

# UNHCR VOLUNTARY RETURN FRAMEWORK SYRIA

## A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

11.11.11 - ACCESS CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (ACHR) - DOOR BEYOND WAR - IGAM - OLIVE BRANCH - PAX - SUPPORT TO LIFE (HAYATA DESTEK) - UPINION

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### 1. CONTEXT

#### 1.1. Key developments since 8 December 2024

Since the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024, the public and political debate on Syria has increasingly focused on the question of whether Syria has become safe for return, whether Syrian refugees can and should return now to their country of origin, and which role the international community should play in any such return processes.

**When addressing these questions, it is crucial to recognise that while the changes on the ground in Syria are undoubtedly of a *fundamental* character, it remains to be seen whether such changes will be of a *durable* nature.** Syria continues to be affected by attacks and violence in parts of the country; the presence of foreign forces; large-scale internal displacement; the unknown fate of over 100,000 forcibly disappeared and missing persons; contamination of large parts of the country with explosive remnants of war; a devastated economy; and a large-scale humanitarian crisis. In addition, Syria has also sustained massive destruction and damage to homes, critical infrastructure and agricultural lands. Property rights have been greatly affected, with widespread housing, land, and property (HLP) violations recorded over the past decade, leading to complex ownership disputes that will take time to resolve. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “*while risks related to persecution by the former Government have ceased, other risks may persist or become more pronounced.*”<sup>1</sup> Although the initial rhetoric of the new transitional authorities has been encouraging, significant obstacles continue to exist in ensuring an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition.

**Against this backdrop, and given the current uncertainties of the situation in Syria, UNHCR has reiterated that it “*does not consider that the requirements for cessation of refugee status for beneficiaries of international protection originating from Syria have currently been met.*”** Accordingly, the UN Refugee Agency has called on states to not forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria (including Palestinians previously residing in Syria) to any part of Syria; 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; and to suspend the issuance of negative decisions on applications for international protection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-position-returns-syrian-arab-republic-december-2024-enarrukobg#:~:text=Everyone%20has%20the%20right%20to,choice%2C%20choose%20voluntarily%20to%20return.>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-position-returns-syrian-arab-republic-december-2024-enarrukobg#:~:text=Everyone%20has%20the%20right%20to,choice%2C%20choose%20voluntarily%20to%20return.>

Meanwhile, according to UNHCR between 8 December 2024 and 13 February 2025 approximately **279.000 Syrians have returned** to Syria.<sup>3</sup> On 6 February, UNHCR published a “Flash Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey” (**RPIS**), which was conducted amongst Syrian refugees in four neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt) but not in Türkiye.<sup>4</sup> Key findings of this RPIS included:

- On the question “**do you intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months?**” 27% of survey respondents answered yes, while 55% said no and 18% stated they didn’t know or were undecided. This indicates a significant increase since the previous RPIS (June 2024) where 1.7% of respondents answered “yes” to this question.<sup>5</sup>
- When people who didn’t answer yes on the first question were subsequently asked “**do you hope to return to Syria within five years?**” 53% answered yes, 25% no and 22% didn’t know or were undecided. In the June 2024 RPIS 36.8% of respondents answered yes and 50.1% said no.<sup>6</sup>
- When people who didn’t answer yes on the second question were subsequently asked “**do you hope to return to Syria one day?**” 43% answered yes, 38% no and 19% said they didn’t know or were undecided. In the June 2024 RPIS 30.2% of respondents answered yes and 55% said no.
- Over 60% of respondents considered it important to conduct a “**go-and-see**” visit before making a final decision on return.

## 1.2. Publication “UNHCR Operational Framework Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs”

On 6 February 2025, UNHCR launched a **new funding appeal** seeking \$370.9 million to implement a **new “Operational Framework for the Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)”**.<sup>7</sup> In this Framework UNHCR states that “*based on the numbers of Syrians returning home, including refugees registered with UNHCR, and explicit requests from refugees in host countries to be supported to return, UNHCR is shifting to a mode of **facilitation** of voluntary refugee return.*” (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-14>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/flash-regional-survey-syrian-refugees-perceptions-and-intentions-return-syria-february-2025>

<sup>5</sup> Data findings on intention to return in the next 12 months differ per country: 42% in Egypt, 40% in Jordan, 24% in Lebanon, and 12% in Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/ninth-regional-survey-syrian-refugees-perceptions-and-intentions-return-syria-rpis-egypt-iraq-jordan-lebanon-june-2024>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcrs-financial-requirements-voluntary-return-syrian-refugees-and-idps-january-december-2025>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcrs-financial-requirements-voluntary-return-syrian-refugees-and-idps-january-december-2025>

