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The Syrian Situation: Host Country Effects and the Prospects for Return

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PART I

The Syrian Situation: Host Country Effects and the Prospects for Return

By Emma Smith, Assistant Professor and Provost's Distinguished Faculty Fellow at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and Zara Sarzin, Consultant at the Fragility, Conflict and Violence Group, World Bank ¹

ABSTRACT

The Syrian refugee crisis has reached a pivotal juncture with the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024. With Syria's political transition improving prospects for voluntary return, sustainable repatriation will depend on meeting a minimum security threshold and rapidly scaling area-based, inclusive investments that support both returnees and the non-displaced populations. This Digest synthesizes leading evidence on two central themes: the integration of Syrian refugees in host countries throughout the conflict—highlighting impacts on labor markets and social cohesion—and the prospects and implications of refugee returns to Syria. It examines the main drivers shaping return intentions, and the challenges faced by returnees. The evidence highlights the importance of security and area-based investments, which together may promote sustainable refugee returns. Investments that benefit both returnees and the non-displaced communities can further promote reintegration and social cohesion in Syria. Recognizing that many Syrian refugees will remain in host countries until conditions in Syria improve further, evidence also supports policies that facilitate the effective integration of refugees in host countries, allowing them to accumulate knowledge, skills, and assets to facilitate their eventual return and reintegration.

¹ * Keywords: Syria, displacement, intentions to returns, refugee returns, socioeconomic effects.

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Introduction

The Syrian conflict is responsible for one of the largest displacement situations in the world, with 7.4 million Syrians internally displaced and 6.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers living abroad at the end of 2024 (IDMC 2025; UNHCR 2025d). Since the conflict's outbreak in 2011—sparked by pro-democracy protests during the Arab Spring—Syria has endured years of civil war, widespread destruction, and mass displacement. Refugee flows surged between 2013 and 2015, during which time UNHCR recorded arrivals of over 5.4 million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR 2025c). The numbers continued to climb, peaking at 7.0 million in 2021 and remaining stable as the conflict persisted (UNHCR 2025d).

While some refugees undertook secondary, often perilous, journeys to Europe, particularly Germany, which hosted over 780,000 Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers at the end of 2024, the majority of Syrian refugees remained in the region (UNHCR 2025d). Neighboring countries, including Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, absorbed most of the Syrian refugees, often experiencing significant population shocks and consequent economic and social pressures. For example, registered Syrian refugees account for over 5 percent of Jordan's population and 13 percent of Lebanon's (UNHCR 2025d; World Bank 2025d). Many host governments estimate the true percentages are higher, due to potentially large numbers of unregistered refugees. After more than a decade, these host countries continue to navigate the economic and social impacts of a large and protracted refugee presence.

Throughout the conflict, many Syrian refugees held onto the hope of returning home, but ongoing insecurity made repatriation impossible. The unexpected fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 marked a pivotal moment, with many displaced Syrians perceiving, for the first time, a pathway to return. By the end of January 2026, an estimated 1.4 million refugees had already returned to Syria from neighboring countries alongside an estimated 1.7 million returned internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR 2026a). The present moment offers an opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned from the global response to the Syrian refugee crisis and look ahead to the open questions surrounding refugees' return to Syria.

This Digest examines the Syrian refugee crisis at this critical juncture. It addresses two central issues: first, the integration of Syrian refugees in host countries and their impact on local communities; and second, the prospects and implications of refugee return to Syria. It examines the main drivers shaping return intentions, the challenges faced by returnees, and the risks and opportunities for Syria's recovery. By reflecting on lessons learned and exploring open questions about reintegration and recovery, the Digest aims to inform future policy and research.

Integration of Syrian Refugees in Host Countries

The integration of Syrian refugees in host countries has been shaped by national policies, economic conditions, household capabilities, and host community attitudes. Comparative analysis shows that policies granting refugees freedom of movement and the right to work are strongly associated with better economic integration (World Bank 2023). Among the primary countries hosting Syrian refugees, labor market access varies substantially. In Germany, Syrian refugees have unencumbered access to the labor market, while in most non-European countries, tight restrictions allow only a relatively small number of refugees to work formally, and typically only in low-skill jobs.

There are few rigorous studies examining the integration outcomes of Syrian refugees in host countries. Demirci and Kırdar (2023) find that in Türkiye, Syrian men have employment rates close to those of natives, with the native-refugee gap in paid employment narrowing to 4.7 percentage points for men and 4.0 for women after adjusting for demographic and educational factors. However, most refugees work in informal, low-wage jobs, and the gap in formal employment remains significant—58 percentage points for men and 6.5 for women. Younger refugees and those proficient in Turkish fare better, and regional differences are notable, with Istanbul offering more opportunities for men and the Mediterranean and Southeast Anatolia regions for women (Demirci and Kırdar 2023). In Jordan, Syrian refugees' employment is also largely informal, but overall employment rates are much lower and the native-refugee gap is wider, despite a shared language (Krafft et al. 2019). This is partly because Jordanian men are predominantly employed in public sector jobs, which Syrians cannot access (Krafft et al. 2019).

Local attitudes can pose an additional barrier to economic integration. Aksoy et al. (2023) analyze integration in Germany and show that both local development levels and discrimination significantly affect labor market and multi-dimensional integration outcomes. Refugees assigned to counties with more negative sentiment towards immigrants or higher unemployment rates are less likely to be employed a few years later (Aksoy et al. 2023).

Building on these insights, we now consider the socioeconomic impacts of Syrian refugees on host countries, focusing on labor markets and social cohesion.

Impacts on Host Countries

Impacts on Labor Markets

Host countries often worry about the potential impact of refugees on local labor markets. Empirical evidence from a range of refugee-hosting countries indicates that the effects of refugees on labor markets are generally modest, with negative impacts typically concentrated among vulnerable groups such as informal, low-skilled, young, and female workers (Verme and Schuettler 2021). Economic theory suggests that these effects may vary across hosting contexts, depending on the skill composition of refugee workers, the responses of native workers and firms, and host country policies (Borjas 2003). Below we survey the evidence on the impact of Syrian refugees across three distinctively different labor markets: in Türkiye, Jordan, and Germany.

In Türkiye, until 2016, Syrian refugees were not allowed to work formally and therefore entered the country's large informal labor market. Cengiz and Tekguc (2022) analyzed the impact of Syrian refugees on Turkish workers at the end of 2015, when the refugee population had reached 2.5 million, and found no significant negative effect on employment or wages for Turkish workers, including those with lower skills. In fact, higher-skilled natives saw wage gains. These outcomes are attributed to labor market complementarity between refugees and natives, increased housing demand that boosted construction jobs, and greater entrepreneurial activity among both Syrians and Turks, which helped absorb the labor supply shock (Cengiz and Tekgüç 2022).

Aksu et al. (2022) also find positive effects for Turkish workers in the formal sector, with increases in wage employment and wages for men, especially in manufacturing, driven by higher product market prices and increased capital investment in regions with more refugees. However, they identify pronounced negative effects in the informal sector, particularly among temporary wage workers, less educated and young individuals, women in part-time and self-employment, and those in agriculture and construction. Tumen (2016) finds similar patterns of effects. Overall, men's total employment remained stable and average wages increased due to offsetting effects between informal and formal sectors, but women faced more adverse outcomes, with no increase in formal sector employment and a decline in labor force participation (Aksu et al. 2022).

Jordan provides another context where refugee labor market access is highly restricted. Although Jordan operates a work permit scheme, permits cover only low-skill sectors and benefit relatively few refugees. Fallah et al. (2019) document minimal sectoral overlap between jobs held by Syrian refugees and Jordanians; while over 40 percent of Jordanians work in the public sector, over 80 percent of Syrian refugees found work in the informal sector. As a result, Jordanians living in areas with high concentrations of refugees did not experience worse labor market outcomes than those with less exposure. Additionally, some Jordanian workers moved from informal to formal employment, with a small positive effect on hourly wages, possibly driven by new jobs created in the humanitarian and development sectors responding to the refugee crisis (Fallah et al. 2019).

Looking at the experience from a high-income country, Busch et al. (2020) model the effect of the 2015-16 refugee influx on the wages of German workers. The authors show that the net welfare impacts on German natives were positive, but distributed unevenly across the population. They show that low-skilled Germans experienced short-term wage losses, due to increased competition from similarly low-skilled refugees, while medium- and high-skilled Germans experienced wage increases (Busch et al. 2020).

Three key insights emerge from these studies. First, adverse wage impacts are concentrated among vulnerable native workers—those in informal employment, with lower skills, and women—who face greater competition and, in some cases,

displacement or wage declines. Second, high-skilled and formal sector workers often benefit, experiencing wage gains due to complementarity with refugee labor, and some natives benefit from occupational upgrading or new opportunities. Third, overall employment and wage effects on native workers are generally neutral or positive, as negative impacts on vulnerable groups are offset by gains elsewhere, and broader economic channels—such as increased demand and investment—help absorb the labor supply shock. Overall, the anticipated widespread negative impact of refugees on native workers did not materialize, but targeted policies are needed to support those adversely affected and ensure the benefits of migration are more widely shared.

Impact on Social Cohesion

Beyond economic considerations, the arrival of Syrian refugees has significantly shaped host community perceptions, which are crucial for both refugee integration and sustaining public support for hosting policies. Social contact theory posits that collaborative interactions between groups can foster connection, while adversarial contact can deepen divisions (Allport 1954; Lowe 2021). Thus, positive exposure might improve host communities' attitudes toward refugees, while perceived economic competition may worsen it.

Evidence from Germany illustrates these dynamics. Albarosa and Elsner (2023) find that the 2015/2016 refugee influx did not erode social cohesion overall. Generalized trust, perceived fairness, and attitudes toward foreigners remained stable, with no widespread increase in anti-immigrant sentiment or concerns about crime. However, these averages mask important variation. In areas with strong employment, attitudes toward migrants improved slightly. In contrast, regions with high unemployment and strong far-right political support experienced increased anti-immigrant sentiment, heightened crime fears, and more anti-immigrant violence. (Albarosa and Elsner 2023).

In Jordan, where there is much higher cultural proximity between refugees and host communities, exposure to refugees receiving large amounts of assistance hurt social cohesion. In a randomized controlled trial, Tamim et al. (2024) show that Jordanians whose Syrian neighbors received substantial housing subsidies and renovation incentives developed more negative attitudes and reduced interaction with Syrians.

The results are consistent with backlash from vulnerable host community members who feel passed over for assistance.

While the evidence presented thus far points to negative effects of exposure in some contexts, the full picture is more nuanced. In Jordan, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) find no evidence that more economically exposed Jordanians are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees (Alrababa'h et al. 2021). In some contexts, exposure can even improve attitudes. For example, in the Netherlands, which hosted approximately 70,000 Syrian refugees in 2024, Achard et al. (2025) find that proximity to refugees led to more positive attitudes toward ethnic minorities and reduced support for anti-immigration parties, especially among right-leaning individuals and those living near refugee centers. These results may reflect the relatively modest scale of refugee arrivals (Achard et al. 2025). Overall, the impact of refugee presence on social cohesion varies by context and is mediated by local vulnerabilities, the visibility and targeting of assistance, and the nature of intergroup contact.

Refugees' integration outcomes and their impact on host countries—alongside conditions in Syria—are important for understanding refugees' decisions about if and when to return. The next section reviews the evidence on the factors that shape refugees' return decisions and reintegration outcomes, and the risks and opportunities this presents for Syria.

