

The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions *

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Abstract

Despite the importance of understanding how refugee crises end, little is known about when and why refugees return home. We study the drivers of refugees' decision-making using original observational and experimental data from a representative sample of 3,003 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. We find that conditions in a refugee's home country are the primary drivers of return intentions. Refugees' decisions are influenced primarily by safety and security in their place of origin, their economic prospects, the availability of public services, and their personal networks. Confidence in information is also important, as several drivers of return only impact intentions among people who have high confidence in their information. By contrast, the conditions in refugee-hosting countries—so-called “push” factors—play a much smaller role. Even in the face of hostility and poor living conditions, refugees are unlikely to return unless the situation at home improves significantly.

1 Introduction

Mass forced displacement has proven to be an enduring challenge in contemporary international politics. More than 26 million people live as refugees worldwide, and the consequences of these persistent refugee crises are profound. Forcibly displaced people face joblessness and food insecurity, lack legal status, and experience hostility and violence in host countries. The governments of hosting countries also struggle to meet the additional demands that refugees place on public services and infrastructure (The World Bank, 2017). The consequences of forced migration are particularly acute in developing countries, where more than 85% of refugees reside, because of constrained government budgets, weak state capacity, and limited public infrastructure (UNHCR, 2019*a*). Despite the significant challenges that refugee crises pose to refugees themselves, hosting countries, and international donors, effective responses are lacking. Each year over the last decade, less than 1% of refugees worldwide received citizenship in a hosting country and only 1-2% were resettled (UNHCR, 2019*a*, pp. 28-33). The vast majority of refugees remain in a state of limbo, neither able to integrate locally nor find a new home through resettlement.

How then do refugee crises come to an end? This is a critical issue for politicians in hosting countries and policymakers in the humanitarian sector who must raise resources to sustain these populations. To answer this question, we need an understanding of whether, when, and why refugees choose to return home. But this has proven to be a challenging issue to explore empirically. Existing administrative data on refugee return is incomplete: in the past, many returns went unrecorded and the definition of return varied across organizations and across countries, making systematic analysis difficult. Moreover, data collection is especially challenging with mobile populations. The unpredictable timing of return means that it has been difficult to capture household return intentions and behaviors through surveys, especially in contexts of ongoing violence, which compound challenges related to data collection and sample attrition.

We tackle the challenges of studying refugee return with original cross-sectional survey data from a nationally representative sample of 3,003 Syrian refugee households in Lebanon. We use this data to examine predictors of return intentions and preparations, to explore the role of information, and to identify differences in the drivers of short- and long-term return intentions. We supplement this analysis of observational data with a conjoint experiment in order to isolate the causal effect of conditions in Syria and Lebanon on return intentions, and an examination of early panel data to test the relationship between return intentions and

return behavior. Finally, we explore the generality of our findings using a second original survey of Syrian refugees in Jordan.

The Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon provides a useful setting in which to examine the dynamics of refugee return. When we launched our study in October 2019, active conflict in Syria was diminishing and many governmental and humanitarian organizations had begun discussing and even facilitating returns. At the same time, conditions across Syria varied widely—many areas remained insecure, and overall prospects for safety, economic recovery, and service provision were uncertain. Moreover, Syrian refugees in Lebanon experienced highly differentiated living conditions, local government policies, and levels of community hostility. In some municipalities, local governments actively targeted refugees for harsh treatment and prominent politicians called for accelerating their return, while in others refugees were integrating both economically and socially. We leverage this variation in prospects in the country of origin and well-being in the host country to learn about the drivers of return intentions.

Our data yield four important findings regarding the drivers of refugee return. First, there is strong evidence that pull factors play a more important role in shaping choices about return than push factors. Perceptions of individual-level safety in Syria are highly predictive of return intentions, as are economic conditions and the availability of public services. Personal networks in Syria also play an important role. By contrast, conditions in Lebanon do not significantly shape return intentions, even though some Syrians confront extremely challenging living situations. Second, the confidence that refugees have in their information about the situation at home is important for translating underlying preferences into actual plans to return. We find evidence that a number of drivers of return—regime control, economic prospects, access to services, and networks in Syria—are moderated by whether people have high confidence in information about conditions in Syria. Third, we find a strong relationship between intentions and behavior in early results from a follow-up panel survey, underscoring the value of systematically measuring return intentions and plans. Finally, the results reaffirm the fundamental humanitarian nature of refugee crises. Despite having been displaced for nearly a decade and having little hope to return in the near future, people who have fled the violence and societal devastation of civil war generally want to return home when those threats dissipate. Forcible displacement is not a cover for economic migration.

This article contributes to three distinct research agendas. First, an emerging body of

work focuses on the drivers of return for internally displaced persons (IDPs), who face the question of whether to return to their region of origin in countries experiencing conflict (Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin, 2014; Beber et al., 2013; Stefanovic, Loizides and Parsons, 2015; Camarena and Hagerdal, 2020). We push this literature in a new direction with a focus on refugees, who, given their distinct legal status and geographic separation from their country of origin, face a set of unique options and constraints as they weigh whether to return home. Second, we approach the literature on host country politics from a new perspective. Traditionally, research on immigrant–native dynamics focuses on host populations in the receiving country, examining the effect of immigration and refugees on local labor markets (e.g., Scheve and Slaughter, 2001), political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014), and tensions, discrimination, and conflict (e.g., Adida, 2014). We explore the possibility that these host country dynamics may in turn shape choices about return. Our results show that refugees may be willing to live with extreme hardship in the absence of a viable opportunity to return to their home country. Third, this work is relevant to the rich literature on post-conflict reconstruction. While much of that work focuses on the dynamics of UN peacekeeping and foreign assistance, our results suggest a particular challenge for post-conflict governments and their international supporters. As conditions improve in a post-conflict environment, countries are likely to experience a wave of return migration—creating both opportunities and challenges. If well managed, return migration can spur economic growth and recovery; however, it can also undermine security, exacerbate conflict, and put added stress on service delivery (Blattman, Hartman and Blair, 2014; Bahar et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2019; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2020).

2 When Do Refugees Return?

In considering the question of how refugee crises end, a natural place to begin is the cessation of violence. Forced migration is often driven by violence (Davenport, Moore and Poe, 2003; Adhikari, 2013; Schon, 2019; Holland and Peters, 2020), and the end of hostilities in the home country may be a major driver of refugee return. In fact, when conflicts come to an end, refugees often find themselves pushed to return by aid agencies in neighboring countries that see their funding dry up and by governments that feel overstretched by hosting displaced persons (Crisp, 2019). At the same time, many governments in post-conflict countries actively seek the return of refugee populations as they work to catalyze an economic

recovery.

How strong is the relationship between the end of conflict and refugee return? Figure 1 presents mobility patterns from four of the largest refugee crises in recent decades, focusing on Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Vietnam. The figure displays the number of refugees over time (from UNHCR data) and when each country was experiencing active conflict (from UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, defined as at least 25 battle-related deaths in a given year) (UNHCR, 2019*b*; Gleditsch et al., 2002; Pettersson, 2019). Declines in refugee numbers are largely attributable to refugee return, as only a small share of refugees are resettled and informal migration to third countries (e.g., in Europe) does not in itself remove a registered refugee from UNHCR’s database (UNHCR, 2019*a*).

The observed pattern is consistent with violence driving displacement and the end of active fighting spurring return. We see that the number of refugees often increases sharply when a conflict begins and tends to decrease in the years surrounding the end of conflict. However, we also see significant variation in when refugees return during both conflict and non-conflict years. The number of refugees sometimes increases and other times decreases during conflict. Moreover, the number of refugees often decreases very slowly after conflicts come to an end.