In this new Operational Framework, UNHCR projects up to 1.5 million Syrian refugees to return in 2025, in addition to a projected 2 million IDPs to return to their place of original residence in 2025. The Framework puts forward four strategic objectives:

1. Ensure return planning and implementation are anchored on international protection standards and principles.
2. Ensure Syrian refugees and IDPs are able to take a free and well-informed decision on whether to return and are actively engaged in the design of return processes in a participatory manner.
3. Facilitate voluntary return, including transportation and material assistance among others.
4. Support the reintegration of refugee and IDP returnees inside Syria, taking into account conflict sensitivity and the needs of all populations in places of return, in collaboration with broader national, UN, NGO and IFI reintegration and development programmes.

Furthermore, the new Voluntary Return Framework is structured on three main areas:

1. **Preparatory activities in host countries and inside Syria.** This includes, among others, the establishment of clear legal frameworks that define the responsibilities of host governments and the Syrian authorities, provide guarantees for the rights of returnees, address practical issues such as exit and entry requirements and customs, and establish the monitoring role of UNHCR; participation and consultation with refugees (including the creation of a regional inter-agency platform – SyriaHome - dedicated to information on voluntary return for refugees); go-and-see visits; and the creation of monitoring systems to make available analyses of return dynamics, including refugee profiles, their intention on return and updated information relating to the prevailing conditions in return areas and available humanitarian services inside Syria.
2. **The return process.** Activities include the establishment of inter-agency multi-sectoral Return Centres, both virtual and in-person; transportation and initial Reintegration Grants; and activities at Final Departure Points / Borders.
3. **Protection and reintegration programmes inside Syria,** with a focus on protection, cash assistance and shelter.

**Recognizing the risk that funding for return programming might come at the expense of much-needed support to refugees who do not return and choose to remain in neighboring host countries, as well as the risk that enhanced return programming might embolden host countries’ deportation campaigns, the Voluntary Return Framework stresses that “many refugees will not return in 2025. Some returnees may face continued or new protection risks inside Syria. While supporting those who want to return, protection space, funding and programmes should be maintained in host countries. UNHCR’s position on Syria returns from December 2024 remains unchanged, urging all States to grant civilians fleeing Syria access to their territories, uphold the right to seek asylum, and ensure full respect for the principle of non-refoulement.”**<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcrs-financial-requirements-voluntary-return-syrian-refugees-and-idps-january-december-2025>

## 2. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF UNHCR INTENTION SURVEY AND VOLUNTARY RETURN FRAMEWORK

The publication of the new UNHCR Voluntary Return Framework raises several questions, which are outlined below:

- **UNHCR contradicting UNHCR policies:** UNHCR has decided to shift from “phase 1” to “phase 2” (facilitation of large-scale return), without the necessary requirements for such a shift in place. These requirements are outlined in UNHCR’s own “Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy”<sup>10</sup> (CPSS, 2018) and “Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria” (ROF, 2019)<sup>11</sup>:
  - Legal framework(s), guaranteeing rights of returnees and unhindered access to them and return areas, is in place;
  - There is clear evidence of the Protection Thresholds being met, including a substantive **and** sustainable improvement in conditions in return areas (emphasis added);
  - Refugees actively request support from UNHCR to return, in large numbers, with UNHCR able to provide counselling, and confirm the voluntary character of return through access to areas of return and monitoring.
  
- **Lack of evidence base:** the formal shift to phase 2-style *facilitation* of return represents a seismic strategic shift in UN return programming in Syria. Yet it is mainly taken on the basis of one data finding (27% of refugees who indicated an intent to return in the next 12 months) in a single intention survey and unspecified “feedback from refugees”, which in itself raises various questions:
  - The 2025 RPIS survey sample consisted of 3,368 respondents, out of which 38% were female and 62% male. This lack of gender balance – in a survey in which it is explicitly stated (p. 8) that “*across all countries, female respondents expressed a lower intention to return to Syria in the next 12 months*” – raises questions on the representativeness of the survey, on which the whole strategic shift into formal UN return facilitation is based. Women’s marital and parental status can strongly impact their intention to return or remain, stressing the importance of gender balance and representativeness in data collection and the importance of disaggregation in data analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-protection-and-solutions-strategy-protection-thresholds>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/regional-operational-framework-refugee-return-syria>

