The politics of return: exploring the future of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Although the Syrian conflict continues, local and global stakeholders have already begun to consider the return of the six million refugees, especially as neither the option of local integration in the countries of first asylum nor that of resettlement to third countries is seen as a realistic possibility. Elaborating on the return debates in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, we relate the politicisation of this question to the growing acceptance of the option of voluntary and involuntary repatriation in the international refugee regime as well as to policies and public opinion. We argue, based on empirical fieldwork, that any debate about the return of Syrian refugees is problematic, since the conditions of safety, voluntariness and sustainability are not fulfilled. Further, returns should not be left entirely to the individual hosting states and actors in the region but should be carried out in collaboration with representative authorities in Syria and the mediation of international organisations upon full resolution of conflict.

Introduction

Over the last eight years, academic and policy-related debates about the future of around six million Syrian refugees living outside of their country directly refer to the three options formulated by the traditional international refugee regime: local integration in the first country of asylum, third-country resettlement and voluntary repatriation. In light of the complex interaction between domestic and international politics, it appears that the option of integration in the first countries of asylum and that of resettlement in third countries gain limited currency as viable possibilities. Instead, the idea of return increasingly becomes a politically preferred one and is considered by various players, including governments and international agencies. Despite the fact that the conflict continues in Syria, various observers emphasise an alarming trend advocating for return, even forced or involuntary.\textsuperscript{1} In fact, it is claimed that around 172,796 refugees have returned between 2016 and 2019.\textsuperscript{2} Return seems to be voiced frequently in a context of creating ‘safe zones’ in Syria for refugees to return to.

However, in the context of refugee repatriation, there are conditions that need to be fulfilled. While the principle of non-refoulement is the most essential component of
refugee protection, the three conditions for viable return are voluntariness, safety and sustainability. Without a peaceful solution for Syria, any debate on the return of Syrian refugees to their homes is, without any doubt, problematic. The tendency observed in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan towards the idea of repatriation of Syrian refugees has not been a linear, straightforward and one-directional development but has involved considerable variation.

In this essay, we first analyse the conventional approaches to repatriation within the traditional international refugee regime and critically review the changes observed in this regime over the last decades, relating them to the return discourse in the three main host countries of Syrian refugees. Second, we scrutinise the policies and practices of these countries regarding reception, settlement and integration since 2011 and connect them to recent developments whereby the return question has gradually gained momentum. Third, we study the political and media discourses regarding Syrian refugees and their eventual return, looking at perceptions of governments and host communities. We thus highlight the ways in which the repatriation debate in these countries is associated with the dynamics and mechanisms of the domestic and international political environment around Syrian refugee issues and varies over time. After elaborating on the way in which public discontent has grown and official discourse and practices have evolved concerning the return question, we discuss whether return is a viable option, looking at conditions in Syria, and at the perceptions and experiences of Syrians themselves in each of the neighbouring states (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan). We conclude by stating that politically driven repatriation strategies fail to protect refugee rights and limit the likelihood of successful integration and sustainable return. This paper is based on fieldwork carried out during the first half of 2018. It involves analysis of official discourse related to the question of return, namely review of official documents, newspaper reports and secondary sources, complemented by interviews with government officials, experts and international organisation representatives in the three countries.

**The return question: changing paradigms in the International Refugee Regime**

The International Refugee Regime (IRR) is the collection of laws and treaties, intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies and funding put in place during the post-World War II era to provide international protection and assistance to those displaced from their country by persecution or war. Analytically speaking, the traditional IRR articulates three main solutions for refugee situations: voluntary repatriation, local integration in the first country of asylum and third-country resettlement. It appears that the way in which the international community treats these solutions is context dependent. However, more strikingly, the formal positions of international organisations and their member states vis-à-vis these three solutions have been changing and so have their implications for the larger context of the refugee regime in parallel to the paradigm shifts observed in the IRR over the past six decades. Similarly, we have witnessed a change in the content and context of these options; indeed, over time involuntary repatriation has emerged as a possible solution.

In order to understand the return debates around Syrian refugees in the three main hosting states (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan), it is imperative to briefly revisit the related
literature on these refugee solution options and their changing status through the shifts in the IRR. It is widely accepted that since the Second World War, there have been major paradigm shifts in the refugee regime, which implies changing perceptions of solutions for refugee situations. Indeed, there have been three main periods in which perceptions on refugee settlement have radically changed. For instance, Chimni refers to the early period after WWII (from 1948 to 1991) as one in which industrialised countries preferred resettlement to repatriation as a solution, even though voluntary repatriation was accepted as the preferred solution. Frellick similarly brought up this period as one when the IRR benefited from the ‘exilic model’ in the absence of realistic hope of repatriation for refugees in the Cold War period in the case of communist countries. During this period, the IRR largely dealt with providing refugee rights in exile, mostly for those escaping authoritarian regimes and conflict areas, finding solutions outside the country of origin or establishing refugee camps.

