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Return aspirations and coerced return:
A case study on Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon

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Abstract

This paper studies return aspirations and current return movements of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey and Lebanon to understand *who* aspires to return after the end of the war, and *why* and *when* refugees return with the conflict still ongoing. To do so, we embed future return aspirations into refugees' broader life aspirations and study how these interact with perceived opportunities (capabilities) in the home and host countries in shaping those aspirations to return. Drawing on 757 survey interviews we present, first, quantitative analyses of the factors underlying current return reflections and future return aspirations. They differ significantly across individuals, and more refugees residing in Lebanon consider to return currently and in the future. Second, we analyse information from 41 in-depth interviews and show how life aspirations (i) are a crucial element in shaping return aspirations and (ii) interact particularly with social, professional and political aspects in home and host countries in shaping return aspirations. The paper also highlights that while most refugees retain a profound belief in return, there is a strong mismatch between aspiring to return and realising it. While return after the war's end is driven by a wish to realise broader life goals, current return migration is driven by legal, medical and financial vulnerability, family obligations and discrimination in the host country.

Keywords: forced displacement, Syria, return migration, aspirations

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Contents

1 Introduction

The return migration of displaced populations has received increasing scholarly and political attention in recent decades. In the 1990s, refugee return became a political priority for local governments and international organisations due to large return movements, particularly in Africa and Asia (Allen and Morrink 1994; Black and Gent 2004; UNHCR 2008). The recent surge in forced migrants turning towards the European continent has again stirred up debates on return migration. In political discourse, the latter is now presented as a 'win-win-win' scenario for host countries, origin countries and returnees (Sinatti 2015). This idea is largely built upon the sedentary humanitarian discourse employed by policymakers, which attests that people belong to their homeland in an inherent, naturalistic way (Omata 2013, 1288). Refugees are regularly placed under pressure to repatriate by national and international refugee authorities advocating for their return (Içduygu and Nimer 2019). Moreover, migrant-hosting countries have increasingly integrated the issue of return into their migration and asylum policies – often under the auspices of their development programmes (Van Houte and Davids 2008). The voluntariness of such programmes has been repeatedly questioned by scholars, however (Carr 2014; Leerkes, van Os, and Boersema 2017; Lietaert 2019). Also, generally speaking, more refugees return spontaneously than do under planned programmes (Zetter 1994).

Many individuals do return to their country of origin after the end of a given conflict. For example, more than 5.7 million Afghans – one-quarter of the total population – returned to their native country after 2002. Likewise, Bosnia welcomed one million returnees after the 1992–1995 war, while more than 700,000 former refugees returned to Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that 2.9 million displaced individuals, of which 2.3 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs), returned to their areas or countries of origin in 2018 (UNHCR 2018). Yet not every refugee (or IDP) returns after the end of conflict, and some do even while it is still ongoing in their country of origin. A recent report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre showed that more than 183,500 of the 2.3 million refugees from South Sudan returned before the end of the war (IDMC 2019). In Syria over the last two years, similarly, there has been a modest number of returns, with 56,000 in 2018 (UNHCR 2019). The observation of these various return movements begs the questions of when and how decisions on return migration are made, and how and why these differ between individuals.

An increasing body of literature has studied the return migration decisions of refugees and IDPs. Unsurprisingly, perceptions of security in their native country are of paramount importance: refugees are generally reluctant to return to a place they consider unsafe (Black et al. 2004). However, for many safety is a necessary but not sufficient condition to return (Monsutti 2006, 33). Conditions in host countries play an equally important role in return intentions. Studies have shown that refugees who are economically and socially less integrated into their host society are more likely to prefer to return (Hansen 1992; Makanya 1991; Rogge 1991; Zetter 1994). Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic, and De Vroome (2015), for example, studied the return intentions of Afghans, Iranians, Iraqi and Somalians in the Netherlands and found that they were higher among those who had experienced discrimination and who identified less with their host country. Likewise, refugees who make socio-economic investments in host countries are more reluctant to return (Lubkemann 2008, 261), whereas those who invest in the country of origin are more prone to. Finally, access to educational opportunities can be an important factor too (van Heelsum 2016, 2017; McSpadden 2004; Omata 2013).

The literature has provided important insights into the factors that impact the decision-making processes of displaced populations, but fails to explain why some choose to return and others do not even while facing similar conditions – either in the host country or upon return.

In this article we embed refugees' return aspirations into their broader life aspirations to understand *who* returns *when*, and *why*. In doing so, we address the missing link between often high return aspirations and low actual return migration, arguing that there is a substantial difference between aspiring to return – also as a political right – and actually doing so. While, as Zetter (1994) argued, the right to return is the *sine qua non* of government diplomacy, the exercising of that right may be another matter entirely.

To guide our analysis, we draw on the capability–aspirations framework (Carling 2002, 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2003, 2014). Inspired by Sen's (1999) capability approach, the capability–aspirations framework conceptualises migration decisions as a function of both the aspiration *and* capability to move. Based on Carling and Schewel's (2018) conceptual work, we define a return aspiration as 'a conviction that return is preferable to staying; it can vary in degree and in the balance between choice and coercion'. These authors highlight that migration aspirations can be understood as a continuum along which only people at or near the two extremes – with firmly established convictions to either leave or to stay – give predictable answers (Carling and Schewel 2018, 946–50). Our paper is thus in line with other researchers who have pointed out that the boundaries between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration are fuzzy, as all mobility involves choices and constraints (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Fischer, Martin, and Straubhaar 1997; Van Hear 1998; Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009; Keely 2002).

Accounting for individuals' aspirations to migrate enhances our understanding of migration 'beyond the limitations of rational choice assumptions' (Schewel and Fransen 2018, 556) as aspirations refer to the more subjective factors that play a role in decision-making processes. Moreover, individuals' broader life goals – such as leading a healthy life, living in secure conditions or being with family – influence whether or not they aspire to migrate. In that sense, migration decisions become instrumental; a means to achieve a broader life goal. Taking these larger aspirations as our starting point allows us to 'analyse how the aspirations interact with perceived opportunities and constraints that give rise to the aspiration to migrate or to stay' (Carling 2014, 954). Embedding return decisions in individuals' broader life aspirations allows us to go beyond simple origin and host country factors in explaining such migration. Moreover, the capability–aspirations framework helps us to understand when return migration shifts towards coerced or even involuntary return – such as when return takes place with conflict in the native country ongoing or because basic needs are not guaranteed in the host country. In such a context, refugees might choose to return without a genuine desire to do so but with the conviction that it is nevertheless better than staying.

Our paper draws on a mixed-methods study conducted in 2018 with self-settled Syrian refugees in four cities in Turkey (Istanbul and Izmir) and Lebanon (Beirut and Tripoli), respectively. An individual-level survey was conducted with 757 respondents, in which they were interviewed on their current living conditions and their future plans regarding staying in their current location, moving on to a third country or returning to Syria. The survey data is complemented with 41 in-depth interviews and informal conversations. We present the respondents' reflections and aspirations on return to Syria under three different, partly hypothetical, return scenarios: (i) with the conflict still ongoing; (ii) if the war were to end; and, (iii) if the war were to end, but the outcome of it was the deciding factor. This was done to test whether current return migration is driven by factors different to the ones after the end of conflict, when constraints are arguably lower.

We first present quantitative analyses, based on the survey data, to divulge factors relating to respondents' return aspirations per the three scenarios. We find that current reflections on return and hypothetical aspirations thereto differ significantly: Whereas approximately 30 per cent of respondents had thought about returning with the war ongoing, most (approximately 65 per cent) aspired to return after its end – either unconditionally or

conditionally. We also uncover differences in return aspirations between refugees residing in Turkey and Lebanon. The qualitative data provides deeper insights into (i) how refugees imagine their return as part of broader life aspirations, (ii) what their conditions and capabilities for that are, (iii) who refuses to return and why, and (iv) which categories of refugees are currently returning – whose return we class mostly as pragmatic or coerced. Our findings emphasise that return is highly complex, and embedded in individuals' broader life aspirations. Whereas some respondents were able to fulfil their life goals outside Syria, others were not and strongly longed for a future there.

