

Fleeing and Returning Amid Insecurity: A Multidimensional Assessment of Conditions in Lebanon and Syria

Refugee Protection
Watch Report 2025



REFUGEE
PROTECTION
WATCH

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DISCLAIMER

Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) made all possible efforts to represent only accurate data, crosscheck all the information in this report, and translate all Arabic data obtained during the research phase into English as carefully as possible. This does not rule out the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which the team hereby expresses its regrets.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syrian refugees in Lebanon continue to navigate an increasingly precarious environment marked by shrinking humanitarian assistance, intensifying pressures from Lebanese authorities, and deteriorating conditions inside Syria. Against this backdrop, voluntary return programs launched in mid-2025 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in coordination with the Government of Lebanon have generated significant attention but very limited uptake. The findings presented in this report draw on real-time community engagement, longitudinal research and legal analysis. They demonstrate that current returns are neither meaningfully voluntary nor sustainably supported, and that conditions inside Syria remain far from conducive to safe, dignified, and durable return.

Refugees overwhelmingly cite structural barriers—lack of housing, insecurity, and minimal access to essential services—as the primary reasons for avoiding formal return pathways. While many express frustration with deteriorating conditions in Lebanon, this has not translated into large-scale return intentions. Instead, both new and long-term refugees consistently describe Syria as unsafe, unpredictable, and generally uninhabitable without significant reconstruction and guaranteed protection.

Interviews with returnees further underscore the risks. Although all received a one-time cash grant provided by UNHCR, most described it as inadequate to cover even transportation costs. Information about conditions inside Syria was scarce or absent, and none of the interviewed families reported receiving reintegration support. Housing was often damaged or uninhabitable, services were limited, and job opportunities almost nonexistent. Many returnees said they returned only because remaining in Lebanon had become impossible, illustrating the coercive pressures undermining the voluntariness of current returns.

At the same time, increasing reports of forced deportations, raids, and arbitrary arrests highlight a growing protection crisis. These actions, combined with shrinking aid, create an environment in which refugees are compelled toward return, regardless of the risks they may face once inside Syria.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 About Refugee Protection Watch

Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) is a coalition established in 2019, uniting the expertise and efforts of organizations dedicated to addressing the complex challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon and refugee returnees to Syria.

The coalition comprises a diverse group of organizations, each contributing unique strengths:

- » **Basmeah & Zeitooneh for Relief and Development (B&Z):** A Syrian refugee-led organization (RLO) providing relief, education, and development programs to Syrian refugees and vulnerable communities in Lebanon.
- » **Women Now for Development:** A Syrian feminist organization empowering Syrian women through programs in protection, education, and advocacy.
- » **Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR):** A refugee-led organization dedicated to defending and promoting human rights in the Middle East and North Africa, with a particular focus on refugee rights.
- » **Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH):** A local non-profit, non-partisan Lebanese human rights organization. Complementary components include advocacy, public mobilization, rehabilitation for victims of torture and families of victims of enforced disappearances, and the provision of pro-bono legal services for vulnerable groups.
- » **Upinion:** A social enterprise specializing in two-way communication with refugee communities, facilitating direct engagement and the collection of real-time insights into their needs and perspectives.
- » **11.11.11:** The coalition of NGOs, unions, movements, and various solidarity groups in Flanders (Belgium) working together for a fair world for international solidarity.

Collectively, we leverage our diverse expertise in human rights, peacebuilding, development, humanitarian assistance, real-time participation, and innovative data collection to monitor and advocate for the protection, humanitarian needs, and human rights of Syrian refugees and returnees. Through comprehensive research and targeted advocacy efforts, RPW aims to influence policies and practices that affect Syrian refugees, ensuring their rights and needs are central to policy discussions.

1.2 Purpose of the report

This report provides an evidence-informed overview and legal analysis of accelerating return programming for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Against the backdrop of cuts to humanitarian aid for refugees in Lebanon and insecurity in Syria, there is a need to critically examine the implications of return programs and the experiences of the refugee communities they affect. This report consolidates insights on Syrian refugees' awareness of and engagement with these programs, and their return intentions, needs and varying priorities. It also examines the experiences of returnees, including practical aspects such as transportation costs and documentation requirements, as well as conditions in their area of return in Syria.

It explores the extent to which the return programs abide by the legal requirements for voluntariness, safety, dignity, and non-refoulement, and offers a comprehensive foundation for evaluating their appropriateness, risks, and potential impacts. Finally, it provides urgent recommendations for improvement.

1.3 Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach that integrates online surveys and digital community engagement, community-led data collection, and in-depth interviews to capture the evolving realities of Syrian refugees and returnees in Lebanon. Together, these methods create a rich, dynamic, and human-centered evidence base.

Mixed-methods approach

Basmeb & Zeitooneh combines quantitative and qualitative tools: Structured online surveys are complemented by in-depth interviews with refugees and returnees residing in Tripoli, Nabaa, and the Beqaa Valley. Sampling is designed to maintain continuity with participants from earlier rounds, while also incorporating new respondents when attrition occurred.

Notably, the data is collected by researchers from within the refugee community. Their lived experience and linguistic, social, and geographic familiarity significantly enhance access, trust, and the depth of qualitative insights gathered. This ensures that the research captures the nuanced realities of refugees' lives and the complexity of their decisions regarding return.

The longitudinal structure, consisting of a baseline round (February 2025), a mid-year round during renewed instability in Syria (May 2025), and an end-year round following heightened tensions in As-Sweida and Southern Lebanon (September–October 2025), provided a dynamic framework to track both continuity and change. This allowed the study to document shifts in security perceptions, economic hardship, access to aid, education challenges, healthcare barriers, and return intentions as conditions evolved inside Syria and in Lebanon.

The design ensured that data patterns from the surveys were enriched and contextualized through narratives, explanations, and emotional expressions shared in interviews, offering a comprehensive and human-centered understanding of refugees' experiences across Lebanon.

Online data collection

Upinion has developed an online platform that allows it to securely connect with marginalized or hard-to-reach communities. The “Digital Engagement Platform” (DEP) enables Upinion to engage with people in real-time in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Through the DEP, Upinion holds conversations with crisis- and displacement-affected communities.

Conversations in Lebanon are held with a digital panel of Syrian refugees and Lebanese nationals primarily recruited through Facebook. Individuals consenting to participate in a conversation are directed from Facebook Messenger to the private Upinion chat mode. This is complemented by outreach activities by Upinionators¹ who assist with trust-building, conversation dissemination, and retrieving useful information to share back with respondents. The data presented in this report were mainly drawn from conversations held with Syrian refugees in Lebanon and returnees between the 17th and the 29th of October 2025 in which 186 Syrian refugees and 35 returnees participated.²

In-depth interviews

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) relies on networks of trust to identify refugees for in-depth interviews to better understand the violations they face. It adopts a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach, in line with do-no-harm principles. For this report, ACHR engaged in in-depth interviews with 13 Syrian refugees (5 women and 8 men) who took part in the UN Self-Organized Voluntary Return Plan from Lebanon and returned to different governorates in Syria.

