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The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees

It seems as though the Assad regime prefers the return of populations going back to rural areas more than those returning to cities.



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اقرأ المقال بالعربي.

Since mid-2017, there has been a lot of talk about the [“voluntary” return of Syrian refugees](#). Concerned voices have however spoken up more urgently as of late, especially at a regional level in [Turkey and Lebanon](#), about the safety of those who

return to Syria. Worries about the fate of the returnees constitute a serious barrier, given the Assad regime's authoritarian practices accompanied with the absence of any international or regional guarantees to protect the returnees from the same fate as that of dozens of thousands [who were killed under torture](#) in the regime's prisons over the past 11 years.

This issue raises some key questions: Does Assad really want refugees to return to Syria? And is this part of his plan of normalization with the international community in order to obtain funds to rebuild the country?

In 2022, [more than 13 million people](#)—more than [half of the population](#)—are either refugees or have been internally displaced. The number includes 5.6 million refugees in neighboring countries. Since mid-2021, a trend on the call for the return of refugees has become clearer in light of the deteriorating economic conditions due to both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Turkey is sending “those who voluntarily wish to return” back to opposition-controlled areas in northwestern Syria, Lebanon is sending refugees back only to areas controlled by the Syrian regime due to the fact that the country [has no common borders](#) with opposition-controlled areas. Consequently, Lebanon has no choice but to either keep refugees or send them back through official border crossings to Syria. This applies to Jordan too, with the exception of the Al-Tanf region in Rif Dimashq, a [55 kilometer area](#) where American and British forces are deployed.

The mechanism and course of “voluntary” returns

A plan was developed by Lebanon's caretaker government to [return 15,000 refugees per month](#), which caused international rejection and [local debates](#), even within the caretaker cabinet itself. According to this plan, Lebanese authorities list the names of refugees “wishing” to return to Syria through a [mechanism](#) put in place in 2017, then the Lebanese General Security sends those [names to the Syrian intelligence agencies](#), waiting for their green light. Sometimes, the Lebanese authorities are informed that some of the refugees on these lists are not allowed to return to Syria due to their revolutionary past, or because their homes are located in areas controlled by the armed opposition in northwestern Syria or by the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast. As for refugees whose return is approved, their return date is set up by the Lebanese and Syrian authorities, and they are deported through the official crossings to Syria. The Lebanese General Security [secures transferring refugees](#) to the Syrian borders, then the Syrian authorities ensure transportation to returnees' towns and villages, or to shelter centers built specifically for those who are not allowed to return to their towns due to certain [security](#) or [safety reasons](#), linked to things such as the removal of rubble and remnants of war, or securing the area militarily.

According to the Lebanese authorities, the return of refugees is completely voluntary, especially since applying for return is optional. However, the restrictions imposed on refugees, their legal conditions that restrict their right of work and movement, and the poor economic conditions they are under force some to return to Syria. In general, [most of the returnees](#) are the elderly, women, and children, since a number of men are reluctant to return as they are already wanted by the Syrian intelligence services, either for participating in the revolution against the regime, or for their military service. In addition, those who already know that they are wanted by the Syrian regime's security apparatus are fully aware that they cannot safely return as long as the regime is in place. Consequently, many prefer to stay in Lebanon, waiting for a solution that guarantees their safety, while others [risk their lives](#) alongside Lebanese and Palestinians, as they try to leave Lebanon by sea.

A safety not guaranteed

Although Syrian intelligence services allow a number of refugees to return, there is no guarantee that returnees will not be persecuted by the security services, due to the lack of proper coordination between agencies. In addition, since the General Intelligence Directorate in Syria and the Lebanese General Security are the two agencies that coordinate these returns, a returnee might simply be wanted by one of these agencies and might fall victim of the regime's brutal practices.

Several cases of arbitrary and illegal detention have been recorded, in addition to cases of rape, sexual violence, and enforced disappearance. These practices have nothing to do with the returnees' political status—whether they belong to the opposition or not—but rather simply because they are refugees or belong to an environment that opposes the regime. In a recent report, Amnesty International described sending refugees back to Syria as [leading them to their death](#).

