



SACD
Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

THE MYTH OF “VOLUNTARY” RETURN FROM LEBANON

DESPITE FACING HORRENDOUS CONDITIONS,
SYRIANS REJECT PREMATURE RETURN



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◦ Introduction

The Lebanese Government estimates that out of the six million people living in the country, 1.5 million are Syrian refugees. This estimate includes both registered and unregistered refugees, (the Lebanese Government suspended registering new refugees in May 2015¹), although UNHCR currently reports that there are 865,531² Syrians registered in Lebanon. Most of these refugees live within vulnerable host communities under conditions of poverty.

The fragile sectarian balance of Lebanon drives an increasingly hostile perception of Syrian refugees among the Lebanese, largely influenced by their past experience with the civil war, as well as by the previous influx of Palestinian refugees. Lebanese officials³ have often stated that integrating the majority Sunni Syrians into the economy may disrupt the state's power-sharing system between Christians, Sunnis and Shia. In line with this, the Lebanese often express concern about competition with Syrians and their established companies in the labor market, while some Lebanese politicians opportunistically use refugees as a scapegoats for the socio-economic deterioration of the country⁴.

Such rhetoric has escalated in the recent months, with the government representatives now openly talking about what amounts to forced return of Syrians to Syria, which is clearly unsafe⁵.

This deeply worrying policy announcement comes as the Lebanese government is negotiating financial aid from the World Bank to address its dire economic situation, and it implies putting vulnerable Syrian refugees on the table as a bargaining chip to extract more funds in the negotiations. It is important to note that the total aid received by the Lebanese government to accommodate the Syrian refugees within the period from 2012 to 2019 exceeded \$6.5 billion. Yet, more than 89% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the extreme poverty line⁶.

The research conducted by SACD showed that 88% of Syrian refugees live in a state of legal insecurity and 96% of them in a state of economic insecurity. This extremely high percentage calls for a careful examination of the mechanisms that the Lebanese government uses to deal with Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The recently announced policy of returning Syrians to Syria, without the most basic conditions being met for a safe, voluntary and dignified return, prompted SACD to conduct a survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon to ascertain their current living conditions and attitudes towards return. We have designed this briefing based on 438 structured interviews conducted with Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon using a standardized questionnaire for collecting data.

The questionnaire gauges the opinions of Syrians regarding four main areas:

- The current situation of refugees
- The impact of discriminatory discourse and policies targeting Syrian refugees
- Plans and visions for the future
- Perceptions of conditions for the return to Syria

¹ Lebanon: New Refugee Policy a Step Forward, February 14, 2017, HRW <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/14/lebanon-new-refugee-policy-step-forward>

² The number of Syrians registered with the UNHCR is 865,531 refugees, UNHCR <https://www.unhcr.org/ar/4be7cc278c2.html>

³ Culbertson, Shelly, Olga Olikier, Ben Baruch, and Ilana Blum, Rethinking Coordination of Services to Refugees

⁴ Dziadosz, Alex, "Syrian Exiles in Lebanon Seek a Refuge in Work," Financial Times, November 21, 2016. As of April 16, 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/1d4b1ec6-9a9e-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae>

⁵ "Voluntary return to Syria" ignites Lebanese government disputes!, September 2, 2022, Almodon <https://bit.ly/3FqHc8D>

⁶ 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees, UNHCR <https://www.unhcr.org/ar/4be7cc278c2.html>

Our research teams conducted face-to-face interviews with the research sample in which women constituted 59%. The team have interviewed the research sample in their places of residence (cities and camps). They divided the housing of the sample participants into five camps in addition to Beqaa, Tripoli and Beirut areas.

The research has shown that a large majority of surveyed Syrians have problems obtaining a legal status in the country. A staggering 64 % of the participants indicated that they do not have any official document or official residence permit in Lebanon. Consequently, the unemployment rate is very high - 43% of the polled Syrian refugees are unemployed, 25% are daily workers without any rights or legal coverage, and 12% of them fluctuate between part-time or full-time work. Out of those who manage to find some work, 90% indicated that they do not work officially. This, accordingly, means that the Syrian refugees are deprived of any rights or legal coverage as they work in the black market due to the refusal of the Lebanese authorities to register them officially.

The negative impact of such a precarious legal and financial position is cascading down to the most vulnerable among the Syrian refugees – their children. There are high costs imposed on refugees to obtain the necessary documents to enroll their children in schools (despite the huge aid that the Lebanese education sector receives to accommodate Syrian refugee children) and as a result 89% of respondents were unable to obtain the documents required to enroll their children in schools - 62% of the research participants reported that their children do not have official documents to attend school due to financial costs, while 27% of them indicated that their children do not have official documents due to the complications imposed by the Lebanese government on Syrians to register their children. Many Syrian children in Lebanon have lost 10 years of their lives, unable to receive education, some forced to work.

And yet, despite these horrendous conditions they are facing in Lebanon, the vast majority of Syrian refugees does not want to return to Syria under the current conditions, especially under the rule of the Syrian regime. The study shows that 73% of the participants have security concerns about returning to Syria fearing they will be exposed to a direct or indirect security risk to their lives. Some 39% of the field survey respondents indicated that forcing them to return would put their lives at risk, whereas 23% of them reported that they would be under threat of conscription, and 11% would be directly and personally threatened.

Some 67% of respondents are not even interested in visiting Syria under current circumstances. Responding to a question on whether they would return in conditions changed, 35% of the participants explicitly answered that they do not want to return to Syria even if the conditions changed, 36% of them may return if certain conditions are met, while the remaining 29% of the respondents are predominantly not considering returning home.

About 30% of the respondents explicitly pointed out that they would resort to trying to flee to other countries if forced to return to Syria, whether by legal or illegal methods, while 37% do not have any plans in case they are forced to return to Syria, However it is highly likely, considering the reality of the situation, that a good percentage of them will choose the same option. As a consequence, this is a dangerous indicator of possible new waves of mass displacement to Europe, which is witnessing a significant increase recently⁷. This is the most striking finding of the survey – many Syrians in Lebanon would rather opt for the “boats of death” than to face returning to Syria in the current circumstances.