With the end of the Cold War, the IRR transformed from an exilic model of response to refugee situations to a source-country model focusing on the causes of refugee flows. It then became unlikely refugees would be offered permanent asylum outside their home countries; instead, they were provided with temporary protection close to the border or a ‘safe zone’ was created inside the country of origin. In the words of Chimni, ‘the notion of safe return was introduced into the discourse’ and ‘in the continuum between voluntary and involuntary repatriation the idea of safe return aspired to occupy the middle ground’. It is assumed that the international community, often under the hegemony of the single superpower of the United States, would be able to intervene to change causes of refugee flows and consequently manage to return displaced people, but the reality in other contexts, such as Afghanistan, has proved otherwise. While voluntary repatriation increasingly came to be promoted as a solution, along with ideas and practices of safe zones, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw another paradigmatic shift in the IRR: a ‘security-based exclusionary understanding’ began to prevail whereby governments increasingly became against local integration and third-country resettlement. As Chimni argued, in this period ‘the doctrine of imposed return was aired by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to draw attention to constraints which could compel it to accept the reality of involuntary repatriation’. However, supporting voluntary repatriation may lead to involuntary or forced repatriations as refugees may not ultimately return to their countries of origin, for various reasons. The IRR has thus transformed from a liberal one implementing a selective but integrative policy, of access to a full status recognition with complete social rights, permanent settlement and right to access to citizenship, to one maximising exclusion on entry and with the perspective of a short stay, and return.

The case of Syrian refugee flows also confirms the dominance of exclusionary approaches in the IRR. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, while the countries in the Global North have largely failed to offer a liberal framework for third-country resettlement, Syria’s neighbouring countries, hosting large numbers of refugees, tend to be reluctant to promote integration. As a result, the idea of repatriation, even involuntary, has emerged. Within the limitations of the conditions surrounding them (namely, the IRR), refugees can also act as agents who are able to exercise action: individual refugees’ agency power can play a significant role in their decision-making about their journeys. Further, within this context, different nation states can play either a more restrictive or a more liberal role with regards to return depending on the socio-political and economic climate.
Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan: a historical synopsis

To understand the recent tendency towards return, it is vital to highlight the larger setting in each of these three national contexts in the region (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan) in terms of the refugee flows and evolution of settlement policies. Across these countries, the initial response was to allow the flow of refugees by maintaining an open-door policy. In Lebanon and Jordan, the open-door policy came as a natural continuation of the prior bilateral treaties between these countries and Syria permitting reciprocal freedom of movement and work permits. Consequently, the UNHCR figures in 2013 indicated that the number of Syrian refugees in each of these three countries reached over a quarter of a million. In 2018, there were more than 3.5 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, nearly one million in Lebanon, and more than a half million in Jordan.

With some exceptions, all three countries adopted a largely non-encampment policy. The Turkish government initially adopted an encampment policy, but as the number of arrivals continued to increase they could not accommodate them further. Currently, only 6% of the refugees in Turkey are in camps. Jordan had initially refused to have camps, but then established six camps hosting nearly one-fifth of refugees. In contrast, Lebanon consistently refused to establish formal camps due to its previous experience with Palestinians. Regarding the legal status of the refugees, neither the Lebanese nor the Jordanian government is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention; as such, neither recognises refugees’ status. Turkey, although a signatory of the 1951 Convention, retains the original geographical focus on Europe and did not initially give Syrians official refugee status either – but later granted them temporary protection.

In the first few years of the conflict, the policies of these three countries asserted the temporariness of the refugees, based on the assumption that the crisis would end in a relatively short period of time and the refugees would return. The approach started to differ between countries as the years progressed.

In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey maintained a positive response to the refugee flows from Syria, perceived as a humanitarian issue. An official discourse centring around the notion of ‘guests’ prevailed. In 2013, the foreign minister at the time, Davutoğlu, defined the Syrians as guests and brothers, stressing that closing the doors to them should be ruled out. In 2014, Deputy Prime Minister Kurtulmuş represented the hosting of refugees as ‘Ansar’. In addition, the presence of Syrians was perceived as having a positive effect on future Turkey–Syria relations. The Lebanese government did not formalise a national response to the refugee presence, instead transferring responsibility for the country’s refugees to organisations such as the UNHCR. The option of permanent settlement and integration was never viable.