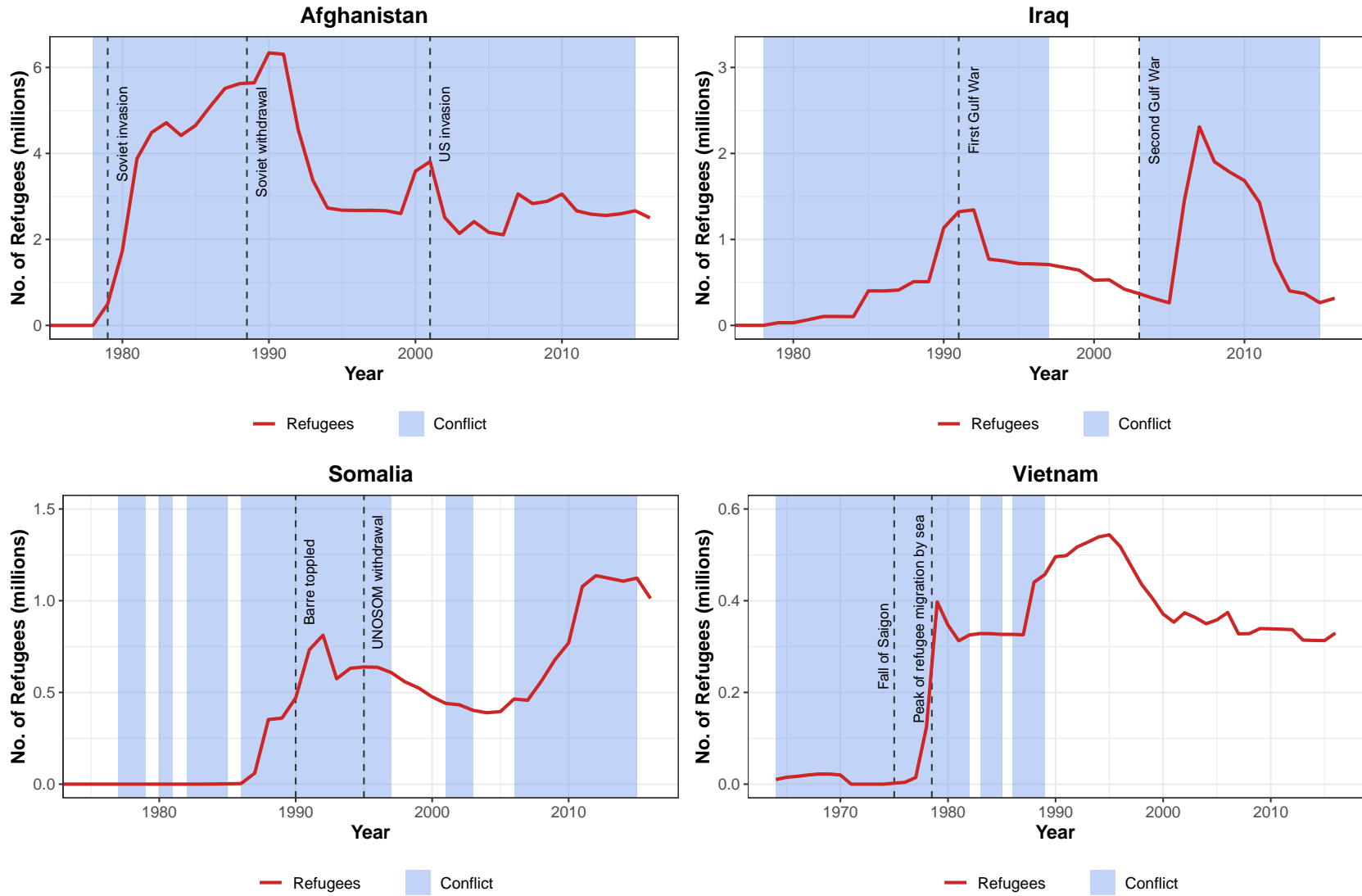


Figure 1: Conflict and Number of Refugees Over Time

These data suggest that macro-level patterns of conflict may be insufficient on their own to make sense of refugee return.¹ Given the fact that violence is rarely distributed uniformly across space or time, it is not surprising that refugee numbers wax and wane during conflict and do not automatically drop when a war notionally comes to an end. It may also be the case that a particular party to the conflict is victorious while another one is defeated, leaving some refugees concerned about their safety if they were to return. Further, constraints other than war and violence may be impediments to refugee return even if households desire to go home at the conflict's end. And it is possible that, after an extended time away from home, refugees have adjusted to a new context and wish to remain there, even in the absence of citizenship.

Given these dynamic patterns of return, we argue for a closer focus on household decision-making. Approaching return migration through this lens requires that we consider people's preferences, the environment in which they live, the context to which they might return, as well as other factors including the costs of moving and people's access to information. A focus on household decision-making enables us to consider the impact of macro-level changes in a home country or a host country, sub-national processes including localized violence and anti-refugee sentiment, and micro-level measures of household experiences, beliefs, and resources.

We begin by defining *return* as moving from a *host* country to one's *home* country with no immediate plans to depart again. Our focus is on the binary choice of whether to return to the home country, thereby setting aside other migration-related choices that refugees face such as internal migration within a host country, location choice within their home country after return, and formal or informal migration to a third country. We offer this definition with an awareness that during war and in its aftermath, the process of return may not be straightforward. Some people may return only to find that the situation in their home country necessitates migrating again in search of safety and a livelihood.²

In identifying the factors that influence return, our theoretical starting point is neoclassical economic theories of migration (Borjas, 1987). Though developed to explain patterns

¹Appendix Section 7.12 looks more systematically at the relationship between conflict and return with time-series regression models.

²Some people living as refugees may consider migration to third countries when deciding whether to return home or not. We leave this possibility for future research. A two-country setup allows us to focus on the essential aspects of the decision to return or not. Our fieldwork and survey data suggest that staying in Lebanon or returning to Syria are by far the two most prominent options that Syrian refugees in Lebanon consider.

of labor migration, these models provide a useful framework for understanding individual decisions to migrate based on the costs and benefits of living in different countries. In this framework, potential migrants consider their long-term expected well-being in a home country against conditions in possible destination countries, while accounting for the costs of travel, the challenges of adapting to a new labor market and culture, and any non-monetary costs or benefits of migration.

The new economics of migration extends these models to incorporate household considerations (Stark and Bloom, 1985). Recognizing that individuals often make decisions in coordination with other household members, this framework envisions migration as one strategy that households use to diversify and thereby minimize risk. These perspectives are complementary, as individuals may seek to maximize income while households aim to minimize risk (Massey et al., 1993). Together, they underscore the value of considering both individual- and household-level factors in modeling migration decisions (Borjas and Bratsberg, 1996; Constant and Massey, 2003).

Although one might question the value of rationalist models of migration in contexts of forced displacement, recent research suggests the value of these frameworks even in environments where decision-making is influenced by violence. For example, one study of Lebanese Christians who were internally displaced during the country's civil war in the 1980s points out that, in the absence of attractive economic opportunities, people may not return to their home areas even if they have strong aspirations to do so (Camarena and Hagerdal, 2020). In the Colombian context, researchers found that internally displaced persons were more likely to return home if they had access to land and meaningful economic opportunities. By contrast, the most vulnerable households—and those most directly affected by violence—exhibited the lowest willingness to return (Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin, 2014).

While this new work on IDPs suggests the relevance of rationalist models of migration, there are a number of unique challenges confronted by refugee households. The decision of refugees to return is often significantly more costly and difficult to reverse, as it involves crossing borders and giving up one's refugee status. At the same time, the feasibility of remaining in place is greater for IDPs who generally have greater access to the labor market and services in their new environments. By contrast, refugees often lack residency status making it difficult to find employment and provide health and education for their families.

Building on the existing literature, we focus on four factors that might shape refugees' choices about return: (a) push factors, or the situation in the host country (b) pull factors,

or the dynamics in the country of origin, (c) the costs of mobility, and (d) the role that information plays in how households evaluate the costs and benefits of return.

Push factors: Existing research has highlighted the situation in the hosting country as a primary determinant of people’s choices about return migration (Dustmann and Weiss, 2007). In particular, previous work on labor migration and IDPs has found that economic and social factors in people’s place of residence affect their choices about return. Constant and Massey (2003) find that a lack of stable full-time employment roughly doubles the odds of return migration for foreign workers in Germany. Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin (2014) find that IDPs in Colombia are roughly four percentage points more likely to intend to return if the household head is unemployed. Stefanovic, Loizides and Parsons (2015) find that integration into a new environment in western Turkey, measured by economic advancement and knowledge of Turkish, decreased return intentions among displaced Kurds from eastern Turkey. Access to social services is another important determinant of material well-being. Studying displacement from Mosul under the Islamic State (IS), Revkin (2021) finds perceptions of service provision under IS—relative to the Iraqi government—shaped people’s choice to flee or stay.

Social networks may be a critical feature of people’s migration decision during and after civil war. Civil war reconfigures societies, changing the roles of existing social networks while also creating new ones (Harpviken, 2009; Wood, 2008). Existing evidence validates that social networks play a key role in people’s migration and return choices. Constant and Massey (2003) find that the range and nature of social attachments to Germany have a large negative impact on return migration. Masterson (2020) finds that Syrian refugees in Lebanon build and leverage network ties to access services and resources. Stefanovic and Loizides (2011) find that social capital among IDPs in Bosnia and Cyprus—manifested through refugee associations—was important in the coordination of mass returns, even in the face of resistance from opposition groups.

Historically, host governments often apply intense pressures for refugees to return en masse (Schwartz, 2019). Many refugee-hosting countries—even those that are initially receptive to refugee migration—gradually ramp up anti-refugee rhetoric and undercut refugees’ legal residency and right to work. Often, the rationale behind such restrictions is that harsher living conditions will incentivize refugees to return home. We expect that a range of push factors in the host country will shape decision-making about whether to return including a household’s economic situation, access to humanitarian aid, availability of public services,

extent of social integration and acceptance, and legal status.

Pull factors: Household decision-making also depends in important ways on the environment in the home country. Refugees must consider the current conditions in their country of origin as well as their expectations about how the situation will evolve. For example, will violence pick up again and would it affect their particular region? Moreover, might they be at risk of targeted persecution or arrest upon return? The threats that people confront come not only from armed conflict, but also from potential retribution. As households assess their safety if they were to return, they may consider current levels of violence in their hometown, their connections or proximity to existing political divisions, and expectations about continued violence and persecution by the government or armed groups.

Previous research documents a robust relationship between the intensity of conflict and forced migration (e.g., Fearon and Shaver, 2020), as well as finding that people who personally experienced violence are more likely to be flee than those who simply faced a general threat of violence (Adhikari, 2013). People who have been forcibly displaced may be less likely to return when they face greater risk of violence in the place of origin. This is consistent with Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin (2014), who find that IDPs in Colombia who directly suffered violence before displacement have lower return intentions than IDPs who did not experience violence.

Expectations of safety must include strategic considerations about group identity. Armed groups often displace civilians strategically based on ethnic group, sect, tribe, or political affiliation (Steele, 2009; Balcells and Steele, 2016; Lichtenheld, 2020). If a government or armed group that engaged in collective targeting retains territorial control, refugees may fear that such communal punishment could be used again in the future, particularly if postwar political divisions map onto past migration choices (see, e.g., Burundi, Schwartz, 2019).

As people consider return, they need to evaluate the conditions of the post-war economy and whether they believe they will be able to meet their family's basic needs. Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin (2014) find that people who own land or have prospects for employment in their place of origin have higher return intentions to return. Beber et al. (2013) find that the South Sudanese residents of North Sudan who were least likely to return were the middle class for whom employment opportunities were scarce in the South.

War may impact people's economic prospects by generating disputes over public policy or property rights (Schwartz, 2019) or when governments claim and redistribute property for the sake of demographic engineering or rewarding allies (McNamee, 2018). War often also

contributes to the destruction of infrastructure and systems for delivering public services. In a post-war context, patterns of reconstruction may reflect geographic and political divisions (Croese, 2017), thereby influencing local livelihoods and choices about return.

Lastly, just as social networks may facilitate well-being in exile, networks in the home country may help people survive if they were to return. Refugees with more friends and family in the home country—whether they are returned refugees themselves or simply never fled the country—may be able to rely on those people for support and community if they were to return. In line with this expectation, Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin (2014) find that social networks in people’s place of origin (measured through membership in a peasant organization or collective land ownership) increase intentions to return.