⁷ A large migration of Syrians from Lebanon to Europe..How is it going? <https://youtu.be/bQZNzSPqIPo>
Including children and women.. Arrest of Syrians in Lebanon preparing to emigrate by sea <https://bit.ly/3Wjly9y>



Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

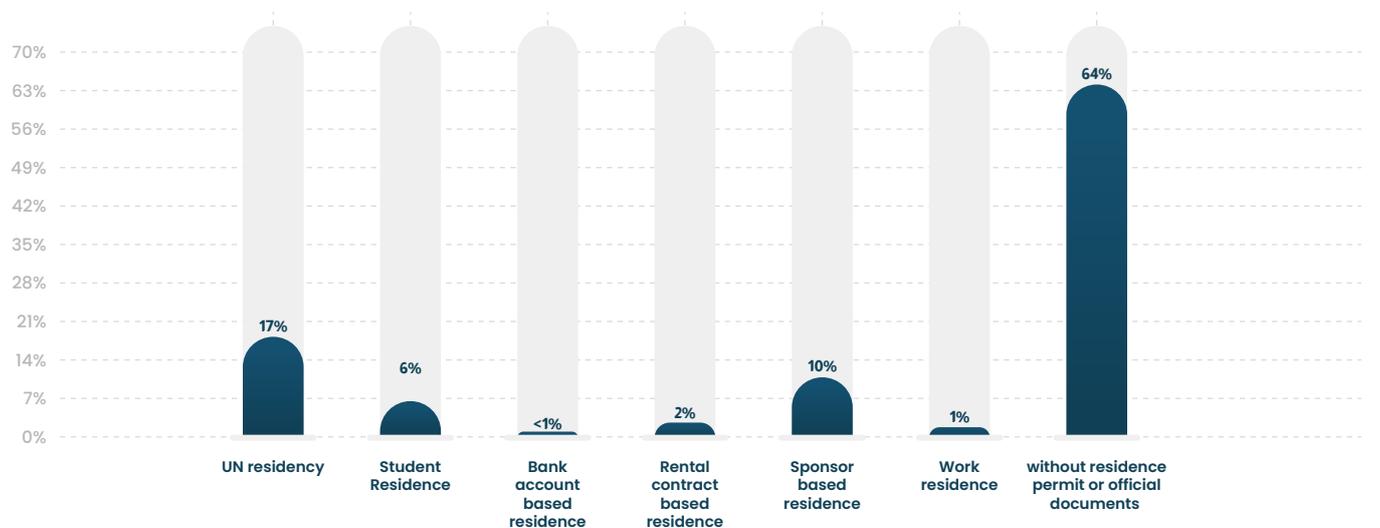


According to UNHCR figures at the end of 2020, the number of Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon reached 865,531 refugees, 89% of whom live in extreme poverty⁸. However, the Lebanese government states that the number of registered and unregistered Syrian refugees has reached one and half million. Lebanese government has prevented registering new refugees on the Lebanese territory since 2015. Furthermore, it has set restrictive conditions and laws that had a negative impact on the rights of refugees. Such restrictions include imposing work restrictions and making work opportunities limited to only three sectors: agriculture, construction and cleaning⁹. In addition to that, there has been continuous campaigns of raids on the camps to detain male refugees¹⁰, on the pretext of not having residency documents or on charges related to terrorism without evidence in order to create a climate of fear and intimidation among the Syrian refugees.

The results of the field research conducted by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) illustrate the difficulties facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon when it comes to making their residency legal. A staggering 64% of the participants indicated that they do not have any official document or official residence permit in Lebanon.

Only 17% of the participants in the field research indicated they have official documents issued by the UNHCR, whereas 10% have residence permits according to the sponsorship law, as shown in Figure No. (1).

Figure No. (1): The legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in terms of type of residence



As illustrated in Figure 2, due to the fact that majority of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon cannot obtain official residencies, 89% of participants do not feel legally safe or that their legal status is stable, and only 8% feel that their legal status is of medium strength.

⁸ 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees, UNHCR <https://www.unhcr.org/ar/4be7cc278c2.html>

⁹ The Minister of Labor issues a decision on the professions restricted to the Lebanese <https://bit.ly/3fi8UcO>

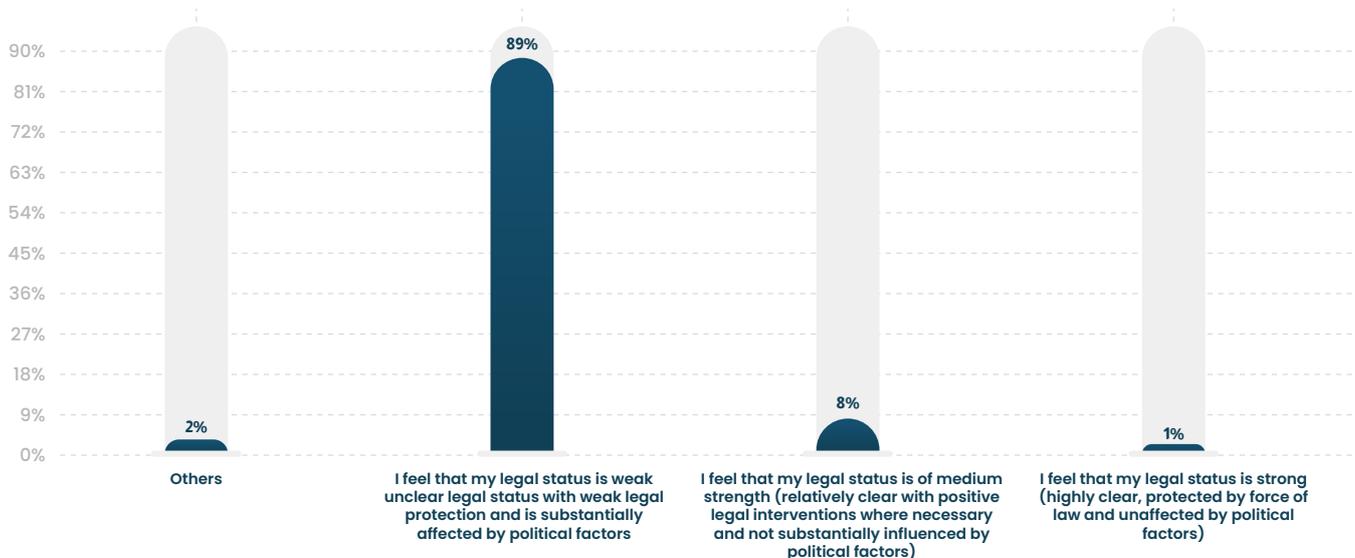
¹⁰ An incitement campaign launched against Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which demanded their killing, burning and expulsion <https://youtu.be/kFHxP8j-V8Q>

