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Understanding Refugee Return: Key Findings, Gaps, and Future Research

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PART I

Understanding Refugee Return: Key Findings, Gaps, and Future Research

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ABSTRACT

The return of refugees to their home countries is often regarded as a desirable outcome in displacement contexts, enabling individuals to rebuild their lives in familiar environments. Nevertheless, returning home remains challenging and infrequent in many contexts. This note reviews the academic literature to identify key factors influencing refugees' decisions to return, highlights gaps in current research, and suggests directions for future study. The evidence underscores that safety and security are preconditions for return. Beyond security, factors such as economic stability, property rights, access to services, and psychological and social connections to home communities are critical. The research also identifies challenges after return, including tensions between returnees and those who stayed behind, as well as difficulties with reintegration. Future research should investigate return dynamics from high-income countries, enhance conceptual frameworks for understanding the return processes, and differentiate return experiences for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Additional focus is needed on climate-induced displacement, reintegration challenges, and the impact of information gaps on decision-making. Generating better data, including panel datasets, is essential for enabling more rigorous analyses of return dynamics. Addressing these research gaps could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the return processes and inform policies that facilitate safe and voluntary returns.

* Keywords: Refugee return, displacement, repatriation, reintegration, safety and security.

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Voluntary return is often considered the preferred outcome among the three durable solutions for refugees—voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to third countries (UNHCR 2003). Although return may allow individuals to reclaim their homes and reintegrate into their communities, it remains challenging and, in many contexts, relatively rare. We begin this report by providing an overview of the existing empirical academic literature, primarily focusing on quantitative studies of refugee return, while also referencing qualitative studies and research on internally displaced persons (IDPs). Then, we turn to gaps in the literature and avenues for future research. As we describe the factors that influence the return of refugees and internally displaced people, we recognize that return is only one of several possible outcomes.

Existing literature

Existing research often highlights the role of safety and security at home as preconditions for return but also emphasizes other socioeconomic conditions, psychological connections, and social networks. Drawing on empirical studies of Syrian refugees, IDPs in Colombia and Iraq, and post-conflict returnees in Burundi and Lebanon, the literature identifies key drivers influencing the decisions to return. Security, particularly the cessation of violence, is consistently recognized as a critical factor, although its impact can vary across contexts. Economic opportunities and property rights are also important, as individuals assess the prospects of economic stability and legal protections in both their home and host communities. Emotional ties and psychological attachment, along with the strength of social networks, may further shape return decisions. Additionally, post-conflict dynamics, including tensions between returnees and those who stayed behind, highlight the need to manage societal divisions to ensure sustainable returns. Although this discussion does not focus on local integration or resettlement to third countries, these alternatives deserve additional research to fully understand the options available to displaced populations and how they choose among them.

Security

For people displaced by violence, security naturally emerges as a critical factor in the decision to return. Conflict, persecution, and threats to their safety compel people to flee, and unless there are substantial improvements in the security situation at home, the prospect of returning remains unlikely. However, the impact of security on return

is likely nonlinear, potentially becoming decisive only after crossing a certain threshold. Arababah et al. (2023) argue that safety in the home country, particularly the end of violence and military conscription, drives Syrian refugees' decisions to consider returning from Lebanon. They develop a threshold model around security, showing that other factors, like economic opportunities and public services, only influence decisions once safety at home is guaranteed. Along these lines, existing research finds that while security improvements are essential for encouraging returns, they must be paired with restoring services and infrastructure to make return feasible and sustainable (World Bank 2020).

Schwartz (2019) makes a valuable contribution by examining how the return process itself can affect the security environment in the place of origin. While security improvements may encourage the return of forcibly displaced people, Schwartz claims that the return process can lead to new conflicts when there are tensions between returnees and those who never left. In Burundi, returnees often faced new social divisions, particularly over land, sometimes leading to local-level violence. This highlights the need to consider security not only as a prerequisite for return but also as a factor that can change and create new challenges during the return process, especially as this violence can lead to additional displacement. This also underscores the important role that governance practices, such as equitable land allocation, inclusive dispute resolution mechanisms, and support for social reintegration, can play *after* return processes in order to prevent future conflicts. Without addressing underlying social tensions, security improvements alone may lead to renewed conflict after return materializes.

Economic opportunities and property rights

Existing research also emphasizes the role of economic opportunities and property rights in shaping the decision to return. Beber, Roessler, and Scacco (2021) describe the importance of economic considerations in shaping return behavior. Their paper focuses on Southern Sudanese living in Khartoum during South Sudan's independence. Many Southern Sudanese in Khartoum at the time were initially displaced by conflict and faced additional hostility around independence. The authors develop a theoretical framework, arguing that the wealthiest and the poorest individuals are more likely to return, while the established livelihoods of middle-class

individuals tended to keep them in Khartoum. This suggests that economic conditions can encourage or deter return, depending on individuals' relative opportunities in the host versus home countries. Quite importantly, this paper is original in using a panel survey to examine the return behavior, as opposed to the return intention only, of Southern Sudanese. Relatedly, Weber and Hartman (2022) show that property rights strongly correlate with the likelihood of return. Using a combination of behavioral data and a conjoint experiment, they show that Iraqi IDPs with documented ownership are more likely to return, which suggests the importance of economic security and legal protection rooted in property rights. This finding also speaks to Schwartz's (2019) observations in Burundi, where conflicts over land ownership and feelings of deprivation over the attention that returnees received became significant sources of tension. Weber and Hartman similarly highlight the need for policies focusing on property rights for post-conflict recovery and return.

The World Bank (2020) also argues that even if security improves in Syria, refugees who have found stable employment and economic security in host countries like Jordan or Lebanon may choose not to return. This is particularly true among refugees who have integrated into the local economy and developed new livelihoods. The decision to return involves not just the availability of jobs or economic activities in the home country but also the relative economic security and opportunities available in the host country. These findings are consistent with the threshold model developed by Alrababah et al. (2023), who use a conjoint experiment to demonstrate that once conditions in the home country are perceived as safe, Syrians consider both the socioeconomic situation in the host country and the place of origin when deciding whether to return.

