



Responsible Deal Project
Policy Brief

17th May 2022

**Roundtable Discussion:
Supporting Syrian Refugees**

A note containing key points made at the Brussels expert roundtable co-hosted by the European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR) and LSE IDEAS - Responsible Deal Project on the 6th May 2022.

Background

On 6th May the ECFR and the London School of Economics convened a 'Chatham House Rules' discussion focused on supporting Syrian refugees in Brussels. The roundtable was an official side event of the EU and UN co-chaired "Supporting the future of Syria and the region" conference and featured Syrian, regional and European experts, as well as UN and European officials. It assessed shifting conditions in regional host countries, looking at means of strengthening sustainable European support. This note contains the key points from the discussion.

The situation in host countries

1. Lebanon

The political and economic crises of the past three years has stretched the government's ability and willingness to support refugees. The Lebanese pound has lost 90 percent of its value, and the country is witnessing a massive collapse of basic services. The number of Lebanese living under the poverty line has increased to 54 percent. The war in Ukraine will also impact Lebanon given that 90 percent of its wheat is imported from Ukraine and Russia. This is directly impacting resources available to Syrian refugees and nearly 90 percent of refugees are now struggling to make ends meet. Despite this, polling to date shows that refugees overwhelmingly do not see a return to Syria as viable due to continued concerns over security and economic conditions. These studies show that the 'pull factor', the situation on the ground in Syria, is still the central consideration for refugees when it comes to return.

This combination, little improvement in Syria alongside an on-going socioeconomic crisis in Lebanon, is creating a febrile political environment. The Lebanese population increasingly blames refugees for their situation and resents the fact that refugees are seen to get more international attention than them. For many Lebanese the perception is that the war in Syria is over and there is no longer a physical threat preventing returns. Politicians have been promoting the view that Syrian refugees are stealing jobs, even though Syrians have long been present in Lebanon and work in sectors where they have historically been dominant even before the war. Placing blame on Syrian refugees is being widely used as a pre-election tactic, with stories about refugees being paid in dollars as opposed to the Lebanese pound, and high birth-rates of refugees being used against them. The media is also participating in these misinformation campaigns. To this backdrop, there is concern that, following the elections, Lebanon might at one point move towards a more concerted campaign of forced returns.

2. Jordan

As in Lebanon, most Syrians in Jordan do not want to return to Syria for the time being. While there are some reports of returns to rebel-controlled areas of Syria, these are limited and the Kingdom has not shown a sign of moving towards forced returns. Attitudes towards Syrians are relatively positive in Jordan. Covid has worsened general socio-economic conditions in the country, but, for the most part, refugees are not being scapegoated. According to experts, this is due to: a) the fact that the country has a long history of hosting refugees, such as Palestinians and Iraqis; and b) Syrians in Jordan came from the South, such as Deraa, with which there was more interaction before the war.

Nonetheless, while polling shows that support for hosting Syrian refugees is generally strong, opinions are more polarised when it comes to whether Syrians should have jobs, work permits and education, with an almost 50/50 split in public opinion. And this underlines the need for policy-makers to support joined-up socioeconomic strategies that link improvements in wellbeing for the population as a whole to the protection and integration of refugees.

Furthermore, with Amman now re-engaging Damascus, there is a risk that this could project the sense that Syria is no longer dangerous which could negatively impact the perceptions of Jordanians regarding returns.

3. Turkey

Like Lebanon, Turkey is affected by a deep economic crisis and increasing political polarisation,

especially towards Syrian refugees, with the rhetoric becoming particularly toxic. Propaganda depicting Syrians in a negative way is increasing, with false information about birth rates and claims that Syrians get advantages over Turkish nationals.

Turkey refers to Syrian refugees as “guests” and has made it always clear that, while it will not force them to return to regime-controlled Syria, their stay is temporary. Granting asylum to all Syrians resident in Turkey would be seen as “political suicide” for a Turkish politician. The perspective in Turkey is that given the lack of international solidarity it has reached the limits of society’s capacity to accept refugees. Erdogan is now walking a careful balancing act: while he does not want to show support to Assad as the winner of the war by returning refugees, he also feels has to respond to increasing domestic pressure in the lead up to 2023 Turkish General Election. Erdogan’s announcement that Turkey will provide financial assistance to Syrians returning to Turkish controlled areas in northern Syria is an attempt to balance these two currents. His pledge to resettle 1 million Syrian refugees in Turkish-controlled areas in Northern Syria over the next year has led to concerns that the process will not be genuinely “voluntary”. It also poses questions regarding the human rights situation in these areas, including the capacity and willingness of military authorities to protect civil society freedoms.

About 400,000 Syrians were born in Turkey and have been educated there. Faced with the choice of going back to Syria or heading to Europe, most prefer to stay where they are. However, given that most do not have refugee status, they have limited protection and residency rights. Moreover, there is no clear process to get a work permit and many of them have only secured temporary permits which precludes them from getting financial aid (something which prompts refugees to seek illegal work). Turkey has no clear asylum process. Its migration laws are selectively enforced and tend to exclude Syrians, who for years have been living on tourist visas or other temporary residency permits.

What possibility of returns?

Key elements of any viable returns strategy include security guarantees for returning refugees, legal safeguards covering property rights, customs, goods, and documents, as well as access by humanitarian organisations. A phased approach will likely necessity a first stage which does not see large-scale repatriation efforts and involves engagement with the government to ensure protection thresholds are being met, whilst not promoting or incentivising returns in any way. The second phase would kick off when protection thresholds and matters of personal safety such as amnesty, documentation, and access to livelihood are met at a wider level.

