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Repatriation as a Durable Solution for Syrian Refugees in Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities Post-Syria's Political Transition

ABSTRACT:
Following Syria's political transition in December 2024, repatriation or return, as a durable solution for Syrian refugees in Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where most of the Syrian refugees live, has become a main point of discussion for the refugees and the refugee-related organizations. This research explores and focuses on the challenges and opportunities concerning the return of Syrian refugees from Iraq in a voluntary, safe, and dignified manner, considering the ongoing political instability, security concerns, and economic challenges in Syria. To obtain views of both Syrian refugees and the relevant organizations that work to assist and support the Syrian refugees in Iraq, the research used a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative surveys with Syrian refugees living in camps and urban areas in the Erbil governorate, where a large number of Syrian refugees live, as well as qualitative interviews with managers of international and national organizations working to assist and protect refugees in Iraq. The findings disclosed that only a limited percentage of refugees intend or are capable of going back to Syria, while the vast majority prefer resettling in another country, indicating security concerns, economic instability, and lack of basic services as primary concerns for returning to Syria. Therefore, while voluntary return or repatriation of Syrian refugees might be a preferred long-term solution, it is currently not feasible due to unresolved political, security, and economic challenges in Syria.

العودة كحل دائم للاجئين السوريين في العراق: التحديات والفرص في مرحلة ما بعد التحول السياسي في سوريا

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ملخص البحث:

بعد التحول السياسي في سوريا في ديسمبر/كانون الأول 2024، أصبحت العودة، كحلٍ دائم للاجئين السوريين في العراق، وخاصةً في إقليم كردستان العراق، حيث يعيش اللاجئين السوريين، محور نقاش رئيسي بين اللاجئين والمنظمات المعنية بهم. يستكشف هذا البحث ويركز على التحديات والفرص المتعلقة بعودة اللاجئين السوريين طوعًا وبطريقة آمنة وكريمة، مع الأخذ في الاعتبار استمرار عدم الاستقرار السياسي والمخاوف الأمنية والتحديات الاقتصادية في سوريا. وللحصول على آراء كلٍ من اللاجئين السوريين والمنظمات المعنية، اعتمد البحث على منهجية متعددة، تجمع بين المسوحات الكمية مع اللاجئين السوريين المقيمين في المخيمات والمناطق الحضرية في محافظة أربيل، حيث يعيش عدد كبير منهم، بالإضافة إلى مقابلات نوعية مع مديري المنظمات الدولية والوطنية العاملة على مساعدة وحماية اللاجئين في العراق. كشفت النتائج أن نسبة محدودة فقط من اللاجئين يعتزمون العودة إلى سوريا، بينما تُفضل الغالبية العظمى إعادة التوطين في بلد آخر، مما يُشير إلى أن المخاوف الأمنية، وعدم الاستقرار الاقتصادي، ونقص الخدمات الأساسية هي الأسباب الرئيسية للعودة إلى سوريا. لذلك، في حين أن العودة الطوعية أو إعادة اللاجئين السوريين إلى وطنهم قد تكون الحل الأمثل على المدى الطويل، إلا أنها غير ممكنة حاليًا بسبب التحديات السياسية والأمنية والاقتصادية التي لم تُحل بعد في سوريا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سوريا، اللاجئون، الحلول المستدامة، العودة، الإعادة الطوعية.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2011, as the wind of change swept across the Arab world, it also sparked a wave of hope among many Syrians, who watched others such as Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans rise against long-standing regimes that had ruled the countries for decades. The Syrians, after decades, also dared to dream of a brighter future: a future of liberation, democracy, peace, justice, and prosperity. Hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered in several Syrian cities and towns such as Daraa, Homs, Hama, and also the capital Damascus, their voices rising in unison, demanding freedom, dignity, and a better life, shouting the slogans of 'Long live the people, down with the regime', and 'The people want to bring down the regime'. However, the peaceful demonstrations at the beginning of the protests ended up in a long-term nightmare for the people and the country as a whole; longstanding atrocities almost tore the entire country apart. The wave of unrest quickly moved beyond these cities, reaching other towns and regions across the country and growing into a widespread conflict by late 2011. The government's harsh and violent response to demonstrators, particularly in areas like Daraa, played a key role in turning the peaceful protest into an armed uprising and, in turn, clashes and killings.

The escalation ultimately plunged the country into a devastating civil war with over 600,00 people killed (Baker, 2024), over 14 million Syrians fleeing their country seeking refuge mainly in the

neighboring countries and Europe, and around 7.2 million Syrians internally displaced within the country (UNHCR, 2025). Out of the number of Syrian refugees worldwide, (Data UNHCR, 2025a) reported that 4,638,563 Syrian refugees have been registered with the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Iraq and the neighboring countries including 304,387 in Iraq, 2,829,266 in Turkey, 755,426 in Lebanon, 564,079 in Jordan, 142,122 in Egypt and 43,283 in North African countries.

Iraq, particularly the Kurdistan region, became a key destination for many Syrian refugees who started arriving in the country and seeking asylum and sanctuary mainly in 2012 and 2013 (Ali, 2020). The vast majority of Syrian refugees who came to the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) were of Kurdish origin due to its geographical proximity and the presence of Kurdish communities, offering cultural and familial ties that eased the transition and, in turn, integration and inclusion. Initially, the numbers remained relatively small, but as the fighting and clashes intensified throughout 2012, the refugee influx surged dramatically. By mid-2012, thousands of Syrians were crossing the border into KRI each month, with many seeking shelter in camps such as Domiz in Dohuk Governorate, which soon became one of the largest refugee camps in Iraq. By the end of 2012, the number of Syrian refugees in KRI reached tens of thousands, marking the beginning of a prolonged crisis that would persist for years as the war in Syria raged on.

In response, the government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), in coordination with the UN agencies, mainly UNHCR the Refugee Agency, and other international and national organizations took significant steps to accommodate the refugees despite the fact that KRI was facing its own economic, infrastructural, political, and security challenges, especially during the so called Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) war, which started in 2014, shortly after the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis. As the displacement of Syrian refugees continued, efforts by the government and humanitarian aid organizations struggled to keep pace with the growing needs of the refugee population, particularly those living in camps (Yassen, 2019). Beyond immediate humanitarian assistance and logistical challenges, the refugee crisis also carried significant political weight and complications, as out of 327,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Iraq (around 90%) reside in cities, towns, villages, and camps within the KRI (Data UNHCR, 2025b). The presence of Syrian refugees in KRI, particularly because the vast majority are of Kurdish origin, added political complexity to the already delicate relationship between the Iraqi federal government and the KRG. While the KRG took the lead in providing refuge, tensions grew over the political dimension of the refugee caseload, resource allocation, governance, and long-term responsibilities. Therefore, as the conflict in Syria continued to evolve, the KRG found itself navigating the challenges of hosting a large refugee population on the one hand while managing its own political, economic, and security challenges on the other.

The relationship between Syria's political transition and refugees' willingness to return is closely interconnected, and it works through several layers, including the possibilities that the political change improves safety, justice, institutional reliability, and economic stability, the higher the likelihood that refugees will consider returning. Conversely, political uncertainty, instability, or lack of accountability discourages return (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2025). This research, therefore, examines whether a safe, dignified, and sustainable return or repatriation of Syrian refugees in Iraq is a feasible and preferred solution following Syria's political transition. It, therefore, evaluates the return option considering its practicality, feasibility, and sustainability as part of the three durable solutions for refugees: local integration or inclusion, resettlement, and voluntary repatriation (UNHCR, 2003; Asylum Insight, 2023). The three durable solutions for refugees offer

different paths to long-term hope, stability, and sustainability. Local integration, including inclusion and eventually naturalization, allows refugees to settle permanently in the host country, which could be challenging in the context of Iraq, mainly due to political and legal barriers, let alone resource limitations that make full integration difficult. Resettlement to a third country usually provides safety for the most vulnerable refugees whose lives, security, or health are at risk in the country of asylum. However, such opportunities remain scarce due to the mass influx of refugees in Europe and other Western countries that usually provide resettlement opportunities to refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere in the world. Repatriation is another durable solution and perhaps the most practical long-term solution, yet when the safety and dignity of returnees are guaranteed during and after return. Although the UN Refugee Agency does not prefer one solution over another, it all depends on the possibility and context with always considering the safety and dignity of refugee returnees (UNHCR, 2021).