Emotional ties and economic opportunities

Researchers have also explored the role that community and emotional attachment, especially the strength of psychological ties, play in the return decisions of displaced people. Ghosn et al. (2021) examine how exposure to violence and psychological attachment to home affect the return decisions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The authors argue that refugees who experienced violence before fleeing are more likely to express a desire to return home. They explain this by suggesting that these refugees often developed coping mechanisms and a sense of competence in dealing with

conflict. On the other hand, Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubin (2014) argue that individuals displaced due to direct threats to their safety were less willing to return. This suggests that the impact of previous experiences with violence may be context-dependent or influenced by other variables, warranting further study. Ghosn et al. (2021) also argue that psychological anchoring to the place of origin makes refugees more willing to risk returning. Additionally, the study highlights that social ties, such as family connections and stable employment, can act as anchors that shape the desire to return.

Relatedly, Camarena and Hägerdal (2020) examine the factors influencing the return of forcibly displaced Lebanese Christians following the civil war, focusing on the interplay between emotional ties and economic opportunities. Their study challenges the view that displaced persons primarily return due to emotional attachment to their homes. Instead, they argue that economic opportunities are crucial in determining whether individuals return permanently. Instead, they suggest that some displaced individuals may maintain ties with their home regions by visiting regularly rather than resettling permanently, especially when economic conditions in their current locations are better. They also argue that displaced persons are less likely to return to some areas where significant violence occurred or to regions with mixed ethnic populations, as violence often aligned with ethnic divisions.

Social and economic conditions in the host country

Arias, Ibáñez, and Querubin (2014) examine how conditions in host communities may shape return. Focusing on IDPs, they find that poor living conditions in host areas do not necessarily push individuals to return. Instead, the decision to return depends on a mix of economic conditions, social networks, and the nature of displacement.

Scholars have also claimed that refugees who develop strong social ties in host countries may find it difficult to sever these connections (Ghosn et al. 2021). Host country conditions also shape the expectations and demands of returning refugees. Schwartz (2019) claims that returning refugees to Burundi often had different expectations of what life would be like upon their return based on their experiences in exile. Those who faced instability and economic tensions upon return often grew dissatisfied with the conditions they found, leading to frustration and, in some cases, renewed displacement. Complementing these findings, Beaman, Onder, and Onder (2022) examine the return of Syrian refugees from Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. By

combining administrative, survey, and conflict-event datasets, they also emphasize the importance of localized safety and socioeconomic conditions. Importantly, they find that refugees who have better conditions in host countries are more likely to return, which could be due to being able to afford the cost of the trip home. Their study also highlights the importance of early returnees, who can influence others' decisions by showing that return is possible.

Return is the result of multiple drivers

How do we make sense of all these findings? The decision to return is rarely driven by a single factor; it results from a mix of security, economic opportunities, social dynamics, and conditions in both the host and home countries. Security is often central, as Alrababah et al. (2023) highlight, but economic factors, such as secure property rights and livelihoods (Weber and Hartman 2022; Beber, Roessler, and Scacco 2021), also play a crucial role, particularly once safety concerns are addressed. Camarena and Hägerdal (2020) and Ghosn et al. (2021) also emphasize the role of emotional and social ties to home communities in shaping return decisions. At the same time, Schwartz (2019) points out that unresolved tensions and societal divisions upon return can lead to new conflicts. Beaman, Onder, and Onder (2022) emphasize the importance of local conditions and the financial ability to return. While there are some disagreements in the literature, most of these studies are relatively recent and more research is needed across various contexts to fully understand the drivers of return.

Gaps and Future Research

After synthesizing the literature, we now turn to some gaps and potential extensions that future research should examine. In the following section, we focus on a few themes: first, most studies on return are conducted in low- and middle-income countries, where the majority of displacement occurs. While returns from high-income countries are less frequent, they are likely to follow different processes and remain insufficiently explored. Second, researchers should be clear about their conceptualization of important terms, including definitions of who qualifies as refugee in certain studies, what constitutes return, and the potentially distinct patterns between refugees and IDPs. Third, existing research has not sufficiently examined heterogeneities in return patterns, and there are significant data gaps, partly due to

the rarity of longitudinal studies tracking displaced people and their return patterns over time. Finally, additional topics such as climate-induced displacement, the challenges of reintegration, and information gaps about conditions in home communities are critical areas that remain understudied. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of return dynamics and inform more effective policies.

Return Dynamics in Different Settings

Much of the research on refugees has focused on the experiences and dynamics of refugee populations in high-income countries. This emphasis is somewhat paradoxical, given that most displaced individuals originate from and are hosted by low- and middle-income countries. In 2023, 75% of the world's refugees and others in need of international protection were living in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2024). While this discrepancy in research focus and population distribution is increasingly recognized (e.g., see Alrababah et al. 2021), more research is required to understand forced displacement dynamics in low- and middle-income countries, where the phenomenon is more concentrated and potentially manifests differently.

At the same time, studies on refugee *return* are predominantly conducted in low- and middle-income countries. While research in these contexts provides crucial insights into return patterns and conditions, it is also important to study how refugee return unfolds in high-income countries. Selection likely plays an important role, as refugees who reach high-income countries often differ from those who remain in neighboring countries. Globally, only a small percentage of refugees are resettled each year.¹ Others reach high-income countries independently, navigating dangerous routes and bearing significant personal costs. These selection dynamics—likely shaped by factors such as vulnerability, resources, and access—mean that the refugee population in high-income countries is different from refugees in low- and middle-income countries. Such differences, along with the varied routes refugees take to reach wealthier countries, likely influence their decisions regarding return.

¹ In 2021, the Migration Policy Institute reported that just over 2% of refugees were relocated for protection in a new country. In 2023, UNHCR reported that 158,700 refugees were resettled, representing only about 8% of the 2 million people identified as needing resettlement, or just 0.3% of the 43.3 million refugees worldwide. For more information, see <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-resettlement-gap> and <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

Understanding how selection affects return dynamics across regions is important but remains understudied.

Additionally, once refugees manage to apply for asylum in a high-income country, the process can take several years, during which they invest significant time, money, and energy into rebuilding their lives. By the time refugees achieve stability in the host country, they often encounter new obstacles to returning home. For refugees in some European countries, even temporary visits home may jeopardize their refugee status, including in countries such as France,² Germany, or Switzerland (European Migration Network 2019; Handbook Germany 2024; SEM 2019). Consequently, even if the situation in the home country improves, the substantial investments refugees have made in integrating—along with the risks associated with returning—may deter many from considering return. Thus, the obstacles refugees encounter in building new lives in high-income countries, combined with restrictive policies, may discourage many from returning to their home countries, even when conditions improve.