Lebanon: Dire conditions for Syrian refugees in Aarsal <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2021/01/19/377592>

"Collective Punishment" in Lebanon.. Syrian refugee camp set on fire after a murder <https://arbne.ws/3sLcOhl>

This prevalent feeling of insecurity comes as a result of discriminatory and illegal policies adopted by the Lebanese government targeting Syrian refugees, used to maintain a constant fear of arrest and deportation to the Syrian regime. Lebanese Minister of the Displaced, Issam Sharafeddine, who stated his intention to visit Damascus to discuss Lebanon's plan to return 15,000 Syrians per month to Syria, has stated that returning the refugees to Syria will be based on "village by village" repatriation¹¹. Accordingly, the Lebanese authorities have worked to demolish some camps with the aim of displacing their refugees and forcing them to return to areas controlled by Assad's regime.

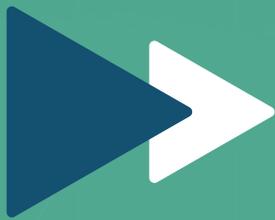
Figure No. (2): Feeling of security and stability among Syrian refugees in Lebanon according to their legal status



¹¹ Lebanon is "legally" preparing to deport 15,000 Syrian refugees per month... amid human rights warnings
<https://arbne.ws/3SYt8X0>

The Lebanese authorities demolish tents for Syrian refugees in Qab Elias camp with the help of military forces
<https://bit.ly/3h2Hjgv>

Economic Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon



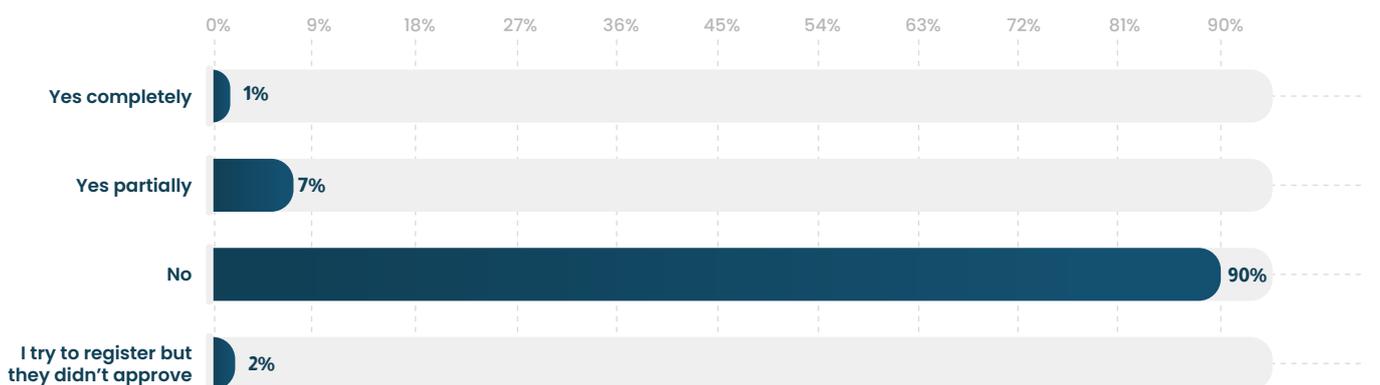
In light of the difficult economic conditions that Lebanon is going through, the failure of government formation and the crisis of Lebanese deposits, it seems that the issue of Syrian refugees was seen as a welcome distraction by some Lebanese politicians. As a result, the virulent discourse portraying Syrian refugees as competitors for jobs, security, and a drain on the scarce public services and resources has increased in Lebanon. Moreover, the spread of rumors, prejudices and misconceptions about the identity of the Syrian refugees and the reasons for their residence in Lebanon have also increased at all levels of Lebanese society, including within the government. As the crisis worsened, Syrian refugees have become scapegoats in light of the government's failure to provide basic services and goods for the local population.

The fragmentation humanitarian aid provided by the international community, which represents the only lifeline for many Syrian refugees and is already suffering from a chronic lack of funding, has played a major role in perpetuating the dire situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. 88% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been living without enough income to buy a basic food basket, estimated at 490,028 Lebanese pounds per person a month, that guarantees survival. Moreover, half of Syrian families in Lebanon (49%) suffer from food insecurity¹².

Most of Syrian refugees do not have work permits in Lebanon as a result of the lack legal residency. Even those with work permits face restrictions in accessing employment opportunities. Syrian citizens are excluded from most professions and businesses, with the exception of the construction, agriculture, environment, and hygiene sectors, pursuant to the decision issued by Ministry of Labor passed in December 2015. Therefore, most Syrian refugees work in the informal sector and often at low wages and without social benefits or labor union protection.

This is clearly demonstrated in the results of our field research conducted for this briefing. 90% of the respondents indicated that they do not work officially. This means that Syrian refugees are deprived of any rights or legal coverage as they work in the black market due to the refusal of the Lebanese authorities to register them officially. See Figure No. (3).

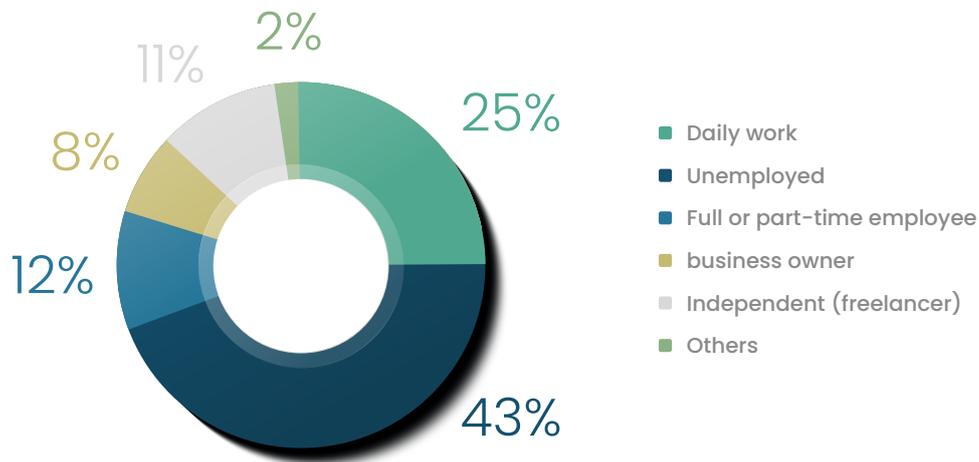
— **Figure No. (3): The legal status of Syrians in Lebanon in terms of registration and tax payment** —