2 The legal context in Turkey and Lebanon, and return conditions in Syria

2.1 Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon

Turkey and Lebanon between them host a significant share of the global Syrian refugee population. Turkey currently hosts the world's largest refugee population, with 3.7 million registered Syrians as of November 2019 (UNHCR 2019). Syrians there live mostly in the southern provinces (Adana Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Mardin, Mersin, Sanliurfa), central provinces such as Konya and Kayseri, and the three western metropolises, Istanbul, Bursa and Izmir (UNHCR 2018; DGMM 2018). In Lebanon, approximately 920,000 registered Syrian refugees resided in Lebanon as of October 2019 (UNHCR 2019). Lebanon has one of the highest refugee–domestic population ratios worldwide, with one-quarter of the country's population being considered a refugee. Syrians have typically sought refuge in the most economically disadvantaged regions of Lebanon, such as the south of the country and the southern suburbs of Beirut; Akkar, the northern part of Lebanon; and, the Bekaa Valley, eastern Lebanon, where formally registered refugees constitute approximately 37 per cent of the local population (ibid.).

In both Turkey and Lebanon the 1951 Geneva Convention is not applied to Syrians, leaving their legal status to varying degrees fragile. Turkey has ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention, but with geographical limitations.[1] Syrians there are placed under Temporary Protection (TP), per the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection. In contrast to Lebanon, it is the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of the Ministry of Interior which manages registration. The law is partly the result of Turkey's European Union accession negotiations and draws heavily on the acquis: It includes *non-refoulement*, the right to legal stay and access to health and education services. However, the regulation does not bestow the explicit right to work. TP holders can apply for a work permit, but there is no guarantee that government authorities will grant it (Ineli-Ciger 2014; Toğral Koca 2016).[2] In 2015, travel permits were introduced to control the mobility of Syrians in Turkey and towards its borders, the latter being sealed off. Lately, the government has halted registration in several municipalities, such as Istanbul and Hatay, which explains why some respondents in the present study had no legal status.

In Lebanon, UNHCR can register refugees based on a Memorandum of Understanding with the government. Yet, the latter does not give legal effect to UNHCR refugee status, leaving those concerned without legal protection or a resident permit. Registered Syrian refugees are therefore considered to be waiting for resettlement to another country (Frangieh 2015; Saghieh and Frangieh 2014). Since 2014/2015, new restrictions on entry as well as on applying for and extending residence permits exist – leaving many Syrians vulnerable. The latter are legally allowed to work in construction, agriculture and cleaning, but from 2015 the

[1] Accordingly, only Europeans can apply for asylum in Turkey.

[2] Due to a presidential decree it is also possible to circumvent *non-refoulement* under certain conditions – namely if there is a threat to public health, morality or order.

right to employment was barred for those already registered with UNHCR (Kahwagi and Younes 2016). Furthermore, such registrations were suspended. Without a valid permit refugees are considered to be in breach of the law, and may be detained by the security apparatus and forcibly returned to Syria. While Lebanon publicly adheres to the principle of *non-refoulement*, it in fact engages in 'legal deportation', as Janmyr (2016, 2018) argues, issuing deportation orders and informing refugees that they must leave the country.

Return had become a highly sensitive and politicised topic in both Turkey and Lebanon by the time the research for this article took place, in 2018. With the Syrian regime regaining control of its national territory, it has been trying to foster the image that Syria is now entering a post-war phase. President Bashar al-Assad declared the country safe for Syrians to return to, while Lebanese and Turkish leaders started to press refugees to go. In both countries, policies have been put in place to facilitate the return of Syrians by formal and informal actors (Fakhoury and Ozkul 2019; Şahin Mencütek 2019). Hezbollah, al-Assad's powerful ally in Lebanon, in cooperation with the General Security Offices (GSO), for example opened several offices across the country for refugees to register for return (Yee 2018); at the border, the GSO stamps passports to state that its owner is banned from returning to Lebanon for an unknown period of time. In Turkey, similarly, during the campaigning for the presidential elections of 2018 the opposition announced that if they won refugees would be deported back to Syria (Butler 2018). Turkey increasingly encourages returns to the opposition-controlled areas by collaborating with local pro-Turkey actors. Returning to Syria has direct legal consequences for those residing in Turkey: Voluntary departure is considered grounds for the cessation of TP, and refuge under it cannot be sought again afterwards. Returnees have to complete a so-called Voluntary Return Form in their city of registration, and ID cards are confiscated at the border (Refugee Rights Turkey 2017). However, with the Syrian regime re-establishing control over the south around Daraa, Ghouta and areas in central Syria around Homs and Hama, it has closely controlled who returns. In Lebanon, for example, returnees are checked both before and upon return by security forces. When Hezbollah organised a widely publicised attempt to return 2,000 Syrians from Arsal, a town in the Bekaa Valley, in 2018, many of those who applied were subsequently rejected by al-Assad's government (Azar 2018; Yee 2018). In one of his public speeches, al-Assad also stated that through the exile of Syrians as a by-product of the war the country had gained 'a healthier and more homogenous society' (Batrawi and Uzelac 2018, 2).

2.2 Return to Syria: Conditions and aspirations

Those who return to Syria face extremely challenging living conditions. An estimated 11.7 million people were in need of various forms of humanitarian assistance in Syria in 2019. While violence has waned in many parts of the country, the impact of present and past hostilities on civilians remains the principal driver of humanitarian needs, while torture and disappearances continue. In 2019/2020, the government offensive against the last rebel enclave Idlib led to 520,000 new displacements (*al-Jazeera* 2020). Essential basic services, such as healthcare, shelter, food, education, water and sanitation are widely lacking. Almost half of healthcare facilities in Syria are either partially functional or not at all, and more than one in three schools damaged or destroyed. The extent of the physical destruction is immense: Throughout the war, 53 per cent of the Syrian population living in urban areas was affected by aerial bombardments and fighting within towns and cities. In Aleppo, for example, which suffered a siege and severe aerial bombing in 2016, all but one neighbourhood experienced damage – with 35,722 buildings either destroyed or severely to moderately damaged (REACH and UN 2019). The national economy suffered on all levels as a result of the destruction of infrastructure and buildings, the interruption of capital flows and economic circuits, and the loss of labour and

consumers. While estimations vary, in 2016 the Syrian gross national product decreased by two-thirds (63 per cent) from its 2010 level (Vignal 2018). According to 2015 estimates, 83 per cent of Syrians lived below the poverty line in that year; prices for staple items continued to rise through 2019 too.

Despite these dire conditions, return aspirations among those still in exile remain high. UNHCR's fifth Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey, conducted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon in 2018/2019, revealed that 75 per cent of refugees hope to return to Syria one day. At the same time, low numbers of Syrian refugees are actually returning – being mostly from Turkey, followed by Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt. Approximately 135,000 refugee returns were verified by UNHCR between 2016 and 2018 (UNHCR 2019).

3 Methods and data collection

This paper focuses on self-settled urban refugees from Syria residing in Turkey and Lebanon.[3] The research was conducted in the seventh year of the Syrian conflict (May–July 2018). Respondents were between 18 and 39 years of age, because this cohort is generally the most prone to mobility (Timmerman, Heyse and Mol 2010). Four cities were chosen for data collection, two in each country: (1) the biggest metropole hosting the highest number of Syrians[4] and (2) a large-scale municipality considered to be a 'transit city' on the migration route towards Europe.[5] A mixed-methods approach was applied, with two main components: an individual-level survey with 757 respondents (response rate: 82.9 per cent in Turkey, 83.6 per cent in Lebanon) and 41 in-depth qualitative interviews. The survey data is used here to sketch the prevalence of return aspirations in the sample and the individual and contextual factors that are related to return aspirations. This analysis is complemented with in-depth insights from the qualitative interviews on how return aspirations are related to individuals' circumstances and broader life aspirations including political elements.