Mobility costs: Households considering migration must weigh the financial costs and physical risks associated with moving (Hunt and Mueller, 2004). Long-distance travel for refugees, in particular, may be expensive and require passage through unsafe territory. Return migrants might also face the prospect of being stopped at military checkpoints run by armed groups that charge tolls or taxes, steal possessions, or detain, interrogate, or abuse travelers (e.g., Stork and Abrahams, 2004). Given these concerns, households facing higher mobility costs may be less likely to return.

Existing work presents mixed evidence about the impact of a country’s travel infrastructure and geography on refugee migration. Schmeidl (1997) does not find evidence that initial refugee flight is shaped by the accessibility of land borders or rugged terrain. Moore and Shellman (2006) similarly find no evidence that distance and terrain affect refugee migration. In contrast, Adhikari (2013), using micro-level data, finds evidence that the presence of accessible roads increases the probability of displacement from that location by approximately three percentage points.

Information: Finally, decisions about whether to return are influenced by a fourth factor: information. As social media, smart phones, and internet connections are now widely available, this factor arguably deserves greater attention than it has received in earlier work. While refugees are generally able to accurately assess their well-being in the host country where they live, beliefs about the conditions in their place of origin are often based on only limited information (Munshi, 2003). After months or years away from home, people need to seek out and piece together information—often incomplete, often contradictory—in order to form expectations about what life would be like if they were to return (Batista and Cestari, 2016). The confidence that people have in their beliefs about the quality of life back home

is likely to shape how they evaluate the costs and benefits of return.

Existing evidence shows that networks facilitate refugee migration by disseminating information about travel routes and destinations (Davenport, Moore and Poe, 2003; Moore and Shellman, 2004, 2007; Schmeidl, 1997; Schon, 2018). Further, violence and poverty motivate people to acquire information about conditions and policies in potential migration destinations (Holland and Peters, 2020). Recent work provides evidence on the role of information in refugee return. Schon (2020, p. 112) argues that before refugees will be willing to return, they need to understand how they will stay safe, and that this may become more challenging the longer people live as refugees. Chu et al. (2019) find that Syrian refugees who have prior experience of violence in Syria are more willing to leave Lebanon and return home, which the authors argue is due to these people's better ability to understand and assess their risk tolerance for violence.

3 The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

To test the drivers of refugee return intentions, we focus on the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. Given the diversity of localities in which Syrians have settled and the heterogeneity in conditions in Syria, this is a helpful case for examining the role of push and pull factors, mobility costs, and information in shaping return intentions. Lebanon, in particular, provides a critical test of the importance of push factors, given the documented hostility, discrimination, and violence that many Syrians have faced in Lebanon. In addition, the context provides meaningful variation in prospects in Syria, mobility costs, and access to information. Syrians in Lebanon vary widely in their characteristics and backgrounds, originating from all of Syria's regions and spanning the country's pre-war socioeconomic spectrum.

What began in Syria in 2011 with street demonstrations and calls for political reforms collapsed into a devastating civil war. Estimates of the death toll range from 371,222 to more than 570,000, and large sections of the country's major cities were destroyed by government bombardment. The war led to an enormous refugee crisis, with millions of people fleeing to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and beyond. As of late 2019, when our study was conducted, more than five million Syrians had fled to neighboring countries and more than six million were displaced inside Syria. Approximately 930,000 Syrians lived in Lebanon, alongside 4.5 million native residents, in a small country with a land area three-quarters the

size of the US state of Connecticut.³

One driving assumption behind Lebanon's national policy agenda for Syrian refugees is that exploitation, vulnerability, and material hardship will force Syrians to leave the country (Janmyr, 2016). Syrians in Lebanon face widespread hostility, confront significant restrictions on the right to work, and have only limited legal status in the host country. Most Syrians in Lebanon lack reliable access to education, healthcare, stable housing, and safe transportation (see, e.g., Mourad, 2017; Lehmann and Masterson, 2020). They live primarily in urban and peri-urban settings, with 15% in camps, informally managed by NGOs, as the UN did not establish official refugee camps in the country. The situation of Syrians in Lebanon is similar in many respects to the hardship that refugees worldwide face; notably, many governments restrict refugee rights in order to accelerate return and, worldwide, less than one third of the world's 25.9 million refugees live in camps.

As the Syrian government regains control of much of the country, tens of thousands of Syrians have begun returning home, even as violence continues to displace more people. State and non-state actors in Lebanon have begun taking steps to facilitate and push for the return of refugees, tensions between Lebanese and Syrians remain high, and discussions about the return of refugees are increasingly prominent in journalistic and policy circles. Looking to Syria, the war has devastated the country's infrastructure and public services, including water supply, electricity, schools, and healthcare. Many people fear the persecution and violence that may result from government retribution and collective punishment in the postwar period. People who escaped Syria during the conflict may be especially prone to retaliation by the regime upon return. Men aged 18-42 are subject to military conscription in Syria, and serving in the Syrian military is likely to put conscripts in dangerous situations for years to come, where they may have to kill innocent people or be killed in combat or insurgent attacks. Even if the ultimate victor in the war is no longer in question, the specter of future violence remains.

³We use UN registration numbers, which provide a conservative estimate of displacement. Refugee population: UNHCR Operational Portal. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>. IDP data: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>. And IDMC. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria>. Data accessed November 15, 2019.

4 Research Design and Data

4.1 Survey Design

We use original survey data from interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3,003 Syrian refugee households living in Lebanon. The survey measured a wide range of household characteristics, predictors of return, and migration intentions, and also included a conjoint experiment to identify drivers of return intentions. The research team contracted a Lebanese survey firm to conduct data collection, and participated in all stages of research including enumerator training, survey piloting, and oversight of data collection. Data collection for the main survey took place from August to October 2019.

To obtain a representative sample of Syrian households in Lebanon, we used stratified random sampling to ensure variation in Syrian and Lebanese demographics in localities and households sampled. A household head (either gender) served as survey respondent. Appendix Section 1 provides a detailed discussion of sampling protocols.

4.2 Measuring Return Intentions

Measuring return intentions is challenging, and survey instruments must account for the different time horizons across which households consider decisions in addition to the uncertainty that people face. Capturing intentions is also difficult in the absence of concrete behaviors consistent with stated intentions. As a result, we also measure preparations to return, as a self-reported but behavioral manifestation of return intentions.

We asked respondents about their return intentions in three ways:

- Return intentions: “Do you plan to return to Syria in the next 12 months?”
- Return preparations: We asked a battery of questions about legal, financial, and logistical steps to prepare for return, and use it to calculate a preparations index with polychoric principal component analysis (PCA).
- Long-term return intentions: “Do you hope to move back to Syria and live there one day?”

It is worth noting that our key outcomes are stated intentions and self-reported preparations to return, not a retrospective measure of actual return choices. Such forward-looking

outcomes are the relevant quantity of interest as policymakers design and implement programs to address the refugee situation and people consider whether to return. A foundational principle of return policy is ensuring its *voluntary* nature, which requires placing people's *intentions* to return at the center of planning.

4.3 Measuring Drivers of Return

We measure four key concepts that we hypothesize will drive return decisions: (1) well-being in Lebanon, (2) prospective well-being in Syria, (3) information, and (4) mobility costs. To measure concepts 1-3, we draw on data from multiple survey questions and use PCA to construct indices to capture aspects of respondents' living situation in Lebanon, prospects in Syria, and access to information. We present the full set of PCA inputs in Appendix Sections 3 and 4.⁴ In both Syria and Lebanon, we measure economic well-being, using data on assets and earning potential in each country, and current employment, earnings, and aid in Lebanon. We also examine the availability of services, including education, healthcare, water, and electricity, in Lebanon and Syria. We analyze the size of social networks and the number of friends and family in Lebanon and Syria. We examine people's ability to move freely and safely around Lebanon, and their integration in the country using the measures from the IPL-12 integration scale (Harder et al., 2018). To construct an index for the security situation in Syria, we focus on both general factors, such as whether there is still fighting, and personal factors, such as whether a family has any draft-aged men and whether the respondent personally experienced violence. The index on safety also includes an input about safety expectations in one year. The economic conditions in Syria and the services in Syria indices also include inputs that measure expectations about the future situation in Syria. We also construct an index for regime control, including detailed questions on which parties currently and formerly controlled a respondent's hometown.⁵ The index for information includes whether the respondent speaks regularly with family or friends in Syria about the situation as well as measures of people's confidence in the information they have about safety, jobs, services, and conscription in their hometown.

In addition to measuring people's confidence in information directly, we ask questions

⁴Although PCA inputs were pre-specified, some survey questions were mistakenly listed in the PAP for inclusion in two indices. We therefore departed from the PAP in these cases in order to maintain mutually exclusive index inputs. See Appendix Section 6 for a list of these changes.

⁵We deviated from the PAP to separately study the role of regime control and safety conditions in Syria.

about the size of refugees’ networks in the host and the home country. Networks of family and friends may directly impact people’s return choices independent of the information they provide, in the sense that many people want to live in the same place as others in their close network. Family and friends may also serve as important sources of information about the conditions in one’s hometown.

We study mobility costs using two metrics: travel distance to one’s hometown and household size. We calculate travel distance from each survey respondent’s town of residence in Lebanon to their hometown in Syria, via the Beirut–Damascus highway and border crossing, using the Google Maps API. Our fieldwork revealed that this was the only legal border crossing open at the time of research and that a majority of Syrians moving back travel via official routes.

4.4 Conjoint Experiment

We also present a conjoint analysis that experimentally manipulates potential drivers of return intentions. This allows us to isolate the effects of conditions in Lebanon and Syria, individual circumstances, and social networks in shaping respondents’ thinking about return. In the conjoint, the enumerator informed respondents: “I will now present you with five conditional scenarios. Please listen to these scenarios carefully and answer the questions about them.” Respondents were then read a sequence of five separate vignettes, and after each one, they were asked the following question: “Under these conditions, would you return to Syria?”