1 A community member who assists Upinion's community manager in recruiting new respondents locally. Upinionators help build trust and facilitate meaningful participation by bridging the gap between Upinion and local communities.

2 Upinion does not aim to establish statistical representativeness. Insights drawn from Upinion conversations are indicative of patterns and may not be generalizable to all Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

2. LOCAL CONTEXT

As of the end of August 2025, there were around 1,300,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon.³ Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, cross-border movements have increased. According to UNHCR, between 8 December 2024 and 31 October 2025 an estimated 383,000 Syrians have returned to Syria from or via Lebanon.⁴ As a result, since January 2025 335,749 Syrians known to UNHCR have been inactivated by either confirmed or presumed return to Syria. In parallel, since December 2024 over 106,000 Syrians have fled Syria for Lebanon.⁵

In the most recent Enhanced Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions to Return to Syria Survey (eRPIS, conducted by UNHCR between 25 May and 5 July 2025), 14% of Syrian respondents in Lebanon indicated their intention to return to Syria in the coming 12 months. This is a sharp decline compared to the 24% who in January 2025 expressed their intention to return in the next 12 months.⁶

The eRPIS identified multiple motivations for return, including perceptions of improved security in Syria and difficult economic conditions in host countries. Barriers for return were primarily structural and included lack of housing, limited employment and livelihood opportunities, and safety concerns.⁷

2.1 Key developments inside Syria

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria's security landscape has remained deeply unstable. The immediate post-fall period was marked by uncertainty, followed by renewed violence across several regions in early 2025. Escalations in Hama and Rural Damascus in late April and early May and across southern Syria in July involved clashes between interim government forces and local actors, resulting in civilian casualties, temporary road closures, and short-term displacement. This reinforced concerns about the fragility of nationwide security conditions.

In March 2025, massacres in the Sahel region of Latakia and Tartous targeting Alawite communities left more than 1,400 civilians dead, according to a July 2025 investigation by the interim government. The inquiry identified nearly 300 suspects but faced criticism for lacking independence and for not examining the potential role of interim government forces, despite

³ *Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, September 2025.

⁴ *Syrian returns & movements snapshot at 31 October 2025*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025.

⁵ For insights on the needs and vulnerabilities of newly arrived Syrian refugees see: *Caught between borders: Experiences of Syrians pushed away to Lebanon after the fall of Assad*, Refugee Protection Watch, May 2025.

⁶ *Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025.

⁷ *Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, September 2025.

claims by rights groups. The violence triggered an initially estimated 40,000 new refugees fleeing into Lebanon. In August 2025, the UN Commission of Inquiry (UN COI) for Syria found that the wave of violence that engulfed coastal and western central Syria from January 2025 onwards likely amounted to war crimes. According to the UN COI, these crimes were perpetrated by members of the interim government's forces and private individuals operating alongside or in proximity to them, as well as by pro-former government fighters or so-called "remnants."⁸

In July 2025, a dispute between a Druze man and members of a Bedouin tribe escalated into large-scale violence in As-Sweida, including human rights violations by armed groups and interim government forces, and Israeli airstrikes on Damascus. Ceasefires were inconsistent, humanitarian access fragmented, and more than 176,000 people were displaced within As-Sweida Governorate. Sieges continue in As-Sweida and the security and access situation remains precarious. An interim government committee to investigate the violence was widely rejected by residents.

Following visits to As-Sweida city and rural parts of the governorate, the UN COI warned on 31 October 2025 that *"the future of Syria is in the balance"* and that *"renewed, brutal violence is jeopardizing the hard-won optimism that followed the fall of the former Syrian government"*. UN COI chair Paulo Pinheiro outlined growing concerns regarding violence and discrimination against women, and continued Israeli attacks across Southern Syria as well as continued tensions in northeast Syria.⁹

Moreover, Israel's intensification of ground incursions into Syria reached record high levels in November 2025, while ISIS attacks have steadily increased in the past months (particularly in the northeast) and several major territorial issues (the SDF-held northeast and the Druze-majority governorate of As-Sweida) continue to threaten the perspective of a peaceful transition in Syria.¹⁰ Additional incidents, including a terror bombing at a Greek Orthodox church near Damascus, kidnappings, revenge attacks and vigilante violence (targeted killings against former Assad regime operatives, or people perceived as being associated with the regime by sectarian, political or familial ties) and widespread housing and land violations, illustrate the fragmentation of authority across the country. Combined with mass displacement, explosive contamination, economic decline, and extensive infrastructural damage, conditions continue to undermine prospects for safe, voluntary, and sustainable return.¹¹ This is also echoed in the September 2025 eRPIS, in which UNHCR urged international donors to *"step up targeted investments in housing, livelihoods, and basic services, particularly in areas of origin, alongside efforts to improve safety, security and economic opportunities."* In parallel, according to UNHCR, international support is needed to *"continue supporting refugees and host communities in neighbouring host countries, in order to ensure that returns are voluntary, safe and dignified and that refugees are not pushed to return prematurely to Syria."*¹²

8 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Violations against civilians in the coastal and western- central regions of the Syrian Arab Republic (January-March 2025)*, Human Rights Council, 11 August 2025 (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)

9 *"The future of Syria is in the balance:" UN Commission sounds alarm on renewed violence amid hopes for justice and peace*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 30 October 2025. Press release.

10 See *Data Update (November 18-25)* - by Charles Lister

11 *"The IRC urges caution as one million Syrian refugees are reported to have returned home"*, International Rescue Committee, 25 September 2025. Press release.

12 *Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, September 2025.

2.2 Overview and analysis of the UNHCR–Government of Lebanon return plan

Responsibilities towards refugees and returnees under international law¹³

The country of asylum (Host Country) has several responsibilities toward refugees. It is bound by the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened. It must treat refugees according to internationally accepted standards and allow UNHCR to supervise their well-being. It should respect UNHCR's leading role in promoting, facilitating, and coordinating voluntary repatriation, contribute to voluntary repatriation as a durable solution, and permit UNHCR to ascertain the voluntary nature of repatriation for both individual refugees and large-scale movements. The host country should facilitate arrangements enabling UNHCR to provide accurate information on conditions in the country of origin, and, when refugees wish to visit their country of origin to assess conditions for return, the host country should work with UNHCR and the country of origin to facilitate such visits.