The survey and in-depth interviews collected information about respondents' flight trajectories, living conditions in the host country, stay, migration and return aspirations, and other socio-economic determinants of behaviour. All interviews were conducted in Syrian Arabic. Data was collected in collaboration with a team of ten young Syrians who were university students and/or who had experience working with non-governmental organisations providing services to refugees in Lebanon or Turkey. The rationale for working with Syrian research assistants followed a participatory logic, and the wish to increase trust among respondents (cf. Müller-Funk 2020) – especially in a context where political and media discourses on the return of Syrian refugees remain omnipresent (cf. Içduygu and Nimer 2019). A two-stage sampling strategy was used for the survey, with a combination of multi-stage clustering, random routes and focused enumeration (for more details about the methodology, see (Müller-Funk et al. 2019). In each of the four cities, ethnically and religiously diverse districts hosting high numbers of lower- and middle-class Syrian were chosen. The survey included a 50–50 gender quota to account for the fact that approximately half of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey is made up of women (Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration 2015; UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2017).

[3] It excludes Syrians living in camps or informal settlements, as well as rural areas. In both countries, a large majority of Syrians live in urban spaces and private accommodation (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2016–2017; UNHCR 2018; Kabbanji and Kabbanji 2018; Erdoğan 2017).

[4] Beirut and its suburbs in Mount Lebanon (Beirut: 20,800 registered Syrians, Mount Lebanon: 246,400 (UNHCR 2017a); Istanbul: 401,928 (DGMM 2016).

[5] Tripoli: 70,000 (UNHCR 2017b); Izmir: 93,324 (DGMM 2016).

For the qualitative interviews, participants were chosen who varied in their migration attitudes, gender, ethnic/religious affiliations, age and educational background. Respondents were found via those who had already participated in the survey, as well as through research assistants' and the researchers' personal networks. Informal conversations continued with some participants via WhatsApp and Facebook. This strategy helped to gain access to a diverse sample (see Table A.0 in the Appendix). In the analysis, interviewees are given fictitious surnames and quoted with a code.[6]

Table 1 below contains an overview of survey respondents' characteristics in Turkey and Lebanon, their current conditions and their region of origin. Respondents were on average 28 years old, 52 per cent female and the majority were married and had children. Educational attainment varied: some 38 per cent of respondents had either no education or primary education, while 46 per cent had either attended lower or higher secondary school and 16 per cent had a university education or equivalent. Most respondents residing in Turkey – 73 per cent – originated from Aleppo, whereas those in Lebanon were more mixed.

Most respondents in Lebanon came from Homs (29 per cent), followed by Aleppo (23 per cent) and Idlib (11 per cent). Around one-third had a valid passport at the time of interview. Many (58 per cent) did not ever previously have a passport, partly linked to the fact that the vast majority of respondents (93 per cent) had no migration experience prior to 2011. Furthermore, obtaining and renewing documents at a Syrian consulate abroad is expensive and also poses a security risk for those living in fear of the country's authorities.[7]

Respondents' legal statuses differed significantly across countries of residence: some 84 per cent of those residing in Turkey had a legal status, versus 28 per cent in Lebanon. One-third had received financial assistance, food vouchers, medical aid or clothes from either the government or an international organisation/NGO during the last 12 months. In terms of health-related satisfaction, respondents scored on average 6.8 on a scale from 1 to 10. Overall life satisfaction, however, was low. On the same scale, the average score was 4.7 (5.4 in Turkey, 4.1 in Lebanon). These findings indicate that living conditions of Syrians in Lebanon are particularly precarious, mirroring the assessment of other studies (Kabbanji and Kabbanji 2018; UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2017b).

[6] T = Turkey, L= Lebanon, M = masculine, F = feminine, Ist = Istanbul, Iz = Izmir, Bei = Beirut, Tri = Tripoli. We omitted any information that could make interviewees identifiable.

[7] Confirming one's citizenship includes a security and background check from the Syrian Interior Ministry (Zayat and Carrié 2017), while a passport renewal necessitates an appointment through official channels – which is difficult to secure (Dambach 2017), and was halted in April 2017 in Turkey (Syrian consulate Istanbul 2017).

Table 1: Survey Respondents in Turkey and Lebanon

	Turkey		Lebanon		Total		Sign. of difference
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Background characteristics							
Age	27.49	5.83	28.68	5.95	28.11	5.92	2.75***
Gender (1 = female)	0.49	-	0.54	-	0.52	-	1.38*
Number of household members	5.28	2.41	5.15	2.53	5.21	2.47	-071
Children (1 = yes)	0.59	-	0.66	-	0.63	-	2.01**
Married (1 = yes)	0.64	-	0.73	-	0.69	-	2.70***
Level of education[1]	2.08	1.10	2.03	1.03	2.06	1.06	-0.69
Income per household member[2]	126.50	128.29	134.33	146.38	130.62	138.08	0.76
Current conditions							
Legal status (1 = yes)[3]	0.84	-	0.28	-	0.55	-	-18.98***
Passport (1 = yes)	0.35	-	0.30	-	0.32	-	-1.47
Assistance (1 = yes)[4]	0.35	-	0.31	-	0.33	-	-1.13
Health-related satisfaction[5]	6.96	2.93	6.67	2.93	6.81	2.94	-1.39
Life satisfaction[6]	5.43	2.90	4.11	2.70	4.74	2.87	-6.49***
Family members outside Syria (1 = yes)[7]	0.88	-	0.75	-	0.81	-	-4.63***
Last place of residence							
Last place of residence in Syria							
Aleppo	0.73	-	0.23	-	0.47	-	-16.01***
Damascus	0.10	-	0.05	-	0.07	-	-2.82***
Daraa	0.01	-	0.02	-	0.01	-	1.96*
Deir ez-Zor	0.04	-	0.08	-	0.06	-	2.40**
Hama	0.01	-	0.06	-	0.04	-	3.61***
Al-Hasakeh	0.04	-	0.05	-	0.05	-	0.37
Homs	0.02	-	0.29	-	0.16	-	11.00***
Idlib	0.03	-	0.11	-	0.07	-	4.38***
Raqqa	0.01	-	0.05	-	0.03	-	3.09***
Rural Damascus	0.01	-	0.03	-	0.02	-	1.97**
Latakia, Quneitra, Suweida, Tartus	0.01	-	0.04	-	0.02	-	2.66***
Years since departure	2.78	0.88	3.22	1.05	3.01	1.00	6.24***

Notes: * indicates that the difference is significant at the 10 per cent level. ** indicates that the difference is significant at the 5 per cent level. *** indicates that the difference is significant at the 1 per cent level. [1] Education was measured as: 1) no education or primary school; 2) lower secondary (Grade 7 to 9); 3) higher secondary (Grade 10 to 12); and, 4) university/superior education. [2] Income per household member refers to the average monthly household income, after taxes and other deductions, divided by the number of household members. [3] Legal status refers to legal stay granted through TP or another residence permit in Turkey, and to a valid residence permit in Lebanon. [4] Legal assistance was measured with the question: '*During the last 12 months, did your household receive assistance from the Lebanese/Turkish government or an international organisation/NGO (e.g. financial assistance, food vouchers, medical aid, clothes etc.)?*' [5] Health-related satisfaction was measured with the question: '*How would you describe your health in general on a scale on which 1 indicates the lowest satisfaction and 10 the highest?*'[6] Life satisfaction was measured with the question: '*All things considered, on a scale on which 1 indicates the lowest satisfaction and 10 the highest, how satisfied are you overall with your life these days?*' [7] Family members outside Syria was measured by asking: *'Does at least one member of your close family – this means your partner, your child/ren, your parents or your siblings – currently live outside Syria?'*

Table 2 below summarises respondents' return reflections and aspirations. Approximately 30 per cent would consider return under current conditions. Yet such reflections were significantly more prevalent among respondents residing in Lebanon, most likely due to the challenging living conditions for refugees there. When asked about mobility aspirations in the case that the war ended, a majority (64 per cent) reported to aspire to return – either unconditionally (40 per cent) or conditional on the outcome of the war (25 per cent).[8] Aspirations to return after the war are comparable across countries, but a significant difference exists between those who aspire to return unconditionally or conditionally. Among respondents residing in Turkey, the latter aspiration was much higher than in Lebanon. This could indicate that more Syrians there have an anti-regime attitude than those in Lebanon. Turkey has become increasingly critical of the regime of al-Assad, and started to serve as the main staging ground for the Syrian opposition in exile. In summer 2011, Ankara started to openly back both the Syrian National Council (the major civilian coalition in exile seeking the overthrow of al-Assad) and the Free Syrian Army (Balci 2012). Most respondents residing in Turkey and who did not aspire to return after the war wished to stay where they were (cf also Müller-Funk 2019). In Lebanon, in contrast, the majority of those who did not aspire to return to Syria after the war expressed the desire to move to a third country.