Prospect and Implications of Syrian Refugee Returns

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 led to significant shifts in refugee returns and intentions. Since December 8, 2024, 1.4 million Syrian refugees and 1.7 million IDPs have returned home (UNHCR 2026a). Despite these substantial numbers, returns represent less than a quarter of the six million Syrians registered as refugees at the end of 2024 (UNHCR 2026b).

The June 2025 Enhanced Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions to Return to Syria Survey (eRPIS), supported by UNHCR and the World Bank, interviewed over 6,000 refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Six months into Syria's political transition, the survey found that 18 percent of refugees planned to return within the

next 12 months, up from 2 percent in April-May 2024, but down from 27 percent in January 2025, likely reflecting both completed returns and renewed security concerns (UNHCR 2025b). Despite these shifts, 80 percent still hope to return “one day,” a figure unchanged since January (UNHCR 2025b).

The survey results underscore the complexity of the decision to return. Refugees intending to return within a year most frequently cite security improvements, national identity, high living costs and limited jobs in host countries, and family reunification. Those not planning to return within 12 months point to damaged or inadequate housing, limited employment and livelihoods, and safety concerns. Long-term hopes for return hinge on substantial improvements in Syria’s stability, access to basic services, housing, legal rights, and economic opportunities (UNHCR 2025b).

This raises many questions for the academic and policy community: Who is likely to return, and when? What factors shape these decisions? What challenges will returnees face? And how can evidence help guide policy to support safe, voluntary, and sustainable returns?

Drivers of Refugee Return

The literature on Syrian refugees’ return intentions should be interpreted cautiously, given the profound and ongoing changes in conditions in Syria. Nonetheless, prior literature identifies several factors that are likely to shape refugees’ decisions including conditions in Syria, experiences in host countries, and mobility costs.

Security in Syria is the most powerful and consistent driver of return intentions. In Lebanon, Alrababah et al. (2023) use a conjoint survey experiment to understand refugees’ choices across hypothetical scenarios, finding that improvements in safety conditions had by far the largest impact on return intentions. Improved security in one’s hometown raises return intentions by 35 percentage points, nationwide improvements by 42 points, and the end of military conscription also boosts return intentions (Alrababah et al. 2023). The strong connection between safety and return also plays out in observed return decisions. Beaman et al. (2022) find that, during the first seven years of conflict, a one standard deviation improvement in security led to a small but significant increase in voluntary returns, even though overall return rates remained low. The importance of safety relative to other factors suggests that refugees only

begin to take other factors into consideration after a base level of safety can be assured (Alrababah et al. 2023).

Economic opportunities and access to services become important once safety needs are met. Both Alrababah et al. (2023) and Beaman et al. (2022) found that economic conditions shape intentions and returns, after safety needs were met. When presented with hypothetical scenarios, Syrian refugees in Lebanon were 8 percentage points more likely to wish to return in situations when job opportunities and public services were available in Syria (Alrababah et al. 2023). Likewise, Beaman et al. (2022) estimate that a one standard deviation increase in nightlights in Syria (an indicator of economic activity) was associated with a 2 percent increase in actual returns, even while the conflict was ongoing.

Other origin country conditions that are likely to shape return decisions include access to housing and assets, and social and family networks in Syria. The destruction of a family home reduces return intentions in hypothetical vignettes (Beaman et al, 2022), while the deliberate decision not to keep assets in Syria is associated with lower return intentions (Al Husein and Wagner, 2023). Additionally, family and social networks in Syria positively influence return intentions (Alrababah et al, 2023; Al Husein and Wagner, 2023).

We now turn to conditions of Syrian refugees in host countries, and the extent to which these also shape return intentions and decisions. While Alrababah et al. (2023) conclude that “pull” factors in origin countries—security, economic conditions, and services—dominate “push” factors in host countries, other studies highlight the importance of host country conditions and experiences. Al Husein and Wagner (2023) find marked differences in the return intentions between Syrian refugees in Türkiye, a neighboring country with temporary protection, and Germany, a high-income distant country offering high levels of protection. Surveying participants from a snowball sample, they find that, conditional on safety in Syria, more than 75 percent of those in Türkiye expressed the intention of returning, compared to 55 percent in Germany. The authors suggest that this large difference may reflect different characteristics of refugees in each country sample, as well as the substantial differences in refugees’ economic outcomes between countries (Al Husein and Wagner 2023).

Integration in host countries has a complex relationship with return intentions. In Türkiye, Kayaoglu et al. (2022) find that Turkish language proficiency and contact with natives are directly associated with reduced aspirations to return to Syria, while education and labor market participation have no direct effects. Integration also affects return intentions indirectly through perceived socio-cultural distance, discrimination, and negative experiences. For example, higher education reduces return aspirations by decreasing perceived socio-cultural distance. Paradoxically, deeper integration may sometimes increase the desire to return. For example, labor market integration raises return aspirations indirectly by heightening perceptions of socio-cultural distance (Kayaoglu et al. 2022).

Finally, even when return is preferred, mobility costs—such as the cost of civil documentation and rebuilding destroyed homes—can be prohibitive. In the Mashreq region, return is most common among Syrian refugees with a higher standard of living in the host country, possibly because they have accumulated resources needed for mobility, and increases in cash assistance are associated with higher intentions to return (Beaman et al. 2022). While observational data does not show a direct link between mobility costs and return intentions of Syrian refugees, higher costs are negatively associated with preparations for return (Alrababah et al. 2023).

Conditions for Returnees and Reintegration Prospects

The fall of the Assad regime has renewed hopes for stability in Syria. Compulsory military service, which led many men of conscription age to leave Syria, has now ended (UNHCR 2025a). The removal of military checkpoints has improved movement and stabilized food prices in some areas (World Bank 2025b). Yet the environment for returnees remains challenging and security risks are still high. Armed groups continue to exert influence and sectarian violence persists in several regions, triggering new episodes of forced displacement in 2025 (UNHCR 2025a). Many refugees face challenges in reclaiming land and property, due to widespread destruction, lack of documents, or disputed ownership (Daraj 2026).

Syria's economy has been devastated by 14 years of conflict, with GDP shrinking by over 50 percent since 2010 (World Bank 2025a). Now classified as low-income, a quarter of the population lives in extreme poverty (World Bank 2024).¹ The economy remains fragile, with GDP per capita expected to decline and extreme

poverty anticipated to increase (World Bank 2025a). The war is estimated to have caused US\$108 billion in damage to infrastructure, housing, and other buildings, with an estimated reconstruction cost of US\$216 billion (World Bank 2025c). While there has been a gradual lifting of bilateral sanctions, humanitarian assistance is down by a third since 2023, undermining the delivery of essential services (World Bank 2025a). These conditions make reintegration for returning refugees especially difficult.

Empirical research on refugee reintegration is limited due to the lack of large-scale datasets in these settings (Loschmann and Marchand 2021). Evidence from Afghanistan highlights several factors influencing labor market outcomes for returnees. Social networks within the local community and accumulated savings play an influential role, as do employment before displacement and spending more years abroad, underscoring the value of skills and experience acquired during exile. However, typical return assistance does not cover the substantial investment needed for self-employment in agriculture or herding (Loschmann and Marchand 2021).

Research in Pakistan shows that the size of cash assistance matters for reintegration outcomes. Esper et al (2022) find that larger cash allowances (US\$350 per person) led to greater investment in durable assets such as housing and improved access to legal documentation for household members, compared to smaller allowances (US\$150), which were primarily spent on immediate food needs. Although larger transfers improved asset accumulation and legal status, they did not significantly affect employment or school enrollment (Esper et al. 2022).

Overall, while recent political changes in Syria offer hope for improved conditions, reintegration of returning refugees will remain difficult due to persistent security risks, economic fragility, and limited humanitarian assistance. Evidence from other post-conflict settings suggest that successful reintegration depends on returnees' assets, skills, and experience and the adequacy of support provided to returnees. Larger cash transfers can help build assets and improve legal status, but may not resolve all challenges, especially those related to employment and income.

Risks and Opportunities for Syria

Large-scale refugee returns can heighten the risk of renewed conflict in countries of origin. Blair and Wright (2024) found that a substantial influx of Afghan returnees,

prompted by changes in repatriation assistance, led to an overall reduction in insurgent violence but also increased insurgent lethality and communal violence. The authors suggest that the cash transfers driving repatriation may have boosted local economic activity in areas where returnees settled, reducing rebel recruitment through higher opportunity costs, but also undermining counterinsurgent effectiveness by disrupting local information networks (Blair and Wright 2024).

A related study by Blair et al. (2025) explores the mass repatriation of Afghans from Iran in 2018, triggered by sanctions and resulting welfare shock for migrants. This influx increased insurgent violence in destination communities, though communal violence was unchanged. The authors attribute the rise in insurgent activity to the negative welfare shock experienced by Afghan refugees, which spilled over to their communities and lowered the opportunity cost for rebel recruitment. The authors theorize that refugee returns are more likely to destabilize origin countries when deteriorating conditions in host countries force repatriation (Blair et al. 2025).

Importantly, Blair and Wright (2024) emphasize that strong local institutions and economic opportunities can mitigate conflict risks. They show that social networks and strong local institutions moderate the potential for refugee repatriation to spark local conflicts. They argue that refugees who return due to direct cash support or improved political and economic prospects in their home country are more likely to generate positive economic spillovers in their destination communities, reducing the risk of insurgent violence. More broadly, when economic opportunities are available in repatriation areas, competition over scarce resources diminishes, enabling both returnees and those who never left to benefit from reconstruction and growth, which fosters social cohesion and lowers incentives for violence (Blair and Wright 2024).

In the long term, returning refugees offer significant opportunities for Syria. Bahar et al. (2024) provide evidence from the former Yugoslavia that industries with more returning refugees saw substantial increases in export performance, driven by productivity gains from the transfer of foreign knowledge, technologies, and best practices. These positive effects were strongest among returnees with higher education, experience in analytical and supervisory roles, and those who worked in productive, higher-paying firms abroad. For Syria, this suggests that returning

refugees can be a vital resource for post-conflict reconstruction, economic diversification, and long-term development (Bahar et al. 2024).

In conclusion, the Syrian refugee crisis presents a complex set of policy challenges and opportunities at a critical juncture. The recent political transition in Syria has improved the prospects for refugee return, yet significant barriers remain, including ongoing security risks, economic fragility, shortfalls in services and housing, and constrained humanitarian assistance. Durable solutions may depend on a sequenced approach and inclusive, area-based investments that benefit both returnees and non-displaced populations. Policy priorities should first focus on restoring security and ensuring basic protection in likely areas of return, as these are prerequisites for sustainable returns and successful reintegration of refugees and IDPs alike. Equally important, area-based investments should concentrate on restoring and expanding access to economic opportunities, housing, and essential services in places of return.

To mitigate conflict risks associated with large-scale repatriation, it will be critical to strengthen local institutions, ensure inclusive and conflict-sensitive investments, and provide adequate cash assistance to returnees alongside other vulnerable households. Harnessing the skills of highly educated and skilled returnees to support reconstruction and productivity gains should also be pursued to maximize the potential development gains from refugee repatriation. Finally, recognizing that many Syrian refugees will remain in host countries until conditions in Syria improve further, evidence underscores the importance of policies that promote social cohesion and facilitate the economic integration of refugees, enabling them to accumulate knowledge, skills, and assets that are essential for their eventual return and successful reintegration.

