10 from Syria, is overcoming her lisp problems with confidence and courage. (Photo by Nour Wahid / Save the Children)

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* All names have been changed to protect the identities of children and the families featured in this report.

Published by Save the Children

First published in September 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Save the Children commissioned this report to help provide a better understanding of how Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq regard their future, their decision-making processes, and priorities in terms of durable solutions.

As the crisis in Syria continues into its second decade, the long-term prospects of Syrian refugees remain uncertain. There are currently approximately 5.7 million registered Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries including Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.¹ Many have been living in displacement since the start of the crisis, and almost half of all registered Syrian refugees are under the age of 18.²

Despite the generosity and support shown by host countries and the international community, daily life remains difficult for most Syrian refugees. Whilst many have been living in host countries for a decade, pathways to inclusion remain largely out of reach, and progress towards attaining durable solutions outside of host countries has been slow.

This report is based on 72 focus group discussions with refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq carried out between February and April 2022. Participants for the focus groups were selected from among refugees participating in Save the Children's programs in each country. Most participants in the focus group discussions have lived in the host country between five and 11 years, whilst a minority arrived more recently, between one and two years prior. The focus group discussions were broken down by sex, age group (young people and older adults), as well as by residence type (camps, informal settlement, and host community).

Participation of people living with disabilities was specifically encouraged in the selection of participants, however respondents were not asked to identify as such during the interviews.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to support sustainable solutions to the displacement needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq through a comprehensive approach that maintains access to all durable solution pathways. For refugees in Lebanon, as well as those in camps in Jordan and Iraq, the situation is particularly urgent; poor housing, limits on freedom of movement, and poor integration with the host community have left many with little hope for the future.

Greater efforts are needed to advance initiatives that minimize the adverse impacts of displacement and enable the full enjoyment of rights for the Syrian refugee population in the region. A comprehensive focus on all solutions pathways needs to be maintained, while advancing opportunities for refugee self-reliance and long-term legal status in countries of asylum. It is essential that solutions planning is based on the informed and voluntary choices of displaced young people, and supports access to quality, formal education, livelihoods, and self-fulfillment in line with their aspirations.

Refugees consulted were frustrated by their difficult and protracted situation, with many regarding their future as uncertain or hopeless due to the perceived lack of progress in attaining a durable solution to their displacement.

Most refugees consulted had considered returning to Syria at one point, but concerns over **personal safety** and **security**, among other factors, remain significant barriers.



Access to greater **personal freedoms, choices, and rights** in host or third countries, especially **gender equality** for women and girls, were important considerations for many refugees in guiding decision-making about the future.



SYRIA

Young refugees in particular viewed moving to a third country as their preferred long-term solution to secure a better life due to the perceived **lack of durable solution pathways** in the host country and **diminishing ties** with life back in Syria.

Refugees, especially those living in camp settings or informal settlements, emphasized their wish to become more self-reliant while in displacement and need for increased **access to legal protection, jobs, education, housing, and improved community acceptance**.





An informal tented settlement for Syrian refugees where Siraj*, 13, (pictured on page 4) and his family have been living for over five years, Bekaa valley, Lebanon.

INTRODUCTION

As the crisis in Syria continues into its second decade, the prospects of Syrian refugees remain highly uncertain. There are currently approximately 5.7 million registered Syrian refugees living in neighbouring countries, including Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.³ Many refugee families have been in displacement since near the start of the crisis. 47 per cent of registered Syrian refugees are children.⁴ Many of these children may have few or no memories of Syria as a place called ‘home’.

The current situation and longer-term prospects for Syrian refugees today are challenging. Despite the generosity and support shown by host countries, communities, and the international community, daily life is becoming increasingly difficult for most Syrian refugees. For example, according to the 2022 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan Needs Overview, up to 90 per cent of refugees in host countries are unable to meet their basic needs.⁵ Whilst many have been living in host countries for a decade, pathways to deeper inclusion remain largely out of reach.

Furthermore, progress towards attaining durable solutions outside host countries in the current context is slow. While most Syrian refugees hope to return to Syria one day, only a small fraction intend to return in the short term.⁶ Between 2016 and June 2022, there were more than 325,551 self-organized refugee returns to Syria.⁷ Meanwhile, the number of available resettlement places remains far below actual need. For example, despite almost 600,000 people assessed to be in need, actual resettlement is no more than 20,000 places per year.⁸

This report provides a qualitative update on how Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq think about

their future, what influences their decision-making processes, and how they view durable solutions in a region hard-hit by COVID-19 and an economic crisis. It is based on 72 focus group discussions with refugees across these countries. Participants were selected among refugees participating in Save the Children’s programs in each country. The study is based on qualitative data from the focus group discussions, and the findings cannot be generalised to the total refugee population in Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Most participants in the focus group discussions have lived in the host country between five and 11 years, whilst a minority arrived more recently, between one to two years ago. A small minority of respondents in Lebanon had been living there prior to the conflict. The focus group discussions were broken down by sex, age group (young people and older adults), as well as by residence type (camps/informal tented settlements and among the host community). In Iraq, interviews were only organised in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Participation of people living with disabilities was specifically encouraged in the selection of participants, however respondents were not asked to identify as such during the interviews. The interviews were carried out between February and April 2022.