- It is unclear to what extent the 27% of survey respondents who answered yes on the question “do you intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months” expressed an intent to *permanently* go back to Syria, or were merely expressing their interest in a go-and-see visit.
- Additionally, the intentions of heads of households, single parents and caregivers, and unmarried individuals without dependents are homogenized in this survey. Different drivers impact these groups’ intentions to return to various extents, making the data worth disaggregating before generalising the results of this survey across the refugee population as a whole.
- While UNHCR is implying that Syrian refugees predominantly want to return to Syria in the short term and that, hence, a phased and cautious approach as outlined in the 2018 CPSS and 2019 ROF no longer makes sense, a UNHCR update published in December 2024 stated that “*the majority of help-line calls received from refugees related to their stay in host countries. They asked whether there would be policy changes on their status, and whether they can continue accessing services or resettlement processing*”, and that “*while many are interested in return, most refugees have adopted a “wait-and-see” approach, emphasizing the need for clarity on several critical issues. Their primary concerns center on the stabilization of the political situation, security conditions in their areas of origin, and access to essential services.*”<sup>12</sup>
- The projection that 1.5 million Syrian refugees will return by the end of 2025 seems to be based on the application of the 27% number on the 5.5 million Syrian refugees living in the region. This while the 27% number is derived from a survey among refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq (*excluding Türkiye*), while the number of 5.5 million also includes Syrian refugees in Türkiye. If one were to apply the percentage of RPIS respondents who indicated their intent to return in the next 12 months (27%) on the number of registered/recorded refugees in the four countries actually surveyed (2,541 million)<sup>13</sup>, the projected number of returnees by the end of 2025 would be 687.000 Syrians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjC3pT67bGLAxUGVaQEHaQgCbcQFnoECB YQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata.unhcr.org%2Ffr%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F113358%23%3A~%3Atext%3DRefugees%2520express%2520concern%2520about%2520the%20cor%2520not%2520in%2520the%2520future.&usg=AOvVaw3E7DgG4vxicZctErnUrbQV&opi=89978449>

<sup>13</sup> 1,478,141 Syrian refugees in Lebanon; 611,473 refugees in Jordan, 303,611 refugees in Iraq and 147,797 refugees in Egypt, overall amounting to 2,541,022 refugees.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard it should also be noted that in previous years there have been significant gaps between UNHCR projections and people who eventually returned. For example, in 2019 UNHCR projected that 250.000-500.000 people would return to Syria. Eventually, 94.971 people returned that year, according to UNHCR data. See [https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria\\_durable\\_solutions](https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions)

- **Not in line with potential returnees’ own stated priorities:** among those intending to return in the next 12 months, demands for specific return assistance rank low in their overall priorities. In the February 2025 RPIS, 55% of those intending to return in the next 12 months express concerns about returning, with the majority highlighting safety and security concerns; concerns over available housing or condition of their property; economic challenges inside Syria; concerns about available services; or concerns over having incurred debts in host countries. The cost of transportation to return and the kind of assistance returnees could expect to receive on return is not included in the top-5 priorities of people who intend to return in the next 12 months.

Similarly, when RPIS respondents were asked “*what are the main reasons preventing you from returning to Syria in the next twelve months?*”, top answers included “concerns over available housing and/or my property/housing”,<sup>15</sup> “safety and security concerns”, “economic challenges in Syria” and “concerns about available services (health, education, water, power, infrastructure etc.)”. This suggests that instead of funding a large-scale return facilitation operation, donors who want to support refugees to return in a safe, voluntary and dignified way should instead prioritise early recovery and reconstruction efforts across the whole of Syria, in a needs-based approach rather than a status-based approach.

- **Lack of cooperation and coordination with refugee-led organisations:** the new Voluntary Return Framework was developed without meaningful participation of Syrian refugee-led organisations (RLOs). This is despite the latter having unique insights, access and knowledge of the needs and perspectives of Syrian refugees. As part of the development of its new Framework, at the end of 2024 UNHCR convened a returns Task Force within the existing Regional Durable Solutions Working Group (RDSWG). **Explicit requests by RLOs, including Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) member Basmeh & Zeitooneh, to be part of these proceedings were rejected by UNHCR, without providing reasons for such rejection.**

RLOs were later welcomed to participate in *implementing* the new Framework, including RPW member Women Now for Development, a positive development as such. However, the lack of RLOs’ meaningful participation in *creating* the Framework contradicts UNHCR’s own Protection Threshold 9 “*Refugees and returnees can effectively participate in the planning and implementation of the return and reintegration process*”<sup>16</sup> and the Global Compact on Refugees (para. 37 and 40)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> In a separate question, 51% of respondents across the four surveyed countries indicated that their house in Syria is fully destroyed, while another 30% of respondents said their house is partially destroyed and uninhabitable.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/regional-operational-framework-refugee-return-syria>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>