Table 2: Return Reflections and Aspirations (Descriptive Statistics)

		Turkey		Lebanon		Total	
		f	P	*f*	P	*f*	P
Reflected about return under current conditions	No	274	76.11	254	63.98	528	69.75
	Yes	84	23.33	141	35.52	225	29.72
	N/A, Don't know	2	0.56	2	0.50	4	0.53
	T-test		T = 3.69***				
Mobility aspirations in case the war ends	Return to Syria	110	30.56	191	48.11	301	39.76
	Conditional on outcome	119	33.06	67	16.88	186	24.57
	Stay in Lebanon/Turkey	81	22.50	40	10.08	121	15.98
	Go to another country	41	11.39	96	24.18	137	18.10
	N/A, Don't know	9	2.50	3	0.76	12	1.59
	Anova		F = 25.64***				

Note: Answer categories N/A and Don't know were excluded from the variance tests.

When asked *why* they aspired to return after the war, the vast majority mentioned their attachment to Syria as a primary reason ('it is my country'/'there is nothing better than my country'/'I love my country'), followed by a wish to reunite with family members and also the fact that life was difficult in their current place of residence (see Table A.2 in the Appendix). This latter reason was more often mentioned by those in Lebanon. Moreover, a significant share indicated that they wanted to return to property – such as housing or land – owned in Syria. Respondents who aspired to return conditional on the outcome of the war often mentioned – alongside their attachment to Syria – political motives: They would consider returning *if* the security situation (20 per cent) or the regime (6 per cent) changed. Some also

[8] The finding that the majority aspire to return is in line with the outcome of the UNHCR's fifth Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey, although in our sample the percentage is lower than the 75 per cent reported therein. This is most likely due to the fact that the UNHCR survey was conducted in different countries and did not include Turkey, where reported return aspirations are lower (per our sample).

mentioned that they would only return if there was no military service (7 per cent). This meant that for them, similarly, regime change would be necessary.

3.1 Regression analyses: The factors underlying return

To provide insight into the factors that underlie respondents' aspirations and reflections on return, we ran descriptive statistics (Table A.2 in the Appendix) and logistic regression analyses. In these, we use the reflections on and aspirations for return as dependent variables, and control for the respondents' (i) background characteristics such as age, gender, marital status and education; (ii) life conditions such as legal status, income and dependence on financial assistance, the location of close family members and health-related and life satisfaction; and, (iii) their last place of residence in Syria (see Tables 3 and 4 below). The analyses are also controlled for current country of residence and the number of years that had passed since leaving Syria.

Table 3 presents the findings on return under current conditions. In terms of background characteristics, it reveals that individuals who are married are less likely to consider such a return. This could be related to married respondents being less willing to take risks out of consideration of their partner. The in-depth interviews saw married women often mention fears for their husbands and their possible military conscription when reflecting on return. Individuals with greater household incomes are more likely to return under current conditions, as are those who have a passport. Most likely, it is on the one hand easier for wealthier individuals to come by the funds needed to make the trip back to Syria and to make a living upon return. On the other, this could also be linked to the aspiration to regain lost social status.[9] Having valid documentation might be related to being less afraid of the Syrian authorities as a consequence of not needing to deal with them, hence fearing persecution less – but also the possibility to reclaim property upon return, or having the possibility to leave the country once again.

Having legal status in the country of residence had a negative effect on the respondents' reflections on return. Moreover, those who reported a higher satisfaction with their health status as well as those who had close family members residing outside Syria were also less likely to consider return with the war ongoing. Furthermore, respondents from Aleppo Governorate were significantly less likely to consider return compared to for Damascus Governorate. This might reflect Aleppo Governorate having been the major opposition area in Northeast Syria (Lund 2018), with the highest number of damaged and destroyed houses nationwide. These findings show the importance of family ties, documentation, financial resources and conditions in Syria for return reflections. Finally, reflections on return were significantly lower in Turkey – most likely due to the fact that Syrian refugees there experience fewer hardships compared to those in Lebanon.

[9] We also ran models controlling for household income before the war (results available from the authors on request). This variable contains many missing values, and the results are therefore not shown in Table 3. The findings reveal, however, that individuals with higher pre-war household incomes were more likely to consider return under current conditions.

Table 3: Return under Current Conditions

	Model 1 Background characteristics	Model 2 Current conditions	Model 3 Return conditions	Model 4 All combined
Age	0.01			0.00
	(0.02)			(0.02)
Female	-0.15			-0.20
	(0.19)			(0.20)
No. of household members	-0.03			0.04
	(0.04)			(0.05)
No. of children	0.39			0.45
	(0.31)			(0.34)
Married (1 = yes)	-0.81***			-0.68**
	(0.29)			(0.31)
Education	0.09			0.09
	(0.09)			(0.10)
Current income per household member		0.00***		0.00**
		(0.00)		(0.00)
Legal status		-0.35*		-0.35
		(0.21)		(0.21)
Passport ownership		0.34*		0.25
		(0.19)		(0.20)
Assistance received		0.04		0.10
		(0.20)		(0.21)
Health-related satisfaction		-0.06**		-0.08**
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Life satisfaction		-0.03		-0.03
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Family members outside Syria		-0.61***		-0.56***
		(0.21)		(0.21)
Last place of residence in Syria (ref. = Damascus)				
Aleppo			-0.89***	-0.76**
			(0.33)	(0.34)
Daraa			-0.90	-0.67
			(0.74)	(0.79)
Deir ez-Zor			-0.86*	-0.66
			(0.46)	(0.48)
Hama			-0.47	-0.42
			(0.50)	(0.54)
al-Hasakeh			-0.00	0.17
			(0.46)	(0.48)
Homs			-0.62*	-0.41
			(0.37)	(0.38)
Idlib			-0.44	-0.25
			(0.43)	(0.45)
Raqqa			-0.67	-0.40
			(0.58)	(0.64)
Rural Damascus			-0.24	-0.21
			(0.62)	(0.65)
Latakia, Quneitra, Suweida, Tartus			-0.27	-0.40
			(0.60)	(0.63)
Turkey	-0.67***	-0.29	-0.48**	-0.21
	(0.18)	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.25)
Number of years since departure	-0.09	-0.03	-0.06	-0.04
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Constant	-0.19	0.26	0.22	0.61
	(0.58)	(0.40)	(0.42)	(0.73)
Observations	703	703	703	703
Pseudo R2	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.08

