



# SUMMARY

Syrian refugees and Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) fled their homes and country in search of safety, but only 21 percent of Syrian refugees and 24 percent of PRS who participated in Oxfam's 2017 protection research confirmed having found safety in Lebanon. The vast majority of the research participants have no intention of remaining in Lebanon after the conflict in Syria ends, but they do not feel that conditions in Syria currently allow for safe return.

Syrian refugee respondents in Lebanon, both male and female, described daily fears and continuous worry. The majority of PRS respondents indicated that they do not feel protected in Lebanon, either from their environment or from the authorities. As a result of the widespread lack of valid residence permits, both Syrian refugees and PRS face risk of arrest, restrictions on movement, and difficulties accessing decent work. It is thus not surprising that enabling access to valid residence – by cancelling the residency fees and (for Syrians) the sponsorship system – was the key factor relating to attaining a sense of safety in Lebanon, across both respondent groups. The respondents' definitions of safety went beyond immediate threats to encompass aspects of economic, political, and social well-being, such as the ability to access jobs and education. The right to work emerged as a priority factor, particularly for men. Women were more likely than men to highlight improved access to assistance as a key factor enabling a safe and dignified life in Lebanon.

In describing their views on ways to obtain a safe and dignified future, half of Syrian refugee respondents and more than half of PRS respondents see a permanent or temporary move to a third country as a way out of their current dire situation. 28 percent of Syrian refugees and 23 percent of PRS respondents indicated wanting to move temporarily or until the conflict ends, with 22 percent and 35 percent, respectively, indicating a desire to move to a third country for the long term. Respondents expressed beliefs that a move to a third country (notably in Europe) would ensure protection and uphold their rights.

Maintaining family unity was highlighted as a key determining factor for both groups in considering a third-country move. Syrian refugees indicated that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should enable those who want to resettle to a third country to apply for resettlement. Palestinians are excluded from most refugee resettlement schemes, which means that dangerous unofficial routes are more often than not their only option for a third-country move. PRS respondents therefore identified the need for UN agencies to facilitate resettlement, or other opportunities for them to travel safely and legally.

Only 7 percent of PRS and 4 percent of Syrian refugee respondents reported wanting to stay in Lebanon after the end of the conflict in Syria. The majority of both groups indicated return to Syria as their preferred future solution, but 76 percent of PRS and 86 percent of Syrian refugee respondents said that they cannot go back to Syria now. As non-Syrian nationals, PRS face an additional uncertainty about what their status will be in post-conflict Syria. Throughout the course of the research, respondents' discourse reflected their fear of forced return.

While there are some clear points of convergence on what factors undermine or enable a sense of safety, refugees' conceptions of what constitutes 'safety' are individualized and subjective. Refugees need to be supported to find safety in the present, and provided with the information and pathways to make their own decisions about their futures. The international community and host governments should not be making decisions for refugees about what or where is 'safe'.

Policy makers must take refugee perceptions and expectations fully into account, and view refugees as autonomous decision makers. As the conditions for return to Syria do not yet exist, efforts need to be made to enable refugees to live safe and dignified lives in Lebanon, and to increase their access to third countries through safe and legal routes. Attempts to forcibly return refugees to Syria – or to host countries where they do not feel safe – before the conflict has ended and the country is stable, will not only violate the principle of non-refoulement, but will also likely lead to the continued and further displacement of Syrians and Palestinians.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

As the Syria crisis continues into its sixth year, over five million people have sought refuge outside Syria.<sup>1</sup> Lebanon currently hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world. As of October 2016, the Government of Lebanon (GOL) estimated that the country was hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees, as well as more than 30,000 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS), and a pre-existing population of nearly 280,000 Palestine refugees in Lebanon (PRL).<sup>2</sup> Poor Lebanese and PRL have seen their living conditions deteriorate,<sup>3</sup> while Syrian refugees and PRS are subject to restrictions that compound the difficulties they face in supporting themselves. Humanitarian assistance remains essential although insufficient to meet refugees' basic needs, and must be supplemented by multi-year development assistance and rights-based policy approaches that benefit both refugees and host communities.<sup>4</sup>

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the Government of Lebanon considers Lebanon a country of transit, not a country of asylum. As such, the Government of Lebanon rejects the integration of refugees within Lebanon. Further complicated by domestic political paralysis, the response to the refugee crisis has been characterized by short-term policies which reinforce the idea that refugees' stay in Lebanon is meant to be temporary. At the same time, resettlement of Syrian refugees to third countries is far from reaching the 10 percent target called for by international NGOs.<sup>5</sup> With limited safe and legal routes available, a number of refugees from Syria – both Syrian refugees and PRS – have chosen to move onwards via dangerous, irregular routes.

In the face of this protracted crisis, some national and international actors have called for refugees to be returned to so-called 'safe areas' in Syria.<sup>6</sup> Despite a recent agreement to establish 'de-escalation zones' inside Syria, the country is far from safe for return. The conflict remains ongoing, and return could expose refugees to war, detention, torture, abduction, and other forms of violence that they fled Syria to escape. In addition, 13.5 million men, women and children (including 6.3 million who are internally displaced) are already in need of humanitarian and protection assistance inside Syria.<sup>7</sup> Any return enforced before the conflict has ended and the country is stable would violate refugees' rights under international law to voluntary return in safety and dignity. In addition, refugees who may voluntarily choose to attempt return to Syria must be assured of their right to flee again should conditions in Syria prove to be unsafe, unstable or unsustainable.

In this complex context, respecting the dignity of refugees requires sustainable policy responses to the protracted displacement crisis that take into account refugees' perceptions, experiences, and expectations, and uphold refugees' rights to make individual assessments of and choices about their futures. Policy makers must take refugee perceptions and expectations fully into account, and view refugees as autonomous decision makers. The sustainability of top-down solutions that fail to do this will be questionable, may lead to the continued and further displacement of Syrians and Palestinians, and may have potentially far-reaching consequences for the stability of Syria's future.