Similarly, in Jordan, Minister for International Cooperation and Planning Fakhoury insisted that there would not be a repeat of the level of integration enjoyed by Palestinian refugees from 1948. However, the government views the refugee population as an opportunity for national development, stressing the economic aspect of the refugee presence. As time progressed, the increasing numbers of refugees combined with fears about potential security threats and spill-over of war from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members across the border led to the securitisation of borders through tough visa requirements and surveillance mechanisms to block migrants’ access to these three countries with air and ground military equipment. The entry of Syrians was limited to extreme humanitarian cases.

Though Turkey implemented visa restrictions for Syrians entering the country as of 2015, as a response to the protracted refugee situation, it provided legal grounds for Syrians to
be classified as ‘persons under temporary protection’ and gave Syrians more rights than other refugees in the country, including access to a work permit, health services and education.\textsuperscript{28} This indicates that the Turkish authorities circuitously accepted the likelihood of the long-term settlement of Syrians, in contrast to the two other countries that kept the refugees in an extremely vulnerable situation. It has continuously been developing strategies to integrate refugees, especially those with capital. Since the Turkey–EU deal in 2016, EU-funded initiatives have been introduced to facilitate refugee access to education and employment. In addition, Turkey has been offering citizenship status to skilled migrants with economic and cultural capital to retain them.\textsuperscript{29}

Jordan also closed its border, citing an ongoing security threat, and moved from a liberal policy with regard to the employment of Syrians to a strict one.\textsuperscript{30} However, since 2015, Syrians have again been granted access to the labour market, and various measures have been taken to facilitate the issuance of permits,\textsuperscript{31} as a part of the Compact deal of 2016, in return for billions of dollars in grants, loans and preferential trade agreements with the EU.\textsuperscript{32} In Lebanon, the government took greater control over the presence of Syrians and adopted its first clear policy in 2014 to decrease their number by reducing access to its territory and encouraging return to Syria.\textsuperscript{33} In May 2015, the Lebanese government instructed the UNHCR to suspend the registration of Syrian refugees. This was accompanied by further restriction of labour policies\textsuperscript{34} and a stricter control of informal work at the municipal level. As a result, the percentage of Syrian refugees with residency permits decreased, leaving them in a precarious legal position. In 2017, the government created a State Ministry for Refugee Affairs and partially repealed strict registration and labour policies.\textsuperscript{35} Yet it continued to benefit from humanitarian assistance on account of receiving refugees.

The policies of these three countries in terms of reception, encampment and integration present a shift from an open-door policy to a stricter political stance. They each developed strategies, in the interplay between domestic and international constraints, weighing out costs and benefits in terms of the presence of refugees. Yet in all three countries, state and society began to feel the increasing weight of hosting large numbers of refugees and started to bring up the issue of return in the absence of responsibility sharing from developed countries.

**Rising calls for return: a societal and political account**

There has been a growing discontent within all three host communities to various degrees. The public rhetoric gradually worsened, and xenophobic tendencies and discrimination are perceived to be on the rise as follows. There has been an increasingly growing sentiment that refugees are a burden on the economy and infrastructure. Citizens of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan feel that they are in competition with Syrian refugees for limited resources and are demanding their welfare rights.\textsuperscript{36}

In Turkey, the solidarity of society towards Syrian refugees slowly faded,\textsuperscript{37} especially as the government progressively took steps to provide social services, employment rights and citizenship, and the public perceived Syrians as competing for the same resources. These feelings are further exacerbated by the fact that these decisions are often made by state officials without consultation with the public and without giving details on implementation. Another main reason behind the growing discontent is related to domestic politics in the
country. The current Justice and Development Party (JDP) government has taken a hard-line position in favour of Syrians’ presence in Turkey. As such, those who oppose the government blame it for the presence of refugees. According to the Syrians Barometer survey, the Turkish public is not sympathetic to the idea of sharing a future with Syrians (82%). The vast majority of Turkish people defended exclusionary options such as ‘they should live in safe zones inside Syria’ (37%), ‘they should be exclusively in the camps’ (28%) or ‘they should all be deported’ (12%). In parallel, several reports have pointed out social tensions and clashes in some neighbourhoods. According to the latest International Crisis Group (ICG) report, incidents of intercommunal violence increased threefold in the second half of 2017 compared to the same period in 2016. Similarly, host communities developed negative perceptions regarding the extended refugee presence in Lebanon. According to El Gantri and El Mufti, many accuse refugees of endangering their livelihoods and the national economy. In addition, perceptions of Syrians are often attributed to past resentment due to the pre-2005 Syrian presence. A proportion of 92% agreed that the presence of Syrian refugees is placing strain on Lebanon’s resources, 42% living in vulnerable areas reported knowing someone who lost their job or business to a Syrian, and 49% indicated that relations with Syrian refugees have worsened since 2014. For Jordanians, the highly visible presence of many thousands of refugees has raised fears over competition for resources and opportunities, especially in the northern governorates. Over the years, it appears that public opinion on Syrian refugees has become increasingly critical. However, according to a survey of 1600 Jordanian citizens, almost all consider Syrian refugees (‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’) as brothers. Yet concerns emerged relating to the economy and development followed by social, political and security issues.