PART II

Summaries of Selected Academic Articles and Research Reports

The labor market integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey

Murat Demirci and Murat Güray Kırdar

World Development, Volume 162 (2023), Article 106138

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This paper **examines the labor market integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey**, drawing on data from the 2018 Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS)—the first nationally representative sample of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Since 2018, Syrian refugees in Turkey have numbered more than 3.6 million. The study compares employment outcomes between Syrian refugees and native Turks, identifies factors influencing integration, and highlights subgroups facing particular challenges.

The authors use a linear probability model to estimate the impact of refugee status on various labor market outcomes, controlling for demographic and educational differences. They further analyze how integration varies by age, education, duration of residence, mother tongue, and region.

The analysis draws on data from the 2018 Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS), which includes a representative sample of Syrian refugees in Turkey for the first time. The TDHS provides detailed information on employment status, job type and sector, and whether employment is formal or informal for both natives and refugees. Descriptive statistics reveal that:

- Syrian refugees are, on average, younger and less educated than native Turks. They are more likely to reside in southern and southeastern provinces, where employment rates are generally lower. The average duration of residence for Syrian refugees is 3.8 years.
- Employment rates are higher among natives (69 percent of men, 22 percent of women) compared to Syrian refugees (62 percent of men, 6 percent of women).
- Refugee men are more likely to be employed as wage workers (88 percent) compared to native men (73 percent). Refugee men are more concentrated in manufacturing, while native men are more likely to work in services. Among women, refugees are more likely to work in agriculture and less likely to work in services compared to natives.

- Refugees are overwhelmingly employed in the informal sector (98 percent of married men, 98 percent of women), compared to much lower rates among natives (19 percent of married men, 38 percent of women).

Main empirical results:

- **Overall employment levels are not much lower for refugees than for natives.** Gaps in labor market outcomes (employment, unemployment, and labor-force participation) between natives and Syrian refugees in Turkey narrow considerably (especially for women) once differences in demographic and educational characteristics of natives and refugees are accounted for. For men, the native-refugee gap in paid employment drops from 7.1 percentage points to 4.7 points after controls; for women, it narrows from 16.1 to 4.0 points. This suggests that much of the observed gap is explained by differences in age and education.
- **Syrian refugees in Turkey lag natives in terms of employment quality.** Gaps in job characteristics persist and display significant heterogeneity, even after differences in demographic and educational characteristics of natives and refugees are accounted for. Refugees are significantly less likely to be employed in most types and sectors of jobs, with the gap being smallest in wage employment, manufacturing for men, and agriculture for women; and larger gaps in self-employment and unpaid family work.
- **Refugees are much more likely to work in the informal sector.** Even after controlling for demographic and educational factors, married refugee men are 58 percentage points less likely to be formally employed than married native men.
- **Labor market integration varies significantly by age, education, language, and region.** Young refugees (under 25) have higher employment rates than native youth, who are more likely to be in education, but refugees' employment rates lag behind natives among older age groups. The employment gap is wider for more educated refugees, especially women. Language proficiency is crucial for men's employment, with Turkish-speaking refugees faring better than Arabic- or Kurdish-speaking refugees. Regional differences also matter: refugee men do better in regions with manufacturing jobs, while refugee women are more likely to find work in regions with agricultural opportunities.

The study finds that **the gap in men's employment between natives and refugees in Turkey is much smaller than in most developed countries. However, these small gaps mask the fact that refugees are much more likely to work in informal, lower-quality jobs, with lower wages and greater job insecurity.** Educated individuals, older refugees, and women face greater challenges in labor market integration. Language skills and access to formal employment opportunities are key factors for improving integration outcomes.

Wage-productivity gap and discrimination against Syrian refugees: Evidence from Turkey

Ceyhun Elgin and Adem Yavuz Elveren

The Economic and Labour Relations Review, Volume 35, Issue 2 (2024), Pages 243–55

<https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2024.15>

This article **investigates the relationship between the wage-productivity gap and perceived economic and social discrimination among Syrian refugee workers in Turkey**. There are more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Most Syrian refugees in Turkey are employed in informal labor markets and face considerable economic and social discrimination.

The analysis is based on survey data collected from December 2022 to February 2023, involving 450 firm owners/managers and 450 Syrian workers in Istanbul. Firm owners/managers provided information on the value of the marginal product created by workers, gross wages, firm age, total number of employees, and the nationality of the firm owner. Workers reported their gross wage, age, gender, education, duration of stay in Turkey, and experiences of social and economic discrimination.

Main findings:

- **A higher wage-productivity gap is associated with increased perceived economic discrimination among refugee workers.** Gender, education, duration in Turkey, salary below the minimum wage, firm age, and firm size are also associated with perceived economic discrimination. In particular, more educated workers, those who have spent more time in Turkey, and those working for older and larger firms perceive less economic discrimination, while female workers perceive more. Worker age and firm owner nationality are not significantly associated with perceived economic discrimination.
- **A higher wage-productivity gap is linked to higher perceived social discrimination.** Worker age, gender, education, and duration in Turkey are also associated with higher perceived social discrimination. In particular, older and female workers report higher levels of perceived social discrimination, while more educated workers and those who have spent more time in Turkey report less. Firm-level variables such as firm age, size, and firm owner nationality are not significant in the regressions of perceived social discrimination.
- Respondents associate the wage-productivity gap more strongly with economic discrimination than with social attitudes.

The authors conclude that **workers experiencing a larger wage-productivity gap report higher levels of economic and social discrimination**. Even if workers are unaware of their marginal product value, they likely understand the wage-productivity gap and associate it with economic discrimination. This gap is linked to both economic and social discrimination. The

authors suggest that policies aimed at reducing this gap could help mitigate perceived economic and social discrimination among refugee workers. These policies may include initiatives to improve economic conditions for refugee workers and the enforcement of labor laws and regulations in informal labor markets, particularly laws concerning refugees.

First Time around: Local Conditions and Multi-Dimensional Integration of Refugees

Cevat Giray Aksoy, Panu Poutvaara, and Felicitas Schikora

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This paper **examines how local labor market conditions and native attitudes at the time of refugees' arrival shape their subsequent integration in Germany.** During the large influx of asylum-seekers to Germany between 2013 and 2016, asylum-seekers were centrally assigned to counties and could not choose their residence for at least three years. This policy aimed to ensure a fair distribution of refugees across counties, minimize tensions between natives and refugees, ease fiscal pressures, and reduce ethnic enclaves, but did not explicitly match asylum-seekers to local integration capacity.

The authors exploit the centralized allocation of asylum seekers across counties, which limits the self-selection of refugees into high-demand labor markets or existing ethnic enclaves. The analysis draws on data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, a representative sample of asylum seekers who arrived in Germany between 2013 to 2016. The survey provides detailed residence histories, socio-demographic characteristics and integration outcomes. Data on county-level characteristics come from the German Federal Statistical Office. Sentiments of German residents towards immigrants are measured using geo-coded Twitter data as well as vote shares for far-right parties. Refugee integration is measured across economic, linguistic, navigational, political, psychological, and social dimensions, following Harder et al. (2018).

Consistent with improving integration over time, the share of refugees not in employment or training declines with years of residence in Germany. However, after three years of residence in Germany, only about 30 percent of refugees are employed.

Main empirical results:

- **Central allocation is unrelated to local socio-economic conditions.** County population size is the only statistically significant predictor of the number of asylum seekers assigned to county. There is no statistically significant association between local socio-economic characteristics (unemployment rate, population density, GDP per capita, average age, and housing space per capita) and the number of asylum seekers at the county level. This supports the claim that placement did not target labor demand

or housing conditions and helps identify causal impacts of initial local context on later outcomes.

- **Attitudes and unemployment capture distinct local factors.** Local attitudes towards immigrants are only weakly correlated with unemployment.
- **High local unemployment rates and unfavorable attitudes towards immigrants reduce refugee employment rates.** A one standard deviation increase in either the unemployment rate or the negative sentiment index is linked to roughly a five percentage point reduction in the likelihood of being employed.
- **Adverse local conditions depress earnings and overall integration.** Both high unemployment and negative sentiment are linked to lower net monthly wages and weaker scores on the Multi-dimensional Integration Index, with attitudes appearing somewhat more important than unemployment for multi-dimensional integration. This suggests that local factors affect not only job access but also the quality of economic participation and social integration.
- **Far-right vote share corroborates the sentiment mechanism.** A one standard deviation higher far-right vote share (about a 1.07 percentage point increase) lowers the probability of being in employment or education by 3.2 percentage points and of being in full- or part-time work by 2.2 percentage points, and reduces net monthly wages by 14.4 percent on average.
- **Effects concentrate in social and economic dimensions.** Unemployment and negative sentiment explain variation in social and economic components of the integration index but do not significantly affect psychological, linguistic, political, or navigational outcomes. This suggests that local conditions operate primarily through labor market access and social inclusion rather than language acquisition or civic engagement.
- **Gender patterns differ: unemployment matters more for men; attitudes matter more for women.** For men, a one standard deviation higher local unemployment reduces the likelihood of full- or part-time employment by about seven percentage points and lowers wages and overall integration. For women, the earnings penalty associated with more negative local sentiment is larger than that for higher unemployment.

Taken together, the findings show that unfavorable initial local conditions—both weak labor markets and hostile attitudes—can have negative consequences for the economic integration of refugees, even in the absence of explicit restrictions on employment. Unfavorable initial conditions also affect refugees' future earnings and social integration. The authors conclude that **attitudes towards immigrants are as important as local unemployment rates in shaping refugees' integration outcomes**. Moreover, the centralized allocation of refugees into economically weaker or less welcoming counties imposes substantial integration costs, particularly in employment and earnings. The results provide evidence for aligning placement policies with local conditions to improve refugees' early trajectories and reduce longer-term social and economic costs.

Is It Merely a Labor Supply Shock? Impacts of Syrian Migrants on Local Economies in Turkey

Doruk Cengiz and Hasan Tekgüç

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Over 2.5 million Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey between 2012 and 2015, the majority settling in regions bordering Syria. Most Syrian refugees lack a high school degree and do not speak Turkish. Few Syrian refugees have work permits, but they can and do work in the informal sector, where they compete with low-skilled Turkish workers.

This paper **examines the effect of Syrian refugees on labor market outcomes for native workers in Turkey**. In addition to the supply-side shock in the labor market, the authors investigate demand-side channels that might enable local economies to fully or partially absorb the labor supply shock, including: (a) native-migrant labor complementarity; (b) increased housing demand; and (c) increased entrepreneurial activities of Syrians and non-Syrians in host regions.

Using geographic variation in refugee settlement patterns, the authors compare labor market outcomes in host and non-host regions before and after the arrival of Syrian refugees. Their analysis draws on employment and wage data from the TurkStat Household Labor Force Survey (2004–2015), refugee counts from the Ministry of Interior, residential building permit data from TurkStat, and new firm establishment data from the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey.