*'We were looking for safety and for life.'*

Syrian woman in Tripoli, northern Lebanon

## ‘SAFETY’ AS DEFINED BY REFUGEES FROM SYRIA LIVING IN LEBANON

Oxfam undertook protection research in late 2016 and early 2017 that used a participatory methodology to provide a platform for refugees to voice their perceptions and views on the present and future.<sup>8</sup> This research found that while refugees’ conceptions of what constitutes ‘safety’ are individualized and subjective, there are some clear points of convergence on what factors undermine or enable a sense of safety. Most Syrian refugee and PRS survey respondents did not feel they had fully found safety in Lebanon. In addition, while the vast majority of Syrian refugee and PRS respondents have no intention of remaining in Lebanon for the long-term, they do not feel that conditions in Syria currently allow for safe return.

Over the course of the Syrian conflict, the experiences that Syrian refugee and PRS research participants had while fleeing differed considerably, but their reasons for fleeing remained similar: seeking safety was the principal concern. Participants’ conceptions of safety at the time of flight, including when initially fleeing inside Syria, were often associated with safety from war, shelling, airstrikes and armed groups. Safety remains their key concern when looking forward: PRS and Syrian refugee participants both identified safety and the end of the crisis as the key conditions necessary for return to Syria. They perceive Syria as unstable and unsafe. In order to make informed decisions regarding the right time to return, survey respondents identified the importance of information on the security situation in their home regions in Syria.

Although the majority of survey respondents expected to find safety in Lebanon, only 21 percent of Syrian refugee and 24 percent of PRS respondents confirmed that they had. The participants’ definitions of safety went beyond immediate physical threats to bodily integrity (such as violence, arrest and harassment) to also encompass aspects of economic, political, and social wellbeing. When explored further by the researchers, it was clear that the research participants considered a dignified life and the ability to secure basic needs as a key component in attaining a sense of safety. Men and women Syrian refugee participants expressed their fear of forced return, and described daily fears stemming from arrests and raids. These fears are linked to the widespread lack of valid residence status, which is a criminal offence<sup>9</sup> for which refugees (in particular men) are regularly arrested and detained. Respondents also discussed threats and worries (e.g. about arrest, deportation or forced return), and noted that tensions with the host community and local authorities are further eroding their sense of safety. For both Syrian refugees and PRS, their sense of safety in Lebanon is also associated with factors such as freedom of movement, access to jobs/income, and the inability to fulfil basic needs and to access services such as education and healthcare. PRS respondents additionally highlighted family separation as a reason for a decreased sense of safety.

Factors affecting perceptions of safety are interlinked. 79 percent of Syrian refugees and 40 percent of PRS in Lebanon lack valid residence.<sup>10</sup> Refugees are arrested and detained for lacking valid residence (e.g. at checkpoints, and during raids on settlements or workplace inspections). As checkpoints are present throughout the country, many refugees have adopted self-imposed restrictions on movement to reduce their risk of arrest. Limited movement results in reduced

*‘I don’t want to return unless there is peace and stability in Syria.’*

Palestinian man from Syria, in Shatila

*‘We fled for our men and our girls. Girls were getting kidnapped from their homes. We were also afraid that our men and boys would be detained.’*

Syrian woman in Tripoli

*‘We are always afraid. If we don’t have valid residencies, we cannot move around.’*