The country of origin has several responsibilities toward its returning nationals. It should ensure that returnees come back safely and with dignity, free from harassment, discrimination, arbitrary detention, physical threat, or prosecution for having left or remained outside the country and provide guarantees or amnesties to this effect while restoring full national protection. It should respect UNHCR's leading role in voluntary repatriation and, where a UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) is not used, provide returning refugees with necessary travel documents, entry permits, and other required documentation. For refugees who have lost their nationality, it should arrange for its restoration and grant nationality to children born abroad and non-national spouses. The country of origin should address root causes of displacement, create conditions conducive to voluntary return and reintegration, and support UNHCR's efforts, ensuring UNHCR direct and unhindered access to all returnees to monitor their situation and the fulfillment of any guarantees or assurances.

On 1 July 2025, UNHCR launched two voluntary return programs in coordination with the Lebanese government for an initial period of three months, later extending them until December 2025. The Self-Organized Voluntary Return Program enables refugees to manage their own return logistics with a one-time cash grant of 100 USD per returning family member to support travel through official land border crossings. The Organized Voluntary Return Program (1 August 2025 - December 2025) provides the same financial assistance and guidance, but includes additional transportation support and is implemented in coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Lebanese authorities.¹⁴

The Self-Organized Voluntary Return Program includes counselling, referrals for specialized assistance when needed, and an in-person appointment at a UNHCR Return Centre. During these interviews, UNHCR requires written consent from those returning, confirming their

¹³ Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection, Handbook, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Geneva, 1996.

¹⁴ [Voluntary Return to Syria](#), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed 28 November 2025.

understanding of the implications of their decision, most notably the closure of their UNHCR file in Lebanon. Refugees are also issued a Repatriation Form (RF), which lists the names of household members, the intended area of return, and the date of departure.

The RF also serves as a one-time identification document facilitating movement through security checkpoints and is finalized by the General Security Office (GSO), which stamps the form and applies waivers for administrative or legal penalties related to residency and overstay. Prior to departure, UNHCR provides a return cash grant of 100 USD per person inside Lebanon. Upon arrival in Syria, and depending on assessed vulnerability, UNHCR offers an additional one-time 600 USD cash grant per family to support reintegration.¹⁵ As of 31 October 2025, 1,500 Syrians underwent the facilitated organized voluntary repatriation program.¹⁶

UNHCR data shows that in practice, only a fraction of Syrians who had returned by August 2025 completed a Voluntary Repatriation (VolRep) assessment. Of the 238,000 who returned from Lebanon to Syria between January and August 2025, only 6,270 Syrian individuals known to UNHCR completed the VolRep assessment launched on 1 July, were issued a Repatriation Form and provided the 100 USD cash grant per returning individual.¹⁷

On 1 July 2025, the Government of Lebanon issued a circular regarding the provision of additional facilitation measures for Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria wishing to depart through land border crossing points. Between 1 July and 31 December 2025, refugees who entered Lebanon regularly or irregularly and have exceeded their authorized length of stay, may depart through land border crossing points without paying any fees or penalties and without re-entry bans being issued.¹⁸

2.3 Legal implications of the return plans

Despite government claims that Syrian returns are voluntary according to UNHCR's standards of return, ongoing return plans fall significantly short of international standards governing voluntary repatriation. They undermine the principles of non-refoulement, voluntariness, safety, and dignity as defined in international law.

Non-Refoulement

Non-refoulement is an essential principle enshrined in international law. It prohibits states from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill treatment or other serious human rights violations.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Cash for Syrian Returnees*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed 28 November 2025.

¹⁶ *Regional Flash Update #51 - Syria situation*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 31 October 2025.

¹⁷ *Lebanon: What's New? LRP Update September 2025*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, September 2025.

¹⁸ *Voluntary Return to Syria*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed 28 November 2025.

¹⁹ *The principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law*, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The state of Lebanon has not adopted to this date the minimum and necessary human rights safeguards that ensure that the principle of non-refoulement can be upheld on an individual basis or that returns are voluntary if they occur in a context where safety cannot be guaranteed. Lebanon has also not ensured that UNHCR can uphold its protection mandate for all refugees as a large majority of refugees in Lebanon have not been able to access their legal right to refugee status. Any discussion of voluntary return must ensure UNHCR can fulfil its mandate by reactivating UNHCR registration of refugees.

Voluntariness

UNHCR defines voluntariness as the free and informed choice to return. In Lebanon, pervasive economic collapse, currency depreciation, and aid cuts have created untenable conditions for refugees. State practices including evictions, raids, arbitrary arrests, and residency restrictions further erode autonomy and foster an environment of multiple push factors that cumulatively amount to a pattern of indirect coercion by providing refugees with no viable alternative. These actions directly undermine the principle of voluntariness.

For example, on 10 June 2025 the Litani River Authority (LRA) issued 34 eviction notices targeting Syrian refugee settlements along the Litani River. ACHR field sources reported that these orders threaten to displace roughly 2,500 people, the majority of whom are women and children. Refugees facing imminent eviction and pressure from landowners to vacate have preemptively dismantled several tents.

In a raid on 14 July in the Bhamdoun area an estimated 50-60 armed officers conducted operations marked by violations of privacy and dignity. Witnesses described the use of physical force during arrests and officers refusing to allow women time to dress. According to ACHR field sources, some of those arrested included refugees who had already registered to return to Syria.

Safety

Safe return requires concrete assurances of protection from persecution and harm, none of which are provided by the State of Lebanon or existing return programming. No verifiable commitments have been made to safeguard returnees, and no mechanism exists to monitor post-return conditions. Conditions of legal safety inside Syria are not currently in place nor durable. Many areas remain insecure due to unexploded ordnance or localized violence. Material safety is absent: many returnees find homes destroyed or confiscated and lack access to livelihoods or essential services. These conditions make the notion of “safe return” legally untenable, while acknowledging that many would choose to return of their own volition on an individual basis.