There appears to be growing discontent to a varying extent in public opinion in all three countries. We postulate that this might be influencing official discourse and practices. It should be noted that there is a significant body of literature on policy responsiveness suggesting that policymakers tend to respond to the demands of the public, particularly in the field of immigration and asylum issues, in order to ensure the support of their citizens. Parallel to the worsening public opinion, and in the absence of options of integration of refugees and of resettlement to third countries, officials in the host countries have brought up the return discourse and suggested concrete mechanisms.

In 2015, as Turkey was hosting nearly 2.5 million refugees and the European countries facing refugee ‘flows’ were trying to protect their borders, the Turkish authorities highlighted the question of ‘responsibility sharing against responsibility shifting’. It is within this context that Turkey’s President Erdoğan, visiting EU authorities in Brussels in 2015, demanded support to solve the migration crisis:

Despite the huge refugee influx, which had so far costed Turkey around €8bn, Turkey continues to maintain its open-door policy; but there is a need for European countries to also take responsibility .... The migrant crisis could be solved in three easy steps: training and equipping the Syrian opposition, declaring a safe zone along the border in northern Syria where Isis fighters would be cleared, and refugees could be resettled by creating a no-fly zone.

It thus appears that the question of return of Syrian refugees was already on the agendas of the Turkish authorities at that time. In 2016, after years of an open-door policy and after having introduced integration policies, officials increasingly began to talk about return. This constituted a U-turn that possibly matched Turkey’s changing public opinion, the
tensions between native populations and Syrians, the country’s degrading economy and the highly tense election period. It seemed that the government realised that the stay of Syrians in Turkey would have a political and social cost and consequently changed its rhetoric. In parallel, Turkey’s military incursions into northern Syria, which were framed as anti-terror missions, had implications for return. President Erdoğan repeatedly mentioned the possibility of creating a safe zone in northern Syria and returning the refugees. In February 2018, he said:

> We want our refugee brothers and sisters to return to their land, to their homes. We are not in the position to hide 3.5 million here forever … we’ll solve the Afrin incident, we’ll solve [Syrian rebel-held] Idlib, and we would like our refugee brothers and sisters to return to their own country.⁴⁹

Indeed, the previous Euphrates Shield Operation⁵⁰ by Turkey into Syria resulted in the return of a large number of Syrians to the Jarablus region. Similarly, following actions in Afrin, Turkey established refugee camps ahead of a possible influx, according to Aksoy, Foreign Ministry spokesperson.⁵¹ He said: ‘The Turkish Red Crescent and AFAD [Disaster and Emergency Management Authority] started preparations to set up camps to host 170,000 people near Idlib and the areas of [the] Euphrates Shield Operation’.⁵² The return debate thus appears to centre on the creation of safe zones. Human Rights Watch highlighted that there had been mass deportations, which was denied by the Directorate General of Migration Management.⁵³ However, it seemed that the return question is always pronounced with a certain degree of caution and remains rather latent.⁵⁴

In Lebanon, as political actors continue to ask for support from international donors, all agree that the Syrians will not stay long term. Foreign Minister Bassil has been calling for the deportation of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the crisis: ‘Lebanon should stop receiving refugees unless for exceptional cases and the Syrians already in Lebanon should be deported’.⁵⁴ His hostile position towards Syrian refugees is aimed at reassuring his Christian Maronite voters that the presence of a large predominantly Muslim Sunni population of a million refugees was only temporary. Indeed, the demographic balance of Lebanon is a particularly sensitive topic. Over the years, several propositions and mechanisms with regard to return have emerged. For instance, both Labor Minister Azzi and then-Prime Minister Salam announced plans to send refugees back to Syria over a two-year period. Minister of Social Affairs Bouassi suggested giving incentives to Syrian families to go back. The anti-refugee rhetoric reached its highest point in 2017, following fights with the Nusra Front group in Arsal. In response, non-state actors, particularly Hezbollah, negotiated the repatriation of Syrian refugees with militant groups, without the direct involvement of the Lebanese government or the United Nations. About 10,000 people returned from Arsal and Shebaa.⁵⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, many Syrians have returned under indirect pressure, namely harsh conditions, lack of legal residency, restrictions on freedom of movement and fear of random arrests.⁵⁶ Most recently, Syrian refugees are being forced to tear down their own homes in the face of an aggressive new campaign to pressure refugees into returning home.⁵⁷ Hezbollah and its allies present dialogue and coordination directly with the Syrian government as prerequisites for the return of the refugees.⁵⁸ The Lebanese government (especially the anti-Syrian regime parties) has been unwilling to negotiate with the Syrian government so as not to jeopardise the international community’s support. Prime Minister Hariri instead advocates for mediation from international agencies.⁵⁹ In addition,
disagreement appears to be related to the perception of safety. President Aoun considers that: ‘There are currently safe zones larger than Lebanon, including agriculture lands, that one can work in.’\textsuperscript{60} He also stated in 2017 at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that he believes that return should occur as early as possible. However, Hariri on many occasions claimed to be strongly opposed, questioning the safety of the refugees in Syria, and insisted that Lebanon would not force refugees to return but rather called for more international help. However, in 2018, Hariri started expressing his support for efforts that are being exerted to support refugees’ return.\textsuperscript{61} In addition, all parties in Lebanon have been advocating for de-escalation zones for the repatriation of Syrian refugees with the support of international organisations. Merhebi, a member of Hariri’s Future Movement, Minister of Affairs of the Displaced,\textsuperscript{62} voiced it as follows:

