

30 June 2017

Highlights

- **443,000 Syrian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) returned** home so far in 2017.
- **31,226 Syrian refugees spontaneously returned** to Syria so far in 2017.
- **Potential for increased returns** if peace and stability in Syria increases.
- **UNHCR scaling up monitoring, planning and response** to returns inside and outside Syria.
- **Preserving asylum space and maintaining funding in host countries** is crucial, given the ongoing instability in Syria and evident continued need for international protection.

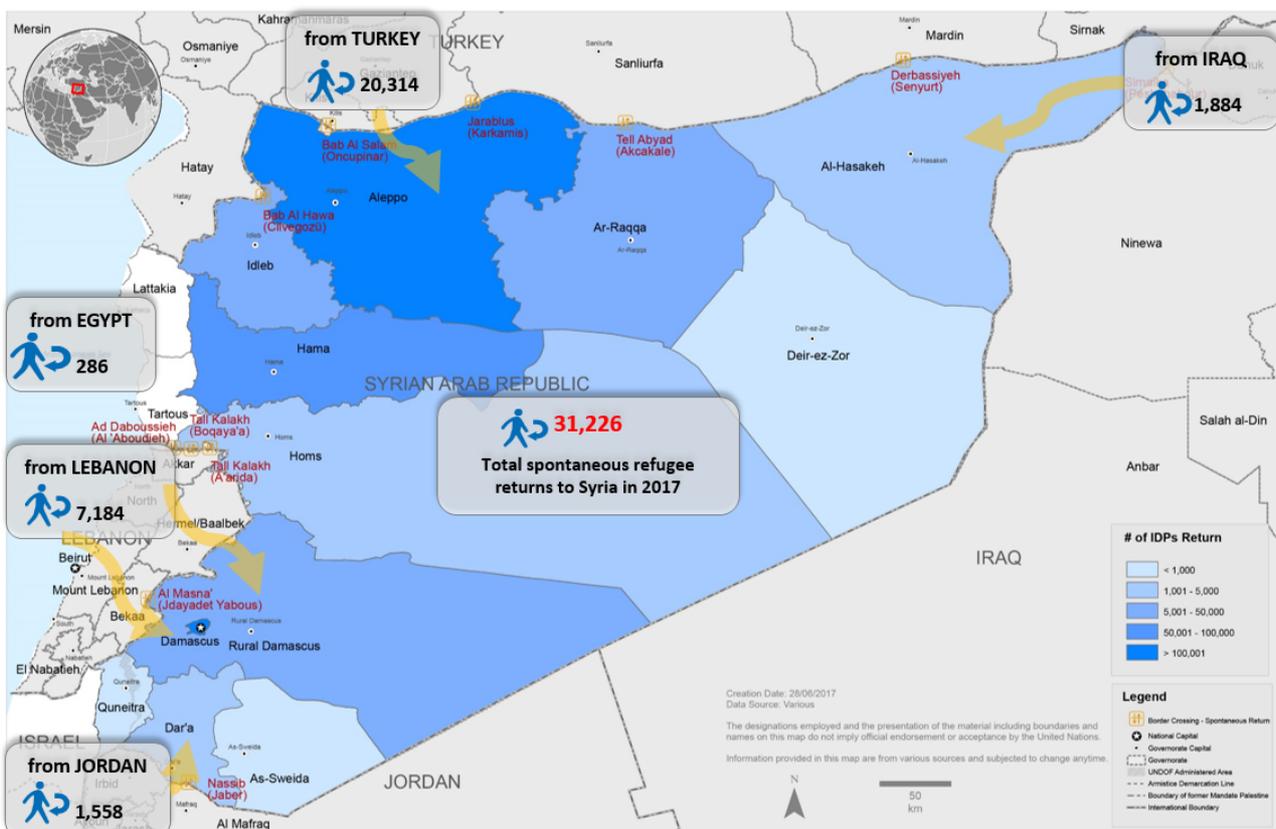
Context & Current Situation

UNHCR is carefully monitoring political and security developments inside Syria, where the Astana and Geneva talks are creating opportunities for peace and stability. IDP returns are expected to increase in 2017. Should these prove to be sustainable, then there could be a significant rise in spontaneous refugee returns to the same areas.