Upon their return, all returnees have to visit security agencies; sometimes, intelligence officers even interrogate returnees in the areas they live in. This varies depending on many factors, including who the returning person is and these agencies' capacities on the ground. [Bribes are often paid to investigators](#) in order to facilitate interrogation procedures and to eventually positively evaluate the returnee in order to close their file at security agencies.

The Syrians that Assad welcomes

The return policy implemented by the Assad regime suggests that there are certain groups that are welcome, while others are not. In fact, it seems as though Assad prefers the return of [populations going back to rural areas](#) more than those returning

to cities, as available data on returning refugees confirm that the majority have returned to rural areas, especially to the [countryside of Homs and Damascus](#).

This is due to factors related to the regime's ability in providing services. For instance, Syrian authorities are unable to provide proper services in various sectors in cities, such as energy, education, healthcare, or transportation. Consequently, the return of refugees to cities increases already existing pressures on services that are still provided at a minimum, especially with the growing [fuel crisis](#) and electricity shortages. On the other hand, the return to the countryside costs less in terms of services, and could result in greater returns in terms of productivity, as those returning to rural areas will [work in the agricultural sector](#), increase production levels, and lead to a decrease in the prices of agricultural products and basic consumer goods such as grains and vegetables. This, in a way, helps the regime boost food security in the country. As for returnees to cities, in addition to greater pressure on services, there are not as many job opportunities, as [industrial production is almost at a standstill](#) due to the shortage of fuel, in addition to the [low value of salaries](#) paid in general. City residents that are outside of Syria are also more likely to pay a military service exemption fee, which provides additional money for the regime's treasury. Furthermore, security agencies fear an increased security threat in cities, such as the possibility of the returnees participating in demonstrations or violence. This plays a key role in favoring refugees returning to rural areas over those returning to cities, as the security threat in the countryside is different and much easier to control as opposed to the one in the city.

The Assad regime adopted a series of legislative tools to put pressure on refugees, by passing laws related to real estate ownership, including [Legislative Decree 66 of 2012](#) and [Law 10 of 2018](#), which are applied in cities, especially in Damascus. These laws contribute to the expropriation of property from those who cannot prove their ownership over their property, especially in the absence of the owner. In addition, [executive seizure is imposed](#) on the property of a man and his family if the man fails to perform the mandatory military service before turning 43. Thus, men must either pay \$8,000 in military service exemption fees or return to perform military service before reaching this age.

Finally, the Assad regime leases agricultural lands belonging to refugees and those who were internally displaced through [public auctions](#) in the absence of an owner, as another means of putting pressure on them. This tactic was adopted in 2019, and is now implemented in the countryside of Hama and Idlib after these areas became under the regime's control. This illustrates how the regime takes financial advantage from the hard decision that the refugees are forced to take, including confiscating or

leasing their property, or indirectly forcing them to return. This falls within the selective return policy that the regime is trying to implement.

The regime also tries to attract another group of Syrians, namely those who have left the country before 2011. They are often invited by regime officials [to invest](#) in areas under Assad's control. The regime lures them through facilitating [investment projects](#) mostly in the services and tourism sectors, representing an additional source of income for the country as these projects create new job opportunities and contribute, to some extent, to the reconstruction and early recovery of the country.

The numbers of returnees are not promising

Several [factors and needs](#) play a significant role in the refugee's decision in returning to Syria, such as the fears of persecution by regime, the [deteriorating economic conditions](#), the dire situation of the [country's infrastructure](#) which has been largely destroyed by regime since 2011.

Over the past years, the United Nations has issued several [reports](#) on the approximate numbers of returning refugees, especially from neighboring countries. Due to various challenging circumstances, nearly [750,000 refugees](#) have returned to Syria since 2016. Most of them (500,000) have returned from Turkey to opposition-controlled areas in northwestern Syria following the [Turkish military intervention](#) against ISIS in 2016 and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in 2018.