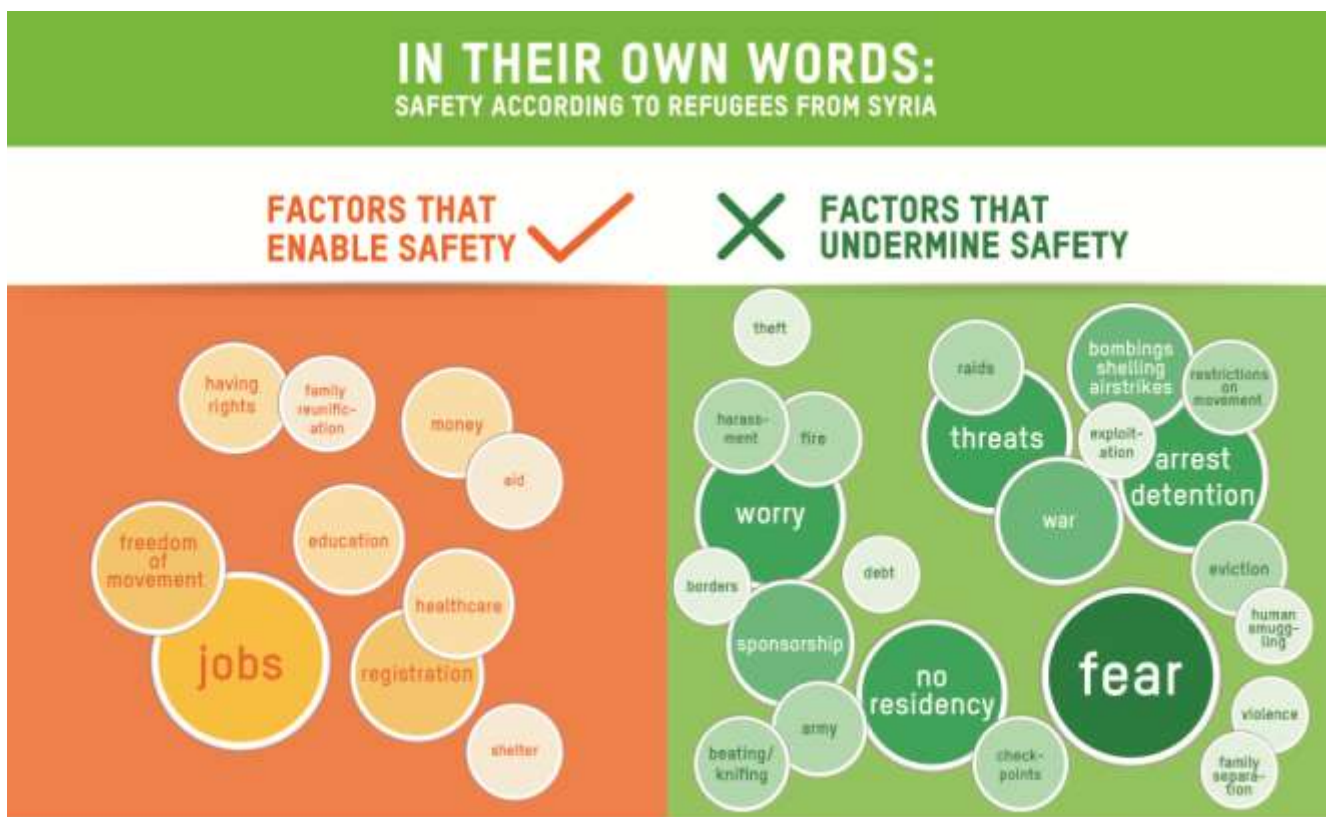
Syrian woman in Bekaa

access to available (almost entirely informal) work. For those who are able to find work, they may have to accept very low wages and/or exploitative and abusive working conditions (because they can be reported to the authorities for any reason). In many cases, refugee women and children, who can more easily pass through checkpoints, have taken up income-earning roles, which has subsequently opened them up to increased risk of abuse and exploitation.<sup>11</sup> To obtain residency, many Syrian refugees have been pushed into sponsorship arrangements, which also leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, including bonded labour. The overall reduced access to decent work means that refugees have less income to live on, which makes it difficult to meet basic needs, increases the need to take on debt, and increases the threat of eviction.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, restrictions on movement and fear of arrest also make it more difficult to move in order to access assistance and subsidized healthcare and education services, as well as making it more difficult to travel to UNHCR offices in order to renew UNHCR registration certificates and maintain valid registration.

*'Safety is having a shelter to protect us, having food to eat, having finances to live. It is having a safe space.'*

Syrian woman in Tripoli

**Figure 1: Factors enabling and undermining safety according to refugees interviewed by Oxfam**



This graphic shows what factors refugees mentioned during discussions around perceptions and definitions of safety, and comparatively how often they mentioned each factor. This was drawn from Oxfam's 2017 protection research, during which we conducted 18 focus group discussions with Syrian refugees and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS), surveyed 738 Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Valley and North Lebanon, and surveyed 197 PRS in two randomly-selected Palestinian camps. See: Nour Shawal and Francesca El Aamir (2017). "We're Not There Yet..." Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon. Oxfam Research Report.

## 2 PALESTINE REFUGEES FROM SYRIA



Hiba, a young Palestinian woman, sought refuge in Lebanon after she fled the war in Syria. Arriving in a camp for Palestinian refugees in North Lebanon, Hiba's family faces dire living conditions. 'When we fled the war and came here, we were expecting to find safety. We didn't find this safety, but we got out of the war.' Photos in this paper were taken by refugees themselves.

Photo: Hiba Abu Nasser, a Palestinian refugee from Syria

Of the 526,744 Palestine refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Syria prior to the conflict, over 120,000 have fled to neighbouring countries, Egypt and Europe.<sup>13</sup> Since May 2014, entry to Lebanon has been severely restricted for PRS (following an initial easing on entry procedures at the start of the conflict). The GOL has issued a number of regulations relating to residency for PRS, which generally provide for one- to three-month windows of time during which PRS can regularize their status, sometimes for free, but at other times with a cost of \$200 per year.<sup>14</sup>

As of the end of 2016, there were 31,502 PRS in Lebanon, 89 percent of whom are living in poverty, mostly in Lebanon's already overcrowded Palestinian camps and gatherings.<sup>15</sup> Although the majority of PRS respondents lived in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, they had perceived themselves more as citizens, rather than as refugees in a host country. In Syria, Palestine refugees were generally treated like Syrians under law number 260 of 1956, which states that '*Palestinians residing in Syria...are to be considered as originally Syrians in all things covered by the law and legally valid regulations connected with the rights to employment, commerce, and national service, while preserving their original*

*nationality*.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, PRL, including those who were born in Lebanon, face legal and institutional discrimination, as well as restrictions on the right to work and the right to own property.<sup>17</sup> For PRS, this stark difference contributes to a gulf in perceptions between their previous lives and the lives they are now living, in double displacement in Lebanon.

#### **Box 1: Palestine refugees in Lebanon**

There are 449,957 Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon, many of whom have been in Lebanon since 1948 or were born in Lebanon. However, only 277,985 PRL still reside in Lebanon, mainly in 12 recognized camps and 42 gatherings (Palestinian communities located outside the official camps, many of which were formed as a result of fighting and destruction during the Lebanese civil war). An estimated 65 percent of PRL are living in poverty. According to a 2015 survey by UNRWA and the American University of Beirut, the physical situation in the Palestinian camps is one of 'decaying infrastructure, a dearth of recreational spaces, insufficient access to roads, deteriorated water and sewage treatment systems, contaminated water, and jerry-rigged electrical wires along with open drainage ditches'.<sup>18</sup>

## PERCEPTIONS OF FINDING SAFETY IN LEBANON

Although 70 percent of PRS survey respondents expected to find safety in Lebanon when fleeing Syria, only 24 percent report that they were able to find it, and the majority of those reporting that they have found safety are women. Focus group discussions indicate that the primary reason for this difference in perception is that men have more difficulty crossing checkpoints and are more likely to be arrested. The majority of PRS respondents indicated that they do not feel protected in Lebanon, either from their environment or from the authorities. As reported by respondents, several factors have contributed to the loss of safety:

- Many PRS are unable to obtain valid residence permits, either because GOL authorities reject their renewal applications or because they are not able to secure the required fees. Lack of valid residence results in refugees restricting their movements (e.g. to avoid crossing checkpoints and risking arrest).
- PRS in Lebanon face restrictions on their right to work, and therefore have little or no access to income.
- Palestinians' access to services has been decreasing since the start of the crisis due to lack of funding.
- Respondents reported feeling held captive within the camps,<sup>19</sup> and the two camps where the respondents reside foster a further sense of insecurity due mainly to the widespread presence of drugs and weapons.
- Family separation was highlighted as a key reason for a decreased sense of safety. According to many respondents, family fragmentation began with family members left behind in Syria who can no longer flee due to the border closure, and has been exacerbated by young men travelling onward from Lebanon.
- PRS respondents reported feeling discriminated against by both PRL and Lebanese people.