Lebanon supports UN efforts to settle the Syrian crisis and consequently ensure the safe return of refugees to their country .... If safe zones are established, we would consider it a good thing because this would reduce the killings in Syria .... There will be no forceful repatriation by the Lebanese government, in line with our commitments to international human rights.

Return seems to be the default option, among all parties, and some returns have already taken place; in total, UNHCR reported 172,796 self-organised refugee returns to Syria between 2016 and 2019: 61,000 from Turkey, 39,000 from Lebanon, 36,000 from Jordan and 33,000 from Iraq\textsuperscript{63}; however, the perception of safety and the timing of the returns are strongly debated. This has resulted in feuds between the Lebanese government and UNHCR, with the former accusing the latter of standing in the way of voluntary return of Syrians.\textsuperscript{64}

The official discourse in Jordan seems the least unfavourable to the influx of refugees. Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communications Momani states that ‘Jordan is proud of its track record regarding hosting and helping refugees.’\textsuperscript{65} Following the car bomb attack in 2016, it was reported that deportations were carried out.\textsuperscript{66} Around 2300 were deported in 2017.\textsuperscript{67} However, Jordan rejected these claims, as Momani told the local media: ‘Jordan is abiding by the international law in this regard .... The return of the Syrian refugees is voluntary and in such cases the return is to areas where there is no threat to their lives.’\textsuperscript{68}

In addition to deportations, economic difficulties may have also been the cause of some returns. In 2017, similar to the other two neighbouring countries, Jordan created safe zones in southwest Syria to ‘soften the flow of refugees into Jordan’ and ‘protect Jordanian territory from pro-Iran militias in Syria’\textsuperscript{69} In February 2018, Prime Minister al-Mulki commented that Jordan had reached its capacity to provide services, spend national resources, and expand social and physical infrastructure to absorb refugees.\textsuperscript{70} However, the situation, as in the case of the two other countries, constitutes an opportunity for bargaining for support from international donors. In this context, the return discourse was never officially brought up. Indeed, the Prime Minister presents the prospect of return to Syria as an unlikely occurrence:

The prospects of an impending return to Syria ... are still remote. Even if a peaceful solution materializes, it will take years to rebuild Syria and for Syrians to resettle. This means that Jordan will have to continue bearing the mounting costs of the crisis and facing the ever-increasing challenges to the social and economic fabric of the country.\textsuperscript{71}

In all cases, it is unclear to what extent returns have been voluntary or forced. In Turkey, the return discourse has been tackled cautiously and linked to safe zones. In Lebanon, return seems the default option among all parties, and some returns have already taken place.
However, the safety perceptions and the timing of the returns are strongly debated. The return discourse is the least discussed in Jordan, despite some reports of deportations. Furthermore, in 2018, agreements were reached by the major players (Russia and the US) which ‘would see two million Syrian refugees return to their lands and grant safety guarantees’.72

**Can return be a viable option? Views from Syria and Syrian refugees**

As the crisis in Syria continues and Europe is guarding its borders and restricting resettlement, neighbouring countries are growing wearier of having to shoulder the presence of Syrian refugees in the long term. The return discourse, as we have demonstrated above, has increasingly surfaced in host states. To assess its viability, we look at the conditions in Syria and analyse the perceptions about return among Syrians in these three countries.