¹² UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, Preliminary Results of the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees, September 2021, available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88960>

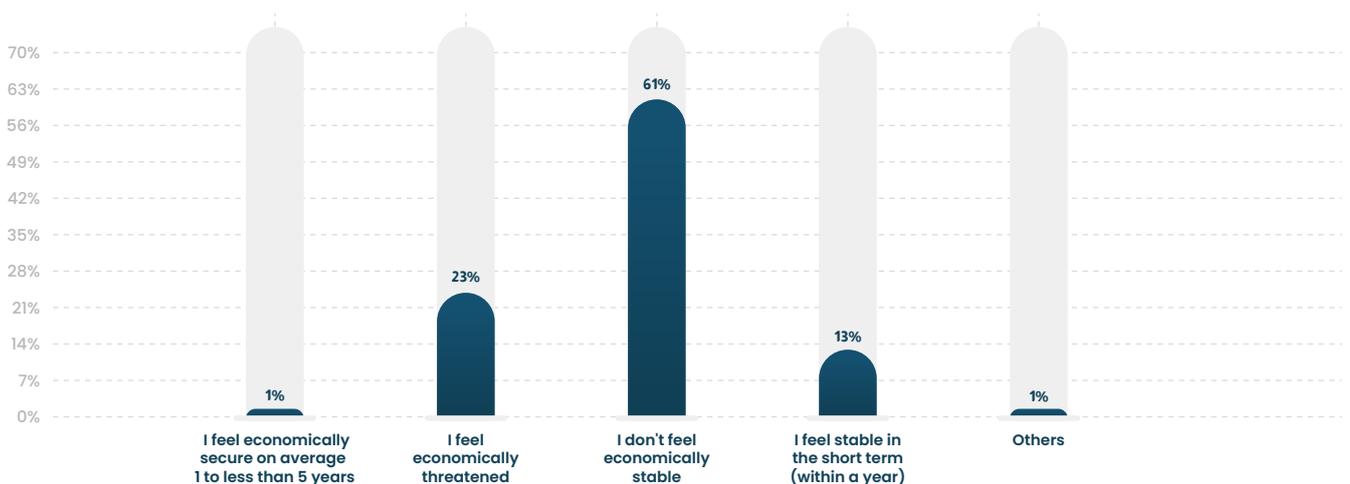
The illegal residency conditions, in addition to the laws and decisions issued by the Lebanese government that narrow the fields of work for Syrian refugees, have resulted in a very high unemployment rate among the refugees. The results of the field survey show that 43% of Syrian refugees are completely unemployed, 25% are daily workers without any rights or legal coverage, and 12% of them fluctuate between part-time or full-time work. Figure No. (5) shows the work situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Figure No. (4): The work situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon



The precarious situation of Syrian refugees constituted a state of economic instability that was reflected in the responses of 61% of the respondents. In addition 23% of the respondents feel completely economically insecure, and only 13% of them feel they have economic stability in the short term (less than a year), as shown in Figure (6). All of these conditions and deliberate restrictions have pushed 57% of Syrian refugees to live in "dangerous, overcrowded or substandard housing" according to a UNHCR report¹³.

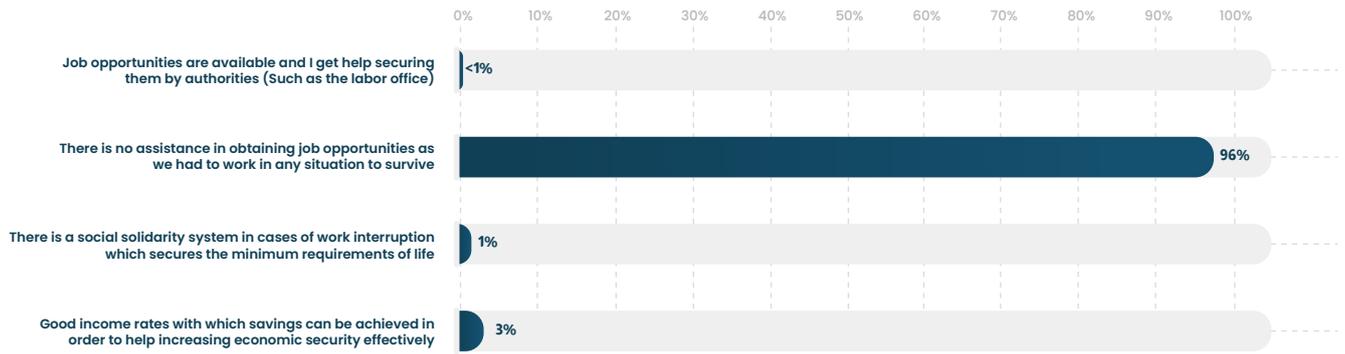
Figure No. (5): The degree of feeling of economic stability among Syrian refugees in Lebanon



Our research shows that 96% of the participants in the field research are forced to work under any circumstances, despite knowing that the conditions in which they work are illegal and could put them at risk. In addition, the refugees have no access to any assistance that would help such workforce to integrate into the Lebanese labor market, including any possible assistance from the Labor Office, as shown in Figure (6).