These numbers are not promising and do not suggest that there is a real project for a voluntary and dignified return.

From January to October 2022, 43,254 individuals returned to Syria. This number constitutes a small percentage of the total number of returnees since 2016, and a very tiny percentage of the total number of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people. [According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR), 29,501 refugees returned from Turkey to northwestern Syria, while 7,087 refugees from Lebanon and 3,679 refugees from Jordan returned to regime-controlled areas.

According to the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), 3,083 refugees who had returned to Syria—mostly from Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan—have been arrested since 2014. 1,887 were later released, while 1,196 remained in detention, including 864 who turned into cases of enforced disappearance.

A policy of deception

The Assad regime claims that refugees and those who were internally displaced fled because of "armed terrorist gangs" invading the country. However, this claim is false,

as the vast majority fled because of the military operations and fierce attacks carried out by the regime, its loyal militias, and its allies Iran and Russia. These attacks mostly targeted civilians and resulted in the destruction of the country's infrastructure, the emergence of radical groups, as well as a global refugee crisis.

Meanwhile, the return of refugees and displaced to regime-controlled areas increases remittances from their families abroad. This has proven to be profitable for the Syrian regime, as they only pay [3,000 Syrian pounds \(SYP\) per US dollar](#) of remittance while the real value of a dollar amounts to 6,300 SYP in the [black market](#). Moreover, in an attempt to keep transfers limited to networks belonging to the regime, [security agencies arrest](#) anyone who works in money transfers through unofficial exchange networks.

Furthermore, the return of numbers of refugees to regime-controlled areas will allow the regime to demand more humanitarian aid under the pretext of the increase of the number of citizens in need of assistance. It will also help put greater pressure on the international community through Russia threatening to [veto](#) every six month the extension of UN Security Council [Resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), which authorizes the UN to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid. On January 9, 2023, the Security Council [agreed to extend](#) cross-border aid for an additional six months.

Refugees as a path to normalization

In the event of the return of certain refugees from Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan, the regime will take the opportunity to pose as though it really welcomes their return. In reality, however, a selective return policy based on interest is implemented, one that is neither for the sake of reconciliation nor citizenship. At the same time, by denying the return of many of these refugees, the regime is putting greater pressure on host countries that are already suffering from political and economic crises and various security threats.

The international community has adopted a policy of indifference and inaction when it comes to the issue of Syrian refugees. These actions have made it impossible to guarantee a dignified and safe return for refugees and the internally displaced populations, putting their lives at risk. Now is the time to focus on their plight, all the while the Syrian regime has been trying to push for a normalization of relations with the world, while discussing post-war reconstruction and humanitarian aid.

The indifference policy adopted by the international community and its inability to act when it comes to Syria makes it hard to guarantee a dignified and safe return for refugees. Furthermore, it is unacceptable to condition humanitarian aid to a political solution, or to the matters of reconstruction and early recovery. The sanctions

imposed on the regime should not be eased once certain refugees and displaced return to Syria unwillingly, as they will face a set of challenging circumstances back home.

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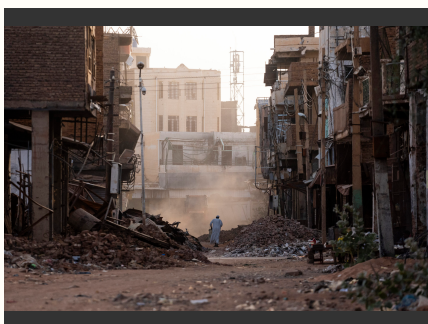


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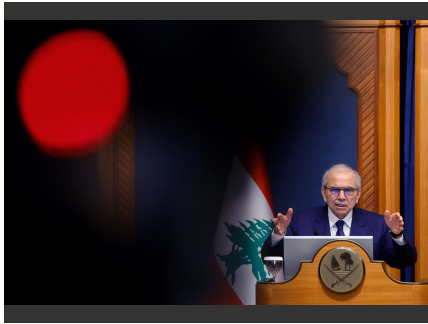
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