- **Using flawed categories:** In the 2025 RPIS, UNHCR again uses a catch-all category, “overall hope to return”, comprising respondents who intend to return to Syria within the next 12 months, those who hope to return within five years, and also those who hope to return one day. Using such a category, the 2025 RPIS states that 80% of refugees have an “overall hope of return”, 12% do not have any such hope, and 8% are undecided. The creation of an “overall hope to return” category exposes serious flaws in UNHCR’s methodological approach, as it should be noted that the three questions that serve as the basis of the “overall hope” category are fundamentally different in nature.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to creating a flawed “overall hope to return” category in the 2025 RPIS, UNHCR’s Voluntary Return Framework switches the data findings of this category with another category (“do you hope to return one day?”):

- In the 2025 RPIS, published on 6 February 2025, it is stated that 80% of respondents have an “overall hope to return” and that 43% of respondents answered “yes” on the question “do you hope to return to Syria one day?”.
- In the Voluntary Return Framework, also published on 6 February 2025, it is stated that 80% of respondents answered “yes” on the question “do you hope to return to Syria one day?”.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

All refugees have the fundamental right to return to their country of origin at a time of their choosing and that all returns must be voluntary, dignified and safe.

**Given the recent changes on the ground and the increased number of returnees since 8 December 2024, international actors should urgently consider how they can increase support to people who voluntarily choose to return to Syria. But in a context where it remains to be seen whether new realities on the ground will be of a *durable* nature, international actors should proceed carefully and cautiously. They should also ensure that enhanced return programming does not inadvertently contribute to protection risks for Syrian refugees, including but not limited to:**

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<sup>18</sup> “Intent” to return in the next 12 months relates to an active consideration/reflection by a refugee about permanently returning in the short term. Such “intent” to return is fundamentally different from expressing “hope” to return. One can indeed express a general sentiment of “hope” to be able to return, in the next 5 years, without necessarily thinking this might actually be possible, and without considering going back to Syria. Moreover, asking a refugee, whether in Syria or another forced displacement crisis, whether he or she “hopes” to be able to return “one day”, is a question that carries no analytical merit or value. It goes without saying that in almost any displacement crisis, one can expect that most refugees do have such a long-term hope. At the same time, a refugee who expresses such hope might very well be convinced that it won’t ever be possible to return.

- Incentivising premature returns to Syria, after which Syrians who return find themselves in a situation where conditions for safe and dignified return are not in place, as a result of which they flee Syria again. However, as neighbouring host countries have adopted stricter policies in recent years, such “re-returnees” would find themselves in an even worse situation than before they returned to Syria, and would be more vulnerable to find themselves at the whims of human smugglers, legal vulnerabilities, and increased poverty. This would likely trigger increased onward migration movements of Syrian refugees, including to EU countries.
- Emboldening aggressive return/deportation campaigns of host country governments, which would likely also trigger increased onward migration movements of Syrian refugees, including to EU countries.
- In the context of rapidly shrinking donor budgets, re-orientating funding to voluntary return programming would likely come at the expense of donor funding to sustain the humanitarian and protection space in neighbouring host countries, where the large majority of Syrian refugees intend to remain in the short-to-medium future.

**Against this background, our organisations emphasise that enhanced return programming should be conducted in a careful, gradual and phased step-by-step pilot approach. Main elements of such approach would include:**

- Clear recognition by UNHCR of the existing Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy (CPSS) as the basis for future return planning and preparedness, and the initiation of an exercise to update the “protection thresholds” outlined therein. In the short term, UNHCR should stick to a “phase 1” approach in which 1) refugee-led organisations are allowed to meaningfully participate in, and shape the design, implementation and evaluation of all return programming; 2) return preparedness plans are further developed; 3) return assistance pilot projects are gradually scaled up and 4) people who return to Syria have full access to increased humanitarian and early recovery programming inside Syria.
- Increased donor support to support ongoing humanitarian and early recovery programming inside Syria, as well as increased donor efforts to ensure a conflict-sensitive reconstruction effort in Syria.
- The unconditional lifting of all sectoral sanctions to ensure sustainable improvement of living conditions for returnees and non-returnees alike.
- Enhanced donor support to UNHCR’s plans to scale up its monitoring capacities at main border crossings and main areas of return inside Syria, and a clear commitment by UNHCR to regularly monitor and analyse progress against an updated list of protection thresholds.



- Refugee-hosting countries (in and outside the region) to allow for “go-and-see” visits to Syria, without further obligation to permanently return and continued protection from loss of legal status, so displaced Syrians can visit their place of origin and assess the situation for themselves.
- Continued donor funding and efforts to uphold the humanitarian and protection space for refugees choosing to remain in neighbouring host countries.