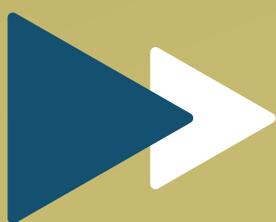
¹³ Lebanon - Preliminary Results of the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees - VASyR 2021 : <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88960>

Figure No. (6): Assessment of the situation related to economic security





The educational situation of Syrians in Lebanon

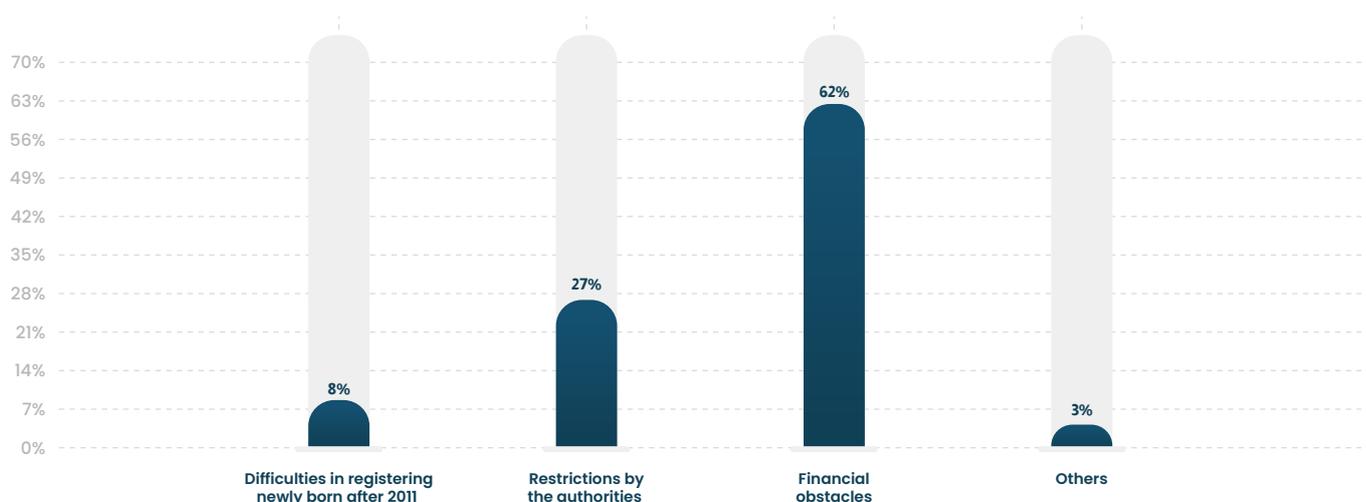


Access to education for children of Syrian refugees constitutes a pressure tool forcing them to return to Syria as their children are deprived of an education and unable to attend school. "The majority of Syrian children in Lebanon are getting nothing, the government's plan is a mystery, and it is tying humanitarian groups' hands with red tape and inexcusable obstacles,"¹⁴ stated Lotte Leicht, EU Advocacy Director and Human Rights Watch in Brussels. Lebanon hosts 660,000 school-age Syrian refugee children. However, according to a United Nations assessment, 30% of them, about 200,000 children, have never gone to school, and 60% have not been enrolled in schools in recent years¹⁵.

Also, as stated by Mrs. Elena Dikomitis, advocacy manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council in Lebanon, "This year again, parents are reaching out to us because some school principals asked them for newly-issued Syrian government documents or a legal residency permit for their child. These documents are virtually impossible to obtain for most refugees in Lebanon and should not keep children out of school. Many children who were blocked from attending school due to documentation requirements end up working in the streets, after living in displacement for almost a decade."¹⁶ Human Rights Watch also strongly criticized what it described as deliberate policies in Lebanon that prevent Syrian refugee children from accessing education. HRW has also pointed out that the Ministry of Education requires children to obtain certified educational records, legal residency in Lebanon, and other official documents that most Syrian refugees cannot obtain.

Many Syrian refugee children lost 10 years of their life and future because of the enrollment procedures and requirements, imposed by the Lebanese government without any humanitarian or moral considerations. Moreover, there are high costs imposed on refugees to obtain the necessary enrollment documents, despite the huge aid that the Lebanese education sector receives to accommodate Syrian refugee children. 62% of the field research participants reported that their children do not have official documents due to financial costs, while 27% of them indicated that their children do not have official documents due to the complications imposed by the Lebanese government on Syrians to register their children. They have also been facing difficulties in registering the newborn children after 2011 as shown in Figure (7).

— **Figure No. (7):** Obstacles for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon to obtain official documents —



¹⁴ Lebanon: Syrian Refugee Children Blocked from School . December 3, 2021 , HRW <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2021/12/03/380578>

¹⁵ The previous source

¹⁶ The previous source

◉ Syrians' options in case they are forced to return to Syria

The genesis of the current crisis which threatens large numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon with forced return into an unsafe Syria lies in the fact that the Lebanese government does not consider the issue of the displacement of Syrians as a political, but a humanitarian issue, creating a mirage in which 13 million Syrians, more than half of the population, were somehow displaced for natural or economic reasons rather than as a result of a systemic policy implemented by the Syrian regime under Bashar Al Assad.

The latest announcements of the Lebanese government confirm earlier indications that it is prepared to ignore all international positions and resolutions that call for a voluntary, safe and decent return as well as the creation of a safe environment. Article 14 of the UN resolution No. 2254 expressly stipulates the urgent need to create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their areas of origin. Also, the Caesar Law adopted by the United States Congress expressly states that one of the conditions for its repeal in Article 301, Paragraphs B/6 is "The Government of Syria is permitting the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrians displaced by the conflict."



Dan Stoenescu

The head of the European Union delegation to Syria

"The head of the European Union delegation to Syria, Dan Stoenescu, indicated in one of his statements in September 2022 that "All Syrians have the right to return to their homes, but the conditions are not yet in place. What is required first is to create conditions for the safe, voluntary & dignified return of refugees and the internally displaced, in accordance with the international law and the principle of non-refoulement".

The Lebanese government also ignores the occupation of Syrian cities and villages by Hezbollah militia (which is classified as a terrorist organization by the European Union, the United States of America, Britain, and a number of other countries¹⁷) which in 2018 was estimated at about 10.000 fighters in Syria. However, this is not surprising as Hezbollah is a partner in the Lebanese government and has the upper hand in it, which partly explains the policies targeting Syrian refugees.



Within this same context, in 2020 the Lebanese government published a paper titled "General Policy for the Return of the Displaced." This paper came as a result of consultations and discussions within the Lebanese government and it is considered to be in violation of international treaties related to the displaced in general and the conventions related to the displaced Syrians in particular.