Main results:

- **Inflows of Syrian refugees did not significantly affect the employment or wages of Turkish workers at the same skill level.** For natives with less than a high school diploma, wage and employment changes were statistically negligible.
- **Wages for relatively higher-skilled native workers increased following Syrian migration**, suggesting a complementarity effect.
- **The entry of Syrian refugees into the informal labor market prompted low-skilled native workers to move into formal jobs.** The share of formally employed natives with less than a high school diploma rose rapidly after 2013, with 2.5 percentage points more natives earning at or above the minimum wage compared to a no-migration scenario.
- **Syrian migrants and high-skilled native workers are complementary, but migration had little effect on very high-skilled workers.** The share of workers earning upper-middle incomes (at or above 200 percent and 250 percent of the minimum wage) increased by more than 2 percentage points, while very high-wage workers saw almost no change.

- **Syrian refugee inflows had a substantial positive impact on residential construction**, with building permits increasing by more than 34 percent.
- **The number of new firms with at least one Syrian cofounder rose sharply between 2010 and 2015**, from less than 2.3 percent to over 31.9 percent of new firms. Even excluding Syrian-founded firms, there was a notable 10 percent increase in new businesses, indicating that non-Syrian entrepreneurs also benefited from the migration.

Overall, the authors conclude that **Syrian refugees have had positive effects on native workers. Lower-skilled natives experienced negligible losses, while higher-skilled workers benefited. Demand-side channels—labor complementarity, increased housing demand, and entrepreneurial activity—played a crucial role in mitigating any adverse effects from the labor supply shock.**

The Impact of Mass Migration of Syrians on the Turkish Labor Market

Ege Aksu, Refik Erzan, and Murat Güray Kırdar

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This paper **estimates the effects of the Syrian refugee influx on the labor market outcomes of natives in Turkey**. The authors use data from the end of 2015, when there were 2.5 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, almost all of whom were working in the informal sector. Syrian refugees in Turkey are, on average, younger and less educated than natives.

The authors exploit the variation in the ratio of Syrian refugees to natives across Turkish regions to isolate the effect of Syrian refugee inflows on labor market outcomes of natives. The analysis draws on several datasets including: (1) demographic characteristics and labor market outcomes from the 2004-2015 Turkish household labor force surveys (THLFS); (2) numbers of Syrians across the 81 provinces of Turkey from 2013 to 2015 from several sources; (3) regional data on trade activity from TurkStat; (4) data on regional consumer price indices for 2003-15 from the Central Bank of Turkey; (5) data on the openings, closings, and liquidation of firms, business cooperatives, and self-proprietorships from the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey for 2009-15; and (6) data on internal migration across regions for the 2008-15 period from TurkStat.

Main findings:

- **Syrian refugees do not affect the overall employment of native men and have a positive effect on their average wages.** There is suggestive evidence of a reduction in men's wage employment, which is compensated by a rise in their self-employment and unpaid family work, that is, there is a transition from wage employment to self-employment and unpaid family work for men.
- **Employment of native women is adversely affected, but there are no adverse effects of the Syrian refugee influx on average wages for native women.** Total employment of native women falls, mainly because native women do not benefit from increased employment opportunities in the formal sector. Declines in women's total employment is concentrated in agriculture and services, and is more pronounced among less educated and older women. Wage employment of native women also falls, mainly because self-employment and unpaid family work do not make up for a reduction in wage employment (unlike for men). The impact on women's part-time employment is particularly adverse. Most women who lose their jobs leave the labor force, and there is no observed increase in unemployment.
- **In the informal sector, men's total employment and wage employment fall substantially—particularly in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing.** In the informal sector, every 10 Syrians displace six native men (including part-time jobs), all of whom are wage workers.
- **Negative effects of Syrian refugees on employment and wages in the informal sector affects some groups more than others.** Adverse effects are more pronounced for temporary wage workers, less educated and young workers, women who are part-time employed and self-employed, and workers in agriculture and construction. Syrian refugees have a particularly strong displacement effect on temporary wage workers, many of whom are seasonal migrant workers from other regions, particularly in agriculture and construction. The substitutability between native and migrant workers in the informal sector decreases with rising levels of education and with age for natives. There isn't any evidence that regional migration flows of less-educated natives, who are likely to work in the informal sector, contribute to the substantial decline in men's informal employment.
- **Men's employment increases in the formal sector, offsetting the drop in informal employment.** Both wage employment and wages of men in the formal sector increased following the influx of Syrian refugees. This effect largely stems from wage employment in the manufacturing sector and self-employment in the services sector. Every 10 Syrians generates jobs for about 6 native men, of whom roughly 3.5 are wage workers, about 2 are self-employed, and 0.4 are unpaid family workers. Additionally, men's full-time employment rose, while part-time employment fell. Increases in wages in the formal sector are more pronounced for non-college-educated, younger (below 40), and full-time male workers.
- **Increases in consumer prices and capital flow to the treatment regions contribute to the rise in labor demand in the formal sector.** There is evidence for a rise in consumer prices, as migrants increase the consumption base more than the production base. An increase in capital investment in refugee-hosting regions also occurs, as the productivity of capital in these regions increases with the massive labor

supply shock. Furthermore, the internal migration of college-educated natives to refugee-hosting areas contributes to the increase in employment and wages in the formal sector.

Overall, inflows of Syrian refugees have no effect on the employment of native men, as the positive effect on formal employment offsets the negative effect on informal employment. For native women, however, overall employment falls, particularly for less educated and older female workers. The analysis also reveals increases in consumer prices and capital investments in refugee-hosting regions. The authors conclude that **the adverse effects on the most vulnerable groups in the labor market, along with the rise in consumer prices, imply that poverty might increase among more vulnerable native groups.**

The impact of refugees on employment and wages in Jordan

Belal Fallah, Caroline Krafft, Jackline Wahba

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This paper **investigates the short-term impacts of the Syrian refugee influx on labor market outcomes in Jordan**. According to the 2015 Population Census, there were 1.3 million Syrians living in Jordan, compared to a population of 6.6 million Jordanian citizens. Until 2016, Syrians were not officially permitted to work, although many found employment in the informal sector. Since 2016, Syrian refugees have been allowed to obtain work permits in specific sectors such as agriculture, construction, food, and manufacturing, which had disproportionately employed migrant labor even prior to the refugee influx.

The analysis leverages the variation in the share of Syrians by locality to identify the impact of refugee exposure using a difference-in-difference framework. It utilizes data from the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey (JLMPS) to capture labor market outcomes before (2010) and after (2016) the Syrian influx. The survey provides nationally representative panel data, encompassing a wide range of labor market outcomes such as employment, unemployment, hours of work, wages, and employment characteristics. Additionally, the authors incorporate data from the 2015 census on the number of Syrian households in each locality to measure the intensity of the refugee influx.

The data reveals that from 2010 to 2016, the number of working-age Syrians in Jordan increased from 19,000 to 644,000. Although the Syrian working-age population constituted about 16 percent of the Jordanian population in 2016, the Syrian labor force was only about 9 percent of the Jordanian labor force, with 143,000 employed Syrians compared to 1.6 million employed Jordanians.

Key empirical results:

- **Jordanians living in areas with high concentrations of refugees have not experienced worse labor market outcomes compared to Jordanians with less**

exposure to the refugee influx. This result holds across various measures, including unemployment, employment, characteristics of employment (formality, occupation, open sector, health and human services sector, private sector), hours worked, and wages.

- **Jordanian workers in areas with high concentrations of refugees experienced a significant increase in job formality, an increase in hourly (but not monthly) wages, and a shift in employment from the private to the public sector.** For each percentage point increase in the share of the locality that is Syrian, the probability of formal employment increases by 0.3 percentage points, and hourly wages increase by 0.9 percent. However, because hours worked have decreased (insignificantly), the effect on monthly wages is insignificant. Additionally, Jordanian workers exposed to a greater refugee influx are less likely to work in the private sector and more likely to work in the public sector.

The influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan between 2010 and 2016 did not have a significant negative impact on the labor market outcomes for Jordanians. Various factors contributed to this outcome, including the low labor force participation of Syrian refugees, the limited uptake of work permits, competition primarily with economic migrants in the informal sector, and the positive effects of foreign aid and increased public service demand. These findings suggest that **with appropriate policies, such as legal work opportunities for refugees combined with aid and trade initiatives, the potential negative impacts on the host country's labor market can be mitigated.**

Should Germany have built a new wall? Macroeconomic lessons from the 2015-18 refugee wave

Christopher Busch, Dirk Krueger, Alexander Ludwig, Irina Popova, and Zainab Iftikhar

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This paper **examines the macroeconomic and distributional effects of the 2015-16 migration wave to Germany.** During this period, approximately 2 million political and economic migrants, predominantly low-skilled refugees, arrived in the country.

The authors identify four main channels through which migration affects native welfare: (1) migrants increase labor supply, lowering the capital-labor ratio and wages, and raising rates of return in a closed economy; (2) migration alters the supply of low-skilled foreign workers relative to natives and high-skilled labor, with ambiguous effects on unskilled native wages depending on labor substitutability; (3) the inflow of young migrants reduces the old-age dependency ratio, boosting returns on the social security system; and (4) increased low-skilled migration raises tax-financed administrative expenditures, reducing natives' welfare.

The study employs a quantitative overlapping generations (OLG) model with a time-varying demographic structure and neoclassical production to analyze the economic impacts of the 2015-16 refugee inflows into Germany. The model is calibrated using micro data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which provides detailed information on wages and assimilation speeds of migrants from different geographic origins over an extended period (1984-2017). The analysis incorporates aggregate migration flows, the skill composition of migrants, and estimates of the elasticity of substitution between different groups of natives and immigrants.

In addition to the SOEP, the study utilizes data from the IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013-2017), which oversamples immigrants from Arab and Islamic countries, the primary source countries of the 2015-18 immigration wave. Additionally, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Sample (2015-2017) is used to specifically analyze the refugee population that arrived in Germany during the years of interest.

Main results:

- **Low-skilled natives experience welfare losses from labor market competition from low-skilled migrants.** Gross wages of unskilled natives deteriorate due to increased competition from equally unskilled refugees. This effect is only partially offset by lower effective contributions to social security, resulting in a decrease in net wages for low-skilled natives throughout the projection period.
- **Medium and high skilled natives experience significant welfare gains.** Short-run gains by medium and high skilled natives exceed the losses of the low-skilled.
- **The overall welfare effects are positive, small initially, and increase over time.** However, this aggregate effect masks significant differences across skill levels: low-skilled natives face welfare losses, while medium and high-skilled natives see gains. Specifically, a young low-skilled native in 2013 experiences a -0.2 percent welfare loss, whereas young high and middle-skilled natives gain 0.2 percent. This suggests that compensating low-skilled natives is possible.
- **Gains for future low-skilled cohorts start to materialize for cohorts entering the labor market in 2018.** While current low-skilled natives face mild welfare losses, future low-skilled cohorts increasingly benefit from the inflow of low-skilled refugees. The positive effects from the younger age distribution of migrants eventually outweigh the negative wage effects, leading to overall welfare gains for these future cohorts.

The authors conclude that **net wages of unskilled natives decline in the short run due to increased competition from unskilled refugees and higher fiscal costs. However, these losses are outweighed by gains for other groups.** Key lessons for other countries include: (1) the skill segment of migrants is crucial, and a binary distinction between college and non-college educated workers may be insufficient; (2) the *relative* magnitude of the substitution elasticities across worker skill types, and across regions of origin of workers are crucial for determining wage and welfare impacts; (3) migration's welfare effects vary over time, necessitating a dynamic transition analysis; (4) initial aggregate welfare effects may be small

but mask significant redistribution, requiring compensation for losers; and (5) over time, welfare effects become more positive, benefiting even low-skilled native newborns due to the younger age distribution of immigrants in an aging society.