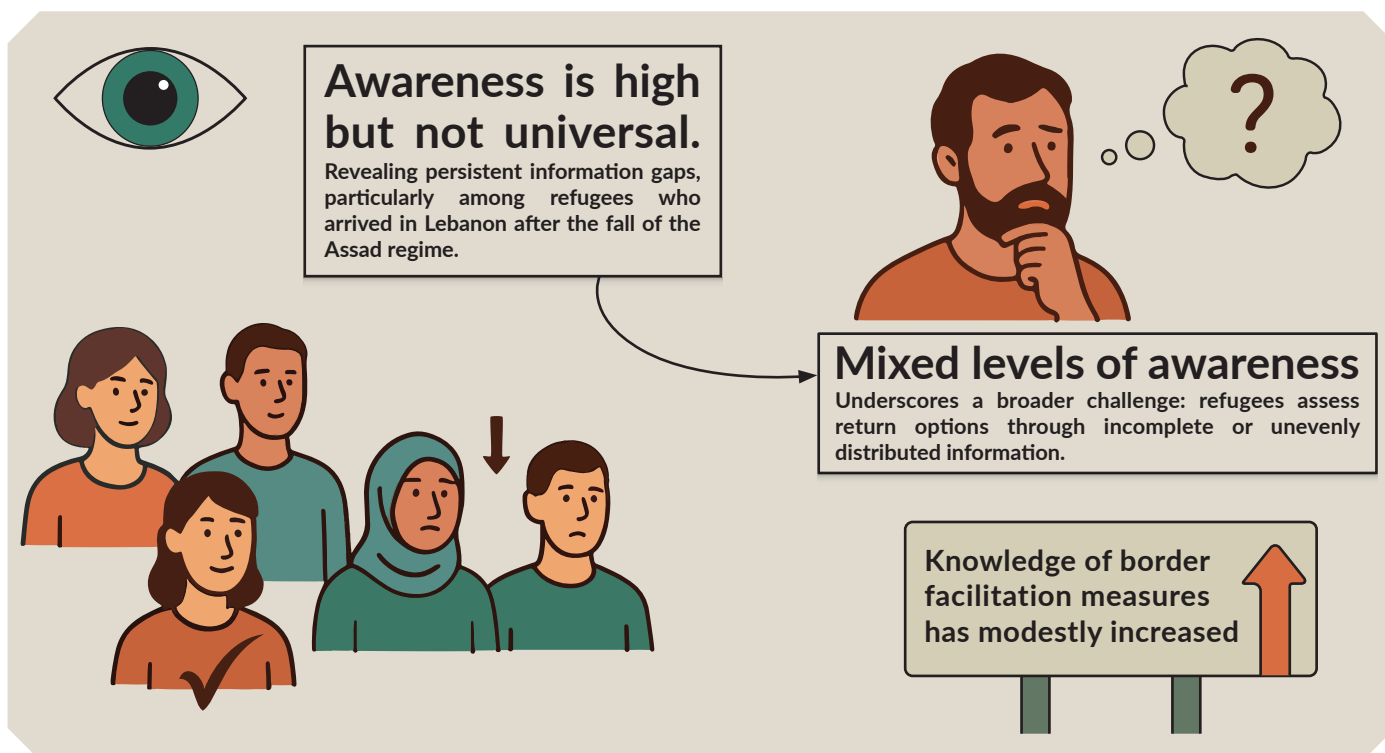
Dignity and Sustainable Reintegration

Dignified return requires respectful treatment, family unity and the ability to reintegrate, including key conditions such as restoration of rights and livelihoods. The return plans neglect these elements entirely. The 100 USD cash assistance per person is insufficient to cover transportation, and the 600 USD family grant upon arrival in Syria does not support sustainable reintegration. The absence of large-scale reconstruction, family reunification measures, psychosocial support, and reintegration programming exposes returnees to renewed displacement and deprivation. Without guarantees of rights restoration, these returns undermine the principle of dignity central to UNHCR's protection framework.

3. KEY DATA FINDINGS

Our analysis of the return programs and their legality and practicability are borne out by the experiences of Syrian refugees. The data findings in this chapter provide insights on refugees' awareness and perceptions of and engagement with the return programs; and document the experiences of returnees in Syria.

3.1 Awareness of voluntary return programs

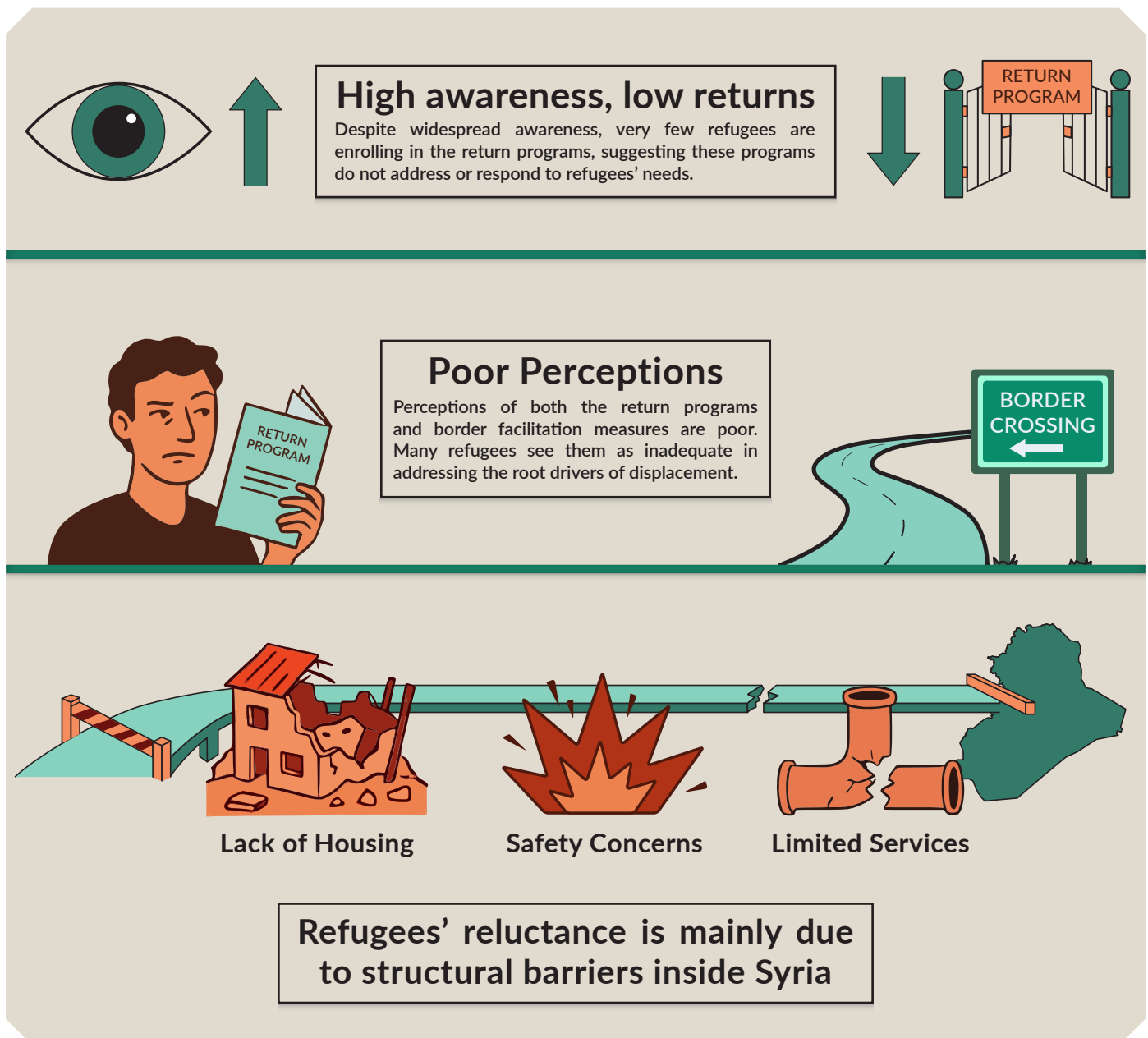


Data presented in subsections 3.1 and 3.2 are drawn from Upinion conversations. Not all participants responded to every question. Sample sizes in parentheses indicate the number of respondents who answered each question.