IDPs: There are around 6.3 million IDPs in Syria, displaced over the course of seven years of conflict. Some 443,000 IDPs are reported to have returned to their place of origin this year. In 2017, the Government of Syria expects significant returns of IDPs, in particular once the school year is finished.

Refugees: There are more than 5 million registered Syrian refugees hosted in the region. UNHCR neither promotes nor facilitates refugee returns to Syria, given that conditions do not exist for safe and dignified return. However, UNHCR does track spontaneous returns through border monitoring, community engagement and continuous registration processes in countries of asylum. UNHCR estimates that 31,226 Syrian refugees have returned from January to May 2017.

Map: *Spontaneous Syrian Refugee and IDP Returns - January to May 2017* (source: UNHCR; IOM)



Challenges

IDPs: The level of destruction of shelter, services and livelihoods inside Syria is massive, and impedes the return of IDPs. Insecurity continues across many parts of the country and risks of protection violations remain high. Ensuring freedom of movement for those fleeing conflict and violence remains critical.



By the end of 2015, the unemployment rate reached **53%**.



11.8M people lack power for up to 18 hours per day.



Damage to transport infrastructure such as roads and bridges affects **3M** people across Syria.

Source: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview

Access to persons of concern inside Syria is a key challenge. Inter-agency convoys are still face challenges in accessing the recently evacuated besieged areas. The capacity of humanitarian agencies in Syria needs to be expanded, and administrative regulations that limit visas, access, and travel approvals are constraints on the overall response.

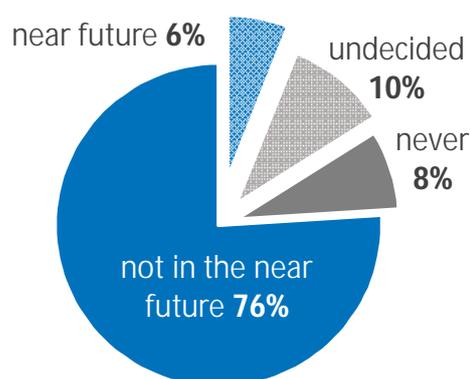
Refugees: Seeking out family members, checking on property, and economic challenges in host countries, including limited of job opportunities, prohibitive costs of living and expensive medical care, are among the reasons cited by refugees as factors encouraging return.

UNHCR's latest intention surveys (February-April 2017) found that the majority (76%) of Syrian refugees interviewed could consider return after 2017 if there is a significant improvement in conditions in return areas.

The highest stated obstacles to return include insecurity, lack of access to services – including water, health, education and electricity - and limited livelihoods opportunities. Around 50% of respondents report that their property in Syria is damaged or destroyed, representing a significant impediment to return. Concerns over risks of protection violations remain high, including renewed or ongoing fighting, recruitment, arrest and detention, and other forms of physical violence.

Close to 40% of all respondents expressed interest in temporary visits. From Lebanon, the majority of those spontaneously returning are doing so on a temporary basis, rather than intending to stay permanently in Syria. Similar to Turkey, Iraq applies a policy regulating temporary visits to Syria and readmission to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) under certain conditions. Flexible border management by host countries, including the possibility of re-entering the host country, can be an important factor in building confidence through go-and-see visits

Syrian refugees: Return Intention



UNHCR Survey on return perceptions & intentions of Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, February-April 2017.

Potential Return Areas

UNHCR data for refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon shows that the majority (63%) originate from four key governorates: Aleppo (17.5%); Homs (17.2%); Dara'a (16.9%); and Rural Damascus (12.2%). Significant numbers also originate from Hassakeh (8.7%), Damascus (7.3%); Idlib (7.3%) and Hama (5.6%). For the 2.8 million refugees in Turkey, where data is managed by the Government of Turkey, samples confirm that a significant percentage originate from northern Syria – in particular Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Idlib, with proportionately fewer refugees from Damascus, Rural Damascus and Dara'a.

