

Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees

Current Situation

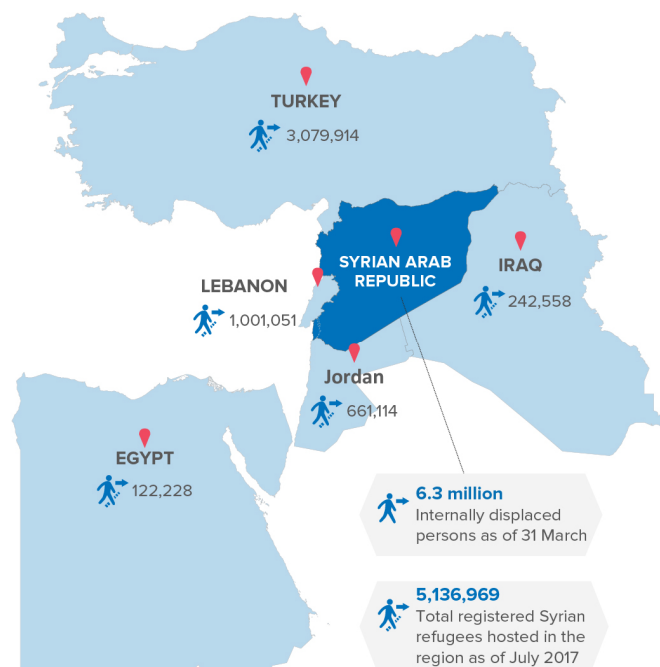
The security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) remains fluid, and complex patterns of conflict and displacement continue in many areas.

An estimated 1.1 million displacements were recorded in the first half of 2017, at an average of 7,300 displacements per day, notably in the context of the Ar-Raqqa offensive. Between January and May 2017, some 450,000 IDPs were estimated to have returned to their community of origin, 303,500 of whom in Aleppo Governorate. The estimated total number of IDPs remained at 6.3 million as of 31 March 2017, and some 13.5 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance within Syria according to OCHA statistics.

At the same time, there are more than five million Syrian refugees in the region, some of whom have now been in exile for over five years. Some 22,200 Syrian refugees are estimated to have undertaken self-organized return to Syria in 2017.

Despite the support provided by host governments and humanitarian actors, refugees in the region are growing increasingly vulnerable. The vast majority live below the poverty line and face difficulties accessing services and providing food, housing, healthcare and other basic needs for their families.

Refugees continue to need access to territory and international protection, as well as ongoing humanitarian support in countries of asylum. Refugees also need access to durable solutions, in line with the core principles of international refugee law, so that they can look to the future with hope and with dignity.



The Durable Solutions Context

The key durable solutions for refugees from Syria are resettlement to a third country, voluntary return to Syria in safety and dignity, and protection and assistance in countries of asylum. Policy, programmatic and strategic directions being pursued across the region in order to facilitate access to durable solutions and informed decision-making while maintaining asylum space include:

- Expanding opportunities for resettlement and other admission pathways to third countries, such as family reunification, labor mobility and academic scholarships;
- Advocating for readmission to host countries of Syrian refugees who are, for instance, studying or working, visiting family, or have other legitimate reasons for travel to a third country;
- Advocating for regularization of temporary visits of limited duration to Syria coupled with readmission to host countries;
- Working with the Government of Syria and other agencies on issues relating to Housing, Land and Property (HLP), civil registration and documentation as well as other protection issues inside Syria that could have a positive impact on Syrian returnees, displaced and affected communities;
- Supporting vulnerable self-organized returnees on a case-by-case basis, including by assisting individuals and through community-based interventions;
- Advocating for international support to refugee hosting countries to enable them to maintain a dignified protection environment.