In the vignettes, each of the numbered attributes below was randomly given one of the lettered values, and the order of the attributes was randomized across respondents. The vignettes were presented as follows:

Imagine that one year from now, regarding the security situation in Syria, [INSERT FROM (1) BELOW]. It appears that in [INSERT HOMETOWN], [INSERT FROM (2)]. As for conscription, [INSERT FROM (3)]. In Lebanon, [INSERT FROM (4)]. Finally, regarding your friends and relatives, are [INSERT FROM (5)].

1. **Safety in Syria:** (a) Your hometown is quite safe; (b) Your hometown remains insecure; (c) All of Syria is quite safe

2. **Economic conditions in Syria:** (a) There are many job opportunities; (b) Public services, such as health centers and schools, are relatively easy to attain; (c) There are few job opportunities; (d) Public services, such as health centers and schools, are difficult to attain
3. **Personal safety:** (a) Military conscription has stopped; (b) Military conscription is still in place
4. **Conditions in Lebanon:** (a) You have a good job in Lebanon; (b) You do not have a good job in Lebanon; (c) Health centers and schools in Lebanon are available and affordable; (d) Health centers and schools in Lebanon are unavailable and unaffordable
5. **Network effects:** (a) Most of your friends and relatives are in Lebanon; (b) Most of your friends and relatives are in Syria; (c) Most of your friends and relatives are in Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Conducting research with Syrian refugees in Lebanon requires particular attention to the sensitive situation in which they live. In order to design this project to reduce potential harm and maximize policy relevance, we collaborated closely with humanitarian and civil society organizations working in Lebanon. We conducted a workshop with over 20 leading humanitarian organizations in Lebanon prior to data collection in which we presented our research design and a draft of our questionnaire. We asked the organizations for feedback on the instrument to remove potentially sensitive questions, such as ones that may cause traumatic experiences or lead to potentially harmful rumors. We also asked for feedback on the types of questions that humanitarian actors would be interested in to help in their planning and advocacy efforts. At their recommendation, we worked with a number of the NGOs to develop a referral system so that our enumerators could connect respondents who asked for or required aid with relevant services. We also had a representative from a major humanitarian organization train our enumerators on protection and how to conduct referrals. The details of the referral system are discussed in Appendix Section 8.4.

5 Results: Observational Data on Return Intentions

We begin by describing our sample. Around 50% of respondents in our sample reside in urban areas in Lebanon and 33% of respondents live in informal settlements. The median year of arrival for respondents was 2013. The majority, 80%, are registered or recorded with UNHCR. In terms of education levels, 49% had an education level less than completing primary school, 39% completed primary school, and 12% had a secondary education or higher. As for aid, 48% of respondents received cash transfers, 62% received food vouchers, and 32% received both. Discrimination toward refugees in Lebanon is quite high but far from universal. 37% of respondents reported living in towns that had curfews in the past two years (which usually target refugees) and 40% reported facing discrimination when searching for houses. Finally, when it comes to conditions in Syria, 67% of respondents reported that protests occurred in their hometown during the revolution and 96% said that there was heavy fighting in their hometown at some point during the war. By the time the survey was conducted, 66% of respondents said that their hometowns were controlled by the government.

We examine the distribution of return intentions in Figure 2. We find that return intentions are increasing with the time horizon. Only 5% of Syrians plan to return in the next 12 months, that is, before approximately September 2020, and about a quarter of Syrians anticipate returning before September 2021. 63% plan to return at some point in the future.⁶ To put these numbers in context, the median year of arrival for respondents was 2013, meaning that the median respondent had been displaced for more than six years at the time of data collection.

To study how cross-sectional differences shape return intentions, we examine the predictive power of a range of potential drivers of refugee return described above. We estimate the following regression model:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i , \quad (1)$$

for each outcome Y and a vector of indices T . Each index is the first principal component from a PCA analysis of the measures detailed in Section 4.3. We also adjust for a range of control variables, X , including household-level covariates and locality-level fixed effects.⁷

⁶We impute missing values in our data using multivariate imputation by chained equations, discussed in Appendix Section 3.3.

⁷In regressions including travel distance on the right-hand side, we drop controls for location in Lebanon

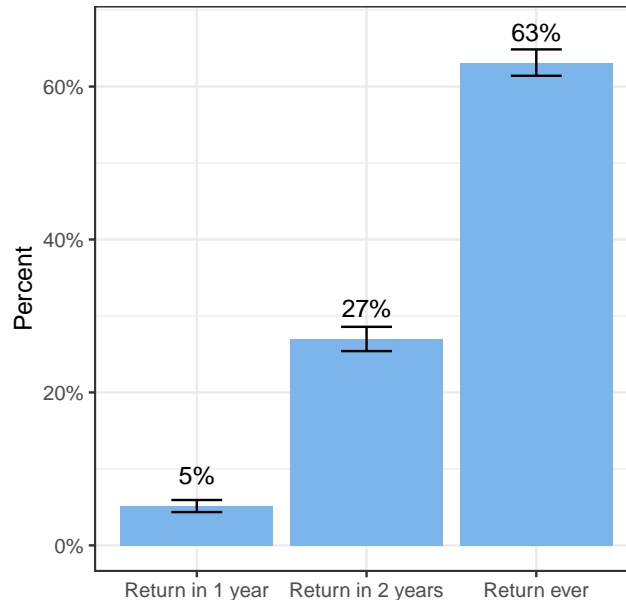


Figure 2: Return Intentions (Short, medium, and long-term)

Finally, ϵ is a mean-zero disturbance term. We also run a series of regression models similar to Equation 1, but where the vector of indices T is replaced with each respective index in one model.⁸

5.1 Drivers of Return Intentions

We present results for the drivers of return intentions in Figure 3. Each dot represents the point estimate for the relationship between a given index, labeled on the y axis, and a metric of return, labeled at the top of each panel. Circles represent point estimates drawn from our main model in Equation 1, and triangles represent point estimates drawn from models with each respective index in one model. The independent variables are grouped into four categories: people’s prospective living situation in Syria, people’s living situation in Lebanon, mobility costs to return to Syria, and people’s confidence in the information they possess about Syria. The horizontal line around each point estimate shows the 90% and 95% confidence intervals (dark and light, respectively). Standard errors are clustered and hometown in Syria, since travel distance is calculated using these two geographic variables.

⁸Figure 3 involves two deviations from the PAP due to multicollinearity, discussed in detail in Appendix Sections 6.1, 7.1, and 7.7.

at the locality level, following from the sampling strategy. Indices are normalized to have mean zero and standard deviation one, and the point estimates present the change in the probability of return intentions that corresponds to a one standard deviation shift in an index. As shown in Appendix Section 7.3, results are robust to using additive indices rather than PCA indices.

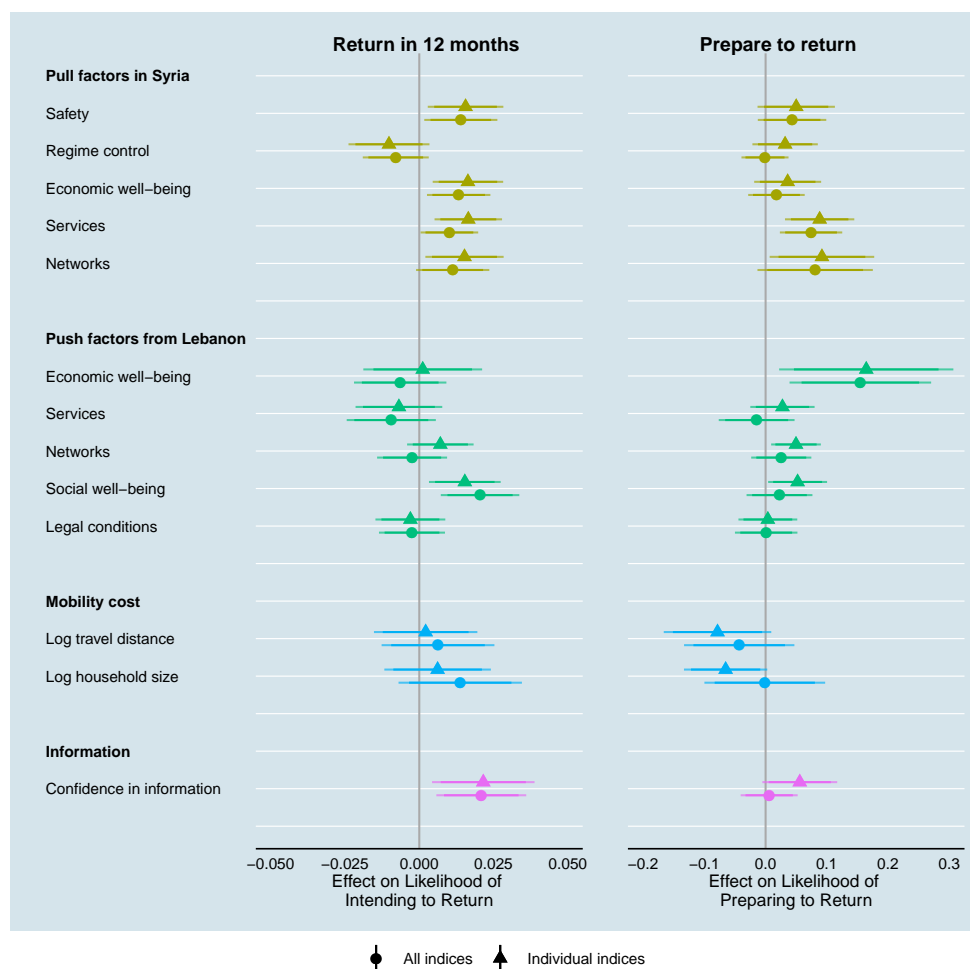


Figure 3: Index Results—Return Intentions and Preparations

Figure 3 provides strong evidence for a relationship between conditions in Syria and intentions to return within 12 months (first panel). We see that safety in Syria, economic prospects in Syria, the availability of public services in one’s hometown, and respondents’ family and friend networks in Syria are positively and significantly associated with return. For each of these indices, we see that a one standard deviation shift in the index corresponds with about a 2 percentage point increase in return intentions. In light of the small fraction

of refugees (only 5%) who plan to return in the next year, this constitutes a large increase in return intentions in percentage terms (roughly 40%). Control by the Syrian government correlates negatively with intentions to return, although we cannot rule out a null relationship at either the 90% or 95% level.