Returns of the predominantly Kurdish refugees in Iraq are likely to focus on Hassakeh. The majority of refugees in Jordan would be to Dara'a and Rural Damascus, and from Lebanon to Homs, Aleppo, Idlib and Rural

Damascus. The majority of spontaneous movements from Lebanon, including temporary visits, are currently to Damascus and other areas under government control.

Preserving Asylum Space in Host Countries

While UNHCR is responding to IDP returns, working to create conditions conducive for return inside Syria, and analyzing refugee population movements, there is clearly a need to maintain funding and further invest resources in host countries to preserve protection space and respond to urgent needs of both refugees and host communities. Large-scale refugee returns are unlikely in the near future. Even should conditions improve in return areas, refugee returns will be gradual and over several years.

The Refugee and Resilience Response Plan (3RP), co-led by UNHCR and UNDP, is the primary regional strategy and appeal for the Syrian refugee response. The 3RP brings five country plans together in a single strategic platform, presents a regionally coherent plan developed by over 240 partners (government, UN, and international and national NGOs) through 43 working groups in the five countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). For 2017, the appeal seeks USD 4.63 billion for the UN and NGO response.

UNHCR Response

IDPs: UNHCR is scaling up its response inside Syria, primarily in light of the potential return of larger numbers of IDPs and, in time, of refugees. UNHCR will maintain and expand its robust humanitarian and protection response, including through the Protection, Non-Food Item and Shelter Sectors, with a strong emphasis on rehabilitation of infrastructure and essential services for communities.

As part of the overall humanitarian response, UNHCR will step up and expand its current response to address the needs of returning IDPs and support their initial reintegration. Initiatives include extending the network of community centres to 100 with a particular focus on current/potential return areas, a further expansion of outreach capacity, promotion of community-based initiatives, shelter programmes, infrastructure rehabilitation and livelihoods support, in partnership with other humanitarian and recovery actors and in coordination with local authorities.

In particular, UNHCR intends to rehabilitate over 60 health facilities and provide them with medical equipment; rehabilitate over 100 schools and support 200 infrastructure interventions. As a core component of its protection interventions, UNHCR will continue to increase its material and technical support to civil registry offices across the country to ensure that returning IDPs and other affected persons have access to civil registration/documentation.

Refugees: UNHCR is pursuing a number of preparatory steps in anticipation of when conditions for voluntary repatriation of refugees in conditions of safety and dignity are in place.

UNHCR aims to ensure that planning for returns are grounded on protection standards and principles, taking into account and reflecting refugees' own intentions and views, and are based on partnership and collaboration between key stakeholders.

At the regional level, 3RP partners have established a UNHCR-led Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) to discuss spontaneous returns and plan for potential facilitated returns. Similar, inclusive inter-agency fora exist or are planned at the country level in host countries.

UNHCR is also analyzing refugee intentions and demographic profiles in neighbouring countries to provide planning information as a coordination service.

Since early 2016, UNHCR has had in place counselling lines for spontaneous returnees providing advice, contacts and information to ensure refugees are making well-informed decisions on whether to return. In 2017, Communication with Communities activities are being strengthened across the region, including through the extensive network of community centres and outreach volunteers in refugee communities.

Next Steps

UNHCR continues to monitor return movements as well as to plan and implement its response both inside and outside Syria. With both the 3RP for Syrian refugees in the region and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syrian IDPs dramatically underfunded, increased international support is required to continue meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs - as well as the needs of returnees if and when large-scale return operations become a reality.

Of the \$304 million that UNHCR has appealed for operations to assist IDPs inside Syria in 2017, \$103 million or 33% has been received. UNHCR will be seeking an additional \$150m in 2017 to ramp up its delivery inside Syria to support both IDPs, returnees and other vulnerable people, and to help improve conditions in potential return areas.