Forced Migration and Social Cohesion: Evidence from the 2015/16 Mass Inflow in Germany

Emanuele Albarosa and Benjamin Elsner

World Development, Volume 167 (2023), Article 106228

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This paper **investigates the impact of the 2015/16 large-scale refugee arrivals on social cohesion in Germany**. During this period, over one million asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and the Western Balkans arrived in the country, doubling the population of persons seeking protection from one to two million. Initially, the German public broadly supported the influx; however, public opinion shifted dramatically following incidents such as the New Year's Eve 2015/16 assaults in Cologne, where some perpetrators were identified as recently arrived asylum seekers.

To estimate the causal effect of refugees on social cohesion, the authors exploit the assignment mechanism of asylum seekers in Germany, which was based on the federal states' population and tax revenues from two years prior. This assignment was unrelated to the contemporary economic, political, or social conditions. The study employs a difference-in-differences approach, comparing changes in attitudes over time between areas with high and low inflows of asylum seekers. The key assumption is that, in the absence of the inflow, the outcomes in both high and low inflow areas would have followed parallel trends.

The primary data source for social attitudes is the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), which provides individual-level panel data with geo-identifiers for respondents' counties of residence. This data is linked to county-level asylum seeker inflow data from the Central Register of Foreigners, detailing the numbers of asylum seekers in each county. Additionally, the study utilizes a geo-referenced event dataset on anti-immigrant violence from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, documenting incidents such as assaults, attacks on refugee housing, and arson. Social cohesion is measured across several dimensions, including generalized trust, perceived fairness, attitudes towards foreigners, and anti-immigrant violence.

Main findings:

- **There is no evidence that refugee inflows affected self-reported measures of social cohesion in the short run.** There is no evidence that inflows of refugees affected social attitudes and perceptions such as trust, perceived fairness, and perceived helpfulness of other people. The only statistically significant effect was a small decrease (around 4 percent of the mean) in charitable donations. These null

findings are notable given the substantial shift in public opinion observed during this period.

- **There is some evidence that the inflow had negative effects on social cohesion in areas where people are generally more concerned about immigration.** In areas with above-median employment rates, the inflow had a small positive effect on trust and perceived fairness. In areas with low employment rates, all effects were small and statistically insignificant. In areas with high vote shares for the far-right AfD party, the inflow led to stronger anti-immigrant sentiment, greater concern about crime, and a lower likelihood of donations to charity.
- **The local presence of refugees increased the incidence of anti-immigrant violence.** Counties receiving larger numbers of refugees saw a disproportionate increase in anti-immigrant violence. A doubling of the local asylum seeker population increased the incidence of anti-immigrant violence by 0.05 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants per month, a 166 percent increase relative to the pre-2015 average. This increase was mainly driven by attacks on asylum accommodation and was concentrated among the top 10 percent of municipalities with the largest inflows of asylum seekers. The effect was stronger in areas with high unemployment and a higher share of AfD voters. This effect on violence was temporary, subsiding after about two years.

Overall, the findings suggest that **while the general population does not significantly react to the presence of asylum seekers, a small segment of the population exhibits extreme reactions, manifesting as anti-immigrant violence.** The authors conclude that high-income countries can absorb large numbers of refugees without major impacts on social cohesion. However, to mitigate the negative reactions observed in certain areas, policies that foster inclusiveness and empathy towards immigrants should be implemented, particularly in regions prone to anti-immigrant violence. Based on the relevant literature, the authors recommend perspective-taking interventions, such as priming family immigration stories among natives, to increase support for refugees. Additionally, promoting narratives that highlight the hardships faced by refugees can positively influence intergroup relations and policy attitudes.

Housing Subsidies for Refugees: Experimental Evidence on Life Outcomes and Social Integration in Jordan

Abdulrazzak Tamim, Emma Smith, I. Bailey Palmer, Edward Miguel, Samuel Leone, and Sandra V. Rozo, and Sarah Stillman

IZA Discussion Paper Series, No. 17622 (2025)

<https://docs.iza.org/dp17622.pdf>

This study investigates the effects of a significant housing subsidy program in Jordan on the economic outcomes of Syrian refugee recipients and their social cohesion with Jordanian neighbors. Jordan hosts approximately 650,000 registered Syrian refugees, representing about 6 percent of its 11.1 million population. Notably, over 80 percent of these refugees reside outside of camps.

The study uses a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) involving 2,870 Syrian refugee households in Irbid and Mafraq governorates, with sufficient statistical power to detect moderate impacts on living standards and subjective well-being. The subsidy covered about a year of rent and included funding for landlords to improve housing quality. The design, which restricts subsidies to existing rental relationships, minimizes migration responses typically linked to rental subsidies.

Data was collected through in-person and phone surveys over three and a half years, with refugee households surveyed three times and Jordanian neighbors once. Surveys covered housing expenditures, housing quality, total household consumption, mental health, and child socio-emotional well-being (using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). Additionally, data from a detailed survey of Jordanian neighbors of both treatment and control households was analyzed to examine the effects of refugee-targeted transfers and housing improvements on host communities' policy views, altruism, and interactions with refugees.

Main empirical findings:

- **The program had largely null effects on living standards, including household consumption and respondent well-being, except for a reduction in housing expenditures.**
- **There was a significant decrease in the socio-emotional well-being of children in treated households**, by 0.34 standard deviations on average. Contributing factors may include reduced food security (due to an unanticipated decrease in food aid), increased COVID-19 exposure, and changes in household composition (including the inflow of additional adolescent household members). This negative effect persisted 1.5 years after the program ended.
- **The program led to a significant deterioration in relations between Syrian refugees and their Jordanian neighbors**, with a 0.33 standard deviation decrease in an index of Jordanian social attitudes and perceptions of refugees. Increased visibility of aid to refugees may have fueled resentment among neighbors, persisting more than a year after the program ended.
- **The negative impacts on child wellbeing and social cohesion may be linked**, as decreased interactions between refugee and Jordanian households and children may have had adverse consequences on child wellbeing. Weaker social ties may have also reduced informal support from Jordanian neighbors.
- **Any short-term benefits of the program dissipated after the program ended.** While the program was ongoing, treated households saw short-term gains in housing quality and financial stability, including increased access to clean water and reduced reliance on loans, but experienced worsening food security and self-reported health, likely due to reduced food aid and increased household size. Shortly after the program ended, treated households reported reduced housing expenditures and increased savings but decreased subjective well-being. One to two years after the

program ended, the only significant lasting effect was the substantial decrease in child socio-emotional well-being.

The housing assistance program provided limited short-term economic improvements that dissipated after the program ended, while negative psychological and social cohesion effects persisted. The significant housing subsidy did not lead to transformative positive changes for recipient households, highlighting the numerous constraints refugees face in accessing livelihood opportunities, credit, and quality housing. The deterioration in social cohesion suggests that assistance targeted exclusively at refugees can provoke host community backlash. Delivering benefits more discreetly, such as through cash or mobile money, may reduce the risk of host community backlash. Alternatively, pairing refugee assistance with enhanced host community support could mitigate negative social impacts and foster broader community improvements.

Attitudes Toward Migrants in a Highly Impacted Economy: Evidence From the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan

Ala' Alrababa'h, Andrea Dillon, Scott Williamson, Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, and Jeremy Weinstein

Comparative Political Studies, Volume 54, Issue 1 (2021), Pages 33–76

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Most of the evidence on factors influencing attitudes toward migrants has emerged from research in developed countries (mainly Europe and the United States), which finds that: (1) in developed countries there is little evidence that attitudes towards migrants are driven by egocentric economic concerns about labor market competition. These are countries where unemployment is low, welfare states are expansive, and language and skill differences give natives a competitive advantage in the labor market; (2) concerns about the nation's economic well-being (known as "sociotropic" concerns) in relation to the negative impact on the host country's economy, welfare system, and public services, shape attitudes toward migrants; (3) attitudes toward migrants are substantially shaped by perceived cultural threat and concerns that migration will change the host country's dominant culture and identity; and (4) humanitarianism may also influence attitudes.

The authors theorize that in developing countries, egocentric economic concerns about labor market competition and sociotropic concerns about the host country economy are likely to be stronger due to weaker economies, welfare systems, and public services, and more direct competition between migrants and natives in the labor market. At the same time, the authors posit that cultural concerns in developing countries are likely to be weaker (due to the increased likelihood of shared cultural and religious identities) and humanitarianism is likely to be weaker (since developing countries have a much larger refugee burden).

To address this geographical limitation, the authors **conducted a large-scale representative survey of public attitudes toward migration in Jordan**, one of the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. The survey was conducted in February 2018 and covered 1,500 Jordanians in regions with both high and low concentrations of Syrian refugees. The survey measured attitudes about the perceived impact of Syrian refugees on the country, hostility toward the refugee population, and support for anti-refugee policies, as well as respondent characteristics that have been identified as potential drivers of attitudes toward migrants in other contexts. It also asked respondents to choose between randomized profiles of refugees with different attributes, to enable an analysis of the relative importance of economic, cultural, and humanitarian considerations in shaping attitudes toward migrants.

Main findings:

- **Economic concerns do not drive Jordanians' attitudes toward Syrian refugees.** Jordanians who have been more economically impacted by the crisis, either personally or in their communities, are no more likely to hold negative attitudes.
- **Humanitarian and cultural factors drive Jordanians attitudes towards Syrian refugees.** Jordanians who are more exposed to refugees' challenging living conditions and who are less sensitive to cultural threat demonstrate more positive attitudes toward refugees.
- **Both humanitarian vulnerability and cultural similarity outweigh egocentric and sociotropic economic threats in determining which Syrian refugees Jordanians prefer to host.**

These results undermine arguments that egocentric and sociotropic economic concerns shape attitudes towards refugees. Rather, the results indicate the potential for humanitarian concerns to sustain public support for hosting refugees over extended periods of time, even in challenging economic circumstances. The authors note that most Syrian refugees in Jordan share cultural similarities with their hosts, and in contexts where there are cultural differences, the analysis suggests that hosts may be less likely to let humanitarian motives override the perceived economic costs of hosting large numbers of refugees. This paper, therefore, reinforces the consensus on the importance of cultural factors in shaping attitudes toward migration.

Local exposure to refugees changed attitudes to ethnic minorities in the Netherlands

Pascal Achard, Sabina Albrecht, Riccardo Ghidoni, Elena Cettolin, and Sigrid Suetens

The Economic Journal, Volume 135, Issue 667 (2025), Pages 808–837

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This paper **examines the effect of exposure to refugees on locals' attitudes towards ethnic minorities and voting preferences in the Netherlands**. Refugees seeking asylum register at a central reception center, where they stay for two weeks before being assigned to

a refugee accommodation facility located in or near residential areas. During the European migration crisis (2011-2016), there was a large influx of refugees from ethnic minority groups, with the number of refugee facilities increasing from around 35-48 in 2011-2013 to about 50 in 2014, and peaking at 120 in 2016. Concurrently, attitudes towards ethnic diversity in the Netherlands generally became more negative, and voting preferences shifted towards parties with a tough stance on immigration.