Another related gap in existing research involves studying the effects of policies in major host countries, such as Lebanon, which prevent refugees from re-entering if they return to their home country, even for temporary visits (Human Rights Watch 2021). While these policies are intended to discourage frequent cross-border movements and reduce the presence of Syrians in Lebanon by making return final, they may actually be counterproductive, as they can discourage return in the first place. Many refugees may wish to visit home temporarily to assess conditions before committing to a permanent return, but these restrictions prevent such visits. Additionally, these policies limit the ability of refugees to gather and share firsthand information about localized conditions at home, reducing the flow of crucial information needed to inform return decisions. As a result, policies aimed at reducing the number

² “In the event of returning to their country of origin, in addition to being the specific target of the threat of persecution which justified their placement under the protection of the OFPRA, protected persons may be exposing themselves to the risk of having the Office withdraw the protection which was granted to them, because this return may indicate a lack of a real threat of persecution. However, despite the threats to which a protected person is exposed in his/her country of origin, this person may, exceptionally, wish to go there for humanitarian reasons, such as the death or serious illness of a close family member. In such circumstances, a protected person may, exceptionally and for a short duration, be authorised to carry out this trip without exposing himself/herself to the risk of the OFPRA putting an end to the protection that has been obtained. This authorisation takes the form of a prefectural safe conduct.” https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d6532be8-616d-4e06-a211-4aea7c9c5843_en?filename=10a_france_beneficiaries_international_protection_en.pdf

of refugees in host countries may inadvertently have the opposite effect by discouraging return altogether, suggesting the importance of studying the effects of such policies.

Defining Refugees, Returns, and IDP Patterns

When studying refugee return, researchers should clarify who is included in the term ‘refugees’ in their studies. In most of the existing research, the term ‘refugees’ refers to individuals who have crossed an international border to escape persecution or conflict, regardless of whether they have been officially granted refugee status. This distinction is important because some of the largest hosts of refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon, have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, while Türkiye has ratified it with limitations. As a result, Syrians in Türkiye are considered ‘guests’ rather than official refugees by the Turkish government (Abdelaaty 2021), while Lebanon has not allowed the UNHCR to register Syrian refugees since 2015, referring to them as ‘displaced’ instead of refugees (UNHCR 2024; Human Rights Watch 2023). Given these ambiguities, researchers should be explicit about their sample and the scope conditions of their studies, ensuring clarity in how they define and operationalize the term ‘refugees’, irrespective of the terminology used by host countries or international organizations.

Similarly, what qualifies as ‘return’ is another important conceptual question. Alrababah et al. (2023) define return as “moving from a host country to one’s home country with no immediate plans to depart again.” However, many displaced individuals engage in temporary returns, or ‘scoping trips,’ to assess home conditions, visit family, or attend cultural or religious events (Human Rights Watch 2015; Vancluysen 2022). For instance, some Syrians have reportedly temporarily returned from Lebanon to access medical treatment or purchase more affordable medication. These short visits are not permanent returns, but existing return measures may not accurately account for such trips. Additionally, the impact of such short trips on long-term decisions about permanent return should be explored. Scoping trips could influence future relationships between returnees and those who remained, providing a unique angle for research that has not been widely explored.

Another important conceptual and empirical question concerns the potentially distinct return patterns between IDPs and refugees. Although existing studies often focus on

one group or the other, they frequently use similar predictors to explain these patterns. Yet, research suggests that those who flee violence internally versus externally may differ significantly (Turkoglu and Weber 2023). For instance, studies have shown that the source of violence may influence the number of refugees or IDPs, with government violence leading to more refugees and rebel violence resulting in more IDPs (Steele 2019; Turkoglu 2022). Globally, internal displacement is more common than cross-border refugee movements (UNHCR 2024). The lack of international borders may make it easier for IDPs to return to their homes. However, forcibly displaced people, whether IDPs or refugees, may flee areas affected by population displacement policies—such as ethnic cleansing—which can make return more difficult, even after their places of origin become safe from conflict. Future research should explore how selection processes into refugee or IDP status influences the likelihood and patterns of return.

Heterogeneities and Data Gaps

Research on refugee return has predominantly focused on the average effects of a set of predictors, such as safety, socioeconomic conditions, and networks, on return decisions, but it has often overlooked how these factors impact different population groups. Exploring variations based on gender, age, and other demographic factors is essential, as these can significantly shape return decisions. For instance, men aged 18-42 in Syria face military conscription, which may deter them from returning. Younger people who fled at an early age may have weaker ties to their home countries and may be less inclined to return. The policy literature highlights additional complexities, particularly how property rights issues intersect with gender, often presenting barriers for women in claiming property rights in conflict-affected contexts like Syria and Honduras (Norwegian Refugee Council 2021a; Norwegian Refugee Council 2021b; Norwegian Refugee Council 2022). These challenges, including legal and cultural obstacles, can hinder reintegration for certain groups, influencing both host countries, which may need to accommodate certain demographics for a long time, and countries of origin, which may face permanent demographic shifts. More descriptive research into these heterogeneities is essential, though it should be interpreted cautiously, as these results may not always reveal the underlying mechanisms.

Furthermore, the limited availability of panel data at the individual level constitutes a significant gap in existing return studies. Several studies rely on cross-sectional data, capturing refugee intentions at a single point in time without tracking whether these intentions lead to actual returns or how they change over time. Historical studies offer useful insights but often lack the micro-level data needed to explain individual return behaviors. Longitudinal panel studies, though resource-intensive and logistically challenging, are essential for understanding how refugees' return intentions shift over time in response to changing circumstances, such as improvements in security, economic opportunities, or access to information. Panel studies are also important for identifying how specific external factors or policy changes—such as shifts in asylum policies, economic changes in host countries, or political developments in home countries—impact return behavior. Panel studies would also provide a clearer picture of how often refugees follow through on their return intentions and explain why some may not act according to their initial plans. These studies would provide deeper insights into how, when, and why displaced individuals return, offering a more comprehensive understanding of return decisions.