With a significant portion of the refugees concentrated in Erbil, the capital of KRI, as well as its surrounding towns, villages, and four refugee camps, namely Qushtapa, Kawergosk, Darashakran, and Basrima (Data UNHCR, 2025b), this study focuses on Syrian refugees residing in camps and urban areas in Erbil governorate. In addition to analyzing the primary source of data from interviews and questionnaires, the research used other sources of secondary data such as journal articles, reports, and assessments from various reliable sources as it examines the current viewpoints and intentions of Syrian refugees and perspectives and positions of the organizations, such as UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, that support, assist, and protect the Syrian refugee population in Iraq. While much research has examined the displacement of Syrian refugees, there is a lack of studies focusing on the vulnerabilities, opportunities, and challenges of their repatriation from Iraq in the context of political change in Syria. The research, therefore, examines the challenges and opportunities confronting refugees regarding their return to Syria following the end of the previous regime in December 2024 and the subsequent political transition, including the establishment of the new government in Damascus.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Refugee Definition and Rights

Refugees, individuals who flee their countries due to fear of persecution, are not a new phenomenon in human history. However, their prominence grew mainly with the creation of the nation-state. Unlike feudal systems, which lacked centralized sovereignty, the nation-state is characterized by a legitimate government, control over its borders, and defined people sharing a common language and culture; therefore, when people are forced to flee one state, they must seek asylum in another. Salomon (1991, p. 33), citing Gordenker, classifies the causes of refuge in the modern era into four main categories: international wars, wars and unrest within one country's boundary, persecution and repression, and increased international tension.

When the League of Nations dissolved in 1946, after World War II, it left behind a mixed legacy of successes and shortcomings. These experiences helped shape the formation of the United Nations (UN), a more structured, influential, and comprehensive international governing body. In 1951, the UNHCR took over the responsibilities of the International Refugee Organization (Easton-Calabria, 2022, p. 59). In tandem, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, laid the foundation for the protection and dignity of individuals, including refugees. One of the UDHR's most relevant provisions is Article 14, which states that 'Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution'. This principle underscores the importance of providing refuge to those in need and forms the basis for international refugee

protection (Amnesty International, 2024). Additionally, refugees have been explicitly defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the expansion in its 1967 Protocol, removing the time (pre-1951) and geographic (European focus) restrictions of the 1951 Convention. Consequently, making refugee protection universal defines a refugee as a person who is outside their home country or place of habitual residence because they fear being persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political beliefs (UNHCR, n.d.). Therefore, refugees are people who feel unsafe staying home and are obliged to seek asylum for safety and protection in another country. Further, under international law, refugees have certain rights, including the right to stay in the country where they seek asylum and the assurance that they will not be sent back or forced to go back to a place where their life or freedom could be at risk. This protection is meant to give refugees a chance to rebuild their lives safely in the country of asylum (OHCHR, 2025).

Furthermore, while the UDHR does not directly address the issue of forcible return, it emphasizes the right to asylum. It also supports the principle of non-refoulement, a cornerstone of refugee law that prohibits sending people back to a country where their life or freedom is at risk. This principle is, however, explicitly enshrined in Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which states that 'no refugee should be expelled or returned to a place, including their own country, where they face threats or persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion'. This protection is vital to ensure that refugees are not forced to return to danger and are protected under international law to safeguard their dignity and safety. Nonetheless, the right to seek asylum or to continue to be recognized as a refugee could end for some specific reasons and in certain circumstances, such as when persecution, threat, or danger has diminished or at least significantly improved. This is specifically outlined in Article 1C(5) of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. "This Convention shall cease to apply to any person falling under the terms of section A if: He can no longer, because the circumstances in connection with which he has been recognized as a refugee have ceased to exist, continue to refuse to avail himself of the protection of the country of his nationality" (UNHCR, n.d.), indicating that a person could no longer be considered as a refugee if they no longer face danger in their home country, particularly related to the reasons why they were given refugee status in the beginning. Nevertheless, the essence of return or repatriation of refugees should always be voluntary, based on their will and informed decision; "refugees cannot be returned against their will to a home country that in their subjective assessment has not appreciably changed for the better" (Barnett, 2001). Together with Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the provisions ensure that refugees can live in safety and dignity in the country of asylum, offering them a chance to rebuild their lives without fear of being sent back to danger, and the return or repatriation of refugees should only be carried out when their safety and dignity are ensured.

2.2 Durable Solutions for Refugees

UNHCR defines durable solutions as lasting ways to help refugees rebuild their lives with safety, dignity, and a sense of belonging (UNHCR, 2003). These solutions aim to end displacement and provide refugees with opportunities not only to survive, but to live in a way that allows them to thrive. Together, these durable solutions reflect a commitment to restoring hope and stability for refugees. Whether through returning home, integrating locally, or resettling in a new country, the goal is to ensure that refugees can live with dignity, safety, and a sense of belonging, free from the fear of persecution. UNHCR identified three main pathways to achieving durable solutions:

1) Voluntary Repatriation: It is perhaps the most practical solution, although not always the most preferred one, as previously mentioned. Voluntary epatriation or return takes place when refugees wish to return to their home country, as the reasons that forced them to flee have diminished or at least the conditions have considerably improved. The durable solution allows refugees to

reconnect with their original roots in their home country and rebuild their lives in familiar surroundings. However, for repatriation to be voluntary, it should be free from any form of direct or indirect coercion and be supported by guarantees of safety and dignity. That is freedom from persecution and access to reintegration and assistance in the home country. It is worth noting that 'return' and 'repatriation', which both are about the return of refugees, are different in scope and context. Return refers to the act when refugees going back to their country after fleeing due to persecution. The decision to return could be driven by personal choice, improved conditions in the home country, or, in some cases, external pressures from the country of asylum or other forces. This kind of return, therefore, could be voluntary or involuntary, and it doesn't always involve organized support or guarantee. Whears repatriation, which should always be voluntary, based on safety and dignity, is a more structured process, usually organized and supported by international organizations such as the UNHCR and the relevant governments - the host and the return countries. Repatriation, thus, focuses on a safe, dignified, and sustainable return to help refugees return and reintegrate into their society. While both concepts and options involve returning home, repatriation carries deeper refugee returnee rights; it is linked to the idea of reintegration of people in their country of origin in a manner that considers and honors their identity and human rights based on safety and dignity (UNHCR, 2003; UNHCR, 2011).

2) Local Integration: It is the other durable solution when refugees find a temporary or long-term residence and protection in the country where they initially sought asylum. Local integration, however, is not only about providing temporary shelter; it eventually includes the empowerment of refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity, safety, and purpose in the country of asylum. For local integration or inclusion to succeed, the country of asylum (the host country) must actively support refugees in becoming part of the community. This means breaking down obstacles, strengthening inclusion, and ensuring refugees are not left marginalized or trapped in long-term dependency. This process involves providing the refugees with legal rights, such as access to work, education, and healthcare, and, over time, offering a pathway to citizenship in many cases. (UNHCR, 2003; UNHCR, 2011). Local integration is often a long-term solution because when host countries open their doors to refugees and provide proper support, everyone benefits - refugees find safety and belonging, while host communities gain new skills and shared prosperity, turning displacement into an opportunity for socio-economic growth and unity. "Conversely, the denial of sanctuary dehumanizes refugees and transforms an enriching resource into a threat to prosperity" (López-Calvo & Agosin, 2022).
3) Resettlement to a Third Country: For refugees who cannot return home or integrate locally, resettlement is the possibility that offers a lifeline. This involves relocating refugees to a third country, often one with greater resources, where they can start a new life where they are safe and protected. It is worth noting that 'Resettlement' is not a right but a possibility typically reserved for the most vulnerable refugees, such as those whose lives, health, and well-being are at risk due to threat, violence, exploitation, or abuse in the host country. Through a careful selection process led by the UNHCR and resettlement countries, refugees are granted permanent residence, protection, and opportunities to rebuild their lives in a third country (UNHCR, 2003; UNHCR, 2011).

2.3 Syrian Refugee Population in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Iraq hosts more than 327,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, with approximately 90% residing in the KRI. Around 70% live in urban areas, and the remaining 30% are settled in nine refugee camps within the KRI. Notably, 41% of the refugee population consists of children and adolescents under the age of 18. The four Iraqi governorates that host the vast number of Syrian refugees and asylum

seekers who are registered with the UNHCR include Erbil, 48.5% (120,881 people); Duhok, 16.4% (40,906 people); Baghdad, 13.7% (34,206 people); and Sulaymaniyah, 12.9% (32,219 people).