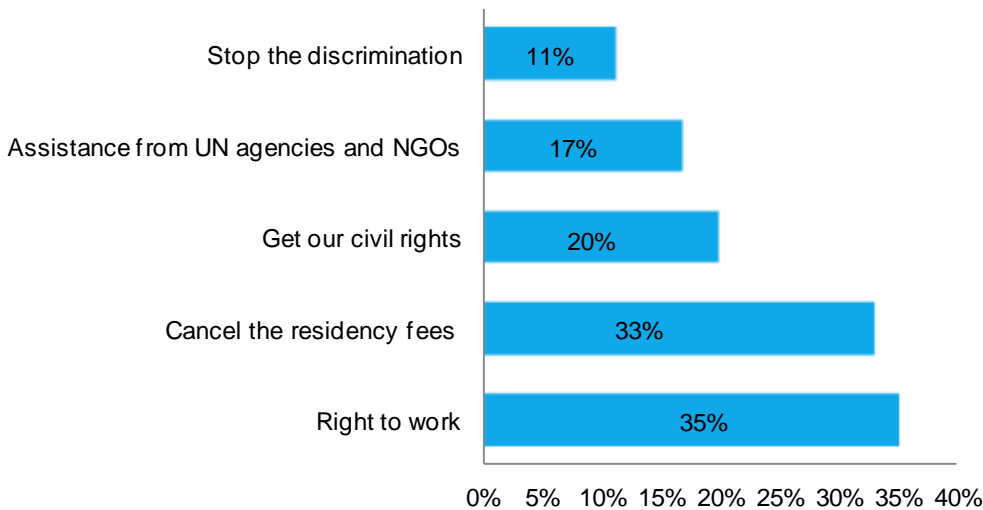


With limited income, limited assistance, and limited recognition of their human and civil rights, PRS are in a dire situation that has a substantial negative impact on their sense of safety.<sup>20</sup> A male respondent from Shatila camp summed up the situation for PRS as follows:

*‘There are three types of safety: social, economic and political. It consists of living with dignity, being able to work safely and live safely. Work is not allowed now. [S]ocial security consists of having basic living standards, no insults, having government protection, no danger, health security, being able to call someone or an institution if you feel in danger.’*

Although 93 percent of PRS respondents do not want to stay in Lebanon in the long term, most do not have any other choice at the moment. In discussing what they would need to make their current stay in Lebanon safe and dignified, PRS respondents highlighted two key requirements: the right to work (a priority for men) and access to residency (by cancelling the residency fees). Interestingly, improved access to assistance was reported by 24 percent of women, but only 7 percent of men.

**Figure 2: What do PRS need to make their stay in Lebanon safe and dignified?<sup>21</sup>**



Note: Responses that received more than 10 percent are reflected in the chart. Respondents were allowed up to three answers per question.

Source: Oxfam research 2017

## PERCEPTIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

Oxfam’s research initiated discussions about the future, with open questions to encourage refugees to freely describe their views on future solutions. The majority of PRS respondents indicated return to Syria as their preferred future solution,<sup>22</sup> but 76 percent felt that return is not possible at this time. PRS respondents do not foresee the conflict ending soon, and even when it does end, they do not know what their status will be as non-Syrian nationals in post-conflict Syria. This creates an additional layer of uncertainty and concern.

According to respondents, safety and the end of the crisis would be their deciding factors in considering return to Syria. PRS respondents expressed the importance of an improved security situation in Syria generally, and in their home areas specifically, to inform their decision making. Once these preconditions are met,

PRS respondents feel they would be able to assess the other material needs that could make return possible.

Moving from Lebanon to a third country is seen by PRS respondents as a way out of their current dire conditions. Over half of PRS respondents indicated a desire to leave Lebanon and move to a third country, 35 percent long-term and 23 percent temporarily until the conflict in Syria is over. However, Palestinians are excluded from most refugee resettlement schemes.<sup>23</sup> This means that dangerous unofficial routes are more often than not their only option for a third country move. This is a journey that most respondents refuse to make by now, having heard reports of their peers dying in the attempt to reach Europe.

PRS respondents identified two building blocks for making their move to a third country possible. First, respondents (in particular women) emphasized that maintaining family unity was essential to any decisions about a move to a third country. Second, respondents identified the need for UN agencies – specifically indicating UNRWA and UNHCR<sup>24</sup> – to facilitate resettlement or (in particular men) other opportunities for them to travel safely and legally.

At present, as Palestine refugees remain barred from returning to their places of origin in historical Palestine, Syria remains unsafe for return; and since they have little access to third countries, the only option they are currently left with is to remain in Lebanon. This was a preferred solution for the future for only 7 percent of respondents.

*'I want to return to Palestine or live anywhere as long as it is like it used to be in Syria before. It's impossible to go back to Syria now ... We're considered Syrians here, but we might not be when it is time to go back. Who knows?'*

Palestinian man from Syria in Shatila camp

*'For me, the best solution is resettlement. Why is it only open for Syrians?'*

Palestinian man from Syria in Beddawi camp

#### **Box 2: The difference between residence and registration**

In Lebanon, **residence** refers to the legal permission for a foreign individual to remain in Lebanon and is granted solely by the GOL. Residence is required for both Syrian refugees and PRS. For Syrian refugees, **registration** refers to the UNHCR process of recording, verifying and assessing the needs of people who approach UNHCR seeking international protection. UNHCR registration is an important avenue for accessing assistance, and provides refugees with a record of their status. However, UNHCR registration does not provide refugees with any legal status under Lebanese law, and does not protect Syrian refugees in Lebanon from arrest or detention. At the instruction of the GOL, UNHCR registration for Syrian refugees was suspended in May 2015. For PRS, UNRWA maintains registration records of individuals and families, to determine who is eligible for UNRWA services.<sup>25</sup>

### 3 SYRIAN REFUGEES

An estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees are currently living in Lebanon, including 1.01 million who are registered with UNHCR and many who are present but not currently registered.<sup>26</sup> 71 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living in poverty.<sup>27</sup> Prior to the conflict, Syrian and Lebanese citizens enjoyed relatively free movement between the two countries,<sup>28</sup> and estimates suggest that pre-crisis there were between 200,000 and 600,000 Syrian workers in Lebanon (depending on the season and state of the economy).<sup>29</sup>

In January 2015, the GOL effectively closed Lebanese borders to Syrians seeking safety/asylum, and introduced new residency requirements for Syrians.<sup>30</sup> These regulations provide two main pathways to residency: 1) applying on the basis of a UNHCR registration certificate,<sup>31</sup> or 2) obtaining a pledge of responsibility (sponsorship) by a Lebanese citizen.<sup>32</sup> Until recently, both pathways required a \$200 fee. In May 2015, the GOL instructed UNHCR to suspend registration of Syrian refugees. Until mid-2016, a 'pledge not to work' was required to obtain residency on the basis of UNHCR registration, and while this pledge was in place it had the effect of pushing registered refugees into sponsorship. In early 2017, the GOL lifted the \$200 fee for residency based on UNHCR registration. While a positive step, this fee waiver does not apply to Syrian refugees who are not registered with UNHCR or to any Syrian refugees who previously obtained residency via sponsorship. In addition, initial monitoring of the implementation of this fee waiver by humanitarian protection actors indicates that it is being applied inconsistently.