This plan means that Syrian refugees will face two options: either to return to Syria from which they fled mainly due to the presence of the current authority that has killed and displaced thousands of Syrians, or to travel to a third country, which is almost impossible for most Syrian refugees due to their financial situation and travelling restrictions. Most countries refuse to receive and host the Syrian refugees, having imposed policies and pressures to force them to return to the areas from which they fled. The impossibility of return to the regime's areas pushes them to seek refuge in other country through illegal immigration and the dangerous smuggling routes that use the so-called "death boats".

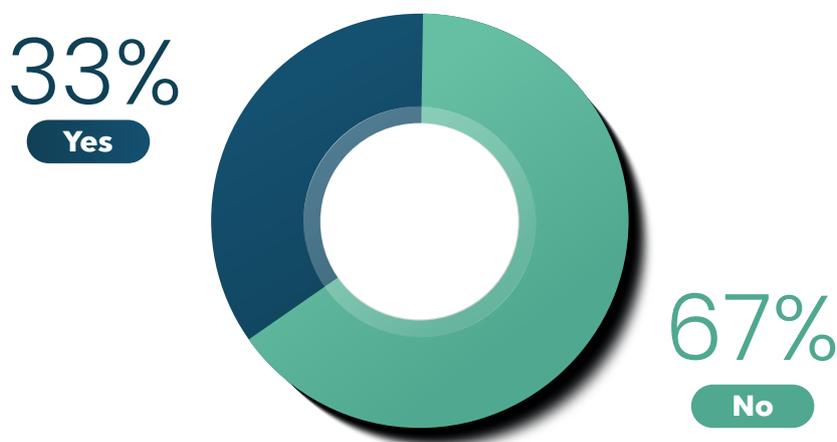
¹⁷ Hezbollah on the Sanctions List, Wikipedia
<https://bit.ly/3fnRiwi>

This policy paper claimed that “returning the displaced refugees is not linked to the political process in Syria”. It also refused to link the political process to the safe return of refugees, which completely contradicts the reality and ignores the facts regarding the reasons for the displacement of Syrians and the conditions they prefer to see before they return to their homes. The plan has also referred to “the necessity of responding to the Syrian government’s demand to hand over the wanted persons”. This effectively means handing over all opponents of the Syrian government who fled for their lives.

In the same context, the Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, has announced the launch of the **“Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2022-2023”**. He also called on the international community to cooperate to return the Syrian refugees to their country, or “Lebanon will take undesirable position toward western countries.”¹⁸

One would expect that with all this pressure and the difficulties faced by the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, their deteriorating legal and economic conditions, their state of anxiety and instability made additionally worse by the announced tendencies of the Lebanese government to return them to their country without any objective considerations, the Syrian refugees may choose to return to Syria under the Assad regime on their own. However, the results of our field research conducted by showed that 67% of the respondents did not show any interest even in visiting Syria, let alone returning, as shown in Figure (8). M. S. answers this question in her own way, saying: “We have nothing in the country, and nothing encourages us to think of returning.”

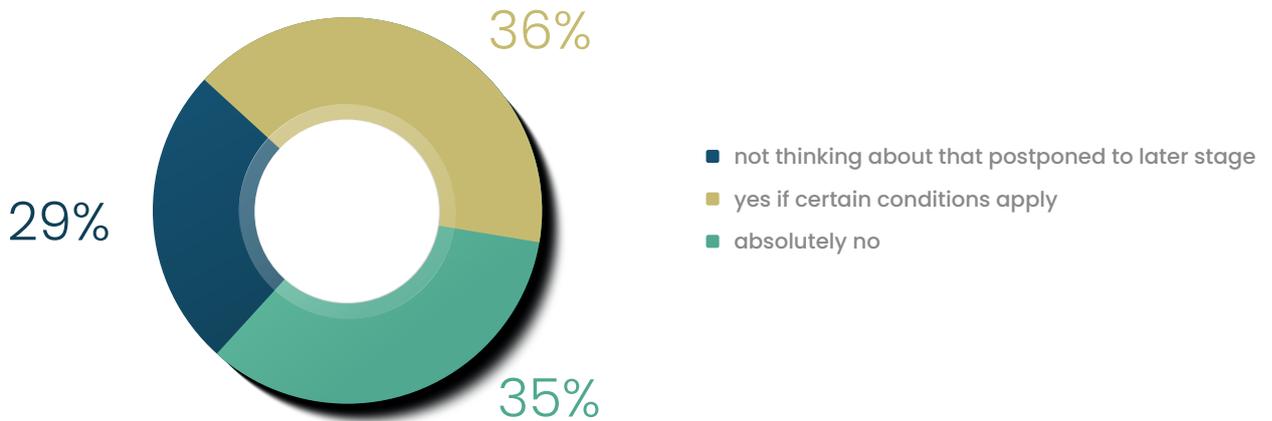
Figure No. (8): The interest of Syrian refugees in Lebanon to visit Syria



In fact, 35% of the participants in the field research explicitly answered that they do not want to return to Syria even if the conditions changed for the better. 36% of them may return if certain conditions are met, while the remaining 29% not thinking about that postponed to later stage. See Figure No. (9)

¹⁸ Lebanon: We will expel Syrian refugees unless the world cooperates to bring them back
<https://bit.ly/3UgdAyV>

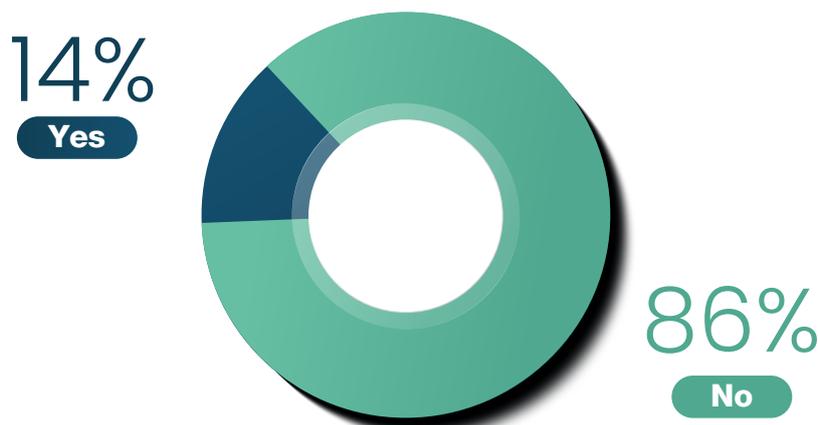
Figure No. (9): the desirability of return to Syria among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in case the conditions are appropriate



These results indicate that despite the catastrophic situation in which the Syrian refugees in Lebanon live, they completely exclude the option of returning to Syria under the reign of the Assad regime. As long as the regime is still in control, for them conditions may be worse than when they fled their homes. As a result, they do not think of going back and are willing to take risks with the "boats of death" than returning home. They insist on emigrating to Europe despite the great dangers they encounter on their way on land or sea as this dangerous journey may lead them to death. **"I will definitely not return, and I believe that the only circumstances that would push me to return to Syria would be if I felt a sense of security stability and not fear of death at any moment"**, Said (N. O.), one of the female respondents who answered the research questions.