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Syrian Refugees per Governorate – Iraq

Location name	Source	Data date	Percentage	Population
Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	48.5%	**120,881**
Dahuk	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	16.4%	**40,906**
Baghdad	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	13.7%	**34,206**
Sulaymaniyah	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	12.9%	**32,219**
Kerbala	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.6%	**4,006**
Najaf	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.5%	**3,707**
Kirkuk	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.1%	**2,677**
Ninewa	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.0%	**2,473**
Basrah	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.0%	**2,415**
Anbar	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.9%	**2,292**
Thi-Qar	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.5%	**1,137**
Diyala	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.4%	**954**
Salah al-Din	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.3%	**760**
Babil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.1%	**302**
Missan	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.1%	**279**
Qadissiya	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.0%	**76**
Wassit	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.0%	**72**
Muthanna	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	0.0%	**69**

(Adapted from Data UNHCR, 2025b)

Further, 30% of the Syrian refugees who live in camps in the KRI include those living in the four Syrian refugee camps in Erbil: Qushtapa Camp, 9.4% of the camp population (8,558 refugees); Kawergosk Camp, 8.9% (8,099 refugees); Darashakran Camp, 12.9% (11,771 refugees); and Basirma Camp, 2.0% (1,807 refugees). The four camps that are administered by the governorate of Duhok include Domiz 1 Camp, 31.5% (28,602 refugees); Domiz 2 Camp, 11.1% (10,109 refugees); Gawilan Camp, 12.7% (11,553 refugees); and Akre Settlement, 1.0% (902 refugees). Finally, the only Syrian refugee camp in Sulaimaniyah is Arbat Camp, where 10.5% of the camp population (9,526 refugees) live (Data UNHCR, 2025b).

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Syrian Refugees per Camp – Kurdistan Region-Iraq

Location name	Source	Data date	Percentage	Population
Domiz 1 Camp – Duhok	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	31.5%	**28,602**

Location name	Source	Data date	Percentage	Population
Darashakran Camp - Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	12.9%	**11,771**
Gawilan Camp – Duhok	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	12.7%	**11,553**
Domiz 2 Camp – Duhok	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	11.1%	**10,109**
Arbat Camp – Sulaimaniya	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	10.5%	**9,526**
Qushtapa Camp - Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	9.4%	**8,558**
Kawergosk Camp - Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	8.9%	**8,099**
Basirma Camp - Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	2.0%	**1,807**
Akre Settlement – Erbil	*UNHCR*	28 Feb 2025	1.0%	**902**

(Adopted from Data UNHCR, 2025b)

Prior to this research, several assessments, studies, and studies were conducted by academics, UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, international and national non-governmental organizations, and other relevant governmental institutions. However, the majority of the studies were conducted before the fall of the former Syrian regime. UNHCR, among others, conducted several surveys about Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries, including Iraq, to find out the perceptions and intentions of Syrian refugees about the durable solutions. In the last regional survey in June 2024, when Assad was still in power, the UNHCR survey indicated that less than 2% of the refugees intended to return to Syria in the following 12 months, while 94% did not have any intention or plan to return, and the rest, over 4%, were not able to decide. However, answering the question of hoping to return to Syria within five years, 50.1% answered Yes, 36.8% answered No, and 13.1% were not in a position to decide. Finally, answering the question of having hope to return to Syria one day in the future, 55% had no hope to return at any point in the future, while 30.2% hoped to return one day in the future, and the other 14.8% remained undecided (Data UNHCR, 2024).

3. Methodology

Considering the context and the main research question, 'Is a safe and dignified voluntary return or repatriation of Syrian refugees feasible following Syria's political transition?', both primary and secondary sources of data collection have been employed. The secondary research involved the analysis of existing data, with a particular focus on qualitative data collected and analyzed by other sources, as well as statistical and quantitative reports, making it a valuable tool for supporting the research. By leveraging data that has already been compiled, a meaningful insight into the topic was gained through sufficient time and effort. "Secondary qualitative data analysis can be a powerful method by which to gain insights that primary data analysis cannot offer" (Cheong et al., 2023). The sources, among others, included academic materials such as peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings that provide theoretical insights, as well as assessments and reports provided by international and national non-governmental organizations, government, research organizations, and reliable media reports.

On the other hand, the primary data source was used to collect original, firsthand, and up-to-date records of data and information, providing direct access to the research subject without prior interpretation or analysis by others. A mixed methods approach, combining quantitative questionnaires (for the refugee respondents) and qualitative semi-structured interviews (for the

organizations' managers), was employed to capture both measurable trends and deeper insights into intentions and perceptions. By using mixed methods, the research was not only able to assess the effectiveness but also explore the details of the questions, including why and how. The mix of qualitative and quantitative methods further allowed for a more integrated, detailed, and rich analysis, enhancing the interpretation of meaning and integration of findings. The quantitative data were contextualized with qualitative narratives, leading to a more vigorous and well-rounded analysis, discussion, and, in turn, findings. This multifaceted approach further ensured that both numerical trends and personal experiences and descriptions were considered and included, providing a balanced and insightful analysis of the research topic. By utilizing the strengths of both methods, the researcher could cross-check data, validate findings, and develop a deeper understanding of the research questions. As noted by Ahmed et al. (2024) about the mixed-method approach, "This approach allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives, enabling the collection of rich, contextual data alongside statistical analysis."

Furthermore, a multistage sampling approach was deployed to collect data and conduct the research, considering both non-probability (non-random) and probability (random) sampling, accordingly. The methods were chosen to achieve the research objectives best, while taking into account the accessibility, feasibility, and cost of conducting the study. With regard to selecting the refugee camp and locations, and considering the efficiency of sampling, cluster approach was used to select the two refugee camps of Qushtapha and Darashakran, out of the four Syrian refugee camps in Erbil, as the vast number of refugees (around 70%) reside in these two camps and they include Syrian refugees from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Shinija (2023) explains that cluster sampling is a method of probability sampling that is often used to study large populations, particularly those that are widely geographically dispersed. In cluster sampling, the researcher divided the population into smaller groups known as clusters. Therefore, in coordination with the camp management and the focal point staff of the UNHCR, 50 questionnaires, using a Google Form link, were shared with heads of households. First, the ethnoreligious and gender quotas were proportionally considered, i.e., 20 Kurds, 10 Arab Sunnis, 10 Arab Shiite/Alawite, 5 Christians, and 5 Druze, as well as considering a balance of males and females headed households. Later, respondents were randomly selected from the groups accordingly. The same approach was used for sharing 50 questionnaires with the Syrian refugees living in the urban areas in Erbil governorate, which was coordinated with the UNHCR and the representatives of the relevant refugee communities. Thus, while the cluster sampling approach was first considered to select the groups, stratified sampling, including quota, was chosen to randomly select individuals within the groups. McLeod (2023) and Murphy (2024) explain that Stratified Random Sampling is about dividing a population into subpopulations and then applying random sampling methods to each subpopulation to form a test group. It is worth noting that the questions were first developed in English and later translated into Arabic by the researcher and reviewed by a PhD university teacher with a specialty in the Arabic language. The English and Arabic questionnaires are available as Word documents and can also be accessed online. The analysis of the descriptive responses and thematic categorization was conducted and translated by the bilingual researcher.

Additionally, purposive non-probability sampling was used, as per the requirements of the study, to select and interview managers of the non-governmental organizations that conduct projects and activities to assist and protect the Syrian refugees in Iraq and Syria. The purposive approach was chosen to gather rich, in-depth qualitative data from the specific, informative, and relevant respondents that best suited to answer the research question and could provide meaningful insights into the challenges, coping mechanisms, and strategic responses (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Qualitative (Semi-Structured) interviews were conducted in English with 11 English-speaking managers from international and national organizations, including UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, and other humanitarian non-governmental organizations that have contributed to assisting and protecting Syrian refugees in Iraq and Syria in the past decade. The managers were purposively selected for their roles in managing and leading the relevant projects and activities with regard to assisting and protecting the Syrian refugees in Iraq in the past 5-10 years, providing rich, up-to-date, and contextual qualitative data. The managers who were interviewed were working in the organizations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP); Bruderhaus Diakonie; Kurdistan Organization for Human Rights Watch (KOHRW); Peace Building & Conflict Resolution; Mari Research and Development, Accepting Others Organization (AOO); and the Swedish Humanitarian Organization (Former).