'We used to see war on TV. Now it has become part of our reality,' say Yara and Raseel, two Syrian refugee women in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Both fled their war torn hometown of Raqqa in 2013. Photos in this paper were taken by refugees themselves.

Photo: Yara and Raseel, Syrian refugees in Bekaa

## PERCEPTIONS OF FINDING SAFETY IN LEBANON

Seeking safety was the main driver behind displacement in and from Syria. However, in many cases, Syrian refugee respondents' expectations that they would find safety in Lebanon were not met. While they report that at the beginning of arrivals in Lebanon they felt safer and were treated better, only 21 percent confirmed finding safety in Lebanon at the time of Oxfam's research. Factors contributing to respondents' loss of or inability to regain safety include:

- Lack of valid residency documents (reported by men in particular)
- Recurrent arrests and raids
- Tension with the host community and the local authorities
- Threats of deportation and forced return (e.g. as articulated by GOL officials and reported in the media)
- Threat of eviction
- Inability to meet basic needs (e.g. due to lack of income and insufficient assistance)
- Decreased access to services such as education and healthcare

Male and female Syrian refugees describe daily fears and continuous worry stemming from arrests, raids and the lack of valid documentation, leading them (men in particular) to restrict their own movements. Previous Oxfam research from 2016<sup>33</sup> found that Syrian refugees are not safe at home, at work or even when going about daily tasks. They face the possibility of raids on settlements and inspections at workplaces, exploitation at work (and, if they lack valid residence, cannot safely access justice in case of abuse or exploitation), and generalized harassment (often for no reason other than being Syrian). Syrian refugees who lack valid residence face more problems at checkpoints, have more challenges in accessing livelihoods and essential services, are more likely to have outstanding debts, and are more likely to be assaulted, threatened or harassed.<sup>34</sup>

Socio-economic issues are directly related to safety. For example, nearly all Syrian refugees in Lebanon pay rent, and in the absence of adequate income, their risk of eviction for non-payment increases. Similarly, without enough income, refugees have to borrow money to meet their needs or go in debt to landlords, which in turn generates new risks of exploitation and abuse. In addition, lack of valid residence and residence via sponsorship both create increased risks of workplace exploitation, including withholding of pay, longer (unpaid) work hours, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and abuse, and threats of being reported to the authorities or having sponsorship withdrawn.<sup>35</sup>

Over the years, refugees from Syria have experienced an increased sense of institutional as well as social rejection in Lebanon, manifested in the stereotypes and hostility generated at local levels, and restrictive policies at the national level. A Syrian woman in Tripoli said, *'Here there is safety from war but we fear the government and locals. They would hit our sons if they see them on the streets and we can't even speak up.'* Similarly, a young Syrian woman in Tripoli noted, *'If we go out at night, people start rumours about us. They ask things of us. They harass us and we can't speak up.'*

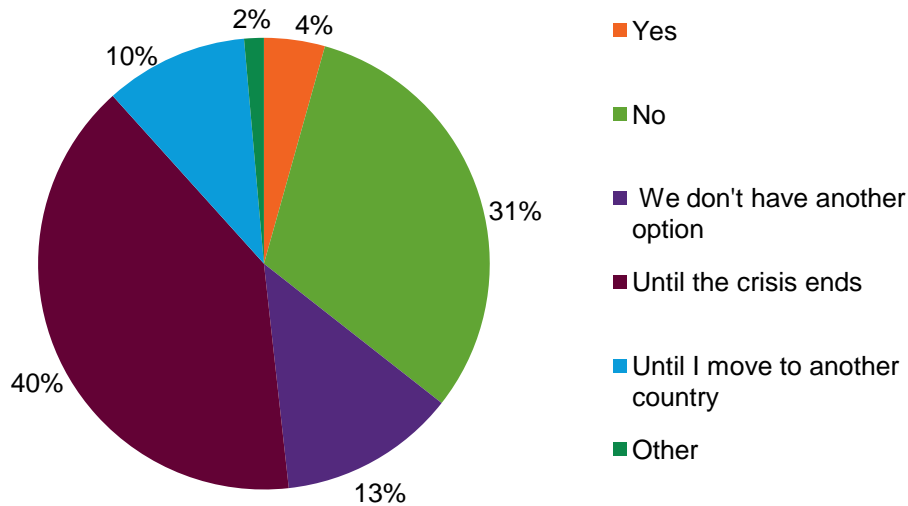
*'Here, it's all about money. Even if you're dying in front of a hospital, you need to pay to be treated.'*

Syrian woman in Bekaa

*'Safety is: not being threatened to lose one's living, to be evicted, not to be arrested, to have freedom of movement.'*

Syrian man in Tripoli

**Figure 3: Do Syrian refugees want to stay in Lebanon in the long term?**



Source: Oxfam research 2017

A future in Lebanon is not what the majority of refugees from Syria hope for: less than 4 percent of Syrian respondents reported wanting to stay in Lebanon after the end of the war in Syria.<sup>36</sup> Respondents reported feeling stuck in Lebanon, and the phrase ‘There is no future for Syrians in Lebanon’ was frequently repeated. While the vast majority of Syrian refugee respondents stated that once the crisis ends, they want to return to Syria, they need to be able to lead a safe and dignified life in Lebanon now, until the conditions for return exist.