In a conversation held between 17-29 October 2025 with 221 Syrian refugees and returnees, Upinion found that **most respondents had heard of both voluntary return programs supported by UNHCR (60%, n=220) or of one of the return programs (30%), while 10% had not heard of either. Most (80%, n=220) had heard of the border facilitation measures announced by the GSO.** This constitutes a modest increase from July 2025 when 71% (n=207) of Syrian refugees participating in another Upinion conversation reported being aware of these measures.²⁰ Awareness of the return programs and border facilitation measures were lower among refugees who arrived in Lebanon after the fall of the Assad regime.

²⁰ *The impact of return policy in Lebanon: Syrian refugee intentions and return prospects*, Upinion, July 2025.

3.2 Uptake and perceptions of voluntary return programs

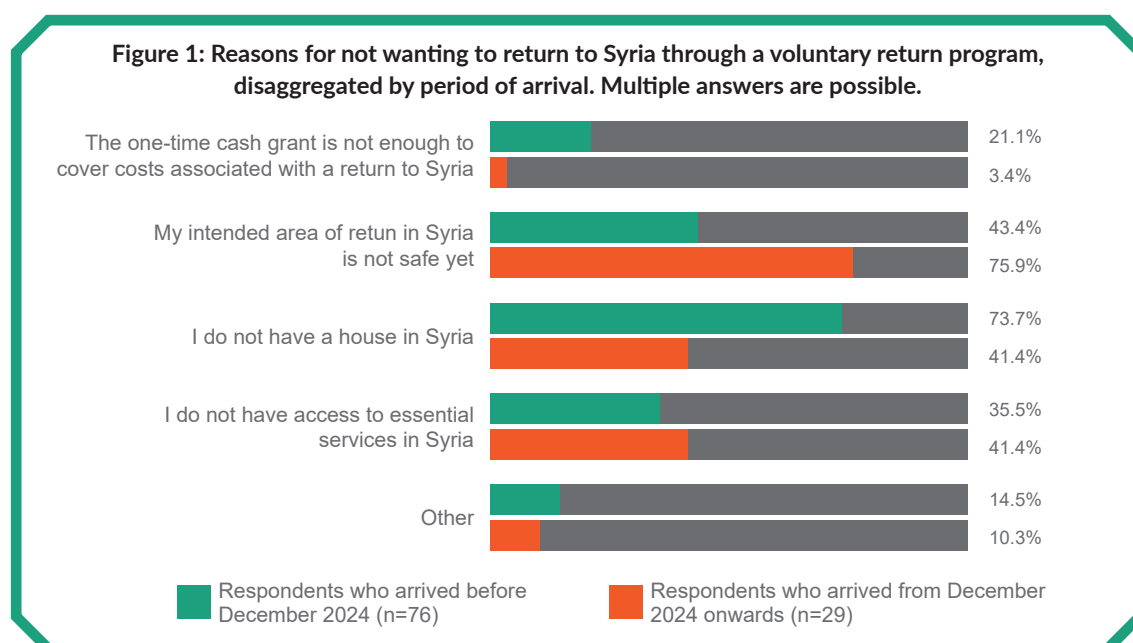


Of the 164 respondents still in Lebanon who had heard of the return programs, only 12 had enrolled in one, and none had yet been interviewed by UNHCR. **Of those not enrolled (n=151), just 3% said they were considering returning to Syria through a voluntary return program, while 71% were not considering it and 26% remained unsure. Their reasons for not wanting to return were largely structural:** lack of housing was the most frequently cited barrier (65%, n=105), followed by safety concerns in intended areas of return and the absence of essential services inside Syria (52% and 37%, respectively). The insufficiency of the 100 USD one-time cash grant was mentioned by 16% of respondents. Other reasons related to broader safety issues, sectarianism, and the lack of employment opportunities.

Among refugees who arrived in Lebanon after December 2024, only 3% (n=29) cited the insufficiency of the cash grant as a reason for not returning, while 76% pointed to safety concerns in their intended area of return. Among those who arrived before December 2024 (n=76), 21% reported the grant as insufficient and 43% indicated area-specific safety concerns. Lack of housing was cited by 74% of the refugees who arrived before December 2024, while only 41% of newly arrived refugees identified it as a barrier to participating in a voluntary return program (Figure 1).

Of Syrian refugees who had heard of both return programs, 68% (n=108) felt that voluntary return programs were not helpful because conditions in Syria remained inadequate. Another 28% believed the programs could be helpful if they better aligned with refugees' needs. Views of border facilitation measures announced by the GSO were mixed: 40% (n=145) considered them helpful, 14% did not, and 46% were unsure. Perceptions of both were more negative among recently arrived Syrian refugees.

These findings were consistent with an earlier conversation (2-17 July 2025), where 37% (n=211) of respondents said they would consider returning to Syria if adequate support were provided. Many respondents (74%, n=90) estimated needing between 1,500 and 2,000 USD to cover basic needs and re-establish themselves in Syria—exceeding the 100 USD one-time cash grant provided by UNHCR.²¹ In July, only 7% (n=139) viewed the border facilitation measures as a safe opportunity to leave Lebanon, while a majority (69%) had no intention of leaving under the exemptions and 22% were undecided.



²¹ Returnees may also be eligible for a one-time cash grant of 600 USD to support reintegration in Syria.

3.3 Refugee return intentions and future plans



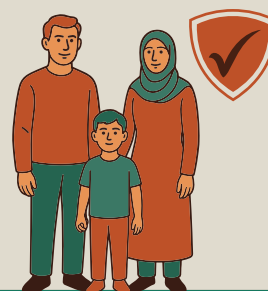
Only a small minority intend to return

11% of Syrian refugees planned to return in the next six months, reflecting structural barriers to return despite worsening conditions in Lebanon.