It is pertinent to note that of the 100 questionnaires distributed to the Syrian refugees as part of quantitative data collection, 73 were completed and returned, illustrating a high response rate of 73%. This strong level of participation increases the credibility of the research and its findings, and suggests the data reflect the views of a substantial majority of the initially contacted group of Syrian refugees, which could be considered a representative fraction. “High response rates are needed in population-based studies, as nonresponse reduces effective sample size and bias affects accuracy and decreases the generalizability of the study findings” (Atchison et al., 2025). However, despite the high response rate, the potential for sample bias must be acknowledged. The sampling method and the selected samples may not be statistically representative of the entire target population, for instance, considering that only two camps were selected out of the four. Moreover, refugees who responded, when randomly selected afterwards, may differ systematically from those who did not; for example, they might be more technologically comfortable, have stronger opinions, or have had more noticeable or important experiences - whether positive or negative - that motivated them to participate. The voluntary participation could limit the ability to generalize the findings beyond the specific target group that responded, as the perspectives of less engaged, less accessible, or more marginalized individuals may be underrepresented in the data. Under-coverage is another concern with regard to bias. Considering the number of participants with the number of refugees, and the participation of the groups, there is a possibility that individuals or groups in the population are not adequately represented in the sample and, therefore, absent from collected data, which, in turn, leads to poor conclusions. (Kallio, 2022).

As for the bias possibility in the qualitative data collection, while the sample size of 11 qualitative interviews might be appropriate for the size of a journal article and achieving a good and satisfying level of data saturation and analysis, the potential for sample bias should be acknowledged. The respondents were purposively selected from specific organizations by the researcher based on their programs and activities, as well as their history in assisting and protecting the Syrian refugees, and their readiness and voluntary participation to be interviewed. This limited number and sampling method inherently limit in-depth understanding, let alone statistical generalizability. Furthermore, the sample may be influenced by self-selection bias, as those who volunteered for the interviews likely had stronger motivations and intentions or more detailed knowledge and wider experiences

to share, potentially underrepresenting the views of others, including other managers from other organizations or those managers who have been less engaged in the subject matter yet might have knowledge and experience from other angles and perspectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

Considering the Validity of the research, which is about how well a research tool or method measures what it is intended to measure and how accurately it measures the theoretical construct it is supposed to measure, and Reliability, which is related to the consistency or stability of the measurement over time or across different observers, the research used a mixed method as single-method approaches are limited in their ability to address these issues comprehensively on their own. Employing a mixed-method approach allowed for triangulation and the complementary use of multiple methods. Measurement triangulation was achieved by using various indicators for the same concept and research questions, such as combining closed and open-ended surveys and semi-structured qualitative interview questions, and quantitative survey results with the interview findings. When different measures produced converging results, confidence in both validity and reliability is further enhanced. Hence, method triangulation further strengthened the study by pairing quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. This combination ensured a more comprehensive and balanced assessment of the research constructs under study (McLeod, 2024).

With regard to the data analysis for the study, it included a comprehensive approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a holistic understanding of the research question. For the quantitative data collected through the online Google Form Questionnaire. Using a Google link for the survey offers several advantages. First of all, it is widely used in Iraq, and it allows easy access and distribution, as the link can be shared via email, social media, or messaging apps, and participants can complete it on any device. Further, Google Forms provides a user-friendly interface, enabling respondents to submit their answers quickly without needing an account. Data collection is automated, with responses organized in real time in Google Sheets, which simplifies analysis. Additionally, it is cost-effective, free to use, and allows customization of questions with options for required responses and validation. Overall, using a Google link ensures the survey process is convenient, efficient, and manageable for both the researcher and participants. The analysis primarily focused on statistical techniques using the same Google tool and Excel database for statistical analysis. Moreover, descriptive analysis was also used to summarize and describe the features of the data, as well as themes and sub-themes. On the other hand, for the qualitative data analysis, which was gathered through semi-structured interviews with managers of the organizations, the process included organizing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative research data (non-numeric), conceptual information, and feedback to capture themes and patterns, answer research questions, and identify actions to improve the problem in question. The process started with reading and reviewing repeatedly to gain familiarity, then manual open coding (color-coding) of the response transcripts, considering the limited number of interviews, and, later, codes were grouped into categories from which themes and, in turn, sub-themes emerged that represented patterns across participants' experiences. The objective was to interpret and capture the underlying meanings and insights from respondents' answers and perspectives, providing a deeper understanding of the study topic. Further, to ensure the reliability and validity of the qualitative data, while collecting and analysing data, continuous attention was paid to make sure that the focus remains on the subject under discussion, and reflection on the features of the phenomena was made in the way they were expressed by the writers and respondents. Thus, a good level of interpretation was maintained based on understanding the deep meanings (Brayman, 2004, pp. 319-325).

Finally, to abide by ethical standards, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Salahaddin University in Erbil prior to the commencement of the

research. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines to ensure the protection, confidentiality, and informed consent of all participants. Moreover, informed consent was obtained, in writing, from all participants before being interviewed, along with clearly explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, transparency, and the right to withdraw at any time, to both groups of respondents. The same was mentioned in the Arabic language on the Google form, which was shared with the refugee participants. Additionally, to strengthen data protection and ensure confidentiality, the refugees completed the questionnaire forms anonymously - their names and specific personal details were not indicated. Apart from the researcher and the university journal that published the study, no other party or institution has had or will have access to the collected data or transcripts. All data collected for this study, including ethical clearance and approval documents, interview transcripts, and responses from the online quantitative questionnaire, are securely saved and can be made available to the relevant publishing journal upon request. By considering and applying the ethical standards and considerations, the study is believed to have been carried out in compliance with Iraqi academic ethical standards and laws, as well as international academic ethical principles and standards.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a comprehensive overview of the key results from the study, offering a detailed thematic breakdown of the findings in both narrative and numeric formats, along with visual graphs, including frequency distribution tables and graphs of analyzed responses to key research questions to further illustrate and verify the findings. Each theme has been carefully analyzed to highlight the main trends and patterns and to explore insights that emerged during the research process. The results are organized to provide a clear and logical understanding of the core areas of focus, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the data and its implications, and giving appropriate meaning to it. The findings could influence policies, shedding light on how they could help pave the path towards a safe and dignified return or repatriation of Syrian refugees from Iraq. It might also shape future research by guiding practical applications.

4.1 Demographic Impact on the Survey Results

First of all, it is important to provide a disaggregated overview of the demographic composition of the quantitative survey respondents, which includes data across two key dimensions: first, the distribution of participants by age and gender; and second, the breakdown by ethnicity and religious affiliation, which are combined here as ethnoreligious factors. This detailed characterization is essential for understanding the representative nature of the sample and for contextualizing the subsequent findings of the study. Therefore, the findings of the survey likely reflect the perspectives of this specific demographic subgroup and cannot be generalized to a broader population due to this significant lack of demographic representation. Table 3 illustrates the demographic profile of the specific group of people who took part in a survey.

Table 3. Disaggregated Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic/ Gender Factors	18–35 years	36–49 years	50–64 years	65+ years	Male	Female
Percentage	77%	19%	4%	0%	66%	34%

	Ethnicity		Religion				
Ethnoreligious Factors	Kurds	Arabs	Sunni Muslims	Shiite/Alawite Muslims	Christians	Yazidi	Druze
Percentage	71%	29%	71%	22%	4%	1.50 %	1.50 %

Moreover, the analysis of demographic impacts on the survey results reveals both similarities and differences in decision-making regarding resettlement to a third country, return to Syria, or staying and integrating in Iraq among the 73 refugee respondents.