The analysis utilizes individual-level panel data from 2011 to 2016 (excluding 2014), combining: (1) data on attitudes towards ethnic diversity, immigration and voting preferences from the LISS Core Survey on Politics and Values; (2) administrative information on the residential locations of asylum seekers; and (3) socio-demographic data on municipalities and neighborhoods from Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The sample comprises individuals who were not exposed to refugees in their neighborhood or vicinity before 2014, with some experiencing an influx of refugees between 2014 and 2016, while others remained unexposed.

The authors exploit the sudden influx of refugees into certain neighborhoods in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2016 to examine whether exposure to ethnic minorities influenced preferences on ethnic diversity. To allow for a causal interpretation of the exposure effect, they rely on the parallel-trend assumption, assuming that preferences of individuals in the Treatment group (neighborhoods that would later host refugees) and the Control group (neighborhoods without refugees) would have followed similar patterns if the refugee influx had not occurred, accounting for individual and year fixed effects and other controls. To understand the mechanisms driving the results, the authors examine variations in proximity to refugee facilities, duration of exposure, and the number of refugees hosted in a neighborhood.

Main results:

- **Exposure to refugees leads to a decrease in anti-immigrant attitudes.** Individuals who experienced an influx of refugees in their neighborhood developed more positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity and were less inclined to vote for the far right compared to those not exposed. Specifically, exposure to refugees decreases the likelihood of voting for the far right by 4.6 percentage points relative to unexposed individuals. This finding supports the notion that changes in voting preferences are accompanied by changes in attitudes towards ethnic diversity.
- **The impact of exposure is highly localized, indicating that personal encounters with ethnic minorities may be important in shaping preferences.** There is no significant effect on individuals exposed to refugees in their municipality but not in their immediate neighborhood, suggesting that proximity is key to influencing attitudes.
- **The effect is particularly strong when exposure lasts longer than six months and when the influx of refugees is not too large.** This suggests that positive contact or

lack of negative contact is essential for generating a positive exposure effect, while an excessively large influx may not yield the same positive outcomes.

- **There are strong heterogeneous effects depending on pre-exposure voting preferences.** The impact of exposure to refugees is significantly stronger for individuals who were relatively right-leaning before the refugees arrived in their neighborhood compared to those who were left-leaning. This indicates that exposure to refugees has the potential to reduce polarization by moderating the views of right-leaning individuals.
- None of the other mechanisms considered—such as improved employment opportunities, increased confidence in the government in neighborhoods hosting refugees (e.g., due to increased public spending), or changes in preferences on matters unrelated to ethnic diversity—can explain the results. This underscores the importance of direct exposure to refugees in shaping attitudes and voting preferences.

The study concludes that proximity and sustained exposure to refugees significantly enhance positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity and reduce the inclination to vote for far-right parties. The effects are strongest when the influx of refugees is not too large, supporting the idea that positive interethnic contact is more likely when rather small groups of refugees enter local realities. These findings indicate that policies promoting interaction between ethnic minorities and the majority population can shift political preferences. Specifically, dispersing refugees geographically and providing local support for their integration can improve attitudes towards ethnic minorities, particularly among right-leaning individuals, thereby mitigating polarization and curbing the rise of extreme right parties.

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

Ala Alrababah, Daniel Masterson, Marine Casalis, Dominik Hangartner, and Jeremy Weinstein

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This paper **investigates the factors that shape the return intentions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon**. Syrian refugees in Lebanon are subject to a range of hardships, restrictions, and barriers to integration, including difficulties associated with obtaining a residence permit, which is required to access health and education services, and restrictions on the right to work.

Building on the “push” and “pull” framework for international migration, the authors hypothesized that refugees’ return decisions are shaped by four main factors: (1) conditions in the host country; (2) conditions in the country of origin; (3) the costs of movement; and (4) the quality of information about the costs and benefits of return.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and a conjoint experiment. The primary data source is a nationally representative survey of about 3,000 Syrian refugee households in Lebanon, conducted in 2019, covering a range of household characteristics and return intentions and preparations. The authors also conducted a conjoint experiment to isolate the causal effects of conditions in Syria and Lebanon on return intentions; respondents were presented with several hypothetical vignettes and asked whether, under these conditions, they would return to Syria. The research also included semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences and decision-making processes. To assess the generalizability of the findings, the authors compared the results from Lebanon with data from a separate survey of almost 1,300 Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Main empirical findings:

- **Syrian refugees' return intentions are primarily driven by conditions in their home country.** Safety, economic prospects, access to services, and social networks in Syria all significantly increase the likelihood of wanting to return. Even when faced with hostility and poor living conditions in host countries, refugees are unlikely to return unless the situation in their home country improves significantly. Despite their protracted displacement and the situation improves in their home country.
- **Conditions in the host country have little effect on refugees' intentions to return.** Conditions in Lebanon do not substantially shape return intentions, even though many Syrians experience extremely challenging living situations. Social wellbeing is the only variable that has a statistically significant association with return intentions. Higher levels of economic wellbeing, networks, and social wellbeing in Lebanon are, however, positively associated with *preparations* for return, suggesting that migration capacity plays a role in facilitating return.
- **Mobility costs are not significantly associated with return intentions.** However, there is some evidence that mobility costs are negatively associated with *preparations* for return.
- **Confidence in information about one's hometown is positively associated with both intentions and preparations.** The relationship between conditions in Syria and return intentions and preparations is shaped by respondents' confidence in their information sources.
- **The conjoint experiment reinforces the observational data, demonstrating that conditions in Syria have a stronger influence on return intentions than conditions in Lebanon.** Safety is the strongest driver of return intentions—security in one's hometown increases return intentions by 35 percentage points and nationwide security increases return intentions by 42 percentage points. An end to military conscription increases the likelihood of return by 18 percentage points. The availability of jobs and public services in Syria both increase return intentions by 8 percentage points. The presence of family and friends in Syria increases return intentions by 5 percentage points. Access to a good job in Lebanon reduces return intentions by 2

percent and access to public services in Lebanon reduces return intentions by 3 percent.

- **The drivers of return intentions in Jordan are similar to Lebanon.** Conditions in respondents' place of origin in Syria (safety, economic prospects, and public services) and the presence of family and friends in Syria are positively correlated with return intentions. Conditions in Jordan and information quality do not appear to significantly shape return intentions.

These results challenge the conventional view that refugees make return decisions by evaluating whether they can do better at home than in their host country. **The authors propose an alternative model of threshold-based decision making; only once a basic threshold of safety at home is met do refugees compare other factors in the host and home country.** Qualitative data from structured interviews with Syrian refugees in Lebanon support the proposition that people are waiting for the security and safety situation in Syria to improve before considering return.

When do refugees return home? Evidence from Syrian displacement in Mashreq

Lori Beaman, Harun Onder, and Stefanie Onder

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This paper **analyzes the factors influencing the early, voluntary, and unassisted return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq during a period of active conflict, spanning January 2011 to March 2018.** Since 2011, about 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country and by mid-2018, only about 1.8 percent of them had returned to Syria voluntarily.

The analysis is based on a novel dataset that includes: (a) administrative data from UNHCR's Profile Global Registration System (ProGres) database, encompassing demographic characteristics, arrival dates, and return dates (if applicable) for two million Syrian refugees; (b) data on living conditions in Jordan and Lebanon from vulnerability surveys conducted by UN agencies; and (c) conditions in Syria from a conflict-events database and nightlights data for Syria, which serves as a proxy for access to utilities in Syria.

The data provides insights into the characteristics of returning Syrian refugees. Returnee households tend to be smaller than those who remain in exile, with a lower proportion of children and a higher proportion of seniors. Additionally, returnees generally have lower educational attainment than non-returnees. Furthermore, return decisions are not always made by the entire household at once. While 63 percent of households returned together, 37 percent of households returned in stages, with one or more individuals returning first, followed by some or all the remaining household members.

Main empirical results:

- **Improved security conditions in a refugee's home district in Syria significantly increase the likelihood of return.** A one standard deviation improvement in security, Index (CEI) between the previous two quarters, leads to a 6 increase in refugee returns.
- **Improved access to utilities in a refugee's home sub-district in Syria, as proxied by nightlight luminosity, increases the likelihood of return.** A one standard deviation improvement in luminosity increases returns by 2 percent. This result suggests that quality of life is a factor in refugees' decisions to return home even in the presence of ongoing conflict in the country of origin.
- **Refugees with better food security and housing conditions in host countries are more likely to return to Syria.** This suggests that as their incomes rise, more refugees are better able to afford the logistical costs associated with returning to Syria.

Overall, these results suggest that **improved security and living conditions in Syria, leading to higher risk-adjusted payoffs of returning, tend to increase the likelihood of refugees returning home. However, higher payoffs in host countries, such as improved food security, appear to increase returns.** The authors posit that an increase in income in exile can trigger return for those with low incomes in the presence of mobility costs.

Determinants of Intended Return Migration among Refugees: A Comparison of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey

Nawras Al Husein and Natascha Wagner

International Migration Review, Volume 5, Issue 4 (2023), Pages 1771–805

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This paper examines factors associated with Syrian refugees' intentions to return to Syria. It contrasts the return intentions of Syrian refugees in Turkey—a proximate, culturally similar country that provides temporary protection—with those in Germany—a more distant, culturally different country that offers permanent protection. Turkey hosts 3.6 million Syrians, and Germany received the largest number of Syrian asylum applicants in the EU (679,000 between 2015 and 2021).

The authors conduct a multivariate analysis to assess the determinants of return intentions, considering refugee characteristics, host-country conditions, and origin-country conditions. The analysis draws on a 2018 survey of 577 Syrian refugees in Turkey and Germany. Respondents were asked about their willingness to return under three scenarios: within two years, when Syria is as safe as before the war, and ever. The survey also captured

demographics, pre-war circumstances and assets, host-country experiences, and family and security considerations in Syria. In addition, the authors tested whether brief exposure to positive or negative information about conditions facing returnees would shift stated intentions.

Descriptive statistics show that only about one-third intended to return within two years, and fewer than 40 percent would return even if Syria were as safe as before the war; by contrast, more than two-thirds expressed an intention to return “ever.” Stated return intentions differed by host country: only 13 percent of refugees in Germany wanted to return after two years, compared with half of those in Turkey. Roughly half of refugees in Germany indicated that they wanted to return to Syria eventually, whereas more than 75 percent of respondents in Turkey wanted to go back one day.

Main findings:

- **Refugees in Turkey are more likely to intend to return than those in Germany.** In Turkey, the likelihood of intending to return was consistently higher across all scenarios (by roughly 23 percentage points for short-term return and up to 51 percentage points when Syria is safe). This host-country gap points to differences in policy environments, integration trajectories, and perceived settlement options.
- **Some individual characteristics are associated with return intentions.** Women and highly educated refugees show systematically lower willingness to return across scenarios. Those who were married were less inclined toward early return, while those who self-identified as poor before the war were more likely to express interest in long-run return. Age was not a significant determinant of return intentions.
- **Brief information exposure does not meaningfully shift return intentions.** Randomized positive or negative messages about challenges or support for returnees had small, statistically insignificant effects on stated preferences.
- **Loss of assets in Syria substantially reduces return intentions.** Refugees who reported no remaining assets in Syria were 11–20 percentage points less likely to consider returning.
- **Feeling unwelcome in the host country correlates with lower long-term return intentions.** Not feeling welcome is associated with a 10–19 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of intending to return when Syria is safe or ever.
- **Values related to services and civic life matter.** Those who valued the presence of civil society were 19 percentage points more likely to indicate that they would return when Syria was as safe as before the war. Those who placed a high value on health services were 14 percentage points less likely to indicate that they would return under the same condition, while the availability of safe houses increased the intention to return within the next two years by 10 percentage points.
- **Security fears and family ties in Syria are pivotal.** The security situation in Syria was the most frequently cited reason for not returning, underscoring the primacy of safety. Having family in Syria increases return interest, including about a 10 percentage point rise for those considering return when the country is safe.

