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REFUGEES' ONWARD MIGRATION DECISION MAKING IN LEBANON, JORDAN AND IRAQ

POLICY BRIEF

Authored by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Aydan Greatrick and Estella Carpi, with Amal Shaiah Istanbouli

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Refugees from Syria and their families face severe restrictions on their ability to build and maintain dignified and meaningful lives, leading many to believe they have no future in host countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. High aspirations for onward migration reflect refugees' frustrations with the situations they are in, and the fear and insecurity they face due to discrimination, social exclusion, and precariousness. However, despite many refugees' aspirations to leave, very few have the capacity or capabilities to undertake onward migration, and they face multiple barriers to their mobility that means they become 'stuck' in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Acknowledging that the majority of refugees remain in neighbouring countries is important for policy to address needs and uphold rights.

Factors influencing refugees' decisions to stay include pathways to rights and protections, access to services and the viability of return. Refugees have to believe that they can build a secure and dignified future for themselves and their families in the host country in order to want to stay. Factors shaping decisions to leave include a lack of access to rights and protection, insecure livelihoods, low markers of social cohesion, and perceptions that European countries offer better long-term reception, rights, and opportunities. However, whilst aspirations for onward migration remain high, onward migration is often impossible for refugees, who must 'make do' with staying in situations of protracted precarity and insecurity.

The relative significance of different factors is difficult to predict, will change over time, and will be determined by refugees' perceptions of their current and future situation. Individual and familial circumstances will likewise change as refugees acquire greater levels of social or economic resources – or find themselves increasingly isolated or affected by precarious situations and poverty. In most instances, onward migration remains impossible, despite high aspirations (wishes, ideas and hopes) to leave.



Front cover photo:
The footprints of Ain Dara Temple in North Syria.
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Summary of factors that influence onward migration decisions:

Decisions to stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and supportive social ties in host countries. • Increased access to high-quality education in host countries. • Perceptions that qualifications will lead to employment and a secure legal status. • Availability of safe educational opportunities. • Employment opportunities that are dignified, legal and which lead to rights. • Availability of work opportunities for wider social groups, including families. • Protection gaps (i.e., limited pathways to resettlement).
Decisions to leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to rights, protection, educational and employment opportunities. • Insecure livelihoods and the high cost of living. • Barriers to integration that prevent long-term planning. • The presence of family members and transnational ties in other countries. • Perceptions of Europe as offering better long-term reception to refugees. • Exclusion from education provision. • Lack of access to long-term employment and secure livelihoods. • Perceptions that European job opportunities lead to legal status and residency.

ASPIRATIONS AND CAPABILITIES

People's decisions to leave are informed by refugees' aspirations and capabilities. Aspirations for onward migration can be wide-ranging, from a wish to an idea to a concrete plan. Onward migration capabilities include economic resources, language skills, and social networks. These, more than aspirations, determine the means of mobility. Aspirations may increase over time, especially when refugees are unable to sustain livelihoods or secure rights and status for years on end. Deteriorating economic situations, including rising costs of living in Lebanon and Jordan, may both increase onward migration aspirations, whilst reducing refugees' capabilities to put in place or act on a concrete plan.

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Factors shaping refugees' capabilities to undertake onward migration include:

- Having the economic means and sufficient resources to facilitate onward migration.
- Access to trusted information about routes and destinations.
- Access to safe and secure onward migration routes.
- Access to social ties and networks, including family members living in European countries.

INFORMATION

Information and social ties play a vital role in shaping refugees' decisions to stay or move onward. They also inform the conditions and capabilities that make such decisions viable. Recognising this, European governments have sought to influence refugees' decisions to stay through migrant information campaigns. However, there is no strong evidence that government-led migration-information campaigns deter onward migration or reduce onward migration aspirations. "Broadcast" information (including media, state-level policy announcements, migrant information campaigns and other 'macro' messaging) is less trusted by refugees, who sooner trust and rely on "narrowcast" information shared between personal networks. European funded migrant information campaigns can also have unintended consequences, leading refugees to mistrust information provided by European states more broadly.