Return needs vary by displacement trajectory

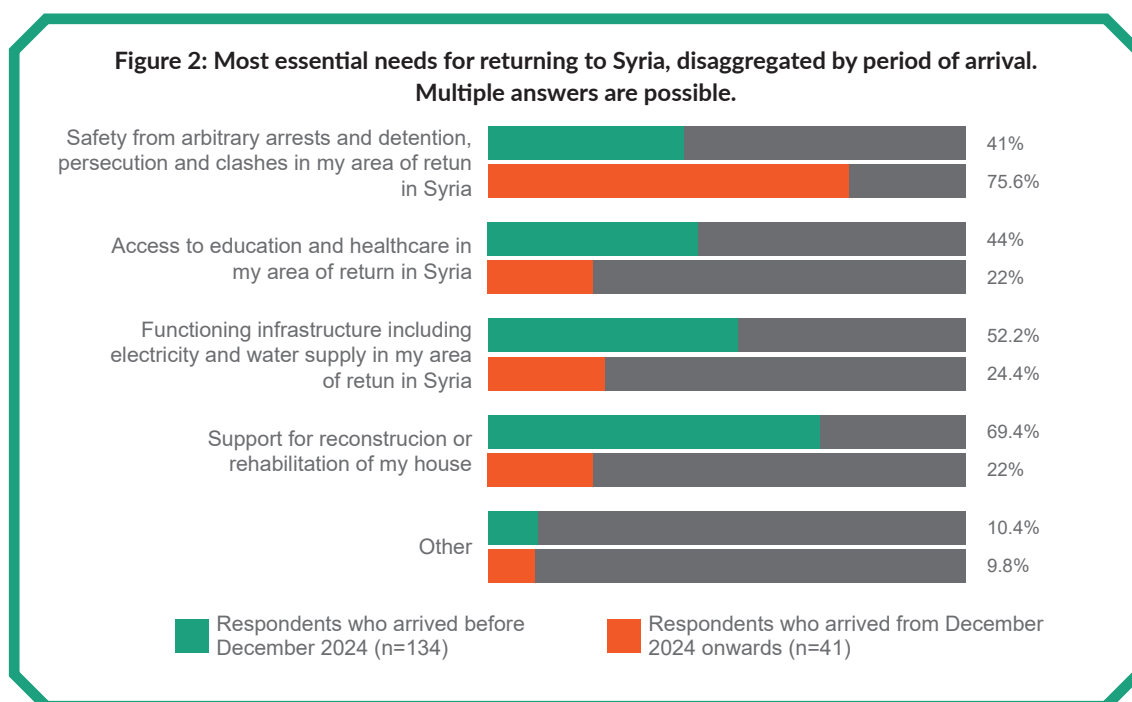
Long-term refugees prioritize rebuilding and infrastructure, while newer arrivals emphasize safety as a prerequisite.



Insecurities in Lebanon and recent clashes in Syria

Insecurities may also shape return intentions, particularly among refugees arriving in Lebanon before the fall of the Assad regime. These pressures, however, do not translate into large-scale plans to return to Syria. Recent clashes in Syria have caused some refugees to reconsider their intention to return.

In the Upinion conversation held between 17-29 October 2025, 11% (n=183) of Syrian refugees planned to permanently return to Syria within the next six months, while 57% said they were not planning to and 32% were unsure. Conditions considered essential for return differed between refugees who arrived in Lebanon before and after the fall of Assad. Those who arrived before December 2024 emphasized support for reconstruction (69%, n=134) and reliable infrastructure such as electricity and water (52%), whereas newly arrived refugees highlighted safety from arbitrary arrests, detention, persecution, and clashes (76%, n=41). Only 41% of earlier arrivals identified safety in their intended area of return as a key requirement (Figure 2).



Security concerns shaped return intentions. Following clashes in As-Sweida and Dar'a governorates in Syria, 18% (n=174) of respondents reconsidered their decision or intention to return soon, while 7% still intended to despite the events. Over half (55%) reported no intention to return regardless of these clashes. Refugees also expressed anxiety about broader regional instability: 31% (n=172) feared a war between Lebanon and Israel, 8% clashes between the Lebanese Army and non-state armed groups, and 55% were worried about both. For refugees arriving before December 2024, 16% (n=131) said these risks pushed them to consider returning to Syria; but they did not appear to influence newly arrived refugees.

In October 2024, the war in Lebanon was the most frequently cited reason for intentions to leave the country (74% of Syrians, n=114; 79% of non-Syrians, n=186).²² In January 2025, the threat of renewed conflict between Israel and Lebanon remained a primary concern and the overriding reason reported by those planning to leave Lebanon.²³ This continued into April 2025, with 26% of Lebanese and Syrian respondents (n=164) identifying Israeli threats as a major concern. Regional anxiety was coupled with fear of domestic insecurity.²⁴

This aligns with findings from Basmeh & Zeitooneh's longitudinal study conducted over three rounds between January and October 2025, which tracked 50 households across Beqaa, Tripoli, and Nabaa in Beirut, to examine how Syrian refugees' intentions evolved in response to living conditions. Among 127 participants in the final round of research (September-October 2025), 58% said they did not wish to return to Syria due to insecurity, economic deterioration, and distrust in governance. A further 21% were uncertain, due to both worsening conditions in Lebanon and instability inside Syria. Only 21% expressed a desire to return. Even among these, most viewed return as a medium-term aspiration.

²² *Voices of Lebanon amidst war: Insights from affected communities and best ways to help*, Upinion, October 2024.

²³ Access to aid, AAP, and plans, Upinion.

²⁴ Follow-up on Lebanon's changing political landscape, Upinion.

For the 26 respondents willing to return, motivations were primarily practical. They cited better living conditions, a stable security environment, recovery of property, educational opportunities for children, and family reunification. **Focus group discussions further revealed that return is viewed as a “distant goal,” shaped by aspirations for stability and dignity rather than confidence in current conditions inside Syria. Refugees described severe economic pressures in Lebanon—shrinking aid, unemployment, rising rent—as major push factors.** Emotional attachment to Syria remained strong but was outweighed by fear, insecurity, and lack of opportunities there.

Conditional readiness emerged as a common theme: Participants emphasized that they would consider returning only if housing, safety, and livelihoods were assured. This reflects a broader outlook of cautious hope, where the desire to return persists but is contingent on real improvements in both Syria’s stability and refugees’ ability to rebuild their lives. This is mirrored in perceptions of future security inside Syria. Among refugees who arrived before December 2024, 34% (n=120) believed insecurity and clashes would continue in the foreseeable future, while this expectation was much higher—68% (n=41)—among newly arrived refugees. Many in both groups remained uncertain, at 45% and 27% respectively.

Syrian Women’s Perceptions and Intentions to Return

The three rounds of longitudinal data collection conducted by B&Z in Lebanon included participants of all genders and diverse backgrounds. Single, divorced, and widowed women heads of household (7 women in round 1, 9 in round 2 and 11 in Round 3) presented a distinct and consistent pattern in how they assessed the possibility of returning to Syria.

Across all three rounds, the majority of women heads of household preferred to stay in Lebanon despite worsening conditions there, with the others willing to consider returning only if safety, housing and livelihoods were guaranteed. Most described Syria as unsafe, citing harassment, detention risks, persistent insecurity, and the absence of institutional protection.

Economic hardship continued to shape perceptions. In all three rounds, most women described their economic situation as “bad” or “very bad” and indicated that financial assistance was their primary need. This was followed by food assistance, healthcare, shelter, and education. Many women emphasized clearly that without stable income or dignified housing, return was impossible.