Unsurprisingly, the key precondition identified by Syrian refugees for leading safe and dignified lives in Lebanon – according to both focus group discussions and surveys – is access to valid residence permits. Cancelling the sponsorship-based residency system was the factor that scored highest among both men and women Syrian refugee respondents, and cancelling the residency fee scored third-highest. The second-highest factor (reported significantly more by women) was receiving assistance from UN agencies and NGOs. Right to work was only the fourth-highest factor, which may indicate the degree to which residency is viewed by Syrian refugees as the primary obstacle to work. Sponsorship is the only pathway to residence currently open to many Syrian refugees. In addition to risks of exploitation and abuse, and threats to withdraw sponsorship if refugees do not comply with demands, sponsorship also carries significant costs in addition to the regular \$200 fee. Sponsors regularly charge unofficial fees for their support, in some cases up to \$1000.<sup>37</sup>

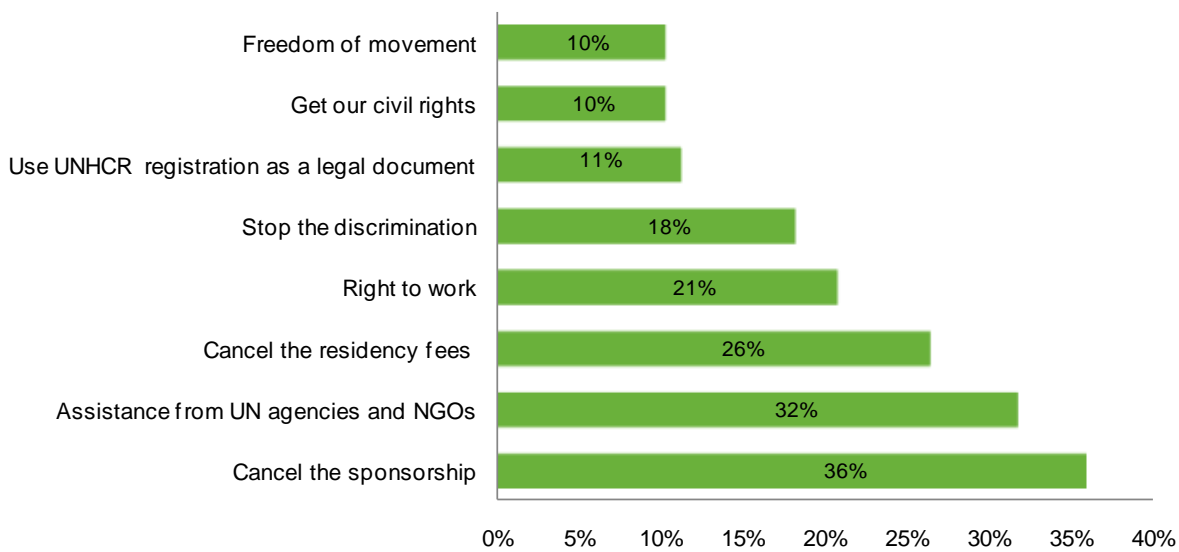
*‘For safety here, we need a solution for residencies and checkpoints.’*

Syrian woman in Tripoli

*‘The sponsor controls the sponsored. They can fabricate charges easily.’*

Syrian man in Bekaa

**Figure 4: What do Syrian refugees need to make their stay in Lebanon safe and dignified?**



Note: Responses that received more than 10 percent are reflected in the chart. Respondents were allowed up to three answers per question.

Source: Oxfam research 2017

## PERCEPTIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite the challenges they face in leading a safe and dignified life in Lebanon, 86 percent of Syrian refugee respondents said that they cannot go back to Syria now. Throughout the course of Oxfam’s research, respondents’ discourse reflected their fear of forced return. Even though the research shows that refugees want to return to Syria in the future, it also confirms that respondents feel the conditions for return have not been met. Safety is the most important factor in decisions about return, with more than 90 percent of Syrian respondents identifying safety, the end of the crisis, and peace as key conditions necessary for their return to Syria.<sup>38</sup> In order to make an informed decision regarding the right time to return, respondents identified the importance of information on both the security situation in their home regions and policies towards amnesty.

*‘My children fear being forced to go back to Syria.’*

Syrian refugee woman in Mina

Half of the Syrian refugee respondents said that they wanted to move to a third country (22 percent for the long term, and 28 percent temporarily or until the conflict ended). Respondents expressed beliefs that a move to a third country (notably in Europe) would ensure protection and uphold their rights, as well as give hope of improved living conditions, with access to services, job opportunities, and education.<sup>39</sup> However, nearly 50 percent of Syrian refugee respondents said that they did not want to move to a third country. Reasons for this included proximity to Syria, and reluctance to subject themselves to further cultural differences and an unfamiliar lifestyle. Some Syrian refugees explained that, regardless of the way they were treated, they preferred being in Lebanon because they felt close to their country.

*‘I got a resettlement opportunity to Rome but I did not go. I am better off here.’*

Syrian man in Tripoli

### Box 3: Pathways to third countries

**Resettlement** is an option whereby a third country (i.e. not the one the refugee has fled from, or the country of first asylum) offers refugee status to that individual in its territory. **Humanitarian admission** programmes are much like resettlement, but normally involve expedited processing, sometimes without the involvement of UNHCR, and may provide either permanent or temporary stay depending on the legislation or policy of the state offering this option. Humanitarian admissions criteria are sometimes based on factors other than protection risk or vulnerability, such as existing links to the country offering admission. **Other forms of admission** could include allowing refugees from Syria legal access to third countries, e.g. through community sponsorship or by relaxing requirements for entry visas to work and study, not necessarily based upon their vulnerabilities.<sup>40</sup>

When considering resettlement or a temporary move to a third country, respondents had two priorities. One priority was family unity, with 38 percent of respondents confirming that the whole family being able to resettle together would be a decisive factor in the decision to move. In this regard, it is worth noting that the respondents' definition of 'family' may be broader and more multi-generational than more nuclear definitions of 'family' used by some resettlement countries. The second priority was further support from UNHCR: 74 percent of respondents indicated that UNHCR should support those Syrian refugees who want to resettle to a third country by allowing them to apply for resettlement through the agency. Respondents agreed that vulnerability may be the most important factor in determining eligibility for resettlement, but were seeking a way to proactively express their desire to move rather than waiting to be contacted by UNHCR.<sup>41</sup> Some respondents gave examples of people who had been interviewed for resettlement when they were no longer interested in moving, whereas others who wanted to leave had not been interviewed.

*'A lot of us want to resettle. The UN should have a way for people to apply because they only ask those who don't want to go. We're not allowed to apply.'*

Syrian woman in Tripoli

## 4 CONCLUSION

The vast majority of refugees who participated in Oxfam's research see their future in Syria, but do not believe that the conditions for return currently exist. PRS and Syrian refugee respondents both identified safety and the end of the crisis as the key conditions necessary for return. Although hope for a safe and dignified future is largely seen as synonymous with a return to Syria, as the conditions for safe return do not yet exist, efforts need to be made to enable refugees from Syria to live safe and dignified lives in the present. However, the majority of Syrian and PRS respondents said that they had not found complete safety and protection in Lebanon, with some living in a constant state of fear. Improving safety and dignity for refugees from Syria should start with ensuring access to valid residence in Lebanon, and increasing their access to third countries through safe and legal routes.