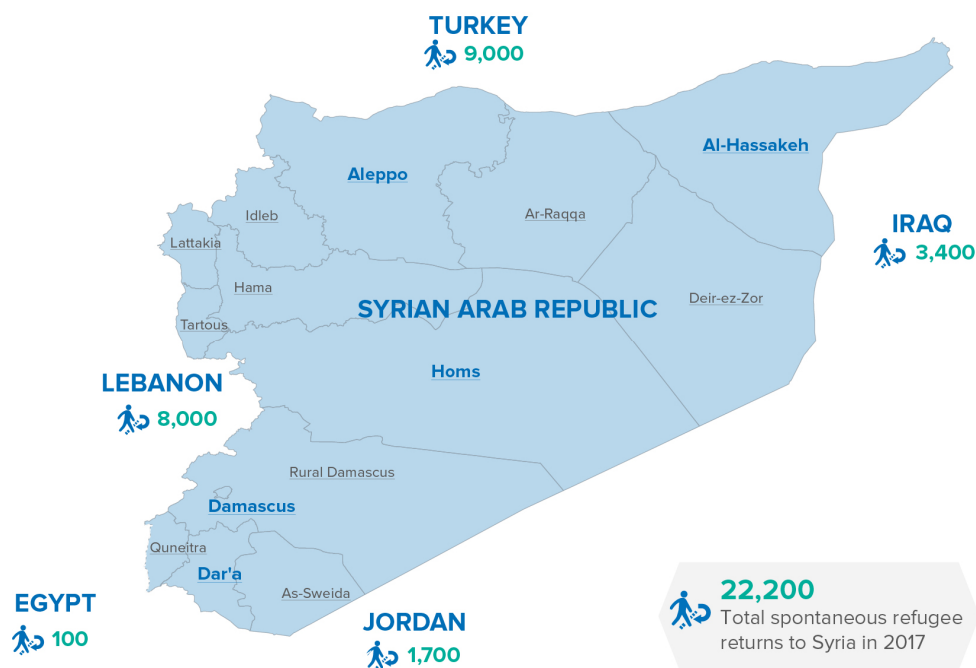
Expanding Resettlement Opportunities and Other Durable Solutions

Between January 2013 and 30 June 2017, UNHCR submitted around 178,500 Syrian refugees from the MENA region and Turkey for resettlement, and will exceed that number through further submissions should more places become available. Of these, some 85,250 have departed for 33 resettlement countries. States have so far pledged over 211,000 places for admissions under resettlement and other pathways - a tangible expression of international burden and responsibility sharing with refugee hosting countries in the region. Resettlement and complementary pathways of admission to third countries can contribute to providing protection and solutions for individual Syrian refugees as well as to ensuring overall protection space is maintained in host countries neighboring Syria. Resettlement and other pathways can also reduce the compulsion for refugees to undertake dangerous irregular onward movements.

Some of the complementary admission pathways include humanitarian visas, family reunification and opportunities for labour mobility and education in third countries. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugee families remain separated within the region and across continents, while the majority of Syrian refugee youth have no access to tertiary level education. For many Syrian refugees, family reunification, scholarship programmes and labour mobility schemes in other countries are therefore the only means to achieve normalcy of life and, ultimately, a solution to their displacement. UNHCR will therefore continue to pursue resettlement and complementary pathways.

Similarly, positive developments have been made in supporting Syrian refugees' access to livelihoods. For example, in Jordan, 35,000 Syrian refugees are currently formally employed with a valid work permit and additional 10,000 refugees in Turkey have been issued work permits. Syrian refugee medical professionals and teachers are also permitted to provide services to refugee communities in Turkey.

Syrian Refugee Returns, 2017



Political developments such as the Astana and Geneva talks and other processes including local agreements may create opportunities for peace and stability in certain areas of the country. Returns have in some cases not been verified as voluntary in nature. IDP returns are expected to increase in 2017, and there are plans to work on frameworks regulating such returns. Should these returns prove to be voluntary, safe and sustainable, there could follow a significant rise in self-organized refugee returns.

UNHCR tracks self-organized return movements through its border monitoring and continuous registration processes in countries of asylum

* Note, the previous issue of UNHCR's Flash Update reported a higher figure of returns from Turkey, based on other data and reports. The estimated number for all countries reported in this Flash Update reflects those spontaneous returns captured by UNHCR border monitoring and/or continuous registration.

and provides counselling and information related to the potential risks associated with self-organized return. Inside Syria, UNHCR is currently unable to systematically monitor refugee return arrivals, including the sustainability of their return, due to access constraints.

UNHCR monitoring and registration data records around 22,200 Syrian refugees having returned from January to May 2017, mostly to northern Syria. Other data and reports, for example from Turkey, indicate that the number of refugee returns could be higher.

UNHCR does not promote or facilitate refugee returns to Syria because conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified returns are not in place. The level of destruction of housing and infrastructure, basic services, social safety nets, and livelihood opportunities inside the country is massive, the security and humanitarian situation remains volatile, and displacement continues. Returnees may face the possibility of renewed or ongoing fighting and are expressing concerns about obstacles to return such as recruitment by armed groups, arrest and detention, and other forms of physical violence. Significant improvements in security and the overall protection environment, including an amnesty for draft evaders, as well as access to services, HLP rights and livelihoods need to be in place before large scale returns could take place.

