

Durable Solutions / Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

In 2018, the government of Syria re-consolidated control over the majority of Syria's territory and started calling for its population to return home. In support to this call, the Russian Federation launched an international initiative in July to organize the return of 1.5 million refugees from Lebanon and Jordan.

In the meantime, a July 2018 intentionality survey conducted by UNHCR in neighbouring host countries showed that **85 percent of Syrian refugees did not intend to return** to Syria in the next 12 months⁽¹⁾. However, there were **56,047 UNCHR-verified spontaneous returns in 2018**, which amounts to a 10 percent increase compared to 2017⁽²⁾. The main reasons selected by respondents who did not intend to return were the **lack of safety and security** in Syria, with respondents highlighting the risk of indiscriminate violence or risks of targeted reprisals as key obstacles, the **lack of livelihood opportunities**, and **inadequate housing**. Of those that do intend to return, **51 percent stated that they did not have sufficient information** on their intended area of return. At the same time, respondents' **hope that it will be possible to return to Syria one day has significantly increased** from 51 percent in 2017 to 76 percent in 2018⁽³⁾.

Principled Returns

Conditions in Syria are currently **not conducive for voluntary return in safety and dignity**. As of August 2018, there were still 6.1 million IDPs in Syria, with an average of 6,550 people being displaced every day⁽⁴⁾. For instance, while 119,698 IDPs returned to their areas of origin in December 2018⁽⁵⁾, there were also 58,549 new IDP displacements during that month⁽⁶⁾.

As long as **UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters** for refugee return to Syria are **not met**,

1. UNHCR, 'Fourth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan', July 2018, Available online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66198>

2. UNCHR, 'Operations Portal Refugee Situations, Syria Regional Response Durable Solutions', Available online: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions

3. UNHCR, 'Fourth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan', July 2018, Available online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66198>

4. UN OCHA, '2018 Humanitarian Response Plan Syrian Arab Republic', August 2018, available online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_2018_hrp_syria.pdf [Accessed 4/2/19]

5. UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns', 15 January 2019, available online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idpspontreturns_201812_final.pdf [Accessed 4/2/19]

6. UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements December 2018', 21 January 2019, available online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idpmovements_201812_final.pdf [Accessed 4/2/19]

Facts & Figures

The living conditions in Syria are dire. For 2018, the UN estimated that:

- **13,1 million individuals are in need of humanitarian assistance**, with 10,5 million in need of urgent live-saving and life-sustaining food, agriculture and livelihoods assistance
- **1 out of 3 people are food insecure**, food basket prices have increased 800 percent compared to pre-crisis prices and 90% of households in Syria spend more than 50% of their annual income on food
- **5,3 million people lived in inadequate shelters**⁽¹⁾.
- **An estimated 10,2 million people are at risk of exposure to explosive hazards**⁽²⁾.

1. UN OCHA, '2018 Humanitarian Response Plan Syrian Arab Republic', August 2018, available online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_2018_hrp_syria.pdf [Accessed 4/2/19]

2. Sub Cluster Mine Action overview, January 2019

humanitarian organisations and the international community should not promote, nor participate directly in large-scale, organised return operations.

Refugees and IDPs do have **the right to return**, and can exercise their agency to do so if that is their **choice**. When or if returns are **self-organised**, humanitarian actors should engage in planning, monitoring, counselling, service orientation and risk education awareness amongst returning populations.

The **government of Syria, host countries, and other relevant authorities have the primary responsibility to create conditions conducive for returns**, with a complementary role played by the humanitarian community. The humanitarian community should always seek complementarity with duty bearers.

Host countries should guarantee continuous access to basic services (education, health, livelihood) for refugees in their countries – with the support of international donors and humanitarian actors. **Humanitarian actors should be able to access and deliver assistance** to all vulnerable populations.

Urgent Concerns

■ Even if Syrians do begin to return to Syria when the conditions are in place, **many refugees will remain in neighbouring countries for years to come**. The **services and infrastructure of host governments have been under continuous strain** over the past eight years and should be better supported and strengthened.