“Our dreams got shattered, we cannot dream anymore.”

Young man (15–25 years), Lebanon

“I want to become an electrical engineer in the coming years. I want to be able to study this major and excel in it.”

Young man (15–25 years), Lebanon

OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENTS

72 focus group discussions

514 participants

210 in Jordan

210 in Lebanon

194 in Iraq

51%

WOMEN & GIRLS



49%

MEN & BOYS



50%

CAMPS OR INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS



50%

IN HOST COMMUNITY



53%

YOUNG PEOPLE (AGED 15-25)



47%

25+ YEARS

FINDINGS: SYRIAN REFUGEES' PRIORITIES

Key changes that refugees hoped to see in their lives for the next two to five years varied greatly across the three countries. In Jordan and Iraq, many respondents mentioned hoping to see their children complete education, and obtain a university degree, and improving their financial situation. In both countries, men and women living in camp-settings outlined ways that their lives could be improved through access to normal housing, better livelihood opportunities, freedom of movement, and access to legal documents.

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees hoped for improvements in basic living conditions, access to quality housing and livelihoods, and sufficient income. Women also mentioned their hope to secure access to quality education for their children, and ensure they learn to read and write. Some boys and young men were hopeful about future opportunities to start a business and earn a decent living in Lebanon.

Worryingly, refugees also expressed feeling quite hopeless given their circumstances. As mentioned by one boy: *"I was asked [how would I like to see my life change] five years ago, and since then, nothing has changed. I don't expect my life to change for the better in the coming years because I lost hope."*

WHERE SYRIAN REFUGEES SEE THEMSELVES IN THE FUTURE

Most respondents in Lebanon and Jordan wanted to stay in the host country for the immediate future but hoped to move to a third country within five years' time. In Iraq, the one-year plans of refugees were

close to evenly split between staying in Iraq and moving to a third country, and in five years' time, almost all refugees wished to be living in a third country.

Generally, younger respondents in all countries were more likely to want to move to a third country, primarily to access education or work opportunities. Girls were more likely to hope to migrate elsewhere. Most respondents hoping to move to third countries were hoping to do so through accessing resettlement opportunities, and most did not seem to be factoring in the low numbers of resettlement opportunities into their planning. Many respondents in Lebanon and Iraq also mentioned hoping to be able to work, save money, and then move to a third country independently, either through support from relatives or through using smugglers.

As regards return to Syria, most respondents highlighted concerns over personal safety and security as key barriers to return, and return was mentioned as the preferred option in the coming five years by only a handful of respondents.

"I will move to a different country, for the sake of daughter's future."

Syrian woman, Jordan

"Travel [elsewhere than Syria or Jordan] is the only solution for us."

Syrian woman, Jordan



Siraj* is a Syrian Refugee. He has been living in a tented informal refugee camp for the last 5 years, in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.

Numerous interviewees, especially in Lebanon, felt unable to think about the future, as they were preoccupied by day-to-day survival and saw their prospects for durable solutions as limited. As mentioned by one young man in relation to his situation in Lebanon: *"I do not see a change for the better, I expect that the change will be for the worse."* In Iraq, refugees were generally less likely to express outright hopelessness, but the lack of certainty about their future weighs heavily on many: *"[In Iraq] I am a refugee – the future is unknown for us in Kurdistan."*

DECISION-MAKING WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

Female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to highlight the need to secure a better future for their children as a key decision-making factor. In Lebanon and Jordan, girls and women frequently mentioned that whilst they could express their opinions, they followed the decisions of their husbands or parents: *"It is the husband who decides for the family, and the woman should listen to her husband because he knows what is right for them."* In Iraq, however, female respondents seemed to have more equal decision-making power and autonomy.

As mentioned by an older woman in Kurdistan: *"We have influence on our husbands' decisions. My husband said he will go back to Syria, and I said: 'I will not return, go alone.'"*

Young people in all three countries felt that their opinions were rarely considered in decision-making within the household. As mentioned by one young female in Iraq, *"I try to say what I have to say, but [parents] do not listen to me. They say that you are still too young to recognize right from wrong"*.

TOWARDS A SENSE OF BELONGING

When asked what would improve their situation and sense of belonging in the host country, respondents in Jordan and Iraq highlighted the importance of guarantees for long-term legal safety, pathways towards citizenship, as well as rights such as unrestricted access to ownership of property, land, the labour market, education, and housing, as well as improved community acceptance. In Lebanon, refugees expressed similar priorities, adding the need for more humanitarian assistance, clarity on who was eligible and the criteria that assistance was based on.