Refugees from Syria have a right to voluntary return in safety and dignity, and – if and when they decide to return – a right to decide where in Syria they want to return to. Respecting these rights means providing refugees with the information, tools, time and space required to make their own individual risk assessments, based on their own unique individual circumstances, and come to their own decisions about their futures. This may mean that some refugees will decide to return long before others do, and some refugees may determine that return is not possible and a third country is their best or only option. The international community and host governments should not be making decisions for refugees about when or if return is 'safe'. Attempts to forcibly return refugees to Syria – or to host countries where they do not feel safe – before the conflict has ended and the country is stable, will not only violate the principle of non-refoulement, but will also likely lead to the continued and further displacement of Syrians and Palestinians.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*'We want the war to end. We want safety.'* – Syrian woman in Bekaa

- **The international community and all parties to the conflict** must urgently prioritize finding a political solution to the conflict – one that involves women and men from affected communities including refugees, provides stability and a sustainable end to hostilities, and enables the building blocks for reconciliation and social justice.

*'I don't want to return unless there is peace and stability in Syria.'*  
– Palestinian man from Syria in Shatila

- For most refugees, it is too early to consider return to Syria as a possibility. **Governments engaged in negotiations and/or hosting refugees** must ensure that any plan or agreement for the return of refugees upholds their rights to voluntary, safe and dignified return, in line with international law and principles of international protection, and that refugees are fully and meaningfully informed to make return decisions, including about the safety in their areas of origin or chosen return, and their ability to access basic rights and needs upon return.



- **Governments engaged in negotiations** must demand inclusion of the right of PRS to return to Syria, with all of the rights that they held under Law 260 from 1956 intact.

*‘I wish I could go to Europe. At least they have education and a future and safety.’ – Palestinian man from Syria in Beddawi camp*

- **Wealthy countries** should scale up safe and regular routes through other forms of admission for refugees from Syria (including Palestinian and other non-Syrian nationals displaced by the conflict), such as family reunification, scholarships and labour-based schemes, in addition to increasing resettlement to the most vulnerable 10 percent of the refugee population from Syria by the end of 2017.
- **UNHCR and/or resettlement countries** should establish mechanisms that enable Syrian refugees who are interested in being resettled or moving abroad on a temporary basis to apply for these opportunities, without diminishing or prejudicing the integrity of vulnerability-based criteria for resettlement and humanitarian admission schemes.
- **Wealthy countries** should specifically scale up options for PRS to obtain protection in third countries. As long as Palestinians are not granted their right to return to historical Palestine and cannot access adequate protection in neighbouring countries, they should have access to protection in a third country, including through resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admissions.

*‘Safety is having valid residencies and an easier and cheaper process to renew, without sponsors.’ – Syrian woman in Tripoli*

- **The Government of Lebanon** should ensure that all Syrian refugees and PRS are able to easily access a form of legal status that grants their basic rights and allows them the capacity to sustain themselves.
- **The Government of Lebanon, UN, and donor governments** should work together to ensure access to decent work for refugees from Syria, without prejudice to their UNHCR registration status, and improve mechanisms for monitoring the enforcement of labour safeguards.
- **The Government of Lebanon** should grant PRL their full social, economic and civil rights.
- **Donor governments** should continue to provide flexible and longer-term humanitarian funding to meet the massive scale of needs for both Syrian and Palestine refugees, in line with the appeals under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017–20.

## NOTES

- 1 Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal. Accessed 25 May 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
- 2 Government of Lebanon (GOL)/United Nations (UN) (2016). *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) 2017-20*, 8. Note: according to the Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal (Accessed 25 May 2017, <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>), 1,011,366 Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR as of December 2016. The 1.5 million figure used in the LCRP reflects also the many Syrian refugees who are present in Lebanon but unregistered, due in large part to the suspension of UNHCR registration in May 2015.
- 3 67 percent of deprived Lebanese and 87 percent of all displaced persons from Syria live in 251 cadastres, many of which are in the same geographic areas that suffered from pre-crisis gaps in public services. Poor Lebanese households face a decrease in income and an increase in debts. See: GOL/UN (2014). *LCRP 2015–16*.
- 4 Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon (2017). *LCRP 2017 Quarter 1 Funding Update*. The 2017 appeal was only 8 percent funded as of 31 March 2017.
- 5 Oxfam has consistently called for rich countries to resettle the most vulnerable 10 percent of Syria's refugees who are currently living in neighbouring countries. See: Evelien van Roemburg, Alexandra Saieh and Daniel Gorevan (2016). *Where there's a will, there's a way: Safe Havens Needed for Refugees from Syria*. Oxfam.
- 6 See for example: The Daily Star (2017, 4 February). *Aoun to Grandi: Help Syrians Go Home*. Accessed 23 March 2017, <https://www.pressreader.com/lebanon/the-daily-star-lebanon/20170204/281513635886837>
- 7 UNOCHA (2016). *2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview – Syrian Arab Republic*, 7.
- 8 Nour Shawaf and Francesca El Asmar (2017). 'We're Not There Yet...' Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon. Oxfam. <http://oxf.am/ZaoC> As part of this research, 18 focus group discussions were conducted with Syrian refugees and PRS, 736 Syrian refugees (409 women and 327 men) were surveyed in Oxfam programme areas in the Bekaa Valley and North Lebanon, and 197 PRS (114 women and 83 men) were surveyed in two randomly-selected Palestinian camps (Beddawi and Shatila).
- 9 The 1962 law regulating entry, stay and exit of foreigners in Lebanon incriminates irregular stay regardless of status.
- 10 AlSharabati, Carole and Jihad Nammour (2016). *Survey on Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Between Resilience and Vulnerability*. University of Saint Joseph (USJ), Political Science Institute. Presentation of Results. February 2017; UNRWA (2017). February 2017 Protection Brief: Palestine Refugees Living in Lebanon.
- 11 Merits Partnership (2016). *Self-Protection and Coping Strategies of Refugees from Syria and Host Communities in Lebanon*. Oxfam. 13-15
- 12 There are no formal camps for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Nearly all Syrian refugees pay rent, even those living in tents or temporary structures in informal settlements.
- 13 UNRWA. *Syria Crisis*. Accessed 31 May 2017, <https://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis#Syria-Crisis-and-Palestine-refugees>.
- 14 Jad Chaaban, et al. (2016). *Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon: 2015*. American University of Beirut (AUB) and UNRWA, 8.
- 15 GOL/UN (2016). *LCRP 2017-20*, 8; Jad Chaaban, et al. (2016). *Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon: 2015*. AUB and UNRWA, 9.
- 16 Alex Takkenberg (1998). *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, 1st ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 17 Jad Chaaban, et al. (2016). *Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon: 2015*. AUB and UNRWA, 7.
- 18 GOL/UN (2016). *LCRP 2017-20*, 8; UNRWA Lebanon. *Where We Work*. Accessed 21 March 2017, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>; UNDP and UN-HABITAT (2015). *Improving Living Conditions in Palestinian Gatherings in Lebanon*; Jad Chaaban, et al. (2016). *Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon: 2015*. AUB and UNRWA, 9.
- 19 In some cases PRS who lack valid residence are quite literally stuck, as some of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon have security checkpoints for entry/exit.
- 20 ANERA (2013). *Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon: A Needs Assessment*. PRS 'have fewer legal protections than other communities, no legal employment possibilities, and are mostly lodged with the poorest host communities in Lebanon'; Jad Chaaban, et al. (2016). *Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon: 2015*. AUB and UNRWA. 3, 12: PRS 'live in constant fear of deportation' and 57 percent of PRS report feeling insecure due to the physical and social environment.
- 21 As indicated by the refugee volunteers who were collecting the data in the Palestinian camps, and validated during feedback sessions with the communities, when respondents selected 'to get our