The relationship between conditions in Syria and preparations for return (second panel) is less clear but points in the same direction. Point estimates are consistently positive, but only the availability of services and the size of social networks are statistically significant. Security in Syria and economic prospects predict preparations to return but the results are not statistically significant. Regime control has no detectable relationship with preparations to return.

The results on push factors in Lebanon are quite different. First, looking at the left panel, we do not find a clear correlation between well-being in Lebanon and return intentions. We cannot rule out a zero association for most of the indices. The one index that demonstrates a statistically significant association with return intentions is social well-being. In contrast to the lack of evidence for a role of push factors in shaping return *intentions*, the second panel reveals evidence for an association between conditions in Lebanon and return *preparations*. We find that higher levels of economic well-being, networks, and social well-being in Lebanon exhibit a detectable *positive* correlation with having taken steps to prepare to return to Syria in at least one specification. The direction of the relationship is not what we expected *ex ante*, based on a theory of preparations being driven by a simple utility comparison between conditions in Lebanon and prospects in Syria. The finding highlights that the theory's focus on migration costs and incentives may have overlooked migration capacities. Indeed, return is a complex and daunting process, and people with more financial and social resources may be better able to undertake a safe, voluntary return.

Looking now at the next group of drivers, we see in the first panel that the results do not provide evidence of a relationship between mobility costs and return intentions. In the second panel, we find a negative association between mobility costs and preparations for return, significant at the 10% level, when we consider indices separately. Looking at the bottom row of Figure 3, we see that confidence in information about one's hometown is positively associated with both intentions and preparations. Information access have may both a direct effect on return intentions and a moderating role, a possibility we formally test in the next section.

Before concluding that pull factors are more powerful predictors than push factors in

shaping return intentions, we explore two additional tests. First, we fit predictive models based on push factors and pull factors using 10-fold cross validation. We present the results in Appendix Section 7.6, and find that predictive models based on pull factors consistently demonstrate higher predictive power than models based on push factors. Second, we test whether Syrians’ conditions in Lebanon exhibit identifying variation at both the national and local levels. If Syrians’ conditions in the country were fairly homogeneous, then a null relationship between push factors in Lebanon and return intentions would be substantively trivial. Reassuringly, the data are not consistent with this concern. In Appendix Section 4.1, the descriptive statistics demonstrate wide variation in the living conditions of Syrians in Lebanon. In Appendix Section 7.4, we re-run all models that controlled for locality level fixed effects, but without adjusting for locality. Our findings are robust to this alternative specification, suggesting that our null findings for the role of push factors in Lebanon are not driven by a lack of identifying variation in living conditions within localities.

5.2 Information and Return Intentions

To further explore the relationship between information and return, we examine whether information moderates the role of perceived conditions in Syria. Specifically, we examine whether conditions in Syria have a larger effect on people’s intentions when they have high levels of confidence in their information about the situation in Syria.

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 (T_i \times \mathbf{1}(I_i > 0)) + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Equation 2 is similar to the “individual indices” specification of Equation 1, but includes a multiplicative interaction term between each index T and confidence in information. The indicator function, $\mathbf{1}(I_i > 0)$, denotes whether a respondent i had an index value for information confidence above the mean. X denotes the same vector of covariates as in Equation 1. Figure 4 presents regression results, displaying the estimated marginal effect of a one standard deviation change in each index for people with low (below-average) confidence in information compared to high (above-average) confidence in information.

The results in Figure 4 suggest that the relationship between conditions in Syria and return intentions and preparations is shaped by respondents’ confidence in their information sources for some key factors. Specifically, we find evidence that information is a significant moderator for the role of regime control and economic prospects in shaping return inten-

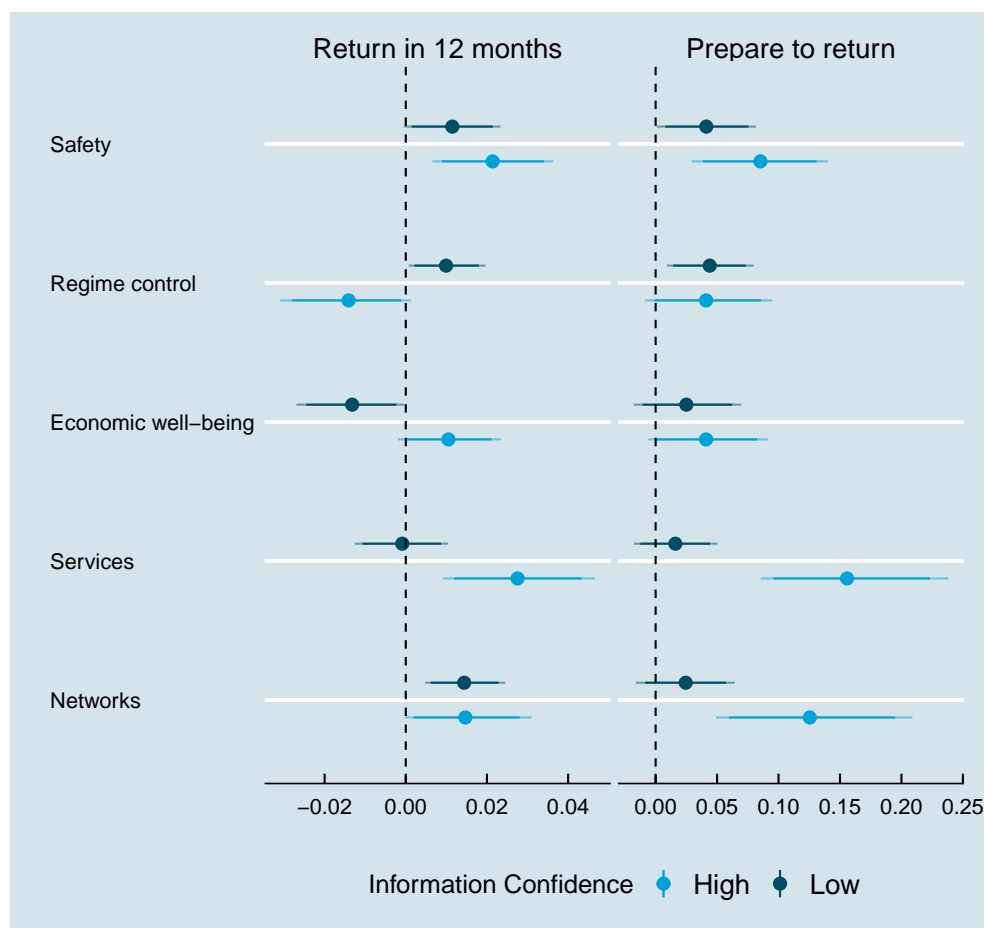


Figure 4: Interactive Effects of Information Confidence on Intentions and Preparations. Estimated marginal effects are presented with the corresponding 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered by locality in Lebanon.

tions. Next, we see a differential relationship between the availability of services in people’s hometowns and both return intentions and return preparations. Last, we see a differential relationship between networks in Syria and return preparations depending on information confidence.

5.3 Long-term Return Intentions

In most refugee crises, some subset of the population will face protracted displacement, continuing to live as refugees for years, decades, and even generations. Our data enable us to consider not only near-term plans to return, but also long-term intentions by exploring the characteristics of respondents who say they do not plan to return to Syria.

Figure 5 presents the same regression analyses described in Equation 1 but with intentions to ever return as the outcome. We saw in Figure 2 that approximately 40% of respondents stated that they do not intend to ever return, suggesting the possibility that hundreds of thousands of Syrians might be displaced for the long term in Lebanon. The results suggest that the trends identified for 12-month return intentions and return preparations shown in Figure 3 are generally consistent when we consider intentions to ever return as shown in Figure 2.