Table 4. Return Aspirations after the War's End

	Unconditional return aspirations	Conditional return aspirations
Age	-0.03*	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Female	-0.32*	0.94***
	(0.19)	(0.23)
No. of household members	-0.03	0.13***
	(0.04)	(0.05)
No. of children	0.14	-0.79**
	(0.28)	(0.34)
Married (1 = yes)	-0.06	0.49
	(0.27)	(0.32)
Education	-0.20**	0.10
	(0.09)	(0.10)
Current income per household member	-0.00	0.00*
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Legal status	0.07	-0.15
	(0.21)	(0.25)
Passport ownership	-0.37**	0.49**
	(0.19)	(0.21)
Assistance received	0.25	-0.34
	(0.19)	(0.23)
Health-related satisfaction	0.00	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Life satisfaction	0.02	-0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Family members outside Syria	-0.34	0.19
	(0.21)	(0.26)
Last place of residence in Syria (ref. = Damascus)		
Aleppo	-0.73**	0.39
	(0.34)	(0.38)
Daraa	-0.84	-0.52
	(0.71)	(1.08)
Deir ez-Zor	-0.36	0.19
	(0.44)	(0.53)
Hama	-0.26	-1.30
	(0.49)	(0.92)
al-Hasakeh	-0.96*	0.67
	(0.51)	(0.55)
Homs	-0.01	-0.10
	(0.39)	(0.49)
Idlib	-0.40	0.29
	(0.44)	(0.51)
Raqqa	-0.06	-0.41
	(0.58)	(0.71)
Rural Damascus	-0.38	-0.11
	(0.64)	(0.79)
Latakia, Quneitra, Suweida, Tartus	-0.75	0.64
	(0.60)	(0.76)
Turkey	-0.72***	0.96***
	(0.24)	(0.29)
Number of years since departure	-0.22**	0.09
	(0.09)	(0.10)
Constant	2.74***	-4.19***
	(0.74)	(0.86)
Observations	703	703
Pseudo R2	0.07	0.10

In Table 4 we use unconditional and conditional return aspirations vis-à-vis the war's end as the dependent variables. The findings reveal, first, that youngsters, men and the highly educated would be less likely to return after the war's end – irrespective of the outcome thereof. On the one hand, this might reflect again fear of doing military service – which concerns young single men most. On the other, given the current state of the Syrian economy respondents with a higher education level might be more pessimistic about future prospects there (as the qualitative interviews reveal).

At the same time, highly educated respondents in Lebanon were more prone to aspire to migrate while the same respondents in Turkey could also foresee prospects in the host country. In in-depth interviews, the more educated were also more sceptical about the outcome of the war overall. Individuals who owned a passport were also less likely to aspire to return unconditionally post-war. This could be related to the fact that they see greater chances to go to another country or acquire legal status in the host one with their official documentation. Syrians who hold the latter are also less likely to get arrested at checkpoints in Lebanon compared to those without it or valid legal status. The last place of residence in Syria is again significant for unconditional return aspirations, with respondents from Aleppo Governorate being less likely to aspire to return compared to for Damascus Governorate. Finally, individuals residing in Lebanon are again more likely to aspire to return unconditionally than in Turkey – which might be a reflection of the former hosting a higher percentage of those who are neutral about the type of regime in power in a post-war Syria. Number of years since departure has a negative effect on unconditional return aspirations, meaning that as time passes individuals are less likely to aspire hereto.

Conditional return aspirations differ among respondents. First, females and individuals living in larger households are more likely to make their return aspirations conditional on the outcome of the war. This might be a result of gender-related vulnerabilities and violence – which has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls. According to research conducted by the Syrian Women's League, the forms of violence that women there are exposed to include arrest, torture, death following torture, arbitrary detention in inappropriate conditions, travel bans and summonses for investigation – that in addition to harassment at checkpoints set up by all conflict parties in their respective areas of control. Women's more conditional return aspirations could therefore be related to fears of gender-based violence, and might depend on safety guarantees and certain rights (as the qualitative interviews disclose). Some women experienced relative emancipation through their displacement, and thus made their return conditional on retaining now-acquired rights. Those with higher household incomes are in general more likely to harbour conditional return aspirations, as are those who have a passport. Those residing in Turkey are more likely to aspire to return conditionally. Number of years since departure has no significant effect on conditional return aspirations, meaning that as time passes such desires remain stable.

Overall, our quantitative findings point to the importance of gender and family circumstances, household income and education, ownership of documentation (a passport and legal residency), health-related satisfaction and political factors. We now use the qualitative interview data to explain how these factors relate to broader life aspirations.

4 Qualitative findings: Explaining the discrepancy between return aspirations and return migration

4.1 Imagining return as part of broader life aspirations

That return aspirations are strongly related to broader life aspirations is illustrated in three ways: First, 'home' is described as where family and property are, and where respondents can

be at peace. Second, respondents aspire to return 'strong' and 'successful' to Syria, and refer to their life goals before the war. In some cases these transformed through the experiences made during displacement: working in a previously unknown sector, such as civil society, learning a new language (in the case of Turkey) or opening a business. Third and finally, some female interviewees – mostly those with higher education levels – mentioned changes in their broader life goals because they had experienced (greater) emancipation since their flight from Syria. The following young respondent interviewed in Istanbul, for example, linked imaginations of his future return to Syria to the possibility to reunite with family members:

> Let the war continue for 200 years… even if we still live in Turkey by the time [it ends], we will return and rebuild the country. (…) So we can reunite around a dinner table. We are all dispersed now, my sister is in Damascus, another sister in Aleppo, another one in Qamishli, my parents in Aleppo, two of my brothers here with me in Turkey and one in Germany. Of course, we gather in a WhatsApp group and talk to each other all the time. But this is not enough. We are all waiting (…). My wish is that everyone returns to Syria, lives in their house and is at peace. That the war ends (T17MIst).

Another respondent highlighted the wish to claim possession once more of the family's property: 'I am thinking of returning to Syria in the future… If my father and mother were not in Syria, I would not return. (…) If I want to return to Syria, there is my mother, my grandfather, my relatives, our lands, our properties are all in Syria' (T9MIz). Family and property are representative of strong feelings of 'belonging' in Syria, which aligns with our quantitative findings. Respondents' aspiration to return 'strong' derives from the idea to first make one's life abroad and then come back successful, building on new linguistic/professional skills and experiences acquired overseas:

> I will return depending on how long the conflict will last. There is this saying 'I will only return strong to Syria', strong with regards to social relations, financial resources and education, with a diploma. I don't want to return and build up everything from zero. I want to have a strong basis to work on (T1MIst).

Respondents clearly refuted the idea of returning to Syria empty-handed and with no active role to play:

> I am convinced personally, first, it is about family and, second, I would not go back to any country without having something in my hand, which I could build on… to rebuild my region… If I improve, I can help others. To actively do something. (…) We all think that if we return to our country, we will return strong (T2MIst).

This sometimes also included educational qualifications, which respondents wanted to acquire before returning:

> This is the most important phase of my life, to build up my life, my future! I dare! (…) I want to return to Syria one day in the future, when I have finished my university. I have the objective to go back to Syria, my objective is not to always stay abroad… (T13MIz).

Some respondents talked about their plan to live a transnational lifestyle between their host country and Syria. A young small-restaurant owner in Istanbul for example explained: 'If the business flourishes, I would live between here and Syria, I would continue my father's business

in Syria, I would run two businesses at the same time. (…) I would open several branches' (I8MIst). For some, return aspirations reflected an inability to realise broader life aspirations in the host country, particularly Lebanon: 'My objective is just to get knowledge, to develop skills and return to Syria. (…) I will not settle down here, because life here is very difficult and the conditions in which people live are very cruel' (L20MBei). In this case, return aspirations were mentioned as a result of frustrations in the host country and the desire to return to a previous lifestyle impossible to now attain in either Lebanon or Turkey. Respondents talked, for example, about the impossibility of continue working in their previous profession, building up a business or of studying. A young female respondent in Istanbul explained her spouse's motivations for returning as follows:

> My husband is convinced that we will return to Syria, he wants to return. Why? Because all his possessions are there, he was the director of a factory… Now, here, he is obliged to labour as a worker… He has a lot of experience… He told me that if I stayed in Syria and the war didn't happen, I would run an international company by now (T18Fist).