In conclusion, the study finds that return intentions are shaped by security and family ties in Syria, host-country context, and selected individual characteristics, with limited responsiveness to brief informational nudges. Policy implications include investing in inclusive integration and services in host countries given the likelihood of prolonged displacement; recognizing the potential long-term skills loss for Syria due to lower return intentions among highly educated refugees; and grounding return policies in careful, micro-level evidence on refugees' preferences.

Return Aspirations of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Aysegül Kayaoglu, Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek, and M. Murat Erdoğan

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This paper **analyzes how conditions in Syria and experiences in Turkey shape Syrian refugees' intentions to return over different timeframes**. As of early 2021, Turkey hosted approximately 3.65 million Syrians under temporary protection.

The analysis employs a mixed-methods design, combining 41 semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees conducted between May and December 2018, and the Syrian Barometer 2017 survey of 1,235 Syrian households across Turkey (collected between May and July 2017). The study classifies return intentions into three categories: (1) never return (no desire to return to Syria), (2) conditional return (willing to return if the war ends and/or the regime changes), and (3) unconditional return (willing to return even if the conflict persists). It examines how host-country integration shapes these intentions across three dimensions: structural integration (measured by labor market participation and education), cultural integration (assessed by Turkish language proficiency), and social integration (indicated by contact with native Turks). The analysis also considers mediating factors, such as perceived discrimination, lived experiences in Turkey, and socio-cultural distance.

Qualitative interviews highlight security and family considerations as central drivers of return intentions. Interviewees highlighted the lack of safety and stability in Syria as the primary barrier. Families—especially those with sons facing conscription risks and households with young children—expressed reluctance to return to an uncertain, unstable environment.

Descriptive statistics reveal that return aspirations are largely conditional. Most respondents would consider returning if the war ends and a new government is formed (about 63 percent), and a further 13 percent would return if the war ends regardless of regime. In contrast, 17 percent would never return, 3 percent would return even if conflict continued, and around 5 percent were undecided. Many face “involuntary stay,” with 40 percent in camps and 24 percent outside unable to return or migrate onward.

Main empirical results:

- **Structural integration has no direct effect on return intentions but operates through mediators.** Labor market participation is associated with heightened socio-cultural distance, indirectly increasing return aspirations. In contrast, higher education is linked to lower socio-cultural distance, indirectly reducing return aspirations.
- **Turkish language proficiency is associated with lower return aspirations overall.** It exerts a direct negative effect on return wishes but is also linked to higher perceived discrimination.
- **Social integration reduces return intentions through direct and indirect channels.** Greater contact with native Turks directly lowers the wish to return and indirectly does so by reducing perceived socio-cultural distance. At the same time, more contact can be associated with some negative experiences, which can increase return intentions.
- **Negative experiences and socio-cultural distance increase conditional return intentions.** Negative interactions with natives and higher perceived socio-cultural distance are positively associated with conditional return—that is, a desire to return contingent on changes such as the end of the war and/or regime change in Syria.
- **Geographic closeness appears to lower perceived barriers to movement and heighten salience of home-country ties.** Living in a province along the Turkish-Syrian border is positively associated with greater return wishes—both conditional and unconditional—relative to never returning.
- **Longer stays reduce unconditional return intentions.** A longer duration of stay in Turkey is negatively associated with unconditional return wishes compared with never returning.
- **Home-country conditions primarily drive conditional return.** Conditional return aspirations are chiefly shaped by factors in Syria, especially security and governance conditions linked to war cessation and regime change.
- **Lower welfare in Syria increases both conditional and unconditional return.** Poor welfare conditions in the origin country are significantly and positively associated with both conditional and unconditional return wishes relative to never returning.

Syrian refugees in Turkey express nuanced, largely conditional return aspirations shaped by both home-country conditions—ending the war, political change, safety, services, and livelihoods—and host-country experiences. Host-country integration interacts with these aspirations in complex ways, with language proficiency and social contact reducing return wishes, and structural integration operating indirectly through socio-cultural distance and experiences of discrimination. Taken together, these dynamics often leave refugees in an “involuntary stay” posture—unwilling to remain under current conditions yet unable to return or move elsewhere—highlighting the need to address both home-country and host-country conditions to influence return aspirations.

The Labor Market Reintegration of Returned Refugees in Afghanistan

Craig Loschmann and Katrin Marchand

Small Business Economics, Volume 56, Issue 3 (2021), Pages 1033–45

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This paper **investigates the labor market outcomes of returned refugees in Afghanistan**. The authors examine the factors influencing the labor market outcomes of returned refugees compared to non-migrants, and in particular, whether the returnees' migration and return experience influences their labor market outcomes. The authors focus on the likelihood of that an individual is engaged in one of three labor market activities: self-employment in business; agriculture which incorporates subsistence farming and/or animal herding; and wage employment.

The analysis relies on cross-sectional data from an original household survey collected in five provinces of Afghanistan in 2011 covering 1,841 individuals, of which 461 are returned refugees from Iran or Pakistan. The sample is restricted to returnees who originally migrated because of political or security concerns or because of an environmental disaster, and who stated their return was motivated by improvements to the political and security situation of the country or personal reasons (e.g. missed their country, culture, or family). By excluding voluntary migrants and those returnees motivated by employment opportunities, the estimates are less affected by selection bias than would otherwise be the case. The authors control for ethnicity (Pashtun, Tajik, other) of the returnee as well as the district type (urban, semirural, or rural) and province of return.

Descriptive statistics:

- Returnees are about 6 percentage points more likely to be self-employed in business, while non-migrants are around 5 percentage points more likely to be wage employed. There is no statistical difference in the likelihood of not working or being engaged in an agricultural activity between the two groups.
- Nearly all returned refugees are the household head, compared with around half of non-migrants. On average, returnees are eight years older than non-migrants. Returnees are more likely to be married and have more children compared to non-migrants.
- Around 15 percent of returnees have a secondary or higher level of education compared to 11 percent of non-migrants.
- There is no discernable difference in the socioeconomic status of returnees and non-migrants in terms of land ownership.
- Returnees are 12 percentage points more likely to have social capital in the form of a local social network (involvement in a community organization other than a religious group).

- A quarter of returnees were employed prior to seeking asylum abroad and just over two-thirds fled to Pakistan, while the rest fled to Iran. The average time abroad is around 12 years, and only 6 percent sent remittances during that period.
- Around half of the returnees repatriated between the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, and around half repatriated in the period from 2002 to 2011; on average they had returned 10 years prior to the survey. Nearly three-quarters of returnees cited improvements in the political and/or security situation as the main reason for return, while the rest reported personal reasons (i.e. wanting to be closer to family and friends).
- The average savings brought back upon return was US\$246, and 28 percent received financial assistance on return from either an international organization or government. Only 19 percent of returnees intend to migrate in the future.

Main results of the empirical analysis:

- **Returned refugees are less likely to be engaged in wage employment compared to non-migrants.** Returned refugees are less than half (0.42 times) as likely to be engaged in wage employment compared to non-migrants.
- **Educational attainment affects labor market outcomes of non-migrants but is not statistically important for the labor market outcomes of returned refugees.** Non-migrants with a higher level of educational attainment (at least secondary education) are less likely to be engaged in agricultural work and more likely to be involved in wage labor—suggesting that non-migrants with low levels of education have few options other than subsistence agricultural labor, whereas higher levels of education open opportunities for wage employment. For returned refugees, however, there is no significant relationship between educational attainment and the likelihood of wage employment.
- **Differences in labor market outcomes arise from dissimilarities in socioeconomic status.** Both non-migrants and returned refugees belonging to households that own land have a higher likelihood of being engaged in an agricultural activity relative to not working.
- **The strength of social networks affects employment status for both non-migrants and returned refugees.** Being involved in a community organization improved the engagement of both non-migrants and returned refugees in all labor market activities.
- **Several factors are found to be of particular consequence for current employment status of returned refugees including employment prior to migration, time abroad, amount of savings brought back upon return, return assistance, and intentions to re-migrate.** Being employed prior to migrating increases the likelihood of being wage employed upon return. The more years spent abroad, the greater the likelihood of being wage employed, suggesting skill acquisition while abroad. Returnees who sought asylum in Iran are more likely to be involved in farming or herding upon return compared to those who sought asylum in Pakistan. The amount of savings brought back upon return is positively associated with becoming self-employed in agriculture or herding. Receiving assistance upon return or having

intentions to 're-migrate' is negatively associated with becoming self-employed in agriculture or herding. The authors suggest that labor-intensive activities such as farming or herding animals may necessitate high upfront investment in productive assets like land and livestock not covered by the support received and which makes future movement less desirable.

The authors conclude that, in a context where wage employment is limited, self-employment may be the only, if not best viable income-generating activity. Providing support to returned refugees for this specific purpose, whether for a business venture or agricultural endeavor, has the potential to facilitate reintegration and improve individual welfare, while also contributing to local development.

More is Better: Evaluating the Impact of a Variation in Cash Assistance on the Reintegration Outcomes of Returning Afghan Refugees

Hisham Esper, Nandini Krishnan, and Christina Wieser

World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series, Working Paper No. 9897 (2022)

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/191991641827471161/More-Is-Better-Evaluating-the-Impact-of-a-Variation-in-Cash-Assistance-on-the-Reintegration-Outcomes-of-Returning-Afghan-Refugees>

This paper **examines the impact of cash assistance provided to Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan on household outcomes post-return**. Between 2016 and 2018, UNHCR assisted more than 458,000 documented Afghan refugees who returned from Pakistan. Between July 2016 and March 2017, UNHCR increased its reintegration assistance amount from US\$150 per returnee to US\$350 per returnee, after which the allowance reverted to US\$150 per returnee.

The authors estimate the effect of the change in cash assistance on post-return integration outcomes. The analysis is based on three post-return surveys (on average data was collected 16 months after return) combined with administrative data from UNHCR's voluntary repatriation forms. The sample includes 1,331 returnee households who received a reintegration allowance of US\$350 (treatment group) and 3,009 returnee households who received a reintegration allowance of US\$150 (control group).

Key findings:

- **Households that received a larger reintegration allowance were more likely to purchase long-term assets, while those that received a smaller allowance were more likely to purchase consumption goods.** Households that received a larger allowance were more likely to purchase land (21 percent) compared to those that received a smaller allowance (7 percent). Households that received more cash were also more likely to use it for transportation and rental payments. Almost half of

returnees who received a smaller allowance spent more than half of it on food, compared to only 17 percent of those who received the larger allowance.

- **The likelihood of owning a dwelling is highly correlated with both the total payment received by the household, and the household size.** Households reporting owning their residence approximately 16 months post-return received US\$2,253 in reintegration assistance on average, compared to US\$1,655 for households not owning a house post-return.
- **There wasn't any long-term impact of reintegration assistance on the likelihood of employment.** Households receiving the smaller reintegration allowance were as likely as those receiving the larger allowance to have an employed household member.
- **There was no significant impact of the variation in cash assistance on the likelihood of enrolling all household children in school.** School education in Afghanistan is free, and an unconditional cash transfer to returnees might not affect school enrollment. Additionally, the data only permitted the authors to measure whether households enroll all their children in school.
- **Households that received the larger reintegration allowance were more likely to have legal documentation.** Households that received a larger allowance were more likely to have legal documentation for all household members (76 percent) compared to those receiving the smaller reintegration allowance (60 percent).