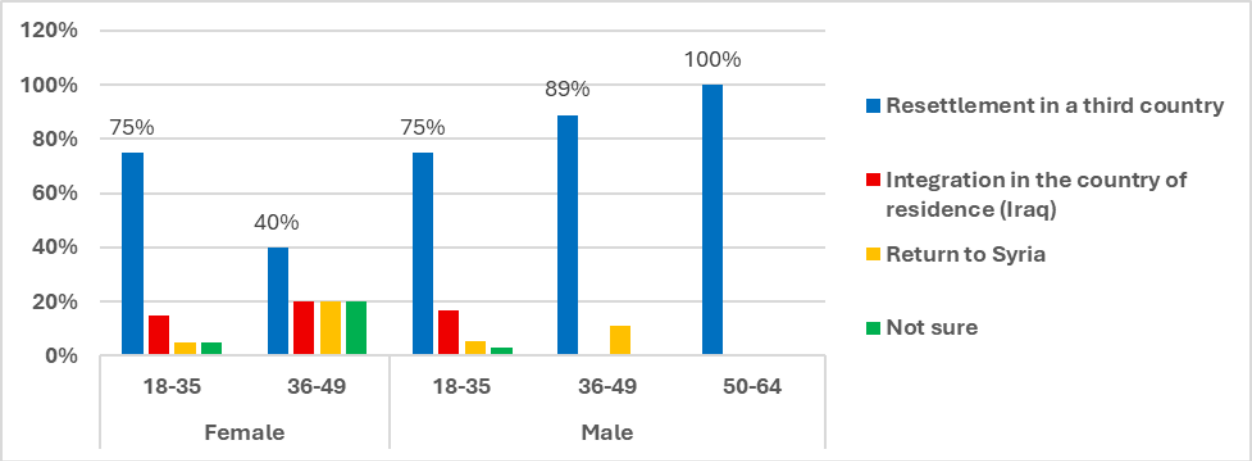

Figure 1. *Gender Impacts on Refugees' Decision-Making Regarding Future Options*

Figure 1 shows how demographic factors (age and gender) influence Syrian refugees' decision-making regarding resettlement, return, or integration. Across all groups, resettlement in a third country is the most preferred option, especially among men, with the highest support among males aged 50–64 (100%). Female respondents, particularly those aged 36–49, expressed more diverse preferences, including integration in Iraq, return to Syria, or uncertainty. Overall, resettlement to a third country remains the primary option for Syrian refugees across both genders and all age categories. This is followed by the option of staying and integrating in Iraq, although it is far less preferred in comparison. Returning to Syria emerges as the least favored choice among respondents.

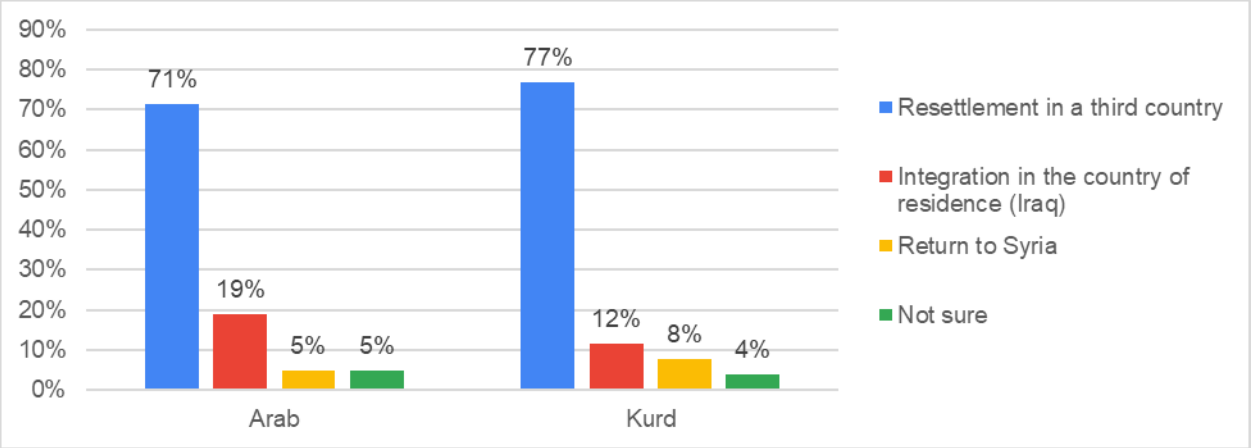

Figure 2. *Ethnicity Impacts on Refugees' Decision-Making Regarding Future Options*

The above Figure 2 further illustrates that both Arabs and Kurds overwhelmingly prefer resettlement in a third country as their future option. However, Arabs show relatively more inclination toward integration in Iraq, while Kurds are slightly more open to the possibility of returning to Syria. Overall, return and uncertainty remain marginal compared to the dominant preference for resettlement. It is worth noting that the respondents only opted for the two national/ethnic options of Arab and Kurd, although other options were provided in the questionnaire.

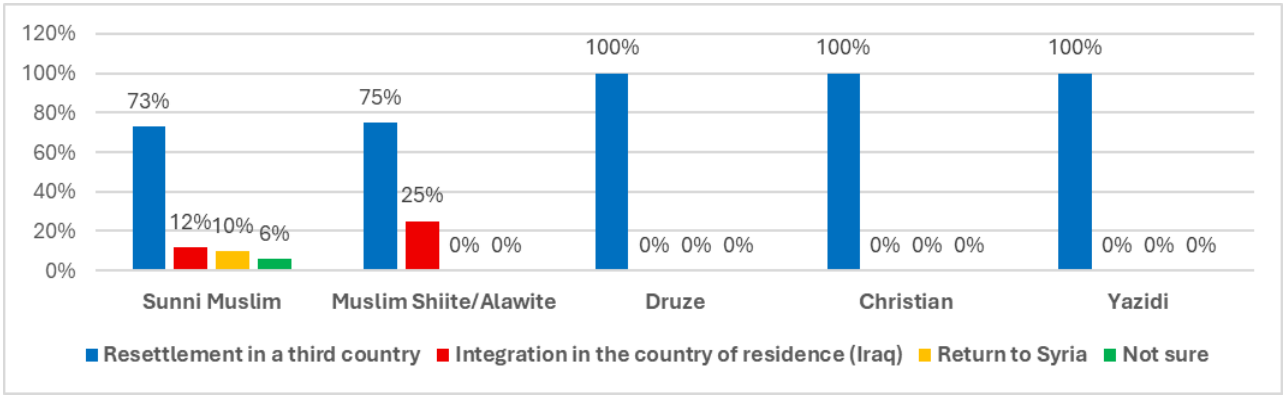

Figure 3. *Religious Background Impacts on Refugees' Decision-Making Regarding Future Options*

The third figure presents Syrian refugees' future preferences by religious affiliation. Resettlement in a third country is the dominant preference across all religious and ethnic groups, with unanimous preference among Yazidi, Druze, and Christian respondents. Sunni Muslims and Shia or Shiite/Alawites show slightly more diverse preferences, with some openness toward integration in Iraq or, to a lesser extent, return to Syria. Overall, the desire for resettlement, like in other distributions, transcends religious and ethnic boundaries; however, minority groups appear more unanimous in rejecting both return and integration options.

4.2 Intention and Perspectives of Syrian Refugees and the Relevant Organizations

To avoid any biases, four distinct options were provided to Syrian refugees regarding their intentions for the future. The options included 'Integration in Iraq', 'Return to Syria', 'Resettlement to a Third Country', and 'Unsure' for those who had not decided yet.

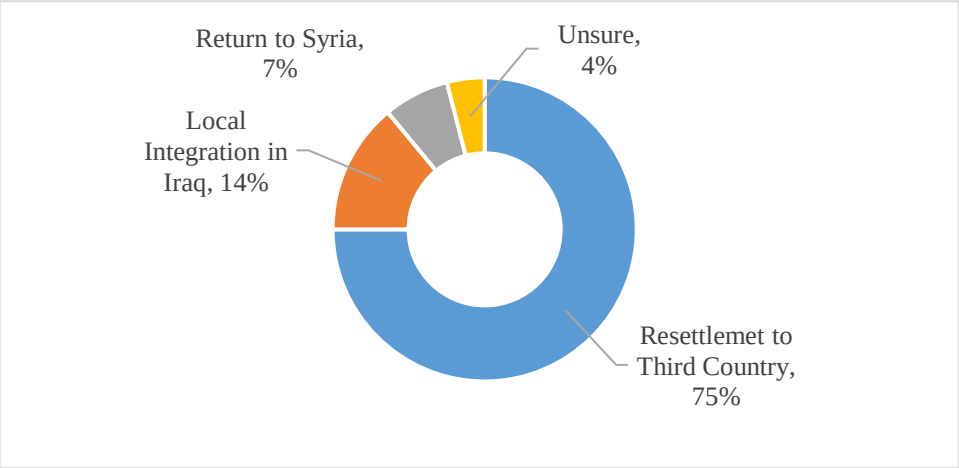

Figure 4. *Future Intention of Syrian Refugees (Overall)*

Figure 4 above contains the overall results of the quantitative survey participated in by Syrian refugees, which show that the majority, 75% of the respondents, expressed a preference for resettlement to a third country, indicating a strong desire for relocation outside of Iraq, regardless of their age, gender, religion, or ethnic background. This suggests that refugees may perceive better opportunities or safety in third countries, away from the challenges they face in the current environment, or returning to Syria. A smaller proportion, 14%, desired integration inside KRI-Iraq, which could indicate that these refugees feel some level of stability or connection to their current surroundings and may hope for long-term solutions in the country of asylum. Only 7% of respondents expressed an intention to return to Syria, suggesting that for most of the refugees, return is not or a less possible option, at least for now. Finally, 4% of respondents were not sure about their plans, possibly reflecting confusion, a lack of information, or the inability to foresee a clear path forward due to the unpredictable circumstances. This difference in responses highlights the complexity of refugee decision-making, with each individual or family facing different challenges, concerns, and aspirations related to their status in Iraq and their possible future options with a particular focus on resettling in third countries.