Nevertheless, small-scale, self-organized return movements by refugees, are occurring. UNHCR anticipates that self-organized returns will continue and, in time, increase. UNHCR advocates that it is important that refugees who decide to return are doing so voluntarily and of their own free will, as an informed choice. Ensuring access to territory and the ability to remain in host countries for refugees who do not wish to return remains critical.

Self-Organized Returnee Profiles

In countries of asylum, UNHCR monitors, and to the extent possible collects data on self-organized departure to Syria from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The Government of Turkey collects information on self-organized departures from its territory and agrees on UNHCR's participation in some voluntary repatriation interviews during which its staff is able to collect some information about returnees and ascertain the voluntary nature of the returns.

Some of the main Governorates of origin of returnees include Aleppo, Al-Hassakeh, Homs, Damascus, and Dar'a.

Across all five countries where UNHCR collects data, family size has an impact on return decisions. The majority of returnees are small families and single people returning alone. Families with more than five people were the least likely to have returned. Females made up more than half of those who departed from Jordan and Lebanon, and just under half of those who departed from Egypt and Iraq. According to findings of UNHCR intention surveys and focus group discussions held in Turkey with smaller population samples, a refugee's decision to return to Syria is highly correlated with the return of other family members, and spontaneous return figures show that 90 per cent of all returnees traveled with members of their family. Additionally, a primary driver for return is family reunification. Of the refugees surveyed in April 2017 in Egypt, Iraq and Jordan, 82 per cent of those who said they would consider return stated that "family reunification in Syria" is a factor influencing possible intentions to return, and element which emerged also in the focus group discussions conducted in Turkey.

Refugees who arrived in 2013-2015 are more likely to consider return than those who arrived before or after. Only one per cent of those who arrived in 2016 spontaneously returned.

Temporary visits and cross-border mobility

In UNHCR surveys, some of those who expressed an intention to return would prefer to have the option of a temporary visit. However, those surveyed seem to rarely travel back to Syria, with about 90 per cent stating they had not traveled back to Syria since they arrived in the country of asylum. Temporary visits to Syria may likely be inhibited by restrictive readmission practices. Given the low number of temporary visits, it remains unclear to what extent such visits to Syria have influenced self-organized returns or the intentions of the respondents. Notwithstanding, based on UNHCR's experience from other refugee return contexts, it is believed that temporary ("go-and-see") visits remain an important protection tool to facilitate informed decision-making. Advocacy should therefore be undertaken with host countries to consider allowing temporary visits to Syria with subsequent readmission to the country of asylum.

UNHCR Response to Returns

In countries of asylum, UNHCR continues to analyze refugee intentions and demographic profiles of both refugees and returnees. At the regional level, partners in the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) have established a UNHCR-led Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) to discuss self-organized returns and to plan for potential facilitated returns once conditions are conducive. Similar inclusive inter-agency fora are in place or planned at the country level in refugee hosting countries and inside Syria.

UNHCR has in place phone counselling lines that provide advice, contacts and information to help refugees make informed decisions, including regarding 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. Profiling of sub-districts in main areas of return, for example on the availability of basic services, will be a vital tool for refugees to make free and informed decisions.

Notwithstanding the bureaucratic and security constraints which impede access in many areas, UNHCR is also scaling up its response inside Syria. UNHCR is expanding its assistance and protection response with a strong emphasis on small-scale rehabilitation of infrastructure and essential services for communities. UNHCR will continue to increase its material and technical support to civil registry offices where functioning and strengthen its protection response to help ensure that returning IDPs, refugees, and other affected persons have better access to civil registration/documentation and are able to restore their HLP rights. UNHCR will continue to advocate and work on policies to help ensure that the principles of voluntary, safe and dignified return are guiding the interventions of humanitarian actors and authorities in both countries of asylum and the country of origin/return.

These efforts will be fully coordinated with governments and agencies in Syria and refugee-hosting countries, and especially with Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and Strategic Framework partners.

Methodological Note

UNHCR's information and estimates related to refugee return movements are mainly captured through UNHCR's regular presence at official border crossing points, border monitoring in coordination with authorities and partners in host countries, online tools synchronized with UNHCR's database, and UNHCR surveys and individual interviews during continuous registration (e.g. when renewing a UNHCR certificate or updating personal records) and similar activities (home visits, assistance monitoring, focus group discussions) in countries of asylum.