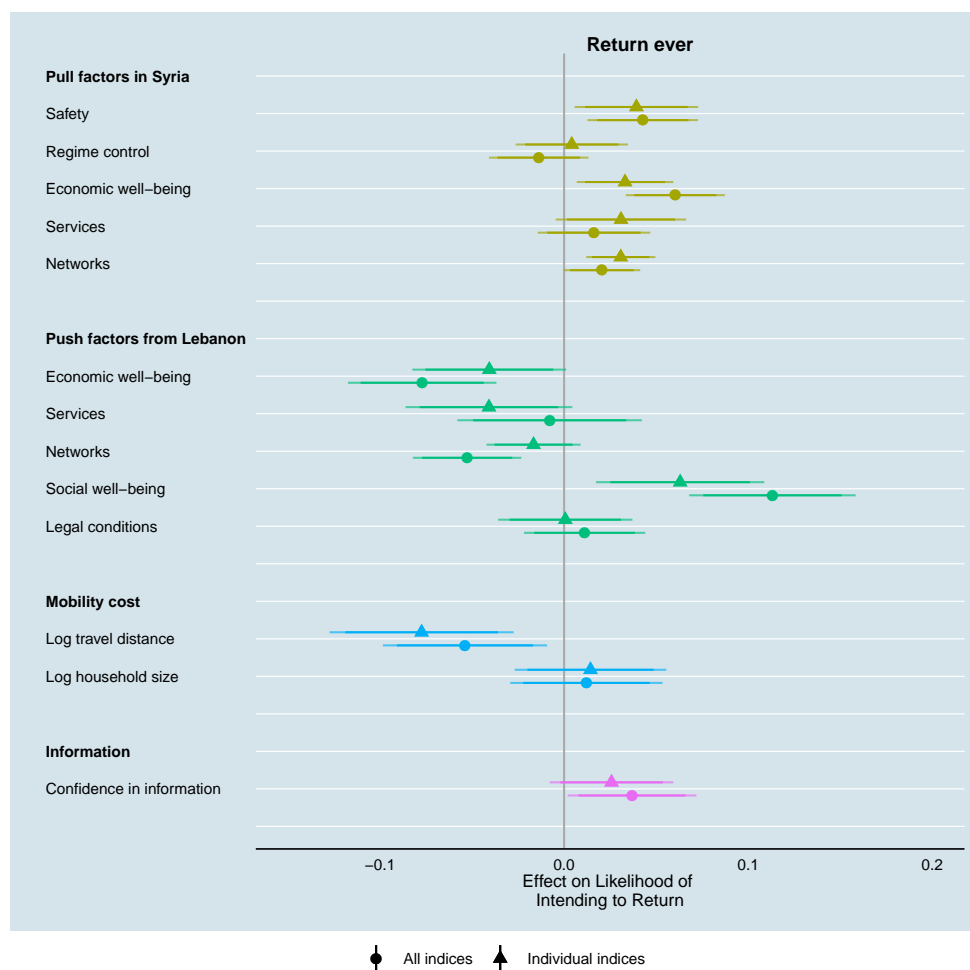


Figure 5: Index Results—Long-term return intentions

Aligning with our main results, we find evidence of a consistent relationship between conditions in the home country and long-term return intentions. Those who report facing better prospects in Syria are more likely to indicate a desire to ever return, whereas those

who do not are more likely to indicate that they will never go back to Syria.⁹

The results do not offer evidence of a straightforward relationship between current well-being in Lebanon and people’s intentions to ever return. Some dimensions of well-being in Lebanon correlate positively, others negatively, with long-term return intentions. Moreover, we see weak evidence of a negative relationship between mobility costs and refugees’ long-term return intentions. Finally, consistent with our results on near-term intentions, we see a statistically significant relationship between confidence in information and long-term return plans.¹⁰

6 Results: Conjoint Experiment

The analysis of observational data strongly suggests that pull factors are more predictive of return intentions than push factors. Yet, our correlational estimates might be affected by other factors not included in the model. In this section, we present the results of a conjoint experiment designed to provide greater leverage on the causal effects of these drivers on return intentions.¹¹

We follow the standard approach for analyzing conjoint experiments, using OLS regressions to estimate the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) for each attribute (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Figure 4 displays the effects for respondents’ answers to the question: “Under these conditions, would you be willing to return to Syria?”

The main findings from the conjoint experiment are consistent with our analysis of the observational data. Conditions in Syria play a more important role in shaping people’s return intentions than conditions in Lebanon. Results suggest that safety is the most powerful driver of return, with security in one’s hometown increasing return intentions by 35 percentage points and nationwide security increasing return intentions by 42 percentage points. The fact that safety in one’s hometown has nearly as large of an effect as nationwide safety, suggests that the majority of variation in people’s consideration of security is driven by conditions in their hometown, highlighting the local nature of security concerns in postwar

⁹We also analyzed predictors of people’s two-year return intentions, as pre-specified. These results are presented in Appendix Section 7.2.1.

¹⁰Figure A18 in Appendix Section 7.2.4 shows the results for a different coding of the outcome, focusing on intending to never return.

¹¹The conjoint results presented here assume a uniform distribution of profiles. Appendix Section 7.11 presents the conjoint results using a different weighting of profiles.

environments. The availability of jobs and public services in Syria increases return intentions by up to 8 percentage points. An end to military conscription also plays an important role in shaping people's return intentions, and increases the likelihood of return by approximately 18 percentage points.

Both access to a good job and public services in Lebanon play a small but statistically significant role in people's return intentions. Someone with a good job in Lebanon is 2 percentage points less likely to return, and if someone has access to public services they are 3 percentage points less likely to return. Despite the statistical significance of these results, the differences in magnitudes between push and pull factors is substantial.

In the bottom of the figure, we see the effect of networks on people's responses. People were nearly 5 percentage points more likely to say that they would return to Syria if they have family and friends there (compared to having people outside of Syria and Lebanon). In contrast, we see a precisely estimated null effect for having family and friends in Lebanon on people's return intentions. These network results align with our earlier findings about the relative importance of the conditions in the home country compared to the hosting country.

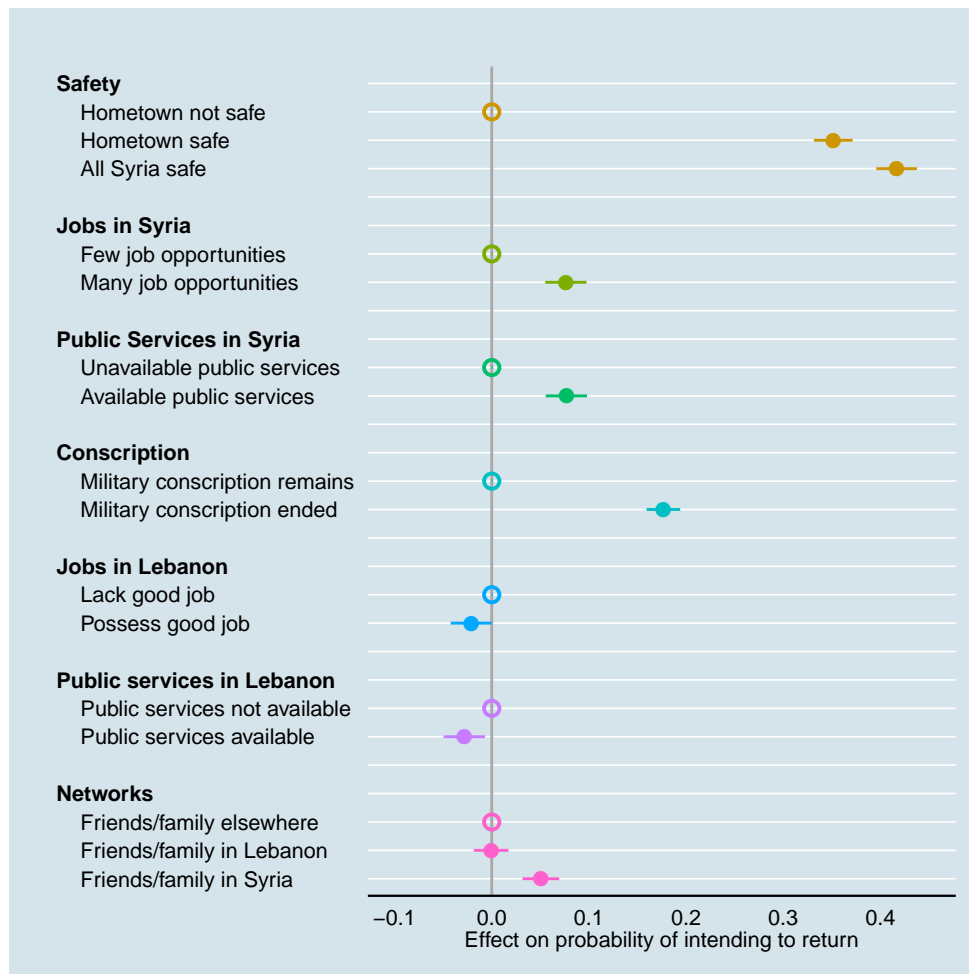


Figure 6: Conjoint Experiment Results. Each dot represents the effect on the probability that respondents would return to Syria in a given hypothetical situation, presented with its corresponding 95% confidence interval. The empty circles at $x = 0$ are reference categories. We cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

7 Return Intentions and Behavior

This study focuses on the predictors of return intentions. One natural concern, however, is whether there is a strong relationship between return intentions and actual behavior. We address this concern in two ways. First, in Figure 3, we show the relationship between our key predictors and steps that respondents have taken to prepare for return. These steps include saving resources, collecting paperwork such as birth certificates or marriage documents, reaching out to Lebanese authorities and UNHCR, and taking scoping trips. Figure 3 shows that pull factors in Syria are correlated with steps to prepare for return while push factors are not.

Of course, the measure of preparations is self-reported and does not necessarily translate into actual return. In order to strengthen our confidence that a study of return aspirations sheds light on likely return behavior, we take advantage of a multi-year panel study that is underway with the 3,003 respondents from the main survey. Although the panel is still ongoing, we examine early results on return behavior in the year since the initial interviews were conducted. The data come from efforts to recontact respondents to identify their current location by calling them on WhatsApp numbers (or, in case we could not reach them, by calling relatives and friends on numbers provided by the primary respondents). Using these methods, we were able to identify the current location of 2,540 (85%) respondents at least once since the main survey concluded. Of those, we found that 91 respondents had returned to Syria.

The observed rate of return (3%) is slightly lower than the stated rate of intentions to return (5%). The low rate of return is not surprising given that the panel has tracked respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has included strict limits on international travel. One should also be careful in interpreting these results as we have not yet completed intensive tracking to identify the location of the 15% of the sample with whom we lost contact. We report in the Appendix (Figure A27 in Section 7.8.1) on the determinants of attrition from the sample. Importantly, return intentions at baseline are not associated with the likelihood of attrition.

Although the rate of return is too low at this stage to examine the full set of determinants of return behavior, we can explore the relationship between return intentions and return behavior. For this, we run the following regression:

$$\text{Return}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Intended Return}_i + \gamma \text{Uncertain Return}_i + \delta X_i + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

Return_i measures whether individual i returned to Syria since the main survey concluded. Intended Return indicates whether the respondent intended to return within 12 months as of August–October 2019, and Uncertain Return indicates whether the respondent was uncertain about return within 12 months at that time. (Thus, the coefficients β and γ are estimated in relation to people who intended to not return.) X is a vector of controls that includes gender, income, age, education, household size, whether the household includes an elderly person, a toddler, or a sick person, whether the respondent is located in an informal settlement or in a Hezbollah-controlled area. It also includes locality fixed effects and place of origin fixed effects.