“ [Moving to a third country] is the only way – we have to take the risk to have a better life. Poverty is what pushes a person to travel.”

Syrian boy, Iraq

In all countries, refugees living in camps or informal tented settlements particularly emphasized the wish to move to non-camp settings and access more sustainable housing options. Those living in tents or unfinished buildings in informal tented settlements primarily wished to have safe and secure homes. This wish was particularly pronounced among women. One young female respondent in Lebanon mentioned, “We don’t want to remain living as refugees in camps, but rather as capable individuals who do not have to worry about financial constraints and the inability to afford anything.” Men were more likely to prioritize access to work, as well as obtaining legal documents and freedom of movement.

In Lebanon, refugees reported hoping for better relations with the host community. Generally, respondents in Lebanon experienced a stronger sense of ‘otherness’ than their peers in Jordan and Iraq. As mentioned by an elderly refugee man in Lebanon, “[the Lebanese people] have negative attitudes towards us as Syrian refugees living in their country.” Despite the hardship experienced in their daily lives, many refugees in Lebanon felt a sense of belonging in the host country

because they had a house to live in and their family was with them – something they felt was not possible in Syria. As mentioned by one young refugee woman: “It is true that the situation in Lebanon is very bad now, but still, it is better than in Syria.”

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND PERSONAL FREEDOM

Most young refugees interviewed saw moving to a third country as the long-term solution to their displacement due to the lack of opportunities in the host country and their concerns about the conditions inside Syria. Moving to a third country was seen as providing a chance to access better healthcare services, including mental health and psychosocial support, greater economic opportunities, and pathways to citizenship. Some parents mentioned that the perceived better living conditions in third countries would relieve pressure they experience in their daily lives in a way that would have positive impacts on their parenting skills. Access to healthcare or support for family members with special needs was also an

Basel* lives with his parents and seven siblings in a two-room caravan Za’atari Camp. His father is unable to work due to a slip disc which has led to severe pain in his back. As a result Basel and his brothers work to support the family in covering their expenses.



“Women are more respected abroad. The society protects them and provides more freedom for them to make their own decisions in relation to work and education and other decisions as well.”

Syrian woman, 15–25, Lebanon

important decision-making factor mentioned by many refugees in determining their plans.

Many refugees had somewhat unrealistic views about life in third countries. Several respondents in Lebanon stated that they hoped to move to third countries, because they believed they “*would not face financial difficulties abroad.*” Young men seemed to have a very strong feeling that there would be no financial difficulties in countries outside of the region. One young refugee man’s comment in Lebanon portrayed well the general perception: “*I see pictures of Syrian refugees there holding iPhone 13, standing next to a BMW car and villa mansions.*”

Older respondents were likely to be more aware of integration challenges faced by family and friends in third countries but said that the possibility of greater financial stability outweighed these concerns. In the words of one male refugee in Lebanon, “*I would feel like a human being there, because I would be respected and I would be living in more satisfactory conditions: I could buy food, medications and seek healthcare services.*”

In Lebanon and Jordan, refugee women particularly mentioned freedom of choice and decision-making without constraints of cultural and social norms as key factors influencing their desire to move to third countries. Young women highlighted that in countries such as Europe, the US or Canada they felt there was “*greater respect for human rights*” including women’s rights and fewer protection risks for children. In general, many female respondents mentioned feeling like they had limited opportunities for self-development in host countries compared to their male counterparts, whereas in third countries, this would look different. As an example, one female respondent mentioned feeling that women abroad can more freely access opportunities for self-development, while in the region “*[women] [abroad] do not learn anything.*” An older female refugee in Lebanon also mentioned having heard that “*women are able to own property like houses and cars [abroad], and that they can freely express their points of view. There is more gender equality there.*”

Samah,* 47, mother of three, says that what is happening is another displacement. She says Syrian refugees never choose to leave their homes in the first place, and that no matter where they stay in Lebanon, they will always want to go back. Samah,* like others in the settlement, is waiting to know what is going to happen.

She says children are not eating or sleeping properly, and that the crisis has hit people who have no one to help them.



LIFE BACK IN SYRIA

Return to Syria in the short-term seems to have become a diminishing possibility for most refugees. Many respondents mentioned that they had thought about return during the years after the beginning of the conflict, however had given up hope as years went by and the obstacles for return in Syria persisted.