Additional Topics: Climate Displacement, Reintegration, and Information Gaps

In addition to the above conceptual and empirical challenges, existing research has not sufficiently explored some important topics related to refugee returns. For one, displacement driven by climate change and the subsequent return process remains understudied. The dynamics of return for those displaced by climate-related events may differ significantly from those displaced by political violence. Natural disasters can temporarily prevent return by destroying homes, infrastructure, and agricultural land, but once areas are rebuilt and conditions stabilize, return often becomes feasible. People displaced by hurricanes may be able to return relatively quickly once their homes are rebuilt, utilities are restored, and basic services, such as healthcare and education, are operational again. On the other hand, some climate-related events may cause permanent damage, such as desertification, rising sea levels, or contamination of local water supplies. In such cases, return may be impossible as local environments can no longer support viable living conditions. These dynamics are quite different from forced displacement driven by political violence, where, even after conflicts end, issues like discrimination, ethnic or political tensions, persecution, or regime continuity may

deter return. While much of the existing research focuses on the return of people displaced due to political violence, more research is needed to understand displacement and return driven by climate-related events.

Another important research area is the effect of returnees on their places of origin and local attitudes toward them. Current research primarily focuses on those who left their home country, often overlooking those who stayed behind. As a result, little is known about how those who left differ from those who remained or how these groups interact after return. Two exceptions include Schwartz (2019), focusing on Burundi, where returning refugees received active government support, and Blair and Wright (2022) who examine how policy-induced refugee return to Afghanistan reduced insurgent violence but increased social conflict. However, more research is needed in other contexts. Future research should examine how common support for returnees is and assess the extent to which policies influence the success of reintegration. In addition to policy support, returnees may bring back new cultural norms, values, or political ideas, which could create friction with those who never left. These cultural differences could challenge social cohesion or introduce long-lasting norms and ideas. Furthermore, the reintegration of returnees could strain local infrastructure, services, and job markets, particularly in already fragile post-conflict settings, making the success of their return dependent on both social and economic factors.

Finally, displaced people often lack access to accurate information about conditions at home, which may shape their return behavior. They often rely on informal networks, anecdotes, humanitarian actors, or government announcements to learn about the situation back home (Alrababah et al. 2020). UNHCR has programs to support safe, dignified, and voluntary returns, and in some cases organizes “go-and-see visits” (UNHCR n.d.). At the same time, according to Human Rights Watch, in many contexts, misinformation and inaccurate perceptions of conditions at home prevail (Human Rights Watch 2021). Misinformation about ongoing conflicts, security conditions, economic opportunities, or housing availability can encourage premature returns or deter people from returning even when conditions have improved. Social media platforms, refugee community networks, and coverage by humanitarian actors can distort perceptions by spreading exaggerated success stories of returnees or focusing

on worst-case scenarios of ongoing conflicts, leading displaced people to make poorly informed decisions.

In sum, much remains to be understood about the dynamics of refugee return. While existing research has provided a foundation, especially in low- and middle-income countries, further studies are needed to explore returns from high-income countries, the effects of specific policies on return, the role of scoping trips, the heterogeneities among different displaced populations, and the effects of climate change and political factors. Additionally, the availability of information and the need for longitudinal research are important areas where more work is required to inform both academic understanding and policy decisions.

PART II

Summaries of Selected Academic Articles and Research Reports

The dynamics of refugee return: Syrian refugees and their migration intentions

Ala Alrababah, Daniel Masterson, Marine Casalis, Dominik Hangartner, and Jeremy Weinstein

British Journal of Political Science, Volume 43, Issue 4 (2023), Pages 1108-1131

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000667>

This paper **investigates the factors that shape the return intentions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon**. Syrian refugees in Lebanon are subject to a range of hardships, restrictions, and barriers to integration, including difficulties associated with obtaining a residence permit, which is required to access health and education services, and restrictions on the right to work.

Building on the “push” and “pull” framework for international migration, the authors hypothesized that refugees’ return decisions are shaped by four main factors: (1) conditions in the host country; (2) conditions in the country of origin; (3) the costs of movement; and (4) the quality of information about the costs and benefits of return.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and a conjoint experiment. The primary data source is a nationally representative survey of about 3,000 Syrian refugee households in Lebanon, conducted in 2019, covering a range of household characteristics and return intentions and preparations. The authors also conducted a conjoint experiment to isolate the causal effects of conditions in Syria and Lebanon on return intentions; respondents were presented with several hypothetical vignettes and asked whether, under these conditions, they would return to Syria. The research also included semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences and decision-making processes. To assess the generalizability of the findings, the authors compared the results from Lebanon with data from a separate survey of almost 1,300 Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Main empirical findings:

- **Syrian refugees’ return intentions are primarily driven by conditions in their home country.** Safety, economic prospects, access to services, and social networks in Syria all significantly increase the likelihood of wanting to return. Even when faced with hostility and poor living conditions in host countries, refugees are unlikely to return unless the situation in their home country improves significantly. Despite their protracted displacement and

limited prospects to return in the short term, refugees generally want to return home when the situation improves in their home country.

- **Conditions in the host country have little effect on refugees' intentions to return.** Conditions in Lebanon do not substantially shape return intentions, even though many Syrians experience extremely challenging living situations. Social wellbeing is the only variable that has a statistically significant association with return intentions. Higher levels of economic wellbeing, networks, and social wellbeing in Lebanon are, however, positively associated with *preparations* for return, suggesting that migration capacity plays a role in facilitating return.
- **Mobility costs are not significantly associated with return intentions.** However, there is some evidence that mobility costs are negatively associated with *preparations* for return.
- **Confidence in information about one's hometown is positively associated with both intentions and preparations.** The relationship between conditions in Syria and return intentions and preparations is shaped by respondents' confidence in their information sources.
- **The conjoint experiment reinforces the observational data, demonstrating that conditions in Syria have a stronger influence on return intentions than conditions in Lebanon.** Safety is the strongest driver of return intentions—security in one's hometown increases return intentions by 35 percentage points and nationwide security increases return intentions by 42 percentage points. An end to military conscription increases the likelihood of return by 18 percentage points. The availability of jobs and public services in Syria both increase return intentions by 8 percentage points. The presence of family and friends in Syria increases return intentions by 5 percentage points. Access to a good job in Lebanon reduces return intentions by 2 percent and access to public services in Lebanon reduces return intentions by 3 percent.
- **The drivers of return intentions in Jordan are similar to Lebanon.** Conditions in respondents' place of origin in Syria (safety, economic prospects, and public services) and the presence of family and friends in Syria are positively correlated with return intentions. Conditions in Jordan and information quality do not appear to significantly shape return intentions.