After examining the situation in Syria, it is difficult to argue that the conditions for safe return are met. In the last eight years, the conflict has caused extensive damage to Syria’s physical infrastructure, including the provision of water and electricity, and to its social infrastructure such as schools and healthcare centres. It is estimated that the war has damaged about a third of the housing stock and led to significant economic loss.73 Over half of the country’s pre-conflict population has been forcibly displaced. In early 2018, three main factors characterised the situation in Syria. First, ISIS is substantially, but not completely, defeated and some small areas in Syria are still under their control. Second, the Assad regime seems to remain in power, and controls the near totality of Syria’s territory. Third, despite peace talks, clashes continue among the Assad regime, local opposition groups and foreign powers. Given this picture, some claim that a de-escalation deal will mark a step towards the final phase of the Syrian civil war.74 Many others, however, argue that the country is entering a dangerous and much more volatile phase, characterised by key stakeholders seeking to protect their interests and staking their hold on the ground.75 In short, despite some major changes, a peaceful resolution remains elusive. Although there have been instances of repatriations following temporary procurements of security, through arrangements with state or non-state actors or implementation of safe zones, Syria is still at war. In the second half of 2019, Idlib, the last opposition stronghold, was losing ground under the offensive of Syrian government forces backed by Russian airpower, and this has become an internationally debated hot topic. Despite the fact that Turkey hopes to return Syrian refugees to the northeastern area, which it wants to extend 30 kilometres into Syrian territory, return is being rendered progressively much more difficult, especially for government opposition. In fact, on the contrary, the Idlib offensive could lead to a fresh wave of refugees, and subsequent agreement between Turkey, Iran and Russia on the formation of a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution, to normalise the situation in Syria and legitimise the regime,76 renders the return progressively more difficult, especially for government opposition members.

As such, when we talk of return, we need to consider that the Assad regime claims that there are ‘definitely’ terrorists among the refugees. The mass exile of Syrians is a by-product of a ‘legitimate war’ for Syria to become ‘a homogenous society’.77 In addition, it introduced a law (Law No. 10 of 2018) that requires property holders in Syria to formally prove ownership of their private property within a period of 30 days (now extended to one year) or face...
confiscation. The fact that many may not be able to return to their own homes or will not be able to get their properties back makes the sustainability of return questionable. More recently, as of May 2018, Assad and his allies have been promoting the idea of return to fuel the perception that the war is ending. For instance, returnees from Lebanon are to be vetted by Syrian intelligence, in coordination with Lebanon’s General Security intelligence agency, and return is to happen to regions under the control of Assad. This position is not shared by all politicians in Lebanon, as Hariri and those who oppose Assad insist the UN must oversee returns.

Meanwhile, the perceptions of the Syrian refugees themselves concerning return need to be considered in the context of the aforementioned discourse. Surveys looking at refugee perceptions in each of these three countries indicate that Syrians would like to return as soon as the situation in Syria improves. In a survey conducted by the UNHCR, 63% of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries said they would like to ‘one day’ return to Syria. While survey results should be considered with caution, as results depend on the phrasing of the question, the Syrian Barometer survey does seem to indicate that the majority of interviewed Syrians in Turkey (61%) will return to Syria if the war ends and a good government is established. Only 16% stated that they would not return to Syria under any circumstances. Similarly, most refugees in Jordan hoped to return to Syria when it was safe to do so. In addition, many refugees stay in Lebanon despite the hardships there in order to stay close to Syria, hoping to return one day.

Further, the decision to return is not straightforward but varies according to socio-economic status, age, religious affiliation, level of Turkish language and geographical region. The primary factors that appear to play a determinant role in the decision to return are safety and security. According to research by Oxfam, most refugees from Syria in Lebanon stated that they cannot go back because it is not safe. Syrian refugees prioritise a durable solution to the conflict. For them to return, they would need to receive reliable information on the situation. Furthermore, Syrian refugees reject any proposals that could lead to Syria’s fragmentation and have no confidence in safe zones. There is fear of persecution under Assad’s regime, and young men fear conscription to the army. Another main factor that determines return decisions appears to be going back to their own regions; as such, the idea of safe zones in another area of the country is not compatible with their views. Those who are most likely to go back are those whose areas of origin have not been severely affected by the conflict. For others, return would be difficult because of the destruction of their houses, and they would require compensation for the loss of property. The 2005 UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees sets the expectation that individuals should be able to return not only to their countries of origin, but to their actual homes. This becomes even more difficult as Assad introduced Law no. 10, which may see the state confiscating the lands of millions of refugees.