Figure 7 shows that even conditioning on this broad set of covariates, return intentions are a strong predictor of actual return.¹² Respondents who said they intended to return in 12 months were seven percentage points more likely to return than those who said they did not intend to return. Expressed in terms of an odds ratio, people who stated that they intended to return in 12 months are over three times more likely to have actually returned. As for respondents who were uncertain about returning, they were not significantly more or less likely to return than those who intended to not return. Consistent with our view that return intentions are a uniquely important proxy for and determinant of future behavior, Figure 7 shows that none of the other covariates are meaningfully associated with return.

8 Beyond Lebanon: Return Intentions in Jordan

Given the magnitude of the Syrian refugee crises, Syrians migrated to numerous countries, including to three primary hosting countries: Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. In order to ascertain whether our results are driven by unique circumstances among Syrians in Lebanon, we ran a separate survey with 1,286 Syrian refugees living in Jordan. These data offer a test of the external validity of our findings to the broader population of Syrian refugees. Our sampling strategy selected individuals from the four metropolitan areas in Jordan with

¹²In this regression, we treated people who attrited as missing data. In Section 7.8.2 of the Appendix, we show that the relationship remains robust when assuming different rates of return among people who attrited.

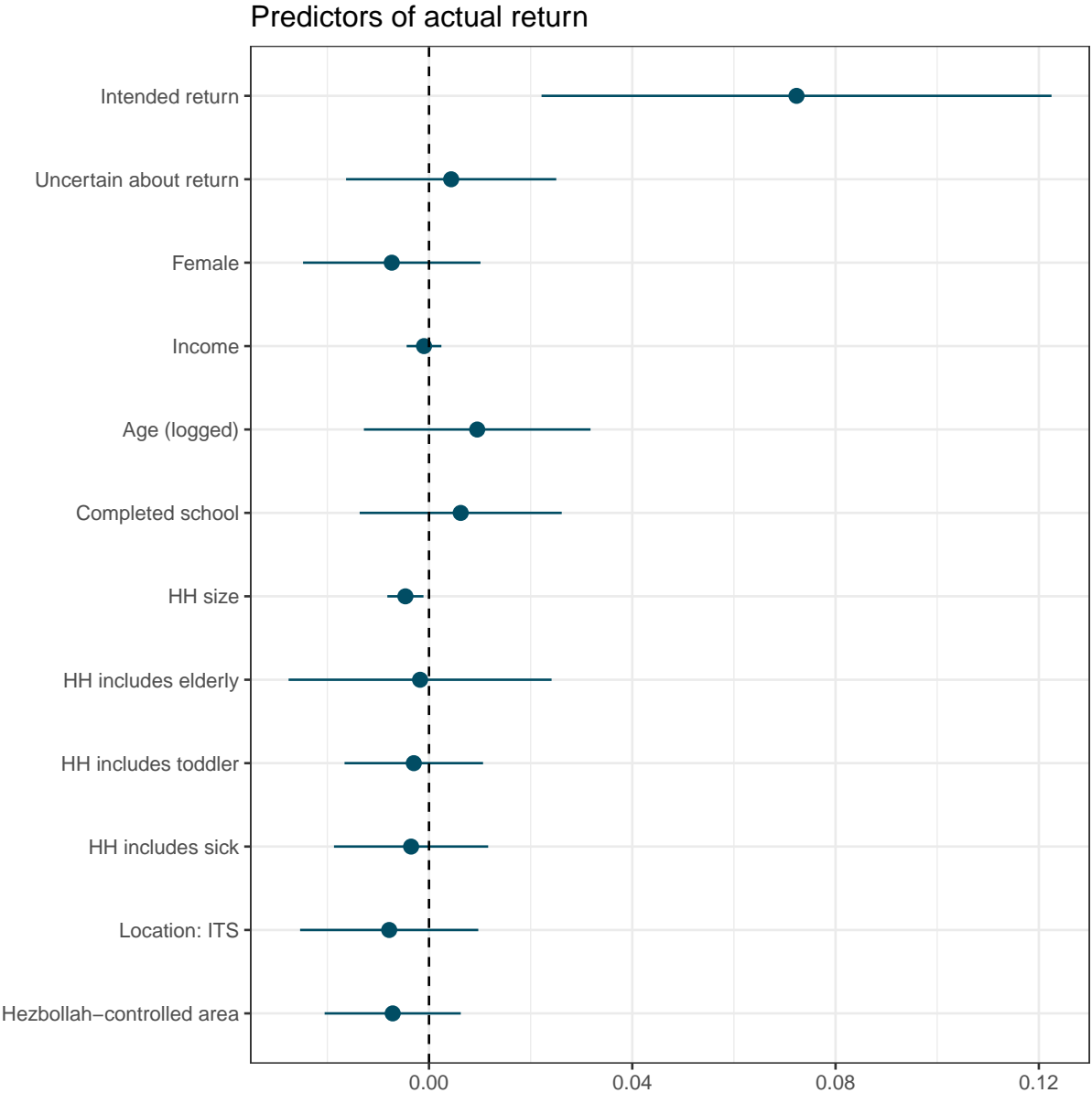


Figure 7: This figure shows the relationship between predictors from the main survey and actual return behavior from the panel. The regression also includes locality fixed effects in Lebanon and place of origin fixed effects in Syria. Standard errors are clustered at the town level.

the largest refugee populations: Amman, Irbid, Mafraq and Zarqa (including Azraq town). In the summer of 2019, enumerators interviewed a random sample of Syrians who received services from the NGO CARE during the study period. The participants were recruited from Syrian refugees living outside of camps, as do more than 90% of Syrians in Jordan (The World Bank, 2017, p. 93).

The two cases make for a valuable comparison given some key similarities and critical differences. Similar to Lebanon, Jordan hosts a large number of Syrian refugees relative to its population, and public discourse in the country widely frames refugees as having large negative economic and fiscal impacts. In contrast, the baseline rate of return intentions for Syrians in Jordan is very low. When we asked Syrian refugees in Jordan if they plan to ever return to Syria, we find that a large majority of respondents (around 75%) reported that they never want to return to Syria. Further, unlike Lebanon, national political discourse in Jordan at the time of the survey was not pushing aggressively for Syrians to return. Therefore, the data enable us to examine whether our results from Lebanon pertain only to a context with major political pressure to return and where a large share of people hope to return home someday.

The difference in baseline return intentions between our samples in Lebanon and Jordan is likely driven by different selection into displacement to the countries (Lichtenheld, 2020). First, we see a difference between the two samples in self-reported level of security in respondents' hometowns. As of summer 2019, 51% of the sample in Jordan said that their place of origin continues to be very dangerous. In contrast, only 28% of respondents in Lebanon said so, when we conducted our survey there a few months later in August–October 2019. Second, our fieldwork suggests that the political attitudes of Syrians living in Jordan tend to be more anti-regime whereas the Syrian population in Lebanon is more divided in its views toward the Syrian government, which aligns with public opinion surveys on the topic (Corstange, 2018).

Using our data from Jordan, we construct indices for dimensions of people's well-being in Jordan and prospective well-being in Syria. We then regress return intentions on the indices, as defined in the "individual indices" specification of Equation 1, to estimate the impact of each factor on peoples' stated plans to ever return to Syria.¹³

Figure 8 presents results from our analysis of the Jordan data. Despite the sizeable difference in baseline return intentions and the political climate, the drivers of return intentions

¹³The list of questions used in each index are included in Section 9 of the Appendix.

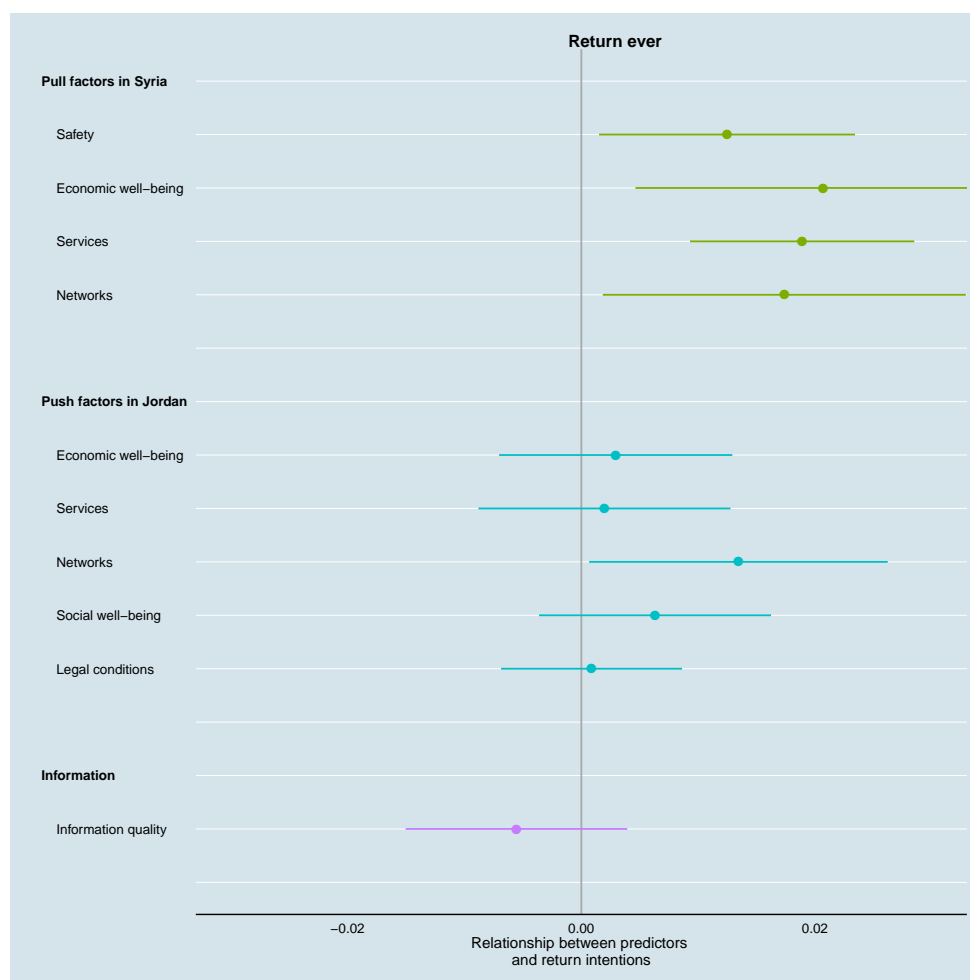


Figure 8: Index Results in Jordan

in Jordan are strikingly similar to Lebanon. First, prospective conditions in Syria play an important role. We see that conditions in respondents' place of origin in Syria—specifically safety, economic prospects, and public services—are positively correlated with return intentions. Also, having family and friend networks in Syria is positively correlated with return intentions.