These results challenge the conventional view that refugees make return decisions by evaluating whether they can do better at home than in their host country. **The authors propose an alternative model of threshold-based decision making; only once a basic threshold of safety at home is met do refugees compare other factors in the host and home country.** Qualitative data from structured interviews with Syrian refugees in Lebanon support the proposition that people are waiting for the security and safety situation in Syria to improve before considering return.

The desire to return during civil war: Evidence for internally displaced populations in Colombia

María Alejandra Arias, Ana María Ibáñez, and Pablo Querubin

Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy, Volume 20, Issues 1 (2014), Pages 209-233

<https://doi.org/10.1515/peps-2013-0054>

This paper **investigates the determinants of the desire to return for internally displaced households in Colombia**. Conflict in Colombia has caused the displacement of more than 3.9 million people.

The analysis is based on detailed survey data collected by the Catholic Church between 1997 and 2004, encompassing over 43,000 displaced households. The dataset includes information on the triggers and actors responsible for displacement, socio-demographic characteristics of the household, land tenure, access to labor markets, and participation in organizations before and after displacement, and the households' preferences regarding return, staying in their current location, or relocating to a new municipality.

The data reveals that only 11 percent of households wish to return. In more than half of the cases, displacement occurred in reaction to a specific event, either a direct threat (42 percent), assassination (7 percent), armed confrontations in the immediate surroundings (6 percent), or the disappearance and torture of individuals (1 percent). The data also reveals a high proportion of female-headed households (40 percent) and a significant unemployment rate (33 percent) among the displaced population. About 63 percent of displaced households had access to land before being forced to leave their place of origin.

Main empirical findings:

- **Households displaced due to a direct threat (assassination, abduction, torture, or extortion) are less willing to return.** Households that were displaced in response to a direct attack or threat are 4 percentage points less willing to return.
- **More vulnerable households have a lower desire to return.** Vulnerable households, in particular female-headed households, households with high dependency ratios, and those from ethnic minorities, are less likely to want to return. Female-headed households are 4 percentage points less willing to return while households that belong to an ethnic minority are roughly 10 percentage points less willing to return.
- **Social networks, as exemplified by membership in peasant organizations and collective land ownership, increase the desire to return.** Participation in peasant organizations increases the willingness to return by 4 percentage points.
- **Economic opportunities in the place of origin encourage return while economic opportunities at the reception site decrease the willingness to return.** Household heads that were unemployed in the municipality of origin are 3 percentage points less willing to return. Similarly, household heads unemployed in the reception municipality are roughly 4 percentage points more willing to return.
- **Households that own land and work in agriculture are more likely to want to return.** Household heads working in agriculture either at the origin or reception site are 5

percentage points more willing to return. Access to other forms of employment in the reception site (wage employment or self-employment) decreases households' willingness to return.

- **Households with land tenure in the place of origin, in particular collective land ownership, are more likely to want to return.** Land tenure increases the desire to return by about 6 percentage points. Households that had access to a collectively owned plot are 23 percentage points more willing to return, an effect almost five times larger than the effect for private property, rental, and informal occupation.

The authors conclude that **the desire to return is correlated with household characteristics and the displacement process itself.** Agricultural workers, and households with land tenure and strong social networks in their places of origin are more inclined to return. This suggests that access to land, which provides economic opportunities for those with agricultural skills, is a key driver of the desire to return. The authors recommend that return programs be specifically tailored to target households with these characteristics, such as those with access to land, agricultural workers, or households with strong ties to local organizations.

When do refugees return home? Evidence from Syrian displacement in Mashreq

Lori Beaman, Harun Onder, and Stefanie Onder

Journal of Development Economics, Volume 155 (2022)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2021.102802>

This paper **analyzes the factors influencing the early, voluntary, and unassisted return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq during a period of active conflict, spanning January 2011 to March 2018.** Since 2011, about 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country and by mid-2018, only about 1.8 percent of them had returned to Syria voluntarily.

The analysis is based on a novel dataset that includes: (a) administrative data from UNHCR's Profile Global Registration System (ProGres) database, encompassing demographic characteristics, arrival dates, and return dates (if applicable) for two million Syrian refugees; (b) data on living conditions in Jordan and Lebanon from vulnerability surveys conducted by UN agencies; and (c) conditions in Syria from a conflict-events database and nightlights data for Syria, which serves as a proxy for access to utilities in Syria.

The data provides insights into the characteristics of returning Syrian refugees. Returnee households tend to be smaller than those who remain in exile, with a lower proportion of children and a higher proportion of seniors. Additionally, returnees generally have lower educational attainment than non-returnees. Furthermore, return decisions are not always made by the entire household at once. While 63 percent of households returned together, 37 percent of households returned in stages, with one or more individuals returning first, followed by some or all of the remaining household members.

Main empirical results:

- **Improved security conditions in a refugee's home district in Syria significantly increase the likelihood of return.** A one standard deviation improvement in security,

measured by the change in the Conflict Events Index (CEI) between the previous two quarters, leads to a 6 increase in refugee returns.

- **Improved access to utilities in a refugee's home sub-district in Syria, as proxied by nightlight luminosity, increases the likelihood of return.** A one standard deviation improvement in luminosity increases returns by 2 percent. This result suggests that quality of life is a factor in refugees' decisions to return home even in the presence of ongoing conflict in the country of origin.
- **Refugees with better food security and housing conditions in host countries are more likely to return to Syria.** This suggests that as their incomes rise, more refugees are better able to afford the logistical costs associated with returning to Syria.

Overall, these results suggest that **improved security and living conditions in Syria, leading to higher risk-adjusted payoffs of returning, tend to increase the likelihood of refugees returning home. However, higher payoffs in host countries, such as improved food security, appear to increase returns.** The authors posit that an increase in income in exile can trigger return for those with low incomes in the presence of mobility costs.