Motivations for return also decreased over time. In round 1, some women still mentioned safety, housing, or family reunification. By round 2, motivations narrowed to emotional ties or hypothetical stability. By round 3, only 3 women mentioned any possible motivator, and these were limited to family reunification or guaranteed safety against gender-related risks. None saw economic improvements or services in Syria as realistic incentives.

Though the sample sizes in each round are small, they still signal a meaningful shift. The widowed, divorced, and single women who participated in round 3 were exceptionally outspoken and consistent in their refusal to return. Their clarity, directness, and firm rejection of return highlight a depth of fear and vulnerability that goes beyond numbers. A dedicated follow-up study will be conducted in the next two months to further examine these perspectives and understand the gendered dynamics shaping return decisions.

3.4 Reported violations against Syrian refugees in Lebanon

- » Reports of deportations, raids, and arbitrary arrests illustrate a climate of coercion that undermines the voluntariness of return decisions.
- » Many refugees reported feeling at-risk, especially among earlier arrivals, reflecting longer-term policing, legal vulnerabilities, and accumulated precarity.
- » Cases of refugees being detained or deported while participating in return programs highlight systemic inconsistencies and rights violations, eroding trust in state institutions and return procedures.

Since the fall of the Assad regime, ACHR has documented 59 cases of forced deportation of Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria. ACHR investigated three cases in-depth, interviewing the victims and recording their testimonies. In these cases, the Syrians were male, subjected to arbitrary arrest from their homes in the early hours of the morning, with the use of coercion by security forces. They were physically assaulted, interrogated, beaten, and denied access to the bathroom for hours. They were transferred to different security branches in Lebanon and then loaded into military vehicles and transported in batches to an undisclosed location inside Syria. The cases highlight how Lebanese security entities continue to engage in illegal forced returns and in the process commit a series of other human rights violations. ACHR documented another two cases of Syrian refugees engaging in the UN return program who - upon submitting their RF at the border - were arrested and taken to detention centers in Lebanon where they were tortured and later deported to Syria. While the justifications for the arrests were related to arrest warrants on terror charges, neither refugee was provided with further information, and their deportation to Syria suggests that the charges were unfounded.

Of Syrian refugees who participated in the October 2025 Upinion conversation, 11% (n=169) were subjected to arrests, evictions or raids between 1 July and 30 September 2025 and 26% (n=164) had been threatened with deportation by Lebanese authorities or individuals in their area of residence. Almost half (47% n=164) of respondents had felt at risk of deportation, arrests, evictions, or raids by Lebanese authorities in the preceding three months. This is more pronounced among refugees who arrived in Lebanon before December 2024, 51% (n=125) of whom felt at-risk in the past three months, vs. only 33% (n=39) of newly arrived refugees.

Between January and October 2025, CLDH assisted 266 Syrian refugees facing risk of deportation to Syria through legal support and rehabilitation services. Across the regions where CLDH teams operate, refugees continue to face widespread discrimination, hate speech, and restrictions on movement, making daily life increasingly difficult. **CLDH has expressed strong concern²⁵ over a draft law that contradicts human rights standards and international refugee protection principles. It contains provisions that institutionalize discrimination, restrict movement, criminalize housing arrangements, and eliminate the right to appeal deportation decisions.** The draft violates the Lebanese Constitution, particularly the constitutional value of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and contravenes Lebanon's obligations under

²⁵ "CLDH Warns About Draft Law Violating Refugee and Human Rights Standards", Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), 13 November 2025.

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). It risks fueling hate speech, racism and social tensions, and CLDH has called for the immediate withdrawal of the draft law, reaffirmation of equality and non-discrimination in all refugee-related legislation, responsible public discourse, protection of housing rights, and full adherence to the rule of law and international standards.

3.5 Experiences of returnees

- » Syrian returnees' experiences reveal major program shortcomings, with financial assistance often insufficient even for basic transport and limited support upon arrival.
- » Many reported returning because life in Lebanon became untenable, challenging the notion that returns are either voluntary or sustainable.
- » Not much information is provided to returnees, leaving families to return with limited understanding of living conditions, services, or safety risks in their areas of return. On arrival, returnees lack adequate housing, often staying with relatives or in unfinished structures, as well as access to basic services.
- » These experiences point to a broader pattern: current returns tend to reproduce vulnerability rather than resolve it, raising protection concerns for both the journey home and reintegration prospects.

Returnees interviewed by ACHR consistently reported receiving the 100 USD per family member in Lebanon, but stated that this was insufficient to cover the full cost of returning. While the grant sometimes covered transportation from Lebanon to Syria—and, in fewer cases, moving furniture—many families faced additional expenses that had not been accounted for. Although a one-time 600 USD cash grant inside Syria may be available for vulnerable returnees, none of the interviewees had received it, with many confused about eligibility and access.

These challenges were echoed in the October 2025 Upinion conversation, in which 21 respondents who returned in or after July 2025 reported their experiences. Eighteen had heard about at least one UNHCR-supported program, yet only five returned through the Self-Organized Program and none through the Organized Voluntary Return Program. Of those five, four said the program influenced their decision to return, with two choosing the self-organized option because it was faster. Although four respondents reported that the return process and requirements had been clearly explained, information about conditions in their areas of return was largely absent, four said they were not given any information, only one received information about access to services such as healthcare or education.

Half of the 16 returnees aware of border facilitation measures announced by the GSO said this somewhat or greatly influenced their choice to return. Documentation needs were also a factor: 4 of the 21 returnees had to collect birth or school certificates before returning, and two faced obstacles due to missing residence permits for children and unclear authentication procedures.

On their reasons for returning, 17 said staying in Lebanon was not possible due to mounting pressures, while only four described their return as voluntary or partially voluntary. Conditions in Syria complicated their decisions: only five respondents felt their area was safe, and seven said they could access essential services. None reported there were employment opportunities in their area of return.

ACHR interviews with 13 Syrians who returned to Syria after July 2025 reinforced these findings. They described difficult living conditions, often lacking adequate housing. Many had no secure accommodation and relied on relatives or unfinished structures on family land, with housing frequently described as unsafe, lacking durability, or needing extensive repairs. One returnee said: *"I was worried about the difficulty of starting from scratch without a home or resources. I stayed with my in-laws and sent my children to relatives while I carried out initial maintenance on my home. We are on the cusp of winter, and my house has no windows and the floor is sandy. What will we do then? My advice to every Syrian considering returning is: Don't return before you have secured the basics of a home for yourself and your family. I advise them not to come and return."* Access to basic services was similarly limited, with returnees describing intermittent water, scarce electricity, and dependence on solar panels or batteries.

Safety concerns varied among the returnees ACHR interviewed. Only one interviewee explicitly described their area as unsafe: *"we hear gunfire, and it's impossible to go out after sunset." Safety is less than it was before.* Others framed insecurity more in socio-economic terms. Many expressed anxiety over their future ability to survive sustainably, and one described feeling abandoned: *"They (UNHCR) promised me they would help us after we returned to Syria with \$400, but I haven't seen anything since we arrived. No one remembers us. If you sleep in the street, no one asks about you or cares about anyone."* These experiences underscore the considerable challenges facing returnees, the fragility of their basic needs on return, and the pressing importance of reconstruction of housing and basic infrastructure.