Moreover, the responses of the participant Syrian refugees to another related question about whether Syrian refugees have plans to leave Iraq for a third country pointed out a significant preference towards going out of Iraq and resettling in a third country. A majority, 63%, indicated that they are seriously considering or planning to leave Iraq for another country. Further, 26% expressed uncertainty, stating that they might leave Iraq in the future depending on the situation. Only 11% of respondents answered that they currently have no plans to leave Iraq, reiterating that a smaller portion of refugees feel settled or fully integrated in the country of asylum. Thus, 89% of refugees are either considering or planning to leave Iraq for a third country or are uncertain about what they will decide in the future. This indication reflects a strong desire and readiness to resettle in another country, depending on opportunities and situations.

Additionally, the findings of the qualitative interviews with international and national managers who work with organizations that support and assist refugees further confirmed that the return of Syrian refugees currently residing in the KRI is highly unfeasible shortly due to several factors. Firstly, Syria continues to face ongoing political instability and security concerns, which make it not safe for refugees to return. Second, Syria's economic situation remains constrained by ongoing challenges, with widespread poverty and a lack of economic and employment opportunities. Further, the country struggles with a lack of essential basic services, such as healthcare, education, water, and weak infrastructure, which are crucial for rebuilding communities and ensuring refugees' safety and well-being. On the other hand, many refugees have already integrated into life where they are, and some have established stable livelihoods, making the return even less appealing. Finally, some refugees fear detention, forced military service, or other forms of persecution or punishment. Therefore, while individual returns may occur, a broader return is hindered or unexpected due to these unresolved challenges. “There is no indication that recent political changes in Syria will prompt Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region to return soon. The key reasons for migration remain unresolved, and neither the autonomous administration in northeastern Syria nor the Syrian government has introduced significant initiatives to encourage their return.” (Domle, Personal Communication, March 15, 2025).

According to Davidoff-Gore and Fratzke (2024), arguing that the host government and politicians should be careful about making statements with regard to sending back Syrian refugees, which could be legally challenged, because the situation inside Syria is not yet safe and conducive for return. Thus, the host countries should recognize that the departure of Syrians is likely to be a long-term phenomenon. Additionally, (Gowayed, 2025) points out that “uncertainties around the Syrian transitional government’s willingness to implement meaningful transitional justice, to hold human rights violators accountable and heal divisions in society”. It is also worth noting that the UNHCR, in its recent guidance, confirmed that, despite the political changes in the regime system, Syria is not yet a safe place for Syrian refugees who live in host countries to decide to return. Therefore, the statement urged the countries of asylum to continue providing refuge and protection to the Syrian refugees until the situation in Syria is conducive to return. Moreover, the UNHCR High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi, advises patience and vigilance, after 14 years of conflict in Syria, to ensure any returns are voluntary, safe, and sustainable for Syrians, including people from all the ethnoreligious and political backgrounds, which depends on parties within Syria prioritizing law, order, and a rights-respecting transition (Grandi, 2024).

4.3 The Primary Challenges for Return or Repatriation

To assess the ranking and distribution of specific challenges and concerns preventing refugees from returning to their home country, specific questions were included in the quantitative survey conducted with Syrian refugees participating in the research. The questions included key challenges such as security/safety concerns, political instability, lack of basic services, economic conditions/job opportunities, property/housing issues, and legal concerns. Additionally, respondents had the option to identify and descriptively include other challenges not listed in the question. As shown in Table 4, security and safety concerns were the most frequently reported barriers preventing refugees from returning or resettling in Syria, followed by lack of basic services and economic difficulties.

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Reported Challenges to Refugees’ Return to Syria

Main Reasons Reported	Frequency (No.)	Frequency (%)
Security and safety concerns	69	95%

Lack of basic services (healthcare, education, water, electricity, etc.)	57	78%
Political instability	55	75%
Economic difficulties/lack of job opportunities	50	68%
Property/housing issues	29	40%
Legal issues/lack of legal protection	13	18%
Personal and family reasons (protecting self/children)	1	1%
All of the above	1	1%

The above self-explanatory frequency table is based on a question about challenges and barriers to the return or repatriation of Syrian refugees. The question allowed participants to select multiple answers; therefore, the total number of responses exceeds the number of respondents (n=73). The percentages presented are calculated based on the total respondent count to indicate the proportion of participants who selected each specific reason. Consequently, the percentages sum to more than 100%, which is characteristic of multiple-response data. All figures have been rounded to the nearest decimal place.

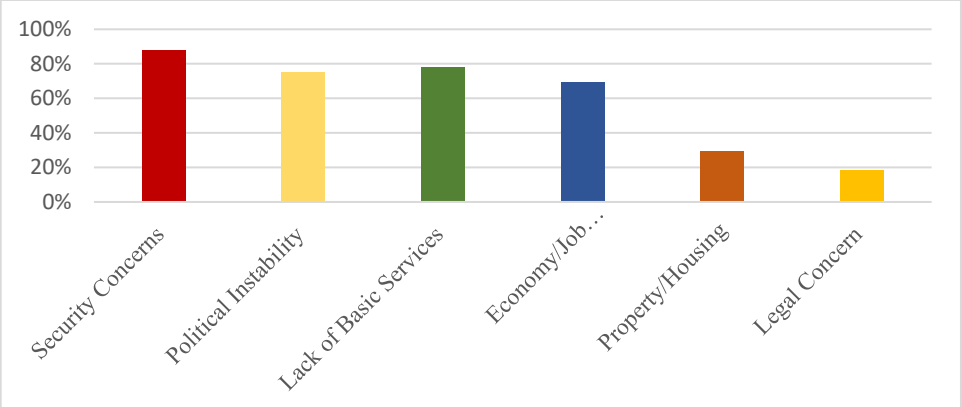

Figure 5. *Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees in Returning to Syria*

The results in Figure 5 of the quantitative survey participated by Syrian refugees indicate that security/safety concerns are the most significant barriers pointed out by nearly 90% of the refugee respondents. This suggests that ongoing conflict, instability, or threats to personal safety remain critical deterrents to repatriation. The second major challenge is the lack of basic services such as health, education, water, and electricity (78%). Thus, many refugees perceive Syria as lacking essential infrastructure, discouraging their return. This is closely followed by political instability (75%), which further indicates that political instability plays a crucial role, as an uncertain governance system and political conflicts have a negative impact on safety, rights, and stability. Additionally, economic factors and lack of job opportunities (nearly 70%) also pose a significant barrier, meaning that many refugees fear they will not be able to sustain their livelihoods upon return. Property and housing issues (nearly 30%) suggest that a notable portion of respondents are concerned about reclaiming their homes or securing adequate shelter. Lastly, legal concerns (18%) appear to be the least cited challenge, though still relevant. These may include documentation issues, potential legal repercussions, or uncertainties regarding citizenship and rights upon return. The data

reiterates that the decision to return is primarily influenced by safety, governance, economic opportunities, and access to basic services. Addressing these issues would be key to facilitating return or voluntary repatriation for Syrian refugees.

Additionally, regarding Syrian refugees' information and awareness of safe and proper return methods, the responses of Syrian refugee participants varied significantly. 18% indicated they are very much aware of safe return options, suggesting a solid understanding of the return process and related procedures; 29% stated they are somewhat aware, meaning they have some knowledge but might lack comprehensive details on the matter; 21% reported that they are not aware at all and have not attempted to gather any information, reflecting lack of intention, a significant gap in understanding the situation, or lack of interest to take initiative in seeking return-related information. Additionally, 31% noted that there is insufficient information available regarding safe return methods, highlighting an interest, but a critical issue with limited access to reliable and clear information and guidance. The data points to a substantial need for targeted information dissemination to ensure that refugees are better equipped with the knowledge to make informed decisions regarding their return.