Coping with Partition: Wealth, Security, and Migration in Post-Separation Sudan

Bernd Beber, Philip Roessler, and Alexandra Scacco

Working Paper (2021)

https://wzb.eu/system/files/docs/ped/ipi/Beber_Roessler_Scacco_Sudan_Coping_with_Partition.pdf

This study **investigates the migration decisions of Southern Sudanese residents of Khartoum following the 2011 referendum that led to the separation of South Sudan.** Specifically, it examines the relationship between wealth, security concerns, and migration choices. The authors hypothesize that the decision to migrate is a trade-off between better economic opportunities and access to services in the North versus greater personal security in the South, given the precarious situation of Southerners living in Khartoum.

The study utilizes a two-round panel survey conducted in 2010 and 2011, capturing data on a sample of 204 Southern Sudanese individuals. The survey included over 150 questions covering political opinions, social networks, government interactions, media exposure, war experiences, and individual/household characteristics.

Main results:

- **The decision to migrate was heavily influenced by how individuals anticipated the impact of partition on their personal security.** Those who believed the separation of South Sudan would positively affect their security were more likely to remain in Khartoum. Conversely, those who anticipated a negative or neutral effect on their security were more likely to leave.
- **The poorest and wealthiest individuals were most likely to relocate, while those in the middle of the wealth distribution were more likely to stay.** This pattern was

observed using both objective measures of wealth, such as household ownership of assets like refrigerators, televisions, computers, and internet access, and subjective assessments of relative wealth.

- Age, risk tolerance, place of birth, and years lived in Khartoum did not significantly influence migration decisions.
- **Southerners who migrated from Khartoum were the most optimistic about the effects of partition.** Southerners who migrated from Khartoum reported more positive perceptions of partition's impact on their political rights, economic well-being, and personal security compared to those who stayed. This is despite a significant increase in unemployment among those who relocated.

The study **revealed a U-shaped relationship between wealth and migration.** Both the poorest and wealthiest Southerners were more likely to relocate, while those in the middle of the wealth distribution were more likely to stay. This suggests that the poorest could accept the hardship of South Sudan due to limited opportunities in Khartoum, while the wealthiest could afford the costs of relocation and potentially access better opportunities elsewhere. Middle-income households, however, were less likely to risk their economic stability in Khartoum despite security concerns.

When do displaced persons return? Postwar migration among Christians in Mount Lebanon

Kara Ross Camarena and Nils Hägerdal

American Journal of Political Science, Volume 64, Issue 2 (2020), Pages 223-239

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12500>

This paper **investigates postwar return migration among Lebanese Christians displaced during the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 1990).** Between 1983 and 1985, an estimated 163,000 Christians were forcibly displaced from over 200 villages in Mount Lebanon, with most relocating to Christian suburbs in East Beirut. Nearly two decades after the war's end, only about 20 percent of displaced Christian households had returned to their original villages as permanent residents, despite favorable conditions such as militia demobilization, the absence of sectarian violence, and the restoration of prewar property rights.

The authors theorize that displaced individuals' decisions to return are shaped by two primary factors: emotional attachment or aversion to their original homes and economic prospects in both their current location and place of origin. Aversion to return is particularly strong when displaced persons would need to live near perpetrators of violence or in areas with a significant presence of non-coethnics. The authors suggest three possible outcomes for displaced individuals: returning permanently, returning regularly as visitors, or not returning at all. They use a natural experiment to examine these outcomes, leveraging the global olive oil boom that coincided with the end of the civil war, which provided an unexpected economic boost to villages with olive trees.

The analysis relies on several key sources: return migration data from the *Institut Libanais de Développement Économique et Social* (ILDES), data on massacres of Christian Lebanese from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), and demographic data on Sunni, Shia, and Druze populations from the 2010 Lebanese voter registration rolls. To assess economic prospects, the authors use global olive oil prices from the International Monetary Fund, and create two variables for olive cultivation: the presence of olive trees and a weighted measure scaling olive tree presence by the proportion of surrounding agricultural land, using satellite imagery from the European Space Agency Climate Change Initiative.

The data shows that before the war, about one-third of the 209 villages studied were mixed (Muslim and Christian), while the remaining two-thirds were entirely Christian. Massacres occurred in 57 villages. By 2007, the percentage of displaced persons who had returned as permanent residents varied from 0 to 100%, with an average of 20 percent.

Main empirical findings:

- **Displaced Christians are less likely to return to villages with a higher proportion of non-coethnics.** Return rates decrease as the proportion of Muslims in a village increases, and this effect is amplified in villages where massacres occurred. However, the occurrence of massacres alone, without the presence of a mixed population, does not significantly reduce the likelihood of return.
- **Economic opportunities, particularly in olive-producing villages, significantly influence return decisions.** Displaced Christians are more likely to return as permanent residents to villages where olive cultivation is possible, particularly as olive oil prices rise. In villages with substantial olive cropland, a 1-point increase in the world price of olive oil leads to the permanent return of four to five additional households.

The authors conclude that even displaced individuals with strong emotional ties to their original homes may opt to return as visitors rather than permanent residents unless there are compelling economic opportunities. Additionally, they find that violence creates negative emotions not only toward the locations where it occurred but also toward the perpetrators, leading displaced persons to avoid returning to intermixed areas, which can further entrench ethnic separation. To encourage returns, the authors recommend focusing on both economic reconstruction and transitional justice. However, they emphasize that the most important policy implication is to support displaced persons in rebuilding their lives in their new locations, rather than focusing solely on inducing their return to pre-war homes.

The journey home: Violence, anchoring, and refugee decisions to return

Faten Ghosn, Tiffany S. Chu, Miranda Simon, Alex Braithwaite, Michael Frith, and Joanna Jandali

American Political Science Review, Volume 115, Issue 3 (2021), Pages 982–998

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000344>

This paper **examines the factors influencing the return intentions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon**. According to UNHCR data, Lebanon hosts over a million Syrian refugee, making it the largest per capita refugee population globally.

The authors investigate two potential mechanisms driving return intentions. First, they explore the impact of an individual's past exposure to violence. Second, they examine the role of an individual's feelings of attachment to their country of origin and their host country, which are likely influenced by their experiences in their country of origin before displacement and their experiences after arriving in their host country.

The analysis is based on a survey conducted in 2018 of nearly 2,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including both observational and experimental elements. A conjoint experiment is used to isolate the effects of prior exposure to violence on risk assessment upon return to Syria. The conjoint experiment involved a random sample of 406 survey respondents, each presented with five scenarios for a hypothetical migrant, each requiring a choice between two locations. These scenarios varied certain attributes, including the chance of harm en route to the location, the chance of a peaceful situation lasting at least a year, the number of people the hypothetical migrant would know there, and the ease of finding work.