A 20-year-old respondent from Rif Idlib came to Lebanon to get married to a Syrian man when studying became impossible for her back home due to the violence. She highlighted that:

> If I go back to Syria, I will continue my university studies. (…) If the war ends or not. If they tell me, there is a way back, I would return. There just needs to be safety on the way. (…) I don't care who wins, the revolutionaries or the regime, what I care about is who is killing people (L10FTri).

Lebanese universities were financially and practically out of reach for her. She also feared that she needed English and French language skills to enter university, which she did not have. Some female respondents mentioned having more personal and professional freedom in Turkey and Lebanon, which they did not want to give up. These were often women with higher educational levels who had managed to enter the labour market in a way meaningful to them. Their return aspirations were thus conditional on keeping this newly acquired status quo. One example was a 30-year-old married woman whose husband was working in Saudi Arabia. She had managed to continue her studies in Lebanon while taking care of their two children, and later found a job in journalism:

> Like all people, I want to return to Syria, I don't want to stay here in Lebanon, I don't want to go to any country (…). I don't want to return to Syria now, not until the war stops completely, so that I can return and work and do something for my country. I don't want to return as a housewife. No. I want to return and work and do something. I cannot return to the situation in which I lived before. (…) So, it's like we say, it's a misfortune but something good came out of it (L7FTri).

Another interviewee, a 32-year-old single lawyer who had fled from a Palestinian refugee camp[10] outside Damascus to Beirut, had undertaken several employment-related trainings while supporting herself in small jobs. She explained that she would only consider return if she had the freedom to continue her work as in Lebanon:

> For me as a Palestinian woman, it was very difficult to enter Lebanon because they want a visa, but I could get one and so entered the country. I entered Lebanon and

[10] Palestinians born in Syria and who fled have a different legal status in Lebanon to Syrian refugees overall.

> decided to follow workshops, because as a Palestinian I cannot go back and forth across borders and I wanted to increase my experience (…). For me, the important thing is that I work, and that I do my projects, I don't want more; that I live how I want (L11FBei).

4.2 Conditions and capabilities to return

A second key finding from the in-depth interviews was that certain conditions in Syria need to be met before respondents would consider return. These concern above all safety, including often: the abolishing of military service or an amnesty for those who had deserted the army or were called to army service; reconstruction and the return of public services and infrastructure; an improvement of economic conditions and the restitution of property; and, political conditions such as a change of regime or of its security forces, the existence of freedom, a civil and democratic state, accountability, women's rights and transitional justice. Furthermore, not everyone who aspired to return was in fact capable of doing so. Interviewees talked in particular about the financial resources necessary to rebuild their lives in Syria, and their hope that the country might one day return to what it was before. This hope was often lost among those who no longer aspired return at all. Regarding personal safety and security, concerns ranged from general violence to fears of targeted persecution and military service. A young male interviewee in Tripoli stated:

> For me, the most important thing is the end of the killing. (…) In the whole country, the killing has to stop. (…) That there is no fear, that there is safety, that people can walk in the street after 9pm without being taken to prison. Now, me, if I went to Syria, they would recruit me for the army, I either need to pay USD 8,000, or I cannot go back. This is not good, this is not stability. If there are no people carrying arms, if you don't have to carry arms. I cannot imagine that my son has to see people carrying arms in Homs (L16MTri).

In general, fears about Syria's secret service, the *mukhabarat*, were omnipresent among respondents and a lack of confidence in the guarantees which the regime has brought forward regarding safe return: 'Of course I wouldn't return without a guarantee, to check up my name before, there must be a guarantee that my name is not listed with the security services' (L7FTri). Another young interviewee highlighted especially the link between having fled military conscription and fears for one's safety upon return:

> There are many Syrians here who are not here because there are bombs in Syria but because we are followed by the security and military forces, we are wanted for the army. These people cannot go back. The majority of families, they have a son who is wanted for the army. How should they return, they cannot return, right or not? Personally, all my friends are wanted for the army or by the security forces. How shall we return to the regions of the regime? (…) I don't feel safe, it's not a safe return (L15MBei).

Respondents who feared persecution by the Syrian authorities also mentioned that returning could put their family back home in danger if they were themselves arrested:

> I cannot return to Syria. I am not a fighter… I don't want to kill and I don't want to be killed. (..) My parents are both retired, they live from their pensions in peace, they don't have many problems. I cannot put them in danger if I get arrested or if I die (T7MIst).

While a number of respondents reported not caring about who held power in Syria in the future as long as safety would be guaranteed, a large proportion directly linked the (absence of the) latter with al-Assad's regime. They concluded that the two were mutually exclusive:

> Of course, we return to Syria, of course, there is nothing better than one's country. But as long as Bashar is present, we won't return, there is no safety. (…) There is no safety. Either they say, Bashar will be taken off, then we would all return. But if there is no security, how should we return? They say, we will repair your houses, we will rebuild but it's all a lie, there is no safety. Of course, Syrians demand to return to their country, and I am one of them (L5FTri).

For others, not only the regime had to change but so too the political system as a whole:

> If the war ends, it depends on how the war ends. Are there safe regions of the opposition? Did the regime fall? Is there a political reconciliation which would allow political activists and civilians to work in civil society and in politics freely? Then I would return. Or is the situation going to return to what it was before? (L15MBei).

Some female respondents referred to laws – particularly the Personal Status Law regulating divorce and custody – needing to change as a precondition for return. A divorced mother in Izmir explained:

> There is also another thing. Custody. If I went back, his father would take him because, in Syrian law, fathers get custody of children after the age of nine. But here, they stay with the mother (TF14Iz). Another interviewee remarked: Me, if the political situation and laws don't change, I won't return. What should I do when I return? Return to divorce by individual will? (L11FBei).

4.3 Refusing to return

Over 34 per cent of survey respondents rejected the idea of returning to Syria regardless of the outcome of the conflict. Interviewees mentioned two major reasons in qualitative interviews. First, they doubted that Syria would ever again become a place that they would like to return to. Respondents described Syria as a society transformed by war and displacement, and no longer the place they used to know or somewhere they felt attached to any longer. They also talked about how Syrian society had become like those who stayed. The latter were often classified as either pro-regime (or at least as having come to terms with it) or as warlords and people taking pleasure in combat. Respondents mentioning this first reason often had higher educational levels and/or clearly voiced their opposition to the regime. The second major reason articulated, meanwhile, was that some had managed to realise their life aspirations elsewhere and considered restarting from scratch not worth the effort. These interviewees explained that they only intended to return to Syria for short-term visits in future. A female respondent and former teacher explained how Aleppo changed during the course of the war, and the difficulties she would face to integrate socially in her original neighbourhood if she returned:

> The nature of Syria has changed… For example, all our neighbours left, there are other people instead. Seventy per cent of people who remained in the regions of al-Assad are mercenaries or people who carry weapons, thieves. How should I integrate there? Before I came to Turkey, I didn't let my son play in the street because there are children

> carrying a bomb around their waist because their father gave them a weapon. The situation is very bad. The problem is not only al-Assad, the military and the bombs but the nature of the people present (T6FIst).

Similarly, a former student from regime-controlled Sweida in southwest Syria, doing a traineeship in Beirut at the time of interview, underlined the negative transformation of Syrian society as a reason for him not to return:

> Out of principle, I would not return. Even if the war ended. (..) My first problem is that I feel that the environment in Syria in general became a bit strange… It feels like a swamp, this is the main reason. Even if the war ended, the chaos, the weapons will remain. (…) There is this phenomenon, which is very prevalent, that young guys between 15 and 19, they take a lot of hashish and drugs. This chaos, this destruction. (…) Society became distorted. (…) I feel that the country is governed by mafias or gangs, and if I returned I wouldn't be a free person (L18MBei).

A former journalist and activist described how she saw Damascus nowadays:

> When I saw Syria last time, I found it ugly. It became a country of war. Damascus and its surroundings are on the ground, completely on the ground. Very poor, military checkpoints, the pictures of al-Assad along the roads, the city became ugly and the pictures of al-Assad and Nasrallah everywhere to say: 'We won, al-Assad first'. (…) I walked there and thought maybe I can return but I found no, I cannot. The truth is that after we left Syria, we felt that the country was broken (…). I cannot return to live in Syria anymore (L19FBei).