In parallel, the eleven managers of the international and national organizations who were interviewed for the research were asked similar questions about challenges to the return of Syrian refugees following the political transition in the country. The respondents pointed out that the current political situation and changes in Syria have caused a complex and uncertain situation that significantly influences the willingness and/or ability to return. While some initial political changes, mainly overthrowing the Al-Assad regime, raised hopes for a safer and more stable Syria, these hopes have been largely weakened by ongoing conflicts, political instability, and a lack of proper and sustainable solutions. Therefore, “refugees remain cautious due to fears of arbitrary arrests, forced conscription, and persecution, particularly under the new government, which has yet to establish trust or provide clear guarantees for returnees' safety and rights” (Abubaker, Personal Communication, March 10, 2025). The absence of evident sustainable political reforms, inclusive governance, and consistent assurances of protection further decreases confidence in the current Syrian government. The respondents further pointed out that the main concern of refugees to consider return/repatriation is safety. Many fear violence, persecution, punishment, or retaliation, especially from armed groups, and others have the risk of being arrested or facing discrimination for ethno-religious and sectarian reasons. As noted by several respondents, refugees want assurance that the conflict has ended and that they will not face harm or serious risk when they return home. “Many refugees are closely monitoring the steps and actions of the new government, but without concrete steps toward reconciliation, security, and safety, the return of large-scale refugees voluntarily might not happen” (Mohammed, Personal Communication, March 19, 2025).

The other obstacle to the return of Syrian refugees is the ongoing economic and livelihood challenges in Syria that were also mentioned in the qualitative interviews. High levels of unemployment, financial inflation, and a lack of job opportunities continue to worsen the difficult conditions. The economic constraints, along with insufficient job opportunities and unclear future employment prospects, create hesitation for those who may wish or consider returning. Refugees who have experienced relatively better economic conditions in the KRI are reluctant to return to a situation where they are not sure about their economic hardship. “Economic challenges which hamper refugee return include lack of job opportunities, economic collapse, and difficulty accessing financial resources or rebuilding livelihoods” (Hakim, Personal Communication, March 17, 2025). Additionally, the lack of access to basic services, such as healthcare, education, water, and electricity, further complicates the challenges. Many rural and conflict-affected areas in Syria are particularly lacking in these essential services, making the prospect of return even less attractive.

Robinson (Personal Communication, March 17, 2025), answering the question, stated that "there is massive damage to Syria's infrastructure that provides basic services to people; this makes return very challenging", and Othman (Personal Communication, March 13, 2025) added "the absence of adequate infrastructure and essential services is a significant barrier, further discouraging the safe and sustainable return of Syrian refugees".

While the UNHCR reported that "more than 7.4 million Syrians remain internally displaced in their own country, where 70 percent of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and 90 percent live below the poverty line" (UNHCR, 2025), Gowayed (2025), through the Arab Center, Washington, DC, added that "displaced Syrians are returning to extremely difficult conditions. Poverty remains extraordinarily high. According to the World Food Programme, nearly 13 million Syrians were food insecure in early 2024, with more than 3.1 million experiencing severe food insecurity. Gowayed (2025) further added that the destroyed infrastructure of almost all the sectors in the country as a result of war and the long-term sanctions mainly by the US is another serious challenge for return and reintegration, let alone the recent decision.

4.4 Facilitating a Safe and Dignified Return and Reintegration of Syrian Refugees

The data collected from Syrian refugees in Iraq who participated in the quantitative data collection reveal their prioritized needs for returning and reintegrating into Syria.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Support Needed for Refugees' Return & Reintegration in Syria

Main Support Needed	Frequency (No.)	Frequency (%)
Financial support	51	70%
Employment opportunities	50	68.5
Psychological/social support	34	47%
Vocation/Educational training programs	30	41%
Legal assistance	29	40%
Information on available return options	26	37%
Family Reunification Support	15	20.5%

The above self-explanatory frequency table is based on a question about support and assistance needed for refugees' return and reintegration in Syria. The question allowed participants to select multiple answers; therefore, the total number of responses exceeds the number of respondents (n=73). The percentages presented are calculated based on the total respondent count to indicate the proportion of participants who selected each specific reason. Consequently, the percentages sum to more than 100%, which is characteristic of multiple-response data. All figures have been rounded to the nearest decimal place.

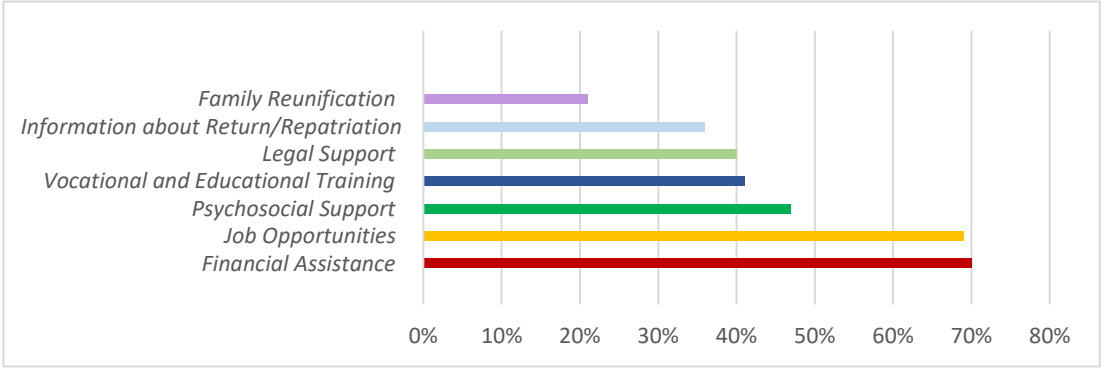

Figure 6. *Assistance and Support Required by the Refugees to Return and Reintegrate in Syria*

Figure 6 illustrates that the most significant requirement, as indicated by the refugee respondents, is financial assistance (70%), which scored the highest percentage of refugees expressing a strong need for financial assistance to facilitate their return and rebuild their lives back home. This suggests that many refugees are concerned about the costs involved in their return and the challenges of rebuilding their lives in Syria. Financial assistance would be essential to cover housing and the establishment of a basic livelihood upon return. Closely following and related to financial assistance, job opportunity (69%) is also considered vital for the same reasons. Many refugees seek sustainable work prospects that would allow them to support themselves and their families once they return to Syria. Thus, employment is seen as a means of long-term stability and economic independence.
Further, nearly half of the respondents (47%) expressed the need for psychological or psycho-social support. This indicates that a significant portion of refugees already have or are dealing with emotional and mental health challenges, which could be due to several reasons, such as war trauma, displacement, or life hardships. Providing psychosocial support, including psychological recovery services and community support programs, is important not only when they return but also after. Another important area is vocational and educational training, which scored (41%). Many refugees seek opportunities to acquire new vocational skills or enhance their existing skills to improve their employability and livelihood upon returning to Syria. This indicates a desire for personal and professional development to enable them to better reintegrate into their society upon return. Legal support and assistance (40%) is also a priority for many refugees, particularly regarding issues such as documentation, land ownership, and other legal rights upon returning to Syria. Legal aid services would help ensure that refugees can re-establish their status and resolve any legal challenges that might arise during the return and reintegration process.

Moreover, a considerable portion of refugee respondents (36%) expressed the need for accurate and reliable information about the return process to Syria. This information is crucial for them to understand the security situation, logistics, and available support mechanisms in Iraq and Syria, helping them make informed and better decisions. Finally, 21% of refugee respondents expressed their concerns and the need for support regarding family reunification. It scores lower compared to other types of assistance, yet this suggests that a considerable number of refugees may have been separated from their families, and family reunification is certainly a critical issue for those affected.