Main findings:

- Contrary to common assumptions, **refugees who experienced violence in Syria are more likely to want to return**, suggesting they've developed coping mechanisms and feel equipped to handle potential risks.
- **Violence affects both men and women's willingness to return**, with no significant difference in how gender influences their risk calculations.
- Refugees who left when most of their hometown had already fled are more likely to want to return, suggesting a strong attachment to their place of origin.
- **Refugees living in predominantly Syrian neighborhoods in Lebanon show a preference for return.**
- **Refugees who had the possibility to discuss fleeing from Syria to Lebanon before leaving Syria are more likely to prefer staying in Lebanon**, suggesting they found it easier to detach from their home location and are less likely to feel anchored there. These individuals are contrasted with refugees who may not have had the time to discuss migration plans and became displaced despite their intention to stay.
- Pre-war employment does not appear to significantly influence return intentions.
- **Refugees who believe the situation in Lebanon has worsened since their arrival are more likely to want to return.**
- **Refugees who find it easy to cross the Lebanese/Syrian border are more likely to prefer staying in Lebanon**, potentially because they can easily travel back and forth informally.
- **Refugees with close family in Lebanon, a job, and registration with the UN are more likely to prefer returning to Syria.** While close family, jobs, and UN registration might act as social anchors in other contexts, they do not appear to strongly influence Syrian refugees' desire to return. This may be due to the precarious nature of jobs and legal challenges faced by refugees in Lebanon.

- The conjoint experiment confirms that refugees generally prefer locations with a lower chance of harm en route. However, refugees who experienced violence in Syria show no significant difference in their preference between moderate and low levels of harm en route, suggesting they feel more capable of managing risk. The experiment also found that refugees are less likely to choose a location where it would be difficult to find work.

The authors argue that refugees who experienced violence in Syria are more likely to want to return, because they have developed coping mechanisms and are better equipped to assess risk. They are also likely to be those with stronger attachment to Syria, having waited until the last minute to flee. Furthermore, those who endured the war longer than most other residents of their hometown and those who live in predominantly Syrian neighborhoods in Lebanon also exhibit a stronger attachment to Syria, and consequently have a greater desire to return. Other factors, such as the situation in Lebanon and the ease of crossing the border, also influence preferences to return. The authors conclude that **refugee preferences for returning home are complex and depend on a combination of factors, including their experiences of violence, their attachment to their homeland, and their experiences in their host country.**

Home, again: Refugee return and post-conflict violence in Burundi

Stephanie Schwartz

International Security, Volume 44, Issue 2 (2019), Pages 110–145

https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00362

This paper explores the connection between mass refugee return and the emergence of violence in post-conflict societies, **by investigating the impact of mass refugee return to Burundi after the country's 1993–2005 civil war.** The author also considers how the experience of return migration affected individuals' future behavior, in the context of the 2015 electoral crisis in Burundi.

Burundi has experienced three major waves of forced migration. The first occurred in 1972, when a Tutsi-led government orchestrated a genocide against Hutu civilians, forcing an estimated 217,000 Burundians to flee to Tanzania. The second wave began in 1993 with the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye and escalated during the civil war, sending hundreds of thousands of Burundians, primarily Hutu, to Tanzanian refugee camps. The third wave, in 2015, saw over 413,000 Burundians flee to neighboring countries, including Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda, amid a renewed political crisis. Starting around 2002, with the civil war ending, hundreds of thousands of Burundians living abroad returned to Burundi.

The author undertook in-depth ethnographic research in Burundi and Tanzania over 9 months from 2014 to 2016, including 258 semi-structured interviews with Burundian civilians, international humanitarian organization staff, Tanzanian and Burundian government officials, and Tanzanian villagers. The research was conducted in three primary areas: villages in Makamba Province in Burundi, the Nyarugusu Refugee camp in Tanzania, and Ilagala village, a small farming town in Tanzania's Kigoma region.

Main findings:

- **Refugee return to Burundi after the 1993-2005 civil war created new divisions between returnees and those who stayed.** These labels were further subdivided by the era of initial flight (1972 or the 1990s) and, in some cases, by country of asylum. Burundians attributed certain characteristics to each group, such as language spoken, style of dress, and even how women carried their babies. These perceived differences fueled narratives about which group had better claims of national legitimacy. Social and political tension in Burundi after the civil war manifested in segregation between returnees and non-migrants, with accusations of discrimination and exclusion from both sides. These divisions were often intertwined with, but distinct from, existing ethnic cleavages.
- **Tensions between returnees and those who stayed were most evident in conflicts over land.** Because land in the interwar years had been occupied, expropriated, bought, or sold, both returnees and those who stayed often claimed the same land as rightfully theirs. The threat of losing land bred distrust, conflict, and violence between returning populations and non-migrants.
- **Informal and formal governance practices exacerbated conflicts between returnees and those who stayed over land.** Informal land inheritance practices in Burundi, based on patrilineal inheritance, created a fertile ground for conflict between male family members with different migration histories. This was further exacerbated by formal land governance practices, specifically the *Commission Nationale des Terres et Autres Biens* (CNTB), which initially promoted land sharing but later shifted to a policy of full restitution for returnees, particularly those from 1972. This policy, implemented retroactively, worsened relations between returnees and non-migrants, fueled violence against the CNTB itself, and ultimately reinforced the separation between the two groups.
- **The 2015 electoral crisis in Burundi saw a mass exodus of refugees, but prior experiences of return migration significantly influenced who fled and when.** Those who had previously returned and faced land conflicts, particularly the 1993 caseload returnees, were more likely to flee early, often citing fear of violence from those who stayed behind. They saw the national crisis as an opportunity to escape the local tensions they had already experienced. Later arrivals, often first-time refugees or those who had successfully reclaimed land, were more likely to stay until the national crisis reached a breaking point.

The author concludes that processes of out-migration and return can aggravate old rivalries and create new divisions between populations who were displaced across borders and those who remained in-country. New migration-related group identities are more likely to harden and become violent when post-conflict institutions intentionally or unintentionally favor individuals based on where they were physically located during wartime.