An Armenian respondent, who had worked in the oil industry before the war, mentioned that all families sharing his ethnicity in his home city in Syria had left, also emphasising that he did not have the psychological strength to return:

> I don't want to return to Syria. (…) A lot of reasons…. it's not only because of financial reasons… It's difficult to return to a country where half the people have been killed and another part is in prison… One needs a strong heart to return to such a country (T18MIst).

He did not believe that either the regime or the opposition would be able to change the political situation in the country. An artist active in civil society and opposed to al-Assad's regime also feared the questioning of those who had stayed put in her birthplace:

> Our village is considered to be loyal [to the government]. So of course, they think that you just left to leave the atmosphere of the village behind… They reject someone who is against the government (…) No one understands that there is something called political opinion and this is what forced you to leave! The majority are convinced that there is nothing in Syria except for terrorist activity, and the army is cleaning Syria! They are convinced, khalas. (…) They consider us traitors! But I am not a traitor! I am someone who thinks about these things with intelligence, and I don't deliver myself to the army and the police... Because in the end, they will put me in prison! They will kill me or… There are no choices… Your life is that, you leave, khalas! And even if you leave, the psychological harm will not! (T12FIst).

Others explained that they would not want to return if they managed to realise life aspirations elsewhere in the meantime, especially with regards to getting married and having children. A 26-year-old respondent in Istanbul, for example, explained that for him the decision was clearly linked to his success in building up the life he desired:

> For example, me, if in a year I leave to Greece or Europe or if I get married here… and live in this environment, I won't think about returning. (…) There is no need to return and think about our house or my mother like a small child. This became the past, just a memory. (…) If I travel to Europe or get married here and things work out, I won't return... I would settle down (T3MIst). Another respondent similarly claimed: Me personally, I would go back if the problems in Syria are solved, but only if it is soon, and if I hadn't developed roots here. If I started a family, if I had a wife and children, then I wouldn't go back (T1MIst).

4.4 Coerced and pragmatic return under current conditions: Medical needs, family obligations and discrimination

In the following, we present the life stories of two respondents regarding their or their family's return to Syria in 2018: one that of someone with whom we have stayed in contact, the other as told by an interviewee whose father returned with the interviewee's mother and sister while he himself stayed in Turkey. While the first respondent returned from Lebanon in a situation of extreme poverty and medical vulnerability to guarantee the survival of his family, the father of the second respondent returned together with his wife and daughter for pragmatic reasons – to take care of his elderly father as well as escape discrimination in the Turkish labour market. None of the returnees had deserted the army, participated in the war militarily or been politically active. In both cases, there was little space in their decision-making for realising broader life aspirations. Especially the first life story is an example of someone whose return we consider coerced, because he was extremely vulnerable legally and financially in Lebanon but had sufficient resources to guarantee his survival upon return.

Jalal, a 36-year-old man from a governorate in Syria's north, lived with his wife and four children in a small apartment in a suburb of Beirut when we first interviewed him. He grew up in the countryside, went to school up until ninth grade and did technical training before eventually starting work in the family business. His family owned two factories in the city close by. Jalal described how he fell in love during his military service and got married after leaving the army. He fled Syria in 2011 when he no longer felt safe. This was the beginning of a long flight trajectory: The family first went from Aleppo to Iraqi Kurdistan before moving on to Turkey, from where Jalal twice tried to reach Europe without success. Finally, they arrived in Lebanon because a childhood friend had told him that he would help him to get a job with him there. However, things did not turn out as expected, and Jalal started to work in construction without a contract. The family registered with UNHCR but soon could not pay the renewal fees for their residence permits anymore. Jalal's salary was barely sufficient to meet their daily living expenses. When one of their children got seriously ill, it was a financial catastrophe. Then, one year before our interview, another incident happened: Jalal fell off scaffolding at work and broke his heel. As he was not insured, he could not afford surgery and his heel bone never grew back to its natural state. Yet, there was no solution other than for him – limping and in pain – to continue working.

When we interviewed him in 2018, he told us that he could never imagine returning to Syria:

> I never thought about returning, and I won't return. To what should I return, Lea? Even if the war finished, I mean, I saw the death. How can I return? My life, my work, me, my father, my brothers, everything is destroyed (…). The only thing, which I am interested in, is if a country treats me like a human being and nothing else. (…) We, here, unfortunately, unfortunately, unfortunately, in the Middle East, we don't have this here (I18MLB).

Several months after our interview, however, Jalal received a considerable amount of money through a crowdfunding initiative, which a friend of his brother-in-law in Europe had organised to pay for his foot operation. As the family's conditions had become extremely vulnerable in Lebanon, they decided to return to their original village in Syria so that Jalal could receive medical treatment – which was much more affordable there than in Lebanon. Returning also meant being able to survive financially during the months of Jalal's recovery as they could live in his brother's house, which had remained intact, while some of the crowdfunded money was still left too. Since then, the family has tried to rebuild their respective lives: Jalal had his operation and started to work in his original profession again. His children went back to school. In the WhatsApp messages and photos which we have exchanged after their return, it was obvious that Jalal was much more cautious about discussing political conditions in Syria than he had been during our interview in Lebanon, solely stating now that the security situation was relatively okay and that they had enough to eat.

The story of Hassan's father was different. Hasan was 24 years old and an engineering student when we interviewed him in 2018. He told us that his parents and his younger sister had just returned to Syria. Hasan grew up in an upper-middle class family along with his two sisters. The family owned several houses and cars. His father, a mechanical engineer, worked as a director of a factory located in a suburb of the city where he grew up. Hasan finished his A levels in Syria in 2011, thereafter studying agricultural engineering. While the situation in the city remained relatively calm, the factory was destroyed in a bombardment in 2012 – resulting in the loss of his father's job. Hasan described how the family's wealth gradually depleted over the years, and that he started to feel like a financial burden on his father as he himself could not contribute to the family income: He could not move freely in the city after he received a call-up to the army, because he went into hiding and avoided military checkpoints. In 2013, when the family's neighbours left to Turkey and with the Syrian–Turkish border still open, Hasan decided to leave as well – not only to ease the financial pressure on his father but also to start a new phase in his life and to escape daily immobility. Some months after Hasan's arrival in Izmir the whole family joined him there, and soon were granted TP without problems. With his vast international experience and English skills, his father expected to find a suitable job fast. However, things did not turn out as expected and he only found a job as a carpenter and a smith – which, according to Hasan, came as a shock.

After five long years, his father eventually decided to return to Syria with his wife and younger daughter. Hasan described his father's decision as being influenced by security conditions having relatively improved in their home city, the stark discrimination he was confronted with in Turkey, a loss of social status and the deteriorating health of Hasan's grandfather (who had stayed behind):

> Towards the end, my mum's father, he was in his 60s, would die six months prior, and then my father said, I need to be with my father… It's the age where we cannot do anything… He is really very old… He doesn't want him to die alone… he wants to be at his side. This is the biggest reason why he went back… And I agree with him about how they are treating us here… (…) Even if there is not 100 per cent security in Syria, the situation is somehow better than before (I13MTIz).

Hasan – who had received a scholarship to one of Izmir's universities – and his sister – who had married in the meantime – both decided to stay.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has highlighted that while most Syrian refugees retain a profound belief in return, there is a strong mismatch between aspirations to and actual return numbers. While most respondents in the present study aspired to return after the war (64 per cent), a large proportion (25 per cent) made their return conditional on the outcome of the war and 34 per cent rejected the idea of returning to Syria altogether even if the war ended. At the same time, approximately 30 per cent had thought about return under current conditions, with the conflict in Syria ongoing. These findings are in line with previous studies that revealed that the majority of Syrian refugees aspire to return 'home' once the conflict is over (e.g. UNHCR 2019). Nevertheless, there were few who returned from Turkey and Lebanon in 2018 relative to the number of Syrian refugees living in both countries (Lebanon: 14,496, Turkey: 22,410) (UNHCR 2018).