The announced plans by the Lebanese government to deport the Syrian refugees back to Syria, do not take into account the return to the original place of residence. Accordingly, regardless of the availability of appropriate conditions for returning, this return cannot in any way be considered a "voluntary return" but rather amounts to a "forced deportation". This was actually confirmed by 86% of the field research participants who do not consider their return to areas other than the areas from which they were displaced as a return to the homeland. In other words, the Syrian refugee in Lebanon considers his return to his homeland as his return to the city or village from which he was displaced, but not to a place where he has never lived, even if it is within Syria. Figure No. (10)

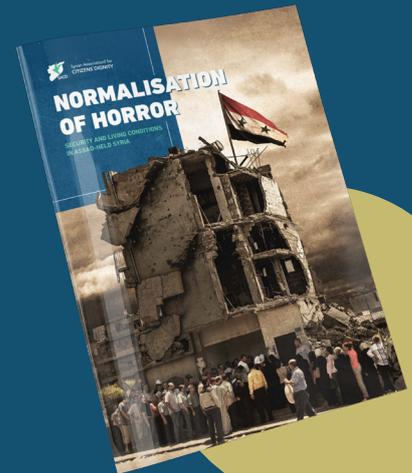
Figure No. (10): Opinions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon regarding deportation to areas inside Syria that are not their original place of residence





This rate is consistent with the findings of a previous report published by SACD, under the title "We are Syria". According to this report, about 73% of the respondents pointed out that the main change that must be achieved for the return of the displaced refugees is to change the control of the security apparatus over the country – 83% of them replied that they would like to return if the security apparatuses were dissolved and restructured¹⁹.

In another report issued in 2021 by SACD, entitled "Normalisation of Horror", SACD referred to amnesty decisions for detainees for the purpose of creating the necessary environment for the return of refugees. The said report also has indicated that no worthwhile and practical guarantee could be obtained from the Syrian and Russian regimes. Accordingly, 82% of the detainees did not benefit from the amnesty decisions because their detention was without trial, whereas 8% of the detainees were not subject to the criteria of amnesty, and 10% of the cases were not released for unknown reasons in spite of the fact that criteria for amnesty were met.



SACD has also pointed out in the aforementioned report that only 26% of the respondents living under Assad indicated that they encouraged people who left Syria to return, whereas 74% did not encourage the return of refugees and IDPs to the areas controlled by Assad regime under the current conditions²⁰.

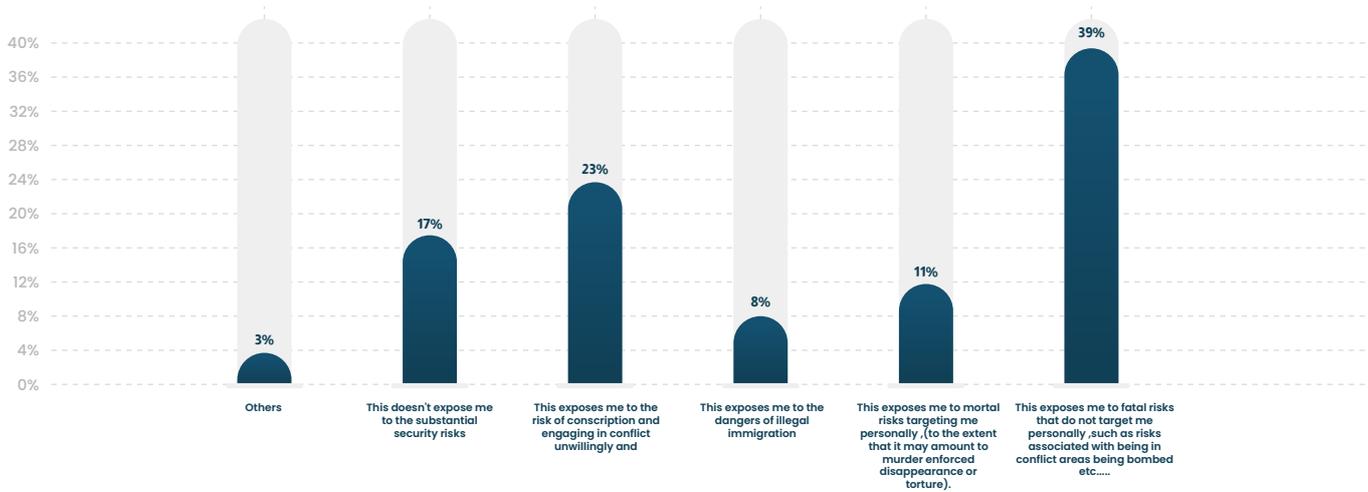
74% of the respondents did not encourage the return of refugees and IDPs to the areas controlled by Assad regime under the current conditions

The high percentage of Syrian refugees who categorically reject the option of returning to Syria, if they are forced to do so, could be easily explained by taking into account the security concerns of Syrian refugees regarding their return. So, 39% of respondents in the research conducted for this briefing indicated that forcing them to return would put their lives at risk, whereas 23% of them reported that they would be under threat of conscription, and 11% will be directly and personally threatened. This means that 73% of the refugee respondents in Lebanon perceive to be directly or indirectly at risk if they are deported to areas under the control of the Assad's regime, as shown in Figure (11).