In tandem, a similar question was asked during qualitative interviews of the managers working in international and national organizations that support and assist the Syrian refugees. The question was: "What measures can UN agencies and NGOs implement to ensure a safe, dignified, and sustainable return for refugees?". The respondents indicated that to ensure the safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees, UN agencies and NGOs can take a range of interventions, actions, and steps. Political reconciliation and trust-building were mentioned as the main and key areas where mainly the UN agencies could play a vital role through creating mechanisms for dialogue and negotiations between different political and ethnic groups and parties in Syria. This is necessary for strengthening trust at the political and social levels to ensure a safe and sustainable return process. International organizations could further advocate for political solutions and support reintegration in Syria in a way that includes all political, ethnic, and religious segments of Syrian society. The UN agencies and NGOs, in coordination with the local authorities, political, religious, and social actors, should further ensure the safety of returnees by advocating for their protection and supporting conflict resolution and peacebuilding. “UN agencies and NGOs should ensure the safety of returnees

by collaborating with governments to implement protective measures and uphold the legal, material, and physical rights of returnees, including and mainly the minorities" (Zangana, March 16, 2025).

Other findings of the qualitative interviews with the managers of the national and international organizations included that providing economic support is crucial for helping returnees rebuild their lives after their return. This includes creating livelihood programs, offering vocational training, and facilitating access to employment opportunities. These efforts can empower returnees with the resources they need to rebuild their lives and those of their children, sustain themselves, and further contribute to the local economy. This, however, should be in parallel with rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, including homes, schools, and hospitals, among others, to provide essential services for the returnees to have a safe, dignified, and sustainable life environment after return.

The other important sectors where UN agencies and NGOs could intervene and play a vital role are psychosocial support and social cohesion. The international and national humanitarian and development organizations should focus more on implementing community-based measures to support and strengthen social cohesion efforts to foster trust between returnees and within host communities. "Support from UN agencies and NGOs is crucial for long-term efforts aimed at ensuring emotional security, providing psychological care, and offering psychosocial training to Syrian refugee returnees, mainly those who experienced repression, trauma, and torture" (Kareem, Personal Communication, March 20, 2025). Moreover, legal protection is another important aspect, as returnees need guarantees that they will not face arrest, punishment, or discrimination when they return home. In this regard, Tahir (Personal Communication, March 18, 2025) stated, "UN agencies and NGOs can push for legal protections, monitor human rights, and ensure returnees are safe from any sort of harm". This also includes supporting the development of legal frameworks that protect refugees' rights, such as their access to documentation, safeguards against discrimination, property rights, and so on. Further, as many refugees lack accurate information about the situation in Syria and the return process and opportunities, this can hinder their decision to return. It is necessary to provide Syrian refugees with clear and regular updates on the conditions, including the legal issues, in Syria, to help them make informed and proper decisions about their return.

The findings make it evident that the main obstacle to a safe return or repatriation for Syrian refugees from Iraq is due to unresolved security risks, political instability, and Syria's weak economy, infrastructure, and services. That is why many refugees still prioritize resettlement or local integration over return/repatriation, as they still have the fears of persecution, and concerns about lack of basic services, and insufficient livelihood and economic opportunities. Their main prerequisites to return, therefore, include safety, financial aid, job creation, psychosocial support, and legal protection. Hence, the relevant governments and international and national non-governmental organizations should accordingly emphasize the political reconciliation, infrastructure rebuilding, and economic development in Syria to pave the way toward a safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Syrian refugees back home. The road ahead, therefore, remains uncertain with many challenges, leaving many Syrian refugees cautiously hopeful for a future free from both the horrors of the past and the threats of new forms of repression (Editors, 2025).

The findings of this section, like the others previously mentioned, are also supported by other reports from reliable national and international sources. The High Commissioner of UNHCR urges the countries and donors to swiftly intervene in improving the living conditions of the people of Syria to ensure that the transition respects the rights, lives, and aspirations of the Syrians (Grandi, 2024). Additionally, Davidoff-Gore and Fratzke (2024) add that "when returns do happen, countries of asylum will need to ensure that they are done in a way that enables returnees to reintegrate in a sustainable way", which they argue that the situation is not yet conducive to a safe, dignified, and

sustainable return and reintegration. Further, Gowayed (2025) adds that to make the situation appropriate for a peaceful and sustainable return of the Syrian refugees, aid and assistance are required from the international community with regard to justice, peace, and livelihood to ensure safe and sustainable return and reintegration of Syrian refugees back home. One of the influential countries that needs to review its decision and contribute to enhancing the situation for the return is the United States, by reviewing its decision on suspending its aid to the non-governmental organizations working inside Syria, which has been put on hold by the US President, Donald Trump, since January 2025.

5. Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future studies. The online quantitative component, which initially targeted 100 refugee respondents in two refugee camps, and 73 refugees ultimately participated, may have introduced selection bias in addition to reaching primarily those individuals with internet access and digital literacy, potentially excluding the most vulnerable groups or economically disadvantaged individuals. Thus, the respondent pool may have skewed perspectives and overlooked specific experiences. The qualitative part, which relied on 11 semi-structured interviews with managers of national and international organizations, has a small sample size, limiting the breadth of perspectives captured. While semi-structured interviews allow for rich, flexible narratives, the limited number of participants may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences, motivations, or challenges faced by Syrian migrants and refugees. Furthermore, the study captures a snapshot within a limited geographical area (primarily refugees living in Erbil governorate) and a specific timeframe (four months in the first half of 2025). Having participants concentrated in a specific geographical area and timeframe, coupled with potential political, security, and economic events at the time, limits the ability to understand how variations in geography, time, and political, security, and economic changes influence Syrians' decisions regarding return.

6. Conclusion

The fall of the previous regime in Syria was first welcomed with hope and relief by many Syrians, who saw it as the end of the Al-Assad family's decades-long oppressive and dictatorial rule. However, the political, security, and economic conditions in Syria have not improved as was expected or at least hoped. Amid this uncertainty, the Syrian refugees in Iraq face a challenging situation in deciding about their future. While very few are eager to return home, the vast majority are hopeful to find a way to be resettled in a third country, while hesitant and waiting to see what kind of political structure will emerge and whether the new government authorities can provide a basic level of safety, stability, livelihood, and services. Therefore, the return of Syrian refugees is deeply complex, shaped by the need for safety, dignity, and also realistic sustainability.

The findings of the study have profound implications for international policy, suggesting that a coercive or premature push for refugee repatriation would be both unethical and ineffective. As research by Betts & Collier (2017) explains, the decision to return is not just emergency relief or logistical but is deeply influenced by other factors, such as economic and psychosocial factors, for the refugees to be able to work, study, and, in turn, rebuild their lives, in other words, ensuring not only recovery or resilience, but sustainability. Therefore, effective policy must move beyond framing return as the primary solution when the situation is not conducive. For refugees to seriously consider returning, Syria must first achieve political stability, security, and an inclusive transition. The ongoing instability and fears of persecution make returning too risky; therefore, the refugees are hesitant to decide. Syrian refugees need clear evidence of political reconciliation and reform,

and respect for human rights and citizenship, before they can trust that their return and life post-return will be guaranteed; without strong protection mechanisms, their reluctance will not vanish. Additionally, basic services and livelihood conditions in Syria also play a critical role. Refugees are also concerned about how they will rebuild their lives and the lives of their children without proper financial support and job opportunities. They, thus, need assurance that they receive proper physical, material, and legal support and assistance.

Therefore, the relevant government authorities, in coordination with the international and national actors, including UN agencies and NGOs, need to work together to promote political and security stability, including inclusivity, to ensure sustainable peace and safety inside the country in order to address the primary barrier to refugee return. They also need to carry out projects to rebuild the basic infrastructure and improve the economic conditions to provide basic services such as health, water, and education, as well as generate job opportunities to promote sustainable livelihoods. Other assistance and services, such are psychosocial and legal support, particularly for vulnerable people, are also necessary to meet the returnees' mental and legal expectations and needs. All of these efforts, among others, could help pave the way for a safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees from Iraq and contribute to ensuring the sustainability of their reintegration. Otherwise, the Syrian refugees might continue in refuge in Iraq or seek asylum in other countries whenever the opportunity arises.

6.1 Recommendations for Policymakers and Organizations to Support the Return and Reintegration of Syrian Refugees

1. Security and Political Stability: The policy makers and government authorities in Syria, in coordination with the international actors, such as the United Nations, ensure political stability, security, and peace in the country through conflict resolutions and peace agreements, and peacebuilding interventions (Immediate and medium term: 3-6 months).

2. Reforming the political, judicial, and security systems: The policy makers, legislative bodies, and government authorities in Syria make further reforms in the political and security systems in the country to pave the way to further inclusiveness of different ethno-religious groups in the country and a national reconciliation framework with amnesty, truth commissions, and