Many of those elements do not exist in Syria, and broader security, economic and social dynamics remain precarious in all areas of the country. The majority of people inside Syria cannot afford monthly basic needs and rely on remittances from abroad. They have less than an hour of access to electricity a day. Many Syrians now rely on emergency funding by NGOs. Constraints on the economy of the country, including via sanctions, also harms their ability to secure basic livelihoods. This insecurity extends to non-government-controlled areas such as Idlib. The Northwest is already overcrowded with internally displaced Syrians and Turkish-built infrastructure and services cannot cater for the needs on the ground. As noted above, there are also concerns regarding civil and political freedoms in the Turkish-controlled areas. The idea of returning Syrians to safe zones in this area is not seen as a viable nor sustainable solution.

The key factor that will drive Syrians to return is an improvement of conditions within Syria. No matter how bad conditions are in host countries, Syrians will not want to return until the situation in

Syria improves on both the security and economic fronts. Attempts by host countries to pressure Syrians to return are failing.

Recommendations for European states and the EU

- **Maintain the line that conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary returns are lacking.** Europeans should push back against any emerging narrative that it is safe for Syrian refugees to return home given the decrease in levels of conflict and some regional re-engagement with Damascus. The issue of returns is sometimes held hostage to Europe's wider political relationship with host countries. There needs to be a firm and coherent European stance pushing back against measures that pressure Syrians to return and using refugees as bargaining chips for political gain. Europeans should affirm that Syria remains unsafe and does not yet provide conditions for dignified returns. On this, host countries are also looking at Europe. European policies denying rights to Syrians directly contradicts the EU's official position on returns and sends a bad message to host countries. As put by one expert, "regional leaders look at [Europe] and think if they are kicking out refugees, why shouldn't we?"
- **While a small number of Syrians may be voluntary returning – and Europeans can engage in conversations on how to improve conditions on the ground – the main focus should be on providing sustainable support for Syrians living in host countries.** Without adequate support, the situations in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq will continue to deteriorate, likely provoking the risk of forced returns, as well as new irregular migration flows towards Europe.
- **Funding needs are acute with all three regional host countries under immense pressures that will now be intensified by the war in Ukraine.** Europeans need to show sensitivity to the very difficult situation that host countries are facing and must maintain significant levels of financial support to help these countries manage the refugee burden. Despite the new migration challenge generated by the Russian war on Ukraine, delivering the long-promised European increases in re-settlement of the Syrian refugee population remains crucial to securing trust and lasting cooperation with regional partners.
- **Focus on durable solutions.**
 - Europeans need to base their programming on the assumption that in the short to medium term Syrians will not return to Syria. The triple nexus framework, drawing together humanitarian, development and peacebuilding tracks provides the basis for a more sustainable approach. It is key that support be channelled through local organisations, along with international NGOs that have experience engaging with local actors. On this front, it is critical to know where aid is being directed.
 - A sustainable approach needs more of a focus on increasing work rights and employment prospects within host countries, as well as regularising the legal status of refugees. Syrian refugees are often excluded from existing asylum processes and host countries emphasise the need to maintain a temporary status in their approach. This pushes Syrians into illegal (and unsafe) pathways to support themselves economically. It also fuels networks of corruption in host countries.
 - Europeans need to better clarify conditions of aid and investments, adding benchmarks that ensure Syrian participation in these investments. They should also take into account the fact that poverty is increasing among host country populations and should ensure that financial support also caters for these populations in order to avoid increasing local resentment and tensions.

- Within Syria, Europeans should do what they can to help improve local conditions. Monitoring and providing information is one area where Europeans could complement action by the UN and international NGOs. Early recovery and resilience support will also be important, with a role for Europe to play in terms of securing small improvements on the ground. A senior representative of an NGO operating inside Syria lamented that donors could only find consensus on pilot or small-scale livelihood projects. This is not adequate to respond to the current crisis and there needs to be a shift towards longer-term programming.
- Even if returns are premature, there is benefit in thinking about what protection and security measures are needed on the ground for it to become viable. Syrians should be at the centre of conversations defining international positions on what constitutes safe, dignified and voluntary returns.
- **“Keep the UN honest”.** European engagement helps to maintain a focus on and hone the argument for safe, voluntary and dignified returns. Ongoing European engagement and pressure here is of critical importance. But Europeans should also recognise that UN agencies have a duty to engage with Syrian authorities on the ground in government-controlled areas – the effective duty bearers – to secure some gains. A humanitarian representative present highlighted that although political engagement with the government has failed, some technical discussions with local authorities have proved useful to advance lower-level gains, for instance on education and legal civil documentation.
- **Differentiate among host countries.** A durable solution approach needs to differentiate between host countries. For instance, project implementation will be more difficult in Lebanon than in Jordan, with a necessary focus on working via NGOs in the former given the collapse of state institutions. While in Lebanon Europeans need to press the government to allow UNHCR to register Syrian refugees (this stopped in 2015), in Turkey there should be a focus on securing some additional space for Syrians to pursue legal pathways, such as ensuring existing asylum-seeking processes apply to them and that they are granted work permits.
- **Enlist the support of the Syrian diaspora and operationalise financial support mechanism.** The Syrian diaspora can support Syrians across the region and inside the country. Currently, Syrians abroad face severe limitations, largely due to sanctions, in channelling financial support to Syrians. Europeans need to help create mechanisms and whitelists for legitimate financial flows.



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Conflict Research Programme
LSE IDEAS
The London School of Economics
and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

lse.ac.uk/ideas



The information in this brochure can be made available in alternative formats, on request. Please contact: ideas.crp@lse.ac.uk

The London School of Economics and Political Science is a School of the University of London. It is a charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Acts (Reg no 70527).

The School seeks to ensure that people are treated equitably, regardless of age, disability, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation or personal circumstances.

Design: LSE Design Unit (lse.ac.uk/designunit)
Photography: Nigel Stead, LSE School Photographer.