¹⁹ "We are Syria" report, SACD <http://syacd.org/qnr2>

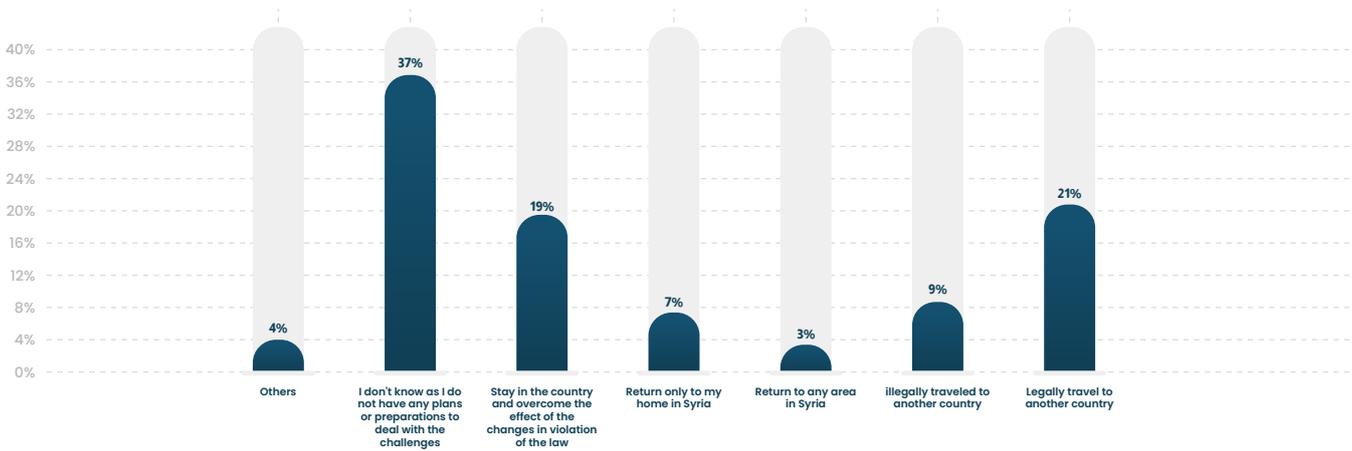
²⁰ "normalization of horror" report, SACD <http://syacd.org/t7bo>

Figure No. (11): Security concerns of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in case they are forced to return to Syria



In the event that the Syrian refugees were indeed forced to return to Syria, only 3% of the field research participants indicated that they would accept to return to any place in Syria, regardless of whether it is their place of origin or not. 37% of the respondents neither have a plan nor know what to do in the event that they were forced to return to Syria, 30% of the respondents would prefer to travel to another country to get out of Lebanon, preferably legally, 19% of the participants will try to stay in Lebanon even if illegally, and 7% will only accept return to their home, as it is shown in Figure No. (12). One of the respondents in this research expressed his fears of forced deportation saying, "Forcing me to leave or forcibly return to Syria will expose me to mortal risks on a personal level; to the extent that it may amount to enforced disappearance, torture, and even murder".

Figure No. (12): Options of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in case they are forced to return to Syria



○ Conclusions

SACD believes that clear and transparent monitoring mechanisms must be established for the aid provided to the host countries to ensure that they reach the beneficiaries. The necessity of continuing to provide assistance to refugees in Lebanon, and to ensure that this assistance reaches them, thus mitigating the negative effects of the presence of refugees on its territory, with all the economic and political problems that the country is already suffering from.

Since the right to access education must be guaranteed for every child, it cannot be accepted in any way that an entire generation of Syrian children waste their lives being prevented from seeking an education in Lebanon, because of the obstacles placed by the Lebanese government. The recent statements of the Lebanese Minister of Education on this matter are very disconcerting, as he said in a statement "We will not borrow to educate non-Lebanese."²¹ The United Nations agencies concerned, especially UNICEF and UNESCO, must take all necessary steps to ensure that Syrian children obtain their right to education as guaranteed by law.

The findings of the field research of this study show that the forcible return of Syrian refugees through the repatriation plans announced publicly by the Lebanese government, tightening the screws on Syrian refugees in Lebanon by making their residency illegal, and limiting their livelihoods with low aid provided by UN, would put them at risk of physical harm, arrest or enforced disappearance at the hands of Assad's forces. It may also cause unrest inside Lebanon itself. The findings of this study have also showed that despite of all these bad conditions experienced by Syrian refugees everywhere in Lebanon, returning to Syria is not a likely option for them. Therefore, forcing them to return would complicate the situation in Lebanon and cause new waves of displacement, primarily towards Europe.

Accordingly, SACD affirms the right of all Syrian IDPs and refugees in various countries of the world to their right of voluntary, safe and dignified return, as guaranteed by relevant international treaties. SACD also asserts that the refugees issue is a purely political one and no one has the right to separate it from reality of the IDPs and Syrian refugees who were forced to leave their homes for fear of persecution, torture and murder.

This would impose a great burden on the countries that will be a destination for new Syrian refugees fleeing the specter of the forced return and the Assad regime. Therefore, the international community must assume its responsibilities in securing decent living conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon if they want to curb the possibility of new displacement towards Europe. All the key countries and stakeholders involved in the Syrian crisis must ensure that the Lebanese government refrains from implementing its plan to forcibly return Syrian refugee, while ensuring the existence of mechanisms that prevent the politicization and dehumanization of the refugees issue in the host countries.

The concept of return does not mean the partial return of refugees, and the return of a small number of refugees by force does not mean that the environment has become suitable for the voluntary, safe and dignified return. As categorically rejected by 86% of the respondents in this study, the return of refugees does not mean their return to areas inside Syria outside their place of origin.

The conditions for return must be defined entirely by the refugees themselves. They are the only ones who have the right to express their thoughts, fears and suggestions about how to return and what changes they want to see so that they can return to the places from which they were forced to leave. Most importantly, these rights and ideas must also be translated into a real political solution within a framework of applicable and robust international guarantees, not the guarantees of the Syrian regime and its allies, as the Syrian regime itself was and still remains the main reason for the displacement of the majority of the Syrian people.

²¹ Minister of Education: If Lebanese students do not learn in the morning shift, then non-Lebanese will not learn in the afternoon shift, Lebanon News <https://bit.ly/3t2c7R0>



SACD
Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

THE MYTH OF “VOLUNTARY” RETURN FROM LEBANON

DESPITE FACING HORRENDOUS CONDITIONS,
SYRIANS REJECT PREMATURE RETURN