We argue that analysing return migration as part of broader life aspirations helps to understand the discrepancy between high return aspirations and low actual return migration. Our findings show how some were able to fulfil their broader life goals outside Syria, while others were clearly not able to – which influenced their reflections on return. Going back was imagined as a 'strong return' by those who aspired to do so after the conflict's end, enabling them to subsequently realise their broader life aspirations. Regarding the latter, respondents particularly mentioned social, professional and political considerations: First, as in other migratory contexts, the role of personal relationships was key, with many wanting to reunite with close family members. Second, economic and professional factors such as being able to work in a certain job, continue a career and recapture lost social status play a central role herein too – including reclaiming one's property. Third, for those who aspired to return after the war but conditional on the outcome of it, the security situation and political factors in Syria played a significant role in their decision-making – as levels of security were perceived differently among interviewees based on their positioning politically within the conflict. With the government-led offensive against the rebel enclave Idlib in late 2019 and early 2020, for many regime-critical Syrians, Idlib, which used to be a region to flee to within Syria but also to potentially return to, is now no longer an option. Political factors also partly explain why over one-third of survey respondents refuse to return. They reported that Syrian society had been so negatively transformed by the war that they no longer felt any attachment to their native country.

Conditions in the country of residence were found to play an important role in respondents' reflections on return under current conditions, with vulnerability a key factor herein – leading to what we have called 'coerced' or 'pragmatic' return. Those residing in Lebanon, in particular, were more prone to consider return under current conditions – most likely because of the challenging living conditions faced there. Individuals who reported having a higher income level were more likely to consider return, which points to the importance of having sufficient means to rebuild one's life upon return. While return aspirations after the hypothetical end of the conflict were thus driven by the wish to realise broader life goals, actual return was the consequence of legal and medical vulnerability, family obligations and of discrimination in the host country.

Finally, broader life aspirations and return movements were directly linked to questions of social status and education level. Our findings highlight that social status plays an important – and partly contradictory – role in informing return: Going back to a previous, or achieving

an aspired to, social status was named as a reason to consider return, but was also a factor enabling it – as financial resources are needed to rebuild one's life. At the same time, financial vulnerability in the two host countries motivated some to consider returning so as to guarantee their livelihood – even if it was considered unsafe to do so. These results confirm previous research on the role of social class in (forced) migration (Van Hear 2004, 2014; Engzell and Ichou 2019; Rutten and Verstappen 2014), and shows that some drivers of migration might be similar across contexts of displacement and so-called voluntary migration. This requires scrutinising the stark distinction between the sociology of migration and the sociology of forced migration (FitzGerald and Arar 2018) which has characterised most of the theoretical migration literature to date. Future research on drivers of mobility should draw from both fields.

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Appendix

Table A.0: In-depth Interview Respondents in Turkey and Lebanon

	Turkey	Lebanon	Total
Age			
18–22 years	3	1	4
23–30 years	10	8	18
31–39 years	8	11	19
Gender			
male	13	12	25
female	8	8	16
Children			
no children	13	9	22
children	8	11	21
Married			
married	10	11	21
divorced	1	2	3
single	10	6	16
Level of education			
no education or primary school	3	3	6
lower secondary (Grade 7 to 9)	4	4	8
higher secondary (Grade 10 to 12)	4	2	6
university or equivalent	10	11	21
Religion			
Sunni	16	16	32
Alawi	0	1	1
Druze	0	1	1
Christian	1	2	3
Atheist/not religious	4	0	4
Ethnic minorities			
Kurdish	2	2	4
Palestinian	0	2	2
Circassian	1	0	1
Turkmen	1	0	1
No minority group	17	16	33
Legal status			
Yes	17	9	26
No	4	11	15
Place of residence in Syria			
Aleppo	6	3	9
Damascus	7	4	11
Daraa	0	0	0
Deir ez-Zor	2	0	2
Hama	0	2	2
Al-Hasakeh	1	0	1
Homs	1	5	6
Idlib	2	1	3
Raqqa	0	1	1
Rural Damascus	0	3	3
Latakia, Quneitra, Suweida, Tartus	1	1	2
Mobility aspirations			
Unconditional/conditional return	11	10	21
Onwards migration	10	16	26
Stay	10	3	13
Location interview			
Tripoli	0	9	9
Beirut and suburbs	0	11	11
Izmir	9	0	9
Istanbul	12	0	12
Total	21	20	41

Table A.1: Main Reported Reason for Aspirations to Return after the War's End

	Frequency	Percentage
Unconditional return aspirations		
Attachment to Syria	196	65.12
Family and friends in Syria	31	10.30
Life is difficult here/I am unhappy here	27	8.97
I/my family own(s) property in Syria	16	5.32
Flight was temporary/I don't want to be a refugee	7	2.33
Job or education in Syria	6	1.99
Syria has changed now	1	0.33
We don't have rights here	2	0.66
I don't see a professional or education opportunity here	3	1.00
There are language difficulties here	2	0.66
There are social problems here/no integration/discrimination	7	2.33
I have psychological problems	2	0.66
Don't know	1	0.33
Conditional return aspirations		
Attachment to Syria	83	42.13
If there is security	39	19.80
Family and friends in Syria	14	7.11
If there is no military service	13	6.60
If the regime changes	11	5.58
Life is difficult here/I am unhappy	11	5.58
If the economic situation improves	7	3.55
If I can access my property	6	3.05
Don't know	6	3.05
I don't see a future here	4	2.03
Other	3	1.52

Table A.2: Who Aspires to Return (Descriptive Statistics)

	Current return aspirations		Unconditional return aspirations after the war		Conditional return aspirations after the war	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Background characteristics						
Age	28.01	5.84	27.52	5.85	28.20	6.08
Gender (1 = female)	0.47	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.62	0.49
Number of household members	4.96	2.53	5.21	2.48	5.47	2.68
Children (1 = yes)	0.58	0.49	0.63	0.48	0.59	0.49
Married (1 = yes)	0.61	0.49	0.68	0.47	0.69	0.46
Level of education	2.16	1.13	1.97	1.05	2.11	1.09
Income per household member	161.50	173.66	129.84	137.38	132.33	140.40
Current conditions						
Legal status (1 = yes)	0.45	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.62	0.49
Passport (1 = yes)	0.37	0.48	0.28	0.45	0.38	0.49
Assistance (1 = yes)	0.30	0.46	0.34	0.47	0.31	0.46
Health-related satisfaction	6.52	3.00	6.85	2.92	6.90	3.02
Life satisfaction	4.38	2.67	4.67	2.76	4.82	2.68
Close family members outside Syria (1 = yes)	0.72	0.45	0.76	0.43	0.85	0.35
Location (1 = Turkey)	0.37	0.48	0.37	0.48	0.64	0.48
Number of years since departing Syria	2.99	1.05	2.95	1.00	2.91	0.97
Last place of residence in Syria						
Aleppo	0.22	0.42	0.32	0.47	0.32	0.47
Damascus	0.43	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.24	0.43
Daraa	0.27	0.47	0.36	0.50	0.09	0.30
Deir ez-Zor	0.28	0.46	0.48	0.51	0.20	0.40
Hama	0.36	0.49	0.43	0.50	0.07	0.26
Al-Hasakeh	0.44	0.50	0.33	0.48	0.28	0.45
Homs	0.34	0.48	0.55	0.50	0.16	0.37
Idlib	0.40	0.50	0.49	0.50	0.21	0.41
Raqqa	0.30	0.47	0.52	0.51	0.17	0.39
Rural Damascus	0.43	0.51	0.43	0.51	0.21	0.43
Latakia, Quneitra, Suweida,Tartus	0.39	0.50	0.35	0.49	0.29	0.47

Note: Answer categories N/A and Don't know were excluded from the variance tests.