Community-led return initiatives

In October 2025, B&Z implemented a pilot project in partnership with UNHCR to support informed, safe, and dignified returns of Syrian refugees from Bar Elias, Lebanon, to Rural Damascus, Syria. In contrast to spontaneous returns and UNHCR-facilitated returns, these return movements are initiated and coordinated by the communities themselves, including communication with the General Security Office (GSO) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), as well as relevant authorities in Syria.

A total of 19 families who expressed their intention to return voluntarily participated in the pilot. Targeted outreach by B&Z in camps in and around Bar Elias identified interested families, selecting the most vulnerable households who wished to return but lacked the financial means to do so. B&Z worked closely with UNHCR on the assessment and referral for a one-time cash grant and conducted extensive awareness-raising activities. This included Communication with Communities materials developed by UNHCR, information on safeguarding and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), and guidance on available services in Rural Damascus, drawing on B&Z's established presence inside Syria.

A key component was B&Z's continuous accompaniment of households throughout the return process. This included providing all necessary information, resolving minor legal or administrative issues in coordination with UNHCR and INGOs, supporting families in packing and loading their belongings onto trucks, and accompanying them all the way to their areas of arrival in Syria. B&Z also facilitated procedures at both the Lebanese and Syrian borders to ensure a smooth and safe crossing.

Upon arrival in Syria, B&Z's local team welcomed the returnees, ensured timely referrals to services, and launched a post-return monitoring survey. As a refugee-led organization with deep roots and operational presence in both Lebanon and Syria, B&Z was uniquely positioned to implement this pilot. The organization brought strong community trust, contextual knowledge, and accurate legal and practical information about both settings. Safeguarding measures, PSEA protocols, and feedback and complaint mechanisms were in place to minimize risks and provide safe reporting pathways.

Unlike recent large-scale returns organized directly by UNHCR, this small-scale pilot initiative demonstrated that when return movements are designed and led by affected communities—and supported by RLOs such as B&Z—they can address information gaps, reduce protection risks, and strengthen the agency of refugees themselves. This approach offers valuable lessons which should inform any discussion on return programming in 2026 and beyond.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Sustain humanitarian and protection space in Lebanon

The Refugee Protection Watch coalition recommends that the Government of Lebanon should:

- » Protect the right to adequate housing for all individuals without discrimination, and revoke any measures that may restrict this right or undermine the dignity of refugees and the rights of property owners.
- » Ensure that all allegations of arbitrary arrests, torture, forced deportation, discrimination or unlawful evictions are promptly investigated, and that perpetrators, including state officials, are held legally accountable.
- » Promote responsible media and human rights discourse aimed at combating growing hate speech and racism, fostering a culture of respect for human rights and social solidarity.
- » Ratify the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its Optional Protocol while working to strengthen the protection of rights and freedom of refugees, including by respecting non-refoulement obligations and reinstating the ability of the UNHCR to issue registration certificates for refugees.
- » Withdraw the new proposed draft law on “Regulating the presence of refugees on Lebanese territory” due to its clear violations of the Lebanese Constitution and Lebanon’s international human rights obligations.

Third country governments and UN agencies should scale up humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support in Lebanon, including by:

- » Accelerating and stepping up efforts to work with and provide financial and capacity-sharing support to Syrian civil society and refugee-led organizations.
- » Actively applying the principle of “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP) throughout all humanitarian, recovery and reconstruction efforts and in funding strategies and requirements; and taking action to ensure the meaningful participation of Syrian civil society actors in policymaking and program design at the most senior levels of the response.
- » Increasing support to locally led initiatives that implement the “triple nexus” between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts across Lebanon.

- » Increasing support to Lebanese municipalities, especially in areas affected by Israeli airstrikes and areas hosting large refugee populations, to reduce pressure on local services without linking aid to coercive refugee policies.
- » Urging the Lebanese authorities to fully comply with the principle of non-refoulement, and to withdraw the draft refugee law that is currently being promoted.
- » Expanding third-country avenues - including family reunification, humanitarian admissions, and resettlement - to reduce pressure on Lebanon and provide real alternatives to unsafe returns.
- » Conditioning and monitoring financial and in-kind assistance to Lebanese security forces to guarantee full compliance with human rights obligations.
- » Develop tailored support packages for vulnerable groups, including women-headed households, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and families lacking documentation.

4.2. Prioritize reconstruction funding over further return programming

- » Third-country governments should significantly scale up and invest in sustainable reconstruction, basic services, and livelihoods inside Syria, through the establishment of a multi-donor Syria Reconstruction Fund.
- » Third-country governments should support UNHCR to set up a structural mechanism to monitor where and when conditions become or stop being conducive for safe, voluntary and dignified return to Syria.

Following the above, UNHCR, as part of its ongoing return programming, should:

- » Conduct a review and evaluation of return programs put in place from 1 July 2025 before extending/upscaling the Organized Voluntary Return Program and ensure that the views of refugees and RLOs are central in any such evaluation.
- » Provide returnees with detailed and up-to-date information on security risks and access to basic services in their specific areas of intended return, to ensure informed decision making for returnees.
- » Provide space for returnees to share sensitive information about their complex security concerns. Questions about security should be open-ended, allowing returnees to share their concerns, perceptions and assessments of security conditions in their areas of return.

- » Clarify the process of collecting and securing legal documentation for returnees in coordination with the GSO and ensure adequate financial support to secure necessary basic documentation.
- » Ensure a consistent presence and monitoring at border crossings to provide safeguards for returnees, uphold accountability, and guarantee that returns are carried out in line with international protection and human rights standards.
- » Incorporate refugees' feedback and perceptions in the design and upscaling of the return programs to account for their needs and preferences. This includes acknowledging and accounting for the specific needs of newly arrived Syrian refugees in return programming.
- » Create a transparent complaints and feedback mechanism for refugees participating in UN return programs, allowing them to safely report violations, misinformation, or coercion.

4.3. Ensure accountability and take action against the Israeli occupation

- » Third-country governments should reiterate their commitment to the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of both Lebanon and Syria.
- » Third-country governments should condemn and impose sanctions over ongoing Israeli attacks on Lebanese territory and the construction of the wall southeast of Yaroun, which constitutes a violation of the Blue Line and Lebanese sovereignty. They should call for the immediate cessation of hostilities and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from all Lebanese territory, in accordance with international law and United Nations Security Council resolutions.
- » Third-country governments should condemn and impose sanctions over the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, the 1974 demilitarized zone and the buffer zone established after 8 December 2024; and demand the immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from Syrian territory.