It thus appears that the notion of a ‘voluntary return’ of refugees is not fully meaningful at present. In addition, in light of current events, we might expect that if Assad stays in power, the opposition members will not want or be able to return, even less so in the absence of property rights. Finally, here one must recall that the UNHCR has an internationally recognised key role in a well-functioning repatriation process. However, as emphasised earlier, the three conditions for viable return must be fulfilled; in addition, the violence on the ground must end completely, and there needs to be a functioning political authority in Syria. Naturally, external powers that are already heavily involved in the ‘Syrian crisis’ also play a
role in this question of return. It is observed that there is a common push by external actors towards normalisation of the situation and repatriation, expecting to gain from reconstruction profit, even though the three conditions for viable return are not met. For instance, it is argued that the payback for Russia for its intervention will be through reconstruction profit. Turkey also aggressively wishes to take part in Syrian reconstruction. Some other countries, such as Iran, the US and some Arab and EU countries, also want to be part of the reconstruction process to different degrees.

**Conclusion**

The option of return of Syrian refugees has increasingly emerged in the political discourse in parallel to the relative absence of practices of integration of refugees in host countries and of resettlement to third countries. It is further exacerbated by the politicisation of the IRR over time, particularly after the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015. Elaborating on the recent return debates, this paper highlights the politicisation, to different degrees, of the return question in all three neighbouring host countries, often under the influence of public opinion and international and domestic politics, which lead to the growing acceptance of repatriation as a solution to the global Syrian refugee question. Though returns are occurring and the situation in Syria is progressively portrayed in the media and official discourse as coming close to an end, conditions are still far from acceptable in terms of safety, voluntariness and sustainability. Indeed, Syria is still in a heavy conflict situation, its territories are under the control of various internal or foreign forces, more than half of its population is displaced and its internationally recognised government retains a fragile grip on power. Within this context, all three main refugee hosting countries have either undertaken initiatives to create ‘safe zones’ through military interventions in Syria by states and non-state actors or advocated for them with the support of international organisations. While securing borders with conflict zones through ‘safe zones’ may offer minimal security, it cannot offer full protection or a durable solution to persecution and political exclusion. As noted by Davutoğlu, the main architect of Turkey’s policies towards Syria, returns to safe zones often mean a temporary arrangement, a type of movement from a refugee situation to internal displacement, which necessitates another settlement programme in the post-conflict period. In the meantime, the refugees themselves want to return only when safety conditions are adequate and only to their original homes. It seems that in the cases where ‘spontaneous’ returns did happen, the question of voluntariness was not clear, as pressure also seems to have been exerted at least indirectly. All three hosting countries are increasingly becoming less open to hosting large numbers of refugees from Syria, as governments try to balance internal and regional politics. At the same time, there are serious political agenda items that derive from long-established cleavages within countries in the region associated with ethnicity, sect and other identity politics. This further complicates the ‘politics of return’.

This issue leaves us with a policy question: can a successful and legitimate repatriation programme only be realised in a fully established post-conflict period when the satisfactory conditions of return have been met, or might it be implemented through safe zones before reaching an optimum post-conflict period? Although answering this question is not within the scope of this paper, we argue that the return question has become highly politicised. Therefore, we advocate for the creation of a framework that responds to contextual variations
and to changing conditions, without leaving it totally up to individual countries to decide, as decisions may be driven by public opinion or political agendas. Instead, countries should act in collaboration with international organisations and, most importantly, with the domestic political authority in Syria for the question of property rights to be resolved. Indeed, according to Long, returns work best when people choose to go back through a gradual process.

The decision on safety and security can thus be considered through a triangulation of actors. Ultimately, the main decisions about what happens within their borders are taken by the nation states themselves. However, for durable solutions, these decisions should be framed within the IRR standards for return (as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, which contributed to it being considered a relatively successful example of return). Further, the refugee community should be convinced of the viability of return.

In this case, as the Syrian regime is a cause of the conflict and a part of it is still in power, collaboration remains uncertain. The Syrian regime is uneasy about the return of refugees, most of whom are considered opposition, and it will be difficult to guarantee their security. One must remember that repatriation is only one of the solutions for the refugees, and there are two other possibilities: integration into the host country and resettlement to a third country. These, too, should be considered by all actors involved. There is the possibility of implementing a ‘Comprehensive Plan of Action’ (CPA) in the future for these 6 million displaced Syrians that includes some negotiated returns being accepted by the Assad Regime (without disappearances), some local integration and some third-country resettlement, through a UNHCR-led international cooperation, as per previous significant models considered successful such as Committee of International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) and CPA for Indochinese refugees.