Overall, **there was a large positive impact of cash assistance on the likelihood of home ownership, legal documentation, and consumption patterns.** Households who received the larger reintegration allowance were 17 percentage points more likely to own a house, 30 percentage points more likely to have issued legal documentation for their household, and 40 percentage points less likely to have spent more than half of their reintegration assistance on food.

Refugee Return and Conflict: Evidence from a Natural Experiment

Christopher W. Blair and Austin L. Wright

Becker Friedman Institute, Working Paper 2021-82 (2022)

https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/BFI_WP_2021-82.pdf

This study **examines the impact of refugee return on conflict dynamics** by assessing the causal effect of a large-scale cash assistance program for Afghan returnees from Pakistan. Initiated due to the expiration of refugees' Proof of Registration (PoR) cards in June 2016, the program doubled cash assistance for voluntary repatriates from \$200 to \$400, averaging \$3600 per median returnee family. This amount was equivalent to a fighting season's income for three recruitment-age males. The program ran from June 29 to December 7, 2016, before a

winter break. Plans to extend the program in 2017 were halted due to budget shortfalls, reverting assistance to pre-program levels.

The authors identify the causal effect of assisted returns by leveraging the program's quasi-random timing and historical returnee settlement patterns within a difference-in-differences framework. The key identifying assumption in their models is that districts hosting a larger share of documented returnees from Pakistan did not experience differential trends in insurgent or communal violence prior to the 2016 encashment program.

The analysis utilizes multiple data sources: (1) historical returnee settlement patterns from UNHCR-Afghanistan, including detailed data linking returnees' settlements with their regions of origin; (2) individual-level data from the Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan Returnees (2018-2019); (3) combat records from the International Distributed Unified Reporting Environment (INDURE) cataloging insurgent and counterinsurgent engagements (2015-2017); (4) data on communal violence from a US government-sponsored conflict tracker (2016-2017); (5) data from the NATO-funded Afghanistan Quarterly Nationwide Assessment Research (ANQAR) survey on dispute resolution preferences; and (6) the location of districts under Taliban influence from ACSOR.

Main empirical findings:

- **The program led to a significant increase in repatriation.** The program led to an unparalleled scale of repatriation, with over 363,000 refugees, representing 66 percent of global documented returnees in 2016.
- **Assisted returns caused a reduction in insurgent violence.** The negative effect of assisted returns on insurgent violence suggests aid facilitated returnee reintegration and raised reservation wages, thereby reducing mobilization.
- **Program-induced refugee returns increased communal violence.** A one standard deviation increase in returnee exposure during the program raised the probability of communal violence by about 1 percent. Encashment beneficiaries reported worse relations with non-migrant neighbors, indicating that communal violence stemmed from animosity and resentment between repatriates and hosts.
- **Policy-induced return caused insurgents to shift from labor-intensive combat to capital-intensive attacks, which require fewer recruits, thereby increasing the lethality of capital-intensive attacks.** This shift is consistent with higher reservation wages, increasing the premium on part-time rebel mobilization.
- **Program exposure reduced the rate of government success in neutralizing insurgent bombs, which are highly sensitive to civilian tips.** This suggests that the economic benefits from assisted returns may have constrained counterinsurgent tip-buying by raising the price of information.
- **Social capital and the quality of local institutions significantly mitigated the risks of communal violence due to refugee return.** Communal violence increased where fewer returnees repatriated to their origin province or district and decreased where more returnees repatriated to their origin community. Return only sparked communal

violence in areas with weaker local institutions (i.e., less reliance on shuras/elders or without Taliban control). In districts with strong informal dispute resolution mechanisms, return was negatively associated with social conflict.

The results indicate that refugee return is linked to an overall reduction and a shift in the composition of insurgent violence. Notably, the encashment program led to increased communal violence and heightened insurgent lethality, both of which are negative outcomes. The study provides evidence that the cash assistance program may have stimulated local economic activity in areas where returnees settled. As reservation wages rise and rebel capacity remains fixed, the production of labor-intensive violence becomes more costly. Furthermore, the market for collaboration responds to economic shocks; following the cash transfer program, there was a decline in bomb neutralizations, likely due to reduced information-sharing about the location of roadside bombs. However, social capital and preexisting kinship ties can moderate the potential for refugee repatriation to spark local conflicts. Additionally, legitimate local institutions for conflict mediation are crucial for ensuring safe refugee repatriation.

Refugee Repatriation and Conflict: Evidence from the Maximum Pressure Sanctions

Christopher W. Blair, Benjamin C. Krick, Austin L. Wright

Social Science Research Network (SSRN) Scholarly Paper No. 5081898 (2025)

<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5081898>

This paper **examines how the mass return of refugees can shape conflict dynamics in their home communities.** It focuses on the large-scale repatriation of Afghan refugees following the sudden reintroduction of “Maximum Pressure” sanctions on Iran in 2018, which severely weakened Iran’s economy and spurred the return of over 600,000 Afghans.

The study uses a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences design to isolate the causal effect of repatriation on violence. It exploits historical settlement patterns of Afghan returnees from Iran between 2012 and 2015 to measure districts’ prior exposure to return, and leverages the unexpected timing of the 2018 sanctions as a common shock. By comparing changes before and after sanctions across districts with high versus low prior exposure, the authors estimate the impact of the repatriation shock on conflict outcomes over 2016–2018 at the district level.

The analysis draws on multiple data sources to measure conflict, returns, and local conditions. Unclassified military conflict records from the International Distributed Unified Reporting Environment (INDURE) for 2016–2018 provide georeferenced data on insurgent-

initiated attacks against Afghan security forces and NATO partners. District-level repatriation data from IOM's Baseline Mobility Assessment capture the spatial distribution and intensity of returns, and the Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan Returnees (SAR) helps triangulate motives for return and track social dynamics within communities receiving returnees.

Main findings:

- **The sanctions-induced mass return increased insurgent violence in return communities.** A one-standard-deviation increase in the share of returnees is associated with a 1.5-2.5 percentage point rise in the probability of insurgent conflict and an increase of 0.7-1.5 attacks per 100,000 residents. These effects point to a measurable deterioration in security in areas most exposed to the repatriation shock.
- **The return did not heighten communal tensions between returnees and non-migrants.** Returnees driven home by sanctions reported modestly better relations and were 3.6-4 percentage points less likely to experience violent communal disputes. This suggests that the rise in violence is not primarily driven by local social conflict between returnees and host communities.
- **Economic hardship linked to return likely lowered the opportunity cost of insurgent recruitment.** Return-exposed districts saw declines in full-time employment, labor market satisfaction, food security, and nighttime luminosity, consistent with deteriorating economic conditions. These patterns align with reduced remittances and trade due to sanctions and a local labor supply shock, which together may have lowered reservation wages and increased the pool of potential recruits.
- **Insurgents shifted toward more labor-intensive tactics where more returnees settled.** A one-standard-deviation increase in exposure was associated with a 1.7 percentage point rise in the share of insurgent attacks that were labor-intensive, including direct fire and complex ambush operations. This tactical shift is consistent with an expanded supply of available fighters in more exposed districts.
- **Iran's retaliatory behavior likely amplified violence in affected Afghan districts.** Violence rose more sharply in areas with pre-existing links to Iranian covert support networks, indicating that sanctioned states may escalate support to armed groups. Such strategic responses can compound the security impact of mass refugee returns.

The paper concludes that the impacts of refugee repatriation are highly context-dependent: when returns are triggered by deteriorating host-country conditions—such as the 2018 sanctions on Iran—they can inadvertently heighten insurgent violence by enlarging the pool of potential recruits. It highlights a cross-border security externality of economic sanctions and other policies that induce involuntary returns: by weakening host economies and disrupting remittances and trade, these shocks can depress local conditions in origin communities, lower the opportunity cost of recruitment into armed groups, and—where external support networks are active—contribute to further escalation.

Migration and Knowledge Diffusion: The Effect of Returning Refugees on Export Performance in the Former Yugoslavia

Dany Bahar, Andreas Hauptmann, Cem Özgüzel, and Hillel Rapoport

The Review of Economics and Statistics, Volume 106, Issue 2 (2022), Pages 287–304

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During the first half of the 1990s, Germany received roughly 700,000 refugees fleeing ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia. By 2000, most refugees had returned to their home country or territories of the former Yugoslavia. The authors exploit this natural experiment, and the exogenous exposure to German industrial know-how and technology it created, **to investigate the role of returning refugees in explaining the export performance of their home countries.**

The analysis is based on confidential German social security data identifying the number of Yugoslavian workers who entered the German labor force (by industry) between 1991 and 1995 and had left it by the year 2000. The data includes individual information such as age, nationality, and educational attainment, as well as occupational codes covering more than 300 different occupations. The analysis also draws on industry-level international trade data for the period 1984 to 2014.

The authors employ a difference-in-differences methodology to estimate changes in export values from the former Yugoslavian countries to the rest of the world caused by return migration of workers who were employed in those same sectors in Germany. To address possible endogeneity due to self-selection of workers into certain industries with high potential in their home countries, the authors employ an instrumental variable approach. They instrument the actual number of returning workers per industry with their expected number given a spatial dispersal policy that exogenously allocated asylum seekers across the different regions of Germany upon arrival.

Key findings include:

- **Yugoslavian exports performed significantly better during the post-war period in industries that returnees had worked in while in asylum in Germany.** Industries with 10 percent more returning refugees exhibit larger exports between the pre- and postwar periods by 1 percent to 1.6 percent. This represents up to 6 percent of all the export growth of former Yugoslavian nations between 1990 and 2005, most of it occurring after 2000. Results cannot be explained by existing previous trends in exports.
- **The main driver of export performance are productivity shifts caused by the inflows of returning workers, who were exposed to better practices and technologies while in Germany.** Robustness tests rule out plausible alternative explanations, such as scale effects (returning workers can produce and export more quantity), the convergence between the industry structure of the former Yugoslavia in

the 2000s and that of Germany in the 1990s, investment linked to migration, or reductions of transaction costs of exporting to Germany caused by migrant networks.

- **Results are particularly driven by certain types of workers and occupations, which would be more likely to transfer knowledge, technologies, and best practices across borders, and thus able to induce productivity improvements.** Results are driven by workers with high educational attainment, in occupations intensive in analytical tasks (as opposed to manual ones), occupations that can be classified as professional and/or skill intensive (as opposed to unskilled ones), and occupations that have managerial characteristics. Results are stronger when looking at workers who, while abroad, experienced fast wage growth, and were employed by the top paying firms within each industry.

The authors find evidence consistent with the idea that **migrant workers exposed to industries in Germany bring back know-how, knowledge and technologies back home that translates into higher productivity in those same industries, which in turn is reflected in export performance.** Certain types of workers and occupations are more suited for diffusing productivity-inducing know-how across borders and such knowledge transfers matter more in certain industries than in others. The authors conclude that **returning refugees, after having been integrated into their host economies' labor markets, can play a significant role in the post-conflict reconstruction of their home countries upon their return.**

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