- civil rights,' they went beyond the traditional framework of civil rights and expressed the need to acquire their economic rights and to generally have their basic human rights respected.
- 22 While older people who were born in Palestine were more prone to express their desire to return to Palestine rather than Syria during focus group discussions, volunteers who collected the survey data found that people were prone to talk about a return to Syria.
  - 23 A few countries, such as Ireland, have pledged resettlement places for non-Syrian nationals who have been displaced from the Syria crisis, which have been opened to Palestine refugees from Syria. However, there are no resettlement programmes for Palestine refugees, including those from Lebanon.
  - 24 It is important to note that UNHCR's mandate does not cover Palestine Refugees in countries where UNRWA is operational. This statement reflects the request of PRS respondents, who referred to UNHCR because they are aware of the fact that UNHCR is the agency that handles most resettlement.
  - 25 UNHCR. *Registration*. Accessed 31 May 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/registration.html>; UNRWA. *Eligibility and Registration*. Accessed 31 May 2017, <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/eligibility-registration>.
  - 26 GOL/UN (2016). *LCRP 2017-20*, page 8.
  - 27 UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP Lebanon (2016), *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASYR) 2016*, 2.
  - 28 Article 1, Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination between the Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 September 1993
  - 29 See for example: S. Ajluni and M. Kawar (2015), *Towards Decent Work in Lebanon: Issues and Challenges in Light of the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. International Labour Organization (ILO).
  - 30 Since January 2015, Syrian nationals must enter Lebanon under one of several visa categories (with documentary proof), namely: tourism, work visit, property owner, tenant, student, shopping, travelling to another country/transiting through Lebanon, medical visits, appointment with a foreign embassy, or as a displaced person. To enter as a 'displaced person' Syrian nationals must meet one of the exceptional humanitarian criteria developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA): unaccompanied and separated children (under 16 years of age) whose parents and legal guardians are confirmed to be displaced in Lebanon; persons with disabilities dependent on family and relatives confirmed to be displaced in Lebanon; persons in need of life-saving medical treatment not usually available in Syria, or not available in a timely manner; and transiting through Lebanon to a third country (with proof of onward travel). The number of humanitarian exception cases granted has been minimal. It should be noted that Syrian nationals can also enter Lebanon if a Lebanese national 'sponsors' them. See: *Regulations and rules about the entry of Syrians to Lebanon and their residency*, issued on 23 February 2015 by Directorate of the General Security: [http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news\\_det.aspx?d=194](http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news_det.aspx?d=194)
  - 31 Practically speaking, due to the suspension of UNHCR registration, it is only possible for Syrian refugees who arrived in Lebanon prior to 5 January 2015 and registered with UNHCR prior to May 2015 to hold valid UNHCR registration certificates.
  - 32 Pledge of responsibility announced on 23 February 2015: [http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news\\_det.aspx?d=194](http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news_det.aspx?d=194)
  - 33 Merits Partnership (2016). *Self-Protection and Coping Strategies of Refugees from Syria and Host Communities in Lebanon*. Oxfam.
  - 34 AlSharabati, Carole and Jihad Nammour (2016). *Survey on Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Between Resilience and Vulnerability*. USJ, Political Science Institute. Presentation of Results, February 2017; UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP Lebanon (2016). *VASYR 2016*; AUB (2015), *Profiling of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, 12.
  - 35 Merits Partnership (2016). *Self-Protection and Coping Strategies of Refugees from Syria and Host Communities in Lebanon*. Oxfam. 14, 17; Human Rights Watch (2016). *'I Just Wanted to be Treated Like a Person': How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees*. 19-20, 22-25.
  - 36 AlSharabati, Carole and Jihad Nammour (2016) had the same 4 percent finding.
  - 37 Human Rights Watch (2016). *'I Just Wanted to be Treated Like a Person': How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees*. 19-20.
  - 38 This finding resonates with the VASYR 2016, which indicated that 71 percent of Syrian refugee households 'cited safety and security in Syria as the most important factor influencing their potential return' (page 16).
  - 39 This is consistent with the VASYR 2016 finding on the top five factors for Syrian refugees considering moving to a third country: lack of safety and security in Lebanon, high cost of living in Lebanon, better education opportunities for children, safety in third country, and respect for human rights in third country (page 16).
  - 40 Evelien van Roemburg, Alexandra Saieh and Daniel Gorevan (2016). *Where there's a will, there's a way: Safe Havens Needed for Refugees from Syria*. Oxfam. 3.
  - 41 UNHCR identifies refugee cases for potential resettlement based on vulnerabilities. Following this initial identification, refugees are interviewed by UNHCR and asked if they would like their case to be put forward for resettlement.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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