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Notes

2. UNHCR, “Situation Syria Regional Refugee Responses.”
4. These interviews were carried out in the scope of various projects. The first, funded by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK), focuses on the comparison of three mass refugee flows to Turkey and a second, funded by TUBITAK and Research Council UK, focusing on Syrian youth integration in Turkey. Further interviews were held within the scope of the Experts’ Workshop ‘What Does the Global Compact on Refugees Mean for the MENA Region?’ in February 2018.
5. Keely, “International Refugee Regime(s).”
7. Barnett, UNHCR and the Ethics of Repatriation; and Hathaway, “Refugee Solutions.”
10. Frelick, “Paradigm Shifts.”
13. The first and most important application of safe zones was to protect the Kurds of Northern Iraq in 1991 during the Gulf War.
18. With the absence of the classical three solutions to refugee situation, large numbers of Syrians ‘voted with their feet’ by moving on to Europe (through Turkey), as in the summer of 2015.
19. Since 1948, 450,000 Palestinian refugees have come to Lebanon, 62% of whom live in 12 camps according to ‘Palestinians in Lebanon’ by Hanafi et al., “Social Exclusion of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon.”
20. İçduygu, Syrian Refugees in Turkey.
22. An Islamic religious reference to the early Muslims who hosted the prophet Muhammad when he emigrated from Mecca.
24. The collaboration was regulated by the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the UNHCR and Lebanon and Jordan to regulate the main aspects of refugee protection.
25. Jordan is currently home to 2 million Palestinian refugees, more than 337,000 of whom live in the country’s 10 official refugee camps and are believed to have greatly contributed to the Jordanian economy, according to ‘Palestine Refugees’ in The New Humanitarian.
26. Lenner, Blasts from the Past.
28. İçduygu, Syrian Refugees in Turkey.
29. Koser Akcapar and Simsek, “Politics of Syrian Refugees in Turkey.”
33. Janmry, “Precarity in Exile.”
34. As of 2016, Syrians are required to sign a pledge not to work and can only sustain their livelihoods through humanitarian assistance provided by the Lebanese government and with support from the international community.
35. Atallah and Mahdi, Law and Politics of “Safe Zones.”
37. ICG, Turkey’s Syrian Refugees.
39. Erdoğan, Suriyeliler Barometresi.
40. ICG, Turkey’s Syrian Refugees.
41. El Gantri and El Mufti, Not Without Dignity.
42. A presence which started in 1976 during the civil war and ended in 2005 following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri.
43. IFIPPIA, Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon.
44. Carrion, Syrian Refugees in Jordan.
45. Athamneh, Momani, and Radaideh, Jordanians’ Perceptions.
46. Morales, Pilet, and Ruedin, “Gap between Public Preferences and Policies.”
47. Cendrowicz, “Erdogan Shames EU.”
48. İçduygu and Ayasli, Geri Dönüş Siyaseti.
49. Daily Sabah, “Turkish Efforts in Afrin.”
50. A cross-border operation by the Turkish military and Turkey-aligned Syrian opposition groups in the Syrian Civil War, which led to the penetration of Turkish forces into northern Syria.
51. Hürriyet, “Turkey to Establish Refugee Camps.”
52. Karadeniz, “Turkey to Set up Camps.”
53. HRW, “Turkey: Mass Deportations of Syrians.”
54. Firstpost, “Lebanese Minister Calls for Deporting.”
56. HRW, “Lebanon: Refugees in Border Zone.”
57. McKernan, “Syrian Refugees Forced to Destroy.”
59. Reuters, “Lebanon Will Coordinate Refugee Returns.”
61. Obeid, “Hariri Set to Meet Russian Delegation.”
63. UNHCR, “Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response.”
64. Hamdan, “Lebanon–UNHCR Feuding.”
67. UNHCR, “Inter-Sector Working Group.”
68. Al-Daameh, “Jordan Rejects HRW Accusations.”
69. Al-Makahleh, “Case for Safe Zones.”
70. Marks, “Pushing Syrian Refugees to Return.”
71. Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, “10th Meeting of the Jordan Response Platform.”
73. World Bank, *Toll of War*.
75. Calamur, “Many Wars within Syria’s War.”
76. Wilks, “Ankara Summit on Syria.”
77. Batrawi and Uzelac, *Four Ways*.
78. HRW, “Syria’s New Property Law.”
79. Alfred, “Dangerous Exit.”
81. Erdoğan, *Suriyiller Barometresi*.
84. Ciplak, Keser, and Erdurmaz, *Suriyeli Siginmacilarin Gelecek Beklentisi*.
88. Barish, “Return of Refugees.”
89. Bellamy et al., *Lives and Livelihoods of Syrian Refugees*.
90. Anderson, “UN Principles on Housing.”
93. Vohra, “Russia’s Payback Will Be.”
94. Aslan, *Turkey’s Reconstruction Model in Syria*.
95. Interview date: 09 April 2018.
97. Harvey, “Return Dynamics in Bosnia and Croatia.”

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