Key policy-relevant findings relating to information and social networks include the following:

- There is no strong evidence that government-led migration-information campaigns deter onward migration or reduce onward migration aspirations.
- Information campaigns that aim to deter onward migration may have unintended consequences, leading refugees to mistrust information provided by European states.
- Trusted social networks play a vital role in shaping refugees' aspirations and decisions.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND PROTECTION

Education, employment, and protection are all relevant factors in shaping refugees' onward migration decisions. Where decent education, secure and dignified employment, and pathways to rights, safety and residency exist, refugees will be more likely to see a future for themselves and their families in host countries. Where obstacles remain to access educational opportunities, secure employment, or safety, aspirations to migrate onward may increase. Protection needs are a significant factor for refugees who experience cumulative discrimination and/or persecution in host countries because of their identity, religion, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality.

The significance of education, employment and protection as factors shaping onward migration decisions is strongly informed by refugees' social backgrounds and experiences. For example, education is a more influential factor for families with children, or for refugees from certain socio-economic backgrounds hoping to pursue higher education in Europe. Likewise, refugee families with younger children will also be likely to face particular protection challenges linked to education, such as bullying or discrimination in schools (see the Social Cohesion Policy Brief). Gendered norms discourage many women and girls from pursuing educational migration to Europe. However, women are more likely than men to seek educational opportunities in other countries in the region where shared-cultural institutions exist. Older boys may be encouraged to seek out employment opportunities in the host country to support family livelihoods in the short-term.

Younger refugees face heightened protection risks linked both to their age and gender, leading to higher aspirations to migrate onward. Younger men consider onward migration because of the increased harassment, violence, detention and refoulement they face by officials. Girl survivors of GBV also consider onward migration because of age- and gender-specific protection issues.

Likewise, younger refugees assess their employment options in line with future aspirations. Older refugees may consider employment opportunities against their existing skills, qualifications, and experiences, and make decisions to stay or leave based on an assessment of their suitability to different labour markets.

Key examples of how social background influences migration decisions:

Decisions to leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity-based discrimination and persecution. • Family separation. • Bullying of school-aged children. • Presence of strong social ties with family living in Europe.
Decisions to stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of strong social ties and kinship networks in host countries, which act as support networks and adaptive mechanisms. • Shared religious or cultural identities, including with host communities, which foster solidarity and informal support networks.

FAMILY SEPARATION

Education, employment, and protection are all relevant factors in shaping refugees' onward migration decisions. Where decent education, secure and dignified employment, and pathways to rights, safety and residency exist, refugees will be more likely to see a future for themselves and their families in host countries. Where obstacles remain to access educational opportunities, secure employment, or safety, aspirations to migrate onward may increase. Protection needs are a significant factor for refugees who experience cumulative discrimination and/or persecution in host countries because of their identity, religion, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality.

It is recommended that:

- European governments should uphold family reunification as way simple and effective way of guaranteeing protection to refugees.
- Family reunification should be more sensitive to the different meanings that refugees might give to family, so that additional pathways to protection and onward migration are available to those at risk.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Aspirations for onward migration remain high despite the significant contributions of foreign assistance directed at improving conditions for refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Despite the widespread belief that effective foreign assistance can contain refugees' movements, there is no sound evidence that it can reduce refugees' migration to third countries in the short term.

Foreign assistance that promotes equitable access to protection, with a coordinated focus on educational provision and secure, legal, and sustainable livelihoods, emerges in the literature as being important to support refugees in building more secure lives in host countries. By contrast, foreign assistance that unintentionally excludes different groups of refugees may contribute to onward migration aspirations, particularly if it prioritises certain nationalities over others.

Effective foreign assistance plays a vital role in supporting livelihoods and addressing protection gaps in host countries, irrespective of whether it does or does not influence people's onward migration decisions. Foreign assistance should seek to uphold international legal and humanitarian principles to ensure that people who continue to face discrimination and persecution in host countries – many of whom lack the capabilities to undertake onward migration directly – can access and secure protection through resettlement, family reunification and humanitarian corridors.

The indirect influence of foreign assistance on refugees' decisions to stay:

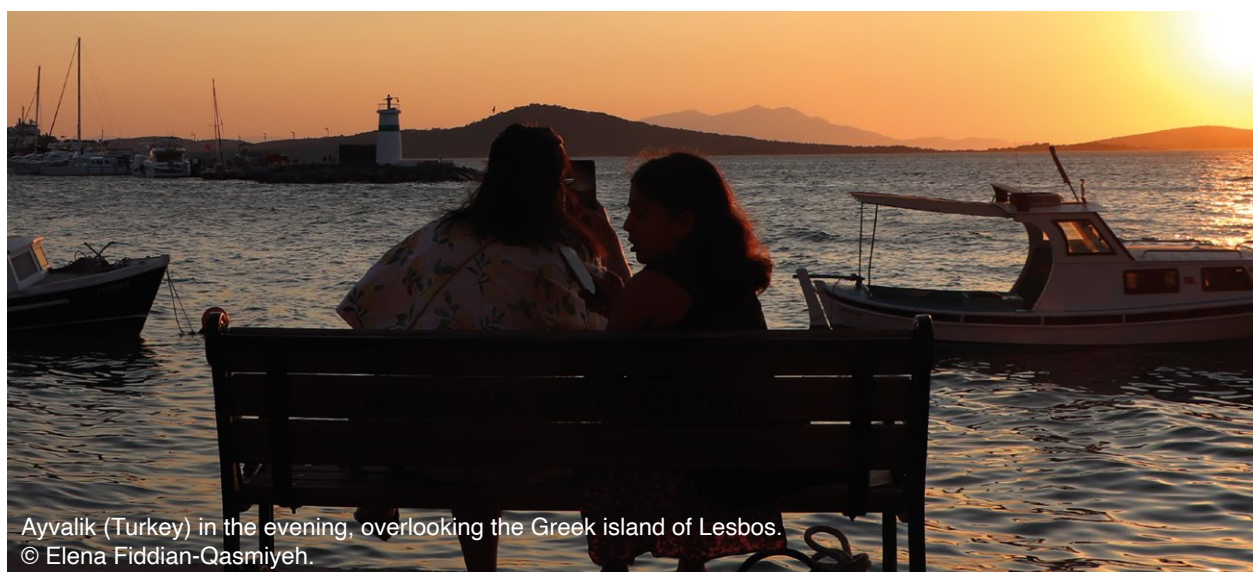
- Foreign assistance that aims to enhance 'social cohesion' and/or reduce or mitigate 'social tensions' between different groups of refugees and host communities may play a role in improving the nature of social relations, increasing refugees' aspirations to stay.
- Creating inclusive and sustainable social protection systems will encourage and optimise the integration, security, and wellbeing of displaced populations in host countries.
- Policies and programmes that directly address the absence of sustainable livelihood strategies, including cash-based assistance, may reduce onward migration aspirations by promoting refugees' economic security in host countries.

The indirect influence of foreign assistance on refugees' decisions to leave:

- Refugees who are excluded from foreign assistance (including because of their nationality) may have stronger aspirations to pursue onward migration.
- A nationality-based focus on Syrians in programmes and policies, rather than on 'refugees from Syria' (including Palestinians, Iraqis, and Kurds from Syria) leads to hierarchies and tensions between members of different refugee communities that can be avoided through area-based approaches which may also foster more positive forms of social interactions and social relations.

CHANGES OVER TIME

Aspirations to migrate onward may increase over time, especially when refugees are unable to sustain livelihoods or secure rights and status for years on end. For example, the deteriorating economic and political situation in Lebanon may be contributing to increasing aspirations to migrate onward. By contrast, in Jordan, increased pathways to residency and work permits following the introduction of the Jordan Compact may have contributed to a better sense of future for some refugees. However, whilst this may have increased some refugees' aspirations to stay in Jordan, many do not 'benefit' from such interventions because of nationality-based exclusions (as is the case of Iraqi refugees from Syria), or because the opportunities available are inadequate and difficult to access. Given this, interventions may both increase aspirations to stay for some refugees, whilst increasing onward migration aspirations for those who are unintentionally excluded from different forms of foreign assistance.



Ayvalik (Turkey) in the evening, overlooking the Greek island of Lesbos.
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ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This Policy Brief is part of a series that synthesises findings from a longer report on Development Approaches to Forced Displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, based on a state-of-the-art desk-based literature review of over 260 sources published between 2016-2021.

The **Full Report** is available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdfullreport

A **Summary Report** is available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdsummary

Other Policy Briefs related to this study are also available:

- **Policy Brief** on Development Approaches to Forced Displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdbriefing
- **Policy Brief** on Refugees' Participation in Local Communities and Social Cohesion in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Available here: www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/dafdsbriefing



A Syrian man from the city of Daraa gently holds his wife's ring in Jordan. Displaced and separated from his family by the conflict in Syria, he was informed by phone that his wife had died in childbirth. He was unable to bury his wife, and is unable to return to Syria to meet his child. "The ring is a part of me."

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