The key reasons for deciding not to return related to concerns over the safety and security situation in Syria and fears of forced military conscription. Economic conditions in Syria were also a factor, although to a lesser extent. As mentioned by one young refugee man in Jordan, *“Everyone thought of going back to Syria. And everyone gave up the idea because there is no safety and we would be imprisoned, and the economic situation is bad and the requirements of life such as electricity are not met.”* One young man commented on the challenging economic situation inside Syria saying: *“[In Syria,] the one whose financial situation is good is*

living well, and the one whose financial situation is bad, is not living at all.” Three interviewees, all in Jordan, explicitly brought up worries about being forced to return to Syria. One man mentioned: *“When I tried to issue an ID card, [Jordanian authorities] told me that they would return me to Syria.”* Although the fear of forced return was not explicitly mentioned elsewhere, many refugees in Iraq also highlighted their concerns about the permanence of their legal status in the country.

One adult refugee man living in Lebanon mentioned having returned to Syria and found that the conditions in Syria were too challenging. Another refugee in Iraq said he had returned to his area of origin near the Turkish border, only to be re-displaced due to bombing. Other respondents noted that they knew of people who had returned to Syria only to be forced to come back to the host country.

“Abroad, no one will force us to put on a hijab or to do anything that we do not agree on.”

Syrian woman, 15-25, Lebanon

“We would not think of returning because it would put our lives at stake.”

Syrian man (younger), Lebanon



CONCLUSION

Eleven years on, the future of Syrian refugees remains uncertain. Those consulted for this report felt increasingly frustrated and desperate because of the lack of pathways to solutions.

For refugees in Lebanon, as well as those in camps in Jordan and Iraq, the situation is particularly untenable; poor housing, limitations on freedom of movement, limitations in education opportunities, and complex relations with the host community and country have left many with little hope for the future. Despite the challenging conditions in host countries, respondents did not feel that return to Syria was an option in the short-term.

Feelings of frustration and desperation were keenly felt by young people, among whom the desire to move to third countries is the greatest. They felt unable to access opportunities for education, employment and entrepreneurship, which limits their potential to contribute to their communities and societies. Lack of opportunities to improve their situation in host countries together with concerns regarding the security situation in Syria is leading many to put their hopes in moving to third countries outside the region. Looking into unsafe migration options was not uncommon among Syrian refugees, especially young people, increasing the risks of smuggling, unsafe migration and related exploitation.

Girls and young women typically saw third country solutions as a pathway towards greater independence and influence in decisions that affect their lives and escaping restrictive gender norms and stereotypes. The findings underscore the urgent need to develop approaches that can enable refugees to access safe durable solutions pathways while return to Syria remains an impossible reality for so many. Helping refugees regularise their legal status and provide them with reliable access to basic services in host countries must be strengthened to secure a future for refugees living in the region. In addition, more focus is needed to increase access to third country solutions safely.

In particular, the Government of Syria and the governments of all countries hosting displaced Syrians and the international community should ensure access to durable solutions, including through:

- Protecting Syrians' right to seek asylum, respecting the principle of non-refoulement, ending deportations to Syria and explicitly limiting any coercive measures which may push refugees to return against their will.
- Increasing access to quality resettlement opportunities for Syrian refugees and refugees from other contexts in line with the commitments in the Global Compact on Refugees, as this remains the only safe and dignified durable solutions option for some of the most vulnerable refugees and the preferred solution for many.
- Facilitating access to complementary pathways for admission to third countries, including through educational programmes and labour migration opportunities. These opportunities need to be supported with adequate safeguards in particular to foster girls' and young women's access to safe opportunities.
- In hosting countries, ensuring adequate long-term and multi-sectoral development funding, with participation and inclusion of host communities promoting social cohesion, to allow for supporting refugee programming that reflects the protracted nature of the crisis.
- Removing barriers for displaced Syrians to access basic services, including quality, formal education, and providing pathways to greater socio-economic inclusion, including livelihoods opportunities.
- Continue planning and preparedness around voluntary return in safety and dignity, including working to remove barriers to return.
- Ensuring that psychosocial support needs are part of a multi-sectoral return preparedness framework for those refugees choosing to voluntarily return to Syria.
- Ensure children and youth are enabled to participate in solutions planning in accordance with their age and maturity, recognising that their concerns and priorities may differ from those of their parents or communities.

ENDNOTES

1 UNHCR, (2022): Operational data portal. Syria Regional Refugee Response. Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

2 3RP (2022): Regional Strategic Overview 2022. Online: https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RSO_8thMay2022.pdf

3 UNHCR, (2022): Operational data portal. Syria Regional Refugee Response. Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

4 3RP (2022): Regional Strategic Overview 2022. Online: https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RSO_8thMay2022.pdf

5 https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Regional_Needs_Overview_2021.pdf

6 UNHCR (2022) Seventh Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria. Online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/seventh-regional-survey-syrian-refugees-perceptions-and-intentions-return-syria-rpis-egypt-iraq-lebanon-jordan-june-2022>

7 UNHCR Data Portal: Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions. Online: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions_solutions

8 UNHCR Data Portal: Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions. Online: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions

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