■ **Resettlement** is arguably the most **tangible and direct form of responsibility sharing by the international community**. At the Brussels conference in April 2017, donors recognized “the critical role of resettlement (...) to offer, together with other legal pathways, safe and dignified access to safety beyond the immediate region”. Yet, this past year has seen a dramatic drop in the number of refugees from Syria who have been offered this option, with submissions by UNHCR **down by over 50 percent compared to 2016**, as growing political backlash has swept western countries and the political focus in Syria has switched to returning refugees. **Opportunities for resettlement for persons with disabilities are even more limited**. Their discrimination is in fact a concern in the resettlement policies of receiving countries as countries tend to restrict the admission of refugees with disabilities blaming the burden on the country’s health care and social service systems.

■ Since 2012, **less than 3 percent of the Syrian refugee population has been resettled to wealthy countries that are signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention**, an overall percentage which has not changed in the last 12 months.

■ **Complementary pathways** such as third country scholarships and family reunification are other migration avenues that may not necessarily focus on vulnerability but on other criteria that might qualify a refugee for entry into a third country. **Refugees continue to face legal, administrative and practical barriers in accessing complementary pathways**.

■ It is not safe for refugees or internally displaced persons to return to areas with **high levels of contamination**. Explosive remnants of war (ERW), landmines and IEDs, including improvised landmines present **an immediate physical threat to civilians, limit safe access to services and impede the delivery of humanitarian aid**.

■ Refugees with **disabilities who need rehabilitation services** are of particular concern to HI as they cannot access these services in many areas of Syria, and are already **highly vulnerable** in neighbouring countries due to **barriers to accessing health services**.

Recommendations

All stakeholders: donors, international actors (including UNHCR and other UN agencies) and involved parties should:

■ **Not prematurely encourage returns of refugees** or of internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Syria;

■ Ensure that the **UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters** for refugee return to Syria is gradually implemented;

■ Be wary of supporting projects that may create **‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors around returnees**, such as incentivising humanitarian assistance for refugees that are linked to returning to Syria from Lebanon or Jordan;

■ Not encourage returns to **areas that are contaminated by explosive hazards** and not safe, until **humanitarian mine actors are allowed access**;

■ Adequately fund the humanitarian response by:

– **Increasing pledges of bilateral and multilateral development support** to neighbouring countries which is **specifically targeted to support both refugees and vulnerable host communities** and follow through on other commitments made at the London and Brussels conferences.

– **Fully funding the aid appeals for the Syria crisis**, such as the Humanitarian Response Plan and Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan but also government response plans such as the **Jordan Response Plan and Lebanon Crisis Response Plan**.*

– **Committing funding/emergency funds to mitigating**

the effects of harsh weather conditions and improving the overall living conditions in IDP camps inside Syria.

■ **Recognise the increased needs in IDP camps inside Syria** and ensure/demand access for the humanitarian community to provide basic services;

■ Recognise that **many refugees cannot or will not be able to return to Syria**, due to well-founded fears of persecution or other reasons;

■ Commit to a specific, **measurable target for an increase in resettlement** or other forms of humanitarian admission of refugees;

■ Offer **complementary pathways to assure safe and dignified pathways to safety** for Syrian refugees to access the EU, UK, USA, Canada and Australia;

■ Support refugees through the **provision of funds and assistance before and after departure from countries of first asylum** including fees, transportation, subsistence, and other social/community engagement.

■ Work closely with other humanitarian actors to ensure that **spontaneous returnees** with specific needs related to age, gender, injury and disability **receive the necessary protection**, information and services to support their voluntary return in dignity and safety.

■ Ensure that **refugees and IDPs are invited to meaningfully participate in humanitarian planning** and the implementation of any returns policy.

* Joint INGO report (2018), *Dangerous Ground: Syria’s refugees face an uncertain future*, available online at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/dangerous-ground-syria-s-refugees-face-uncertain-future>