Property rights and post-conflict recovery: Theory and evidence from IDP return movements in Iraq

Sigrid Weber and Alexandra Hartman

Working Paper (2022)

https://www.sigridweber.com/files/IDP_property_return.pdf

This working paper **examines the impact of property rights on the return decisions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq** following the 2014-2017 civil war against the Islamic State (IS). The conflict displaced over 15 percent of the Iraqi population, leaving a complex and uncertain property rights landscape.

The Iraqi government has implemented several formal legal institutions to address property rights issues in the aftermath of the conflict, but these institutions have been implemented unevenly, leading to a high degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty is further exacerbated by the destruction of land registries by IS, the challenges of proving ownership, and complex political dynamics at the national level. Additionally, long-standing discrimination against minorities' access to housing, land, and property rights in Iraq has been amplified by the conflict, with minorities facing a lack of official documentation and a deep mistrust in the state's ability to enforce their rights.

The analysis is based on: (1) a 2019 survey of 960 Iraqi IDPs and returnees, which includes data on the origin and destination of IDPs and returnees; (2) data from a survey of 1,474 Yazidi and Sunni Muslim IDPs and returnees originally from the area around Sinjar, including a conjoint and a vignette survey experiment to explore how differences in individual's perceptions about property rights influence return decision making; and (3) panel dataset created by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) that includes a larger sample of Iraqi respondents from throughout the country.

Main findings:

- Ownership of property does not influence return movements, but destruction of property reduces the likelihood of returns.
- **Secure property rights are strongly correlated with return.** Individuals with written documentation proving ownership are 9 percentage points more likely to return, while property disputes decrease the likelihood of return by 14 percentage points.
- **The conjoint experiment confirms that secure property rights are a key factor in return decisions, even when considering other factors like security, social networks, and economic opportunities.** Secure property rights increase the probability of return by 6 percentage points. Respondents with weaker property rights security prioritize physical security more strongly. Yazidi respondents, on average, perceive secure property rights as more important than Sunni Muslim respondents.

The authors conclude that secure housing, land, and property rights play a vital role in population returns after violence. In particular, individuals are more likely to return to their former homes if they have written documentation of their rights and if their property is not disputed or damaged. The study highlights the importance of addressing property rights issues

in post-conflict settings to promote equitable returns and prevent the perpetuation of social and political inequalities.

The mobility of displaced Syrians: An economic and social analysis

World Bank (2019)

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>

This report **examines the voluntary movement of Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, focusing on the economic and social factors that influence their decisions.** When the study was conducted in 2019, the Syrian conflict had displaced over half of the country's population, with more than 5.6 million registered as refugees abroad and another 6.2 million internally displaced.

The analysis includes: (a) a review of international experience to identify the key push and pull factors influencing return movements; (b) an assessment of the conditions faced by Syrians in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, examining how these conditions relate to the identified push and pull factors; (c) an analysis of the voluntary return of approximately 100,000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2018 to determine the relative importance of these factors in shaping return decision; and (d) simulations and a scenario-based approach to project how these factors might influence future refugee mobility patterns.

Key messages:

- **Refugee return is a complex and multifaceted process, often characterized by iterative, staggered, or cyclical movements.** It is not a simple, linear event. Refugees, acting rationally within a set of constraints, make decisions to maximize their well-being and that of their families. This can lead to unconventional coping strategies, such as the dispersal of family members between exile and return locations, or circular movements.
- **International experience suggests four key factors influencing refugee mobility: peace, security, and protection; livelihoods and economic opportunities; housing, land, and property; and infrastructure and access to services.** These factors interact in complex ways, with their impact varying across refugee situations and individuals. While formal peace agreements can trigger large-scale returns, spontaneous returns to conflict-affected areas are not uncommon. Poverty in the country of asylum can drive return, but conversely, refugees with higher socioeconomic status may have a greater propensity to return than those impoverished by displacement. Returning refugees do not necessarily return to their original places of origin, even with reintegration assistance. Refugees from rural areas increasingly return to cities, and there may be sizable secondary displacement of returning refugees. Return presents unique challenges for women, who may have fewer opportunities to acquire skills or capital in exile and face difficulties securing livelihoods, reclaiming property, and accessing essential services upon return.
- **Syrians face persistent hardships both inside and outside Syria.** While countries of asylum offer better access to services and livelihood opportunities compared to conflict-intensive regions within Syria, this is not always true for other regions. Refugees often face a trade-off between security and quality of life, with short-term security often coming at the

cost of lower human capital accumulation, disproportionately impacting Syrian children and youth. Syrian women face additional challenges, including increased economic responsibilities, limited access to social and economic life, and heightened gender-based violence.

- **Returns to date have been small-scale and selective due to persistent concerns about insecurity in Syria.** Refugees who are single, or male, or not members of a nuclear family have been more likely to return. Conditions in Syria have predictable and monotonous effects on the return of refugees, i.e. better security and service access in Syria consistently increase returns. Host country conditions are more complex; a lower quality of life in exile doesn't always increase returns. For example, more education increases return at primary education level but not at secondary or tertiary education levels. Surveys suggest a complex interplay of economic and psychological factors, and the future mobility of Syrian refugees could differ significantly from past patterns.
- **Simulations confirm the importance of both security and service provision for future refugee returns.** Service restoration is more effective in mobilizing refugees when security is less of an issue. The international community has a diverse policy toolkit to assist refugees, host countries, and Syrians in Syria, including subsidies (return assistance), per capita transfers within Syria, and service restoration. The simulations suggest that: (1) “corner solutions” (using only one policy tool) are inefficient because the problems addressed by these tools are interconnected and a more comprehensive approach is needed; (2) policies should be adaptive, shaped by conditions on the ground, for example, insecurity in Syria is a major deterrent to return and reduces the effectiveness of service restoration efforts, therefore with improvements in security, more resources can effectively be allocated to restoring services; and (3) the policy objective should be to maximize the welfare of all involved, including refugees (both those who return and those who remain in exile), host communities, and Syrians in Syria. Maximizing refugee returns is a poorly defined objective and may come at the expense of overall welfare.

The report concludes that the return of refugees is a complex process that is influenced by multiple factors including peace, security, and protection; livelihoods and employment; housing, land, and property rights; and infrastructure and services. Security is the most important driver of return, but service restoration is also crucial. The study emphasizes that maximizing returns at any cost is not a viable policy objective. Instead, the focus should be on maximizing the well-being of refugees, host communities, and Syrians in Syria.

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