Second, in line with results from Lebanon, we do not find strong evidence that conditions in Jordan drive return intentions. First, we see in Figure 8 that economic conditions, access to public services, social well-being, and legal conditions are not strongly associated with return intentions. Networks is the one dimension of conditions in Jordan where we find a relationship with return intentions. This contrasts with results from Lebanon, where social well-being is the one push factor that consistently predicts return intentions. These two

results may suggest a link between return intentions and some underlying construct of social integration.

Finally, looking at the impact of information, we do not find evidence of a relationship between information and return intentions in Jordan. This contrasts with the evidence we found in Lebanon for the importance of information for Syrians' decision making about return.¹⁴

9 Threats to Inference

As is typical for cross-sectional analysis, there are a number of key threats to inference that might affect our interpretation of the correlations we present in the paper. First, it is possible that Syrians selected where to live in Lebanon according to their baseline preferences for return. If this were the case, variation in Syrians' living conditions in Lebanon could be driven by return intentions. For instance, refugees who planned to return quickly may have chosen to live closer to the Syrian border. In addition to being closer to Syria, these areas tend to exhibit lower levels of security due in part to conflict spillovers and are generally poorer than the rest of Lebanon. These differences could lead to a downward bias in our estimates for the effects of social and economic well-being in Lebanon and an upward bias for the effect of travel distance on return intentions.

Two factors mitigate this concern. First, our empirical models adjust for district fixed effects (except those including travel distance, see below). This implies that our estimates are solely based on comparisons between Syrians living in the same Lebanese district. Second, we estimate the effect of travel distance on return intentions using only travel distance from the Syrian border to respondents' home towns, thereby accounting for endogenous residential choices in Lebanon, and we find that the results remain the same (see Figures A30 and A31 in Appendix Section 7.10).¹⁵

Second, we explore whether the absence of a strong relationship between push factors and return intentions is driven by a lack of variation in conditions in Lebanon. The challenges that Syrians face in Lebanon may sometimes appear monolithically dire from the outside, and if Syrians' conditions in the country are indeed homogeneous, then a null relationship between

¹⁴We were not able to ask respondents in Jordan for the name of their hometown or district in Syria, preventing analysis of mobility cost.

¹⁵In our main regression, the travel distance analysis is based in part on location in Lebanon, meaning we do not adjust for district fixed effects in the regression.

push factors in Lebanon and return intentions would be substantively trivial. However, our survey data make clear that there is important variation in the social, economic, and legal challenges that Syrians in Lebanon face.

When it comes to the economic situation in Lebanon, 35% of interviewed respondents reported having worked in the four weeks prior to the survey while the remaining 65% reported not having worked. Among households that receive income, 45% received an income less than \$250 per month and 21% received more income than \$450, which is the minimum wage in Lebanon for full-time employment. Respondents also varied in their social well-being in Lebanon. While 37% reported living in towns that experienced curfews in the 2 years prior to fielding the survey (pre-Covid curfews, which often targeted Syrians), 63% did not experience curfews in Lebanon during those two years. Further, 40% stated that Syrians experience housing discrimination and 48% claimed that Syrians experience discrimination in healthcare in Lebanon.

In Appendix Section 7.13, we examine this more systematically by producing a map of Lebanon that shows the variation in respondents' conditions by district using an index of all the components used to measure push factors in Lebanon. The map shows significant variation across districts—the difference in the push factor index between the district with the worst and the best conditions for respondents is about 2.4 standard deviations.

A third possible concern is that we fail to capture the full extent of push factors by relying on data from only two countries, rather than the full sample of countries in which Syrian refugees live. For instance, refugees living in wealthy countries with strong social safety nets, or refugees who have been resettled permanently to a third country may have lower return intentions as a result of these welcoming policies. However, most refugees face situations fundamentally similar to those of Syrians in Lebanon. More than 85% of refugees reside in developing countries, and over the last decade less than 1% of refugees received citizenship in a host country each year and only 1–2% were resettled annually (UNHCR, 2019*a*, pp. 28-33). Further, our ability to replicate the paper's main findings with a sample of Syrians living in Jordan, a country that has been comparatively more welcoming to refugees, suggests that the results travel at a minimum to other countries in the MENA region.

10 Conclusion

In this paper, we offer a framework for understanding the dynamics of refugee return. We identify four major drivers of return: push factors in the host country, pull factors in the home country, the cost of mobility, and the role of information. We test our hypotheses in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon using observational and experimental survey data from a representative sample of refugees and explore the external validity of our results with a second survey in Jordan.

We find strong evidence that the return decisions of Syrian refugees are shaped primarily by the situation in the home country (pull factors), rather than the dynamics in the hosting country (push factors). The most important pull factors are perceptions of safety, economic opportunity, the availability of public services, and the size of personal networks. Strikingly, we do not find evidence of a strong relationship between conditions in the hosting country and people's return intentions.¹⁶ We find evidence that the strength of pull factors is moderated by the confidence that respondents have in their information about the situation in Syria.

Descriptively, our findings related to return aspirations have two important facets: short-term return intentions are relatively low and return intentions are a powerful predictor of return behavior. These findings align with the existing literature in two ways. First, previous studies focused on return migration find that labor migration and wartime displacement can lead to high rates of long-term residence in destinations (see, e.g., Constant and Massey, 2003; Camarena and Hagerdal, 2020). Second, recent studies of labor migration with direct measurement of both migration intentions and behavior find that intentions were good predictors of future emigration (see, e.g., Van Dalen and Henkens, 2013; Docquier, Peri and Ruysen, 2014; Tjaden, Auer and Laczko, 2019).

As we consider the broader import of these findings, it is useful to reflect on the benefits and limits of a study conducted in Lebanon (and Jordan). On the one hand, Lebanon offers a number of important features including wide variation in push and pull factors. However, Lebanon differs from other contexts in three important ways. First, the median respondent in our data has been in Lebanon for six years, but many refugees worldwide have been displaced even longer. As displacement extends across generations, people who grew up in a host country may develop deeper economic and social ties, while holding fairly limited ties to the country that their parents or grandparents fled. Second, the dynamics of return

¹⁶The findings align with Kaya and Orchard (2020), who find that conditions in Syria predict return intentions among Syrians in Germany, while push factors in Germany play a negligible role.

may differ for refugees living in Western countries, where about 15% of refugees worldwide reside. These refugees are likely different in important ways from those who stay in the region of their home country, for example encountering a more welcoming legal environment, and facing much higher transport costs to return. Finally, our findings are driven both by conditions in Lebanon and Syria. Our interpretation of the relative importance of push and pull factors may only generalize to contexts in which high levels of ongoing violence impede return to the country of origin.

The paper also raises a number of important questions for a growing research agenda on refugee crises and the dynamics of return. First, further work is needed to understand the role of well-being in the host country in refugee decision-making. The null relationship we find between host-country conditions and return intentions could emerge if well-being in the host country has countervailing negative and positive effects on people's return aspirations and preparations. People with greater resources may be both better off in exile but also more able to afford the costs of moving back home. Our results provide evidence for this possibility, where we see that better conditions have very small or null effects on people's intentions to return, but a positive association with concrete steps to prepare to return.

Second, although previous research explores *why* refugees seek out information about potential destinations (Holland and Peters, 2020), little is understood about *how* refugees acquire and assess information about the situation in potential destinations. It is intuitive that high-quality information will condition migration choices, especially given the potential negative consequences of returning prematurely to a dangerous context. But the uncertainty that refugees have about the situation at home may lead them to underweight outcomes in the home country relative to those in the host country (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Given the complexity of our findings on information and the absence of a well-identified causal effect, further research is needed on how quality information influences return decisions.

Finally, refugees' decision-making about return is a product of both individual-level factors and aggregate shocks (e.g., economic crisis or civil war in the hosting country). In considering the role of push factors, it will be important to examine how aggregate shocks condition household decision-making. It will be valuable to explore how shocks and household characteristics interact, something that we are not in a position to do with cross-sectional and experimental data.

We conclude with two key takeaways for policymakers and humanitarian organizations. First, the results reaffirm the fundamental humanitarian mandate of the refugee protection

regime. Refugees are not economic migrants by another name. The vast majority intend to return to their home country when threats to their physical, economic, and social well-being have decreased, and when they feel that they possess credible information. Even after years in a host country, people's migration choices do not appear to be driven by opportunities in that country. We find that more than two thirds of Syrians in Lebanon want to return home, and prospects for a good job and access to public services in Lebanon do not influence people's likelihood of staying. The evidence is clear that policies that deny rights to refugees or broader anti-refugee hostility are unlikely to drive people to return.

The findings also offer lessons for how humanitarian agencies can support refugee well-being while also promoting safe, voluntary return. Given the strong desire of refugees to return home, efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance and provide economic opportunities are unlikely to incentivize refugees to remain in the host country. More traditional development programs that support refugees' economic integration could benefit both refugees and host-country economies and free refugees from a reliance on aid. This would, in turn, allow humanitarian agencies to focus their attention and resources on emergencies, rather than struggling to provide ongoing assistance in protracted displacement situations. In addition, there is a clear role for access to information. To end refugee crises, credible information dissemination is critical, as refugees need a good understanding of the conditions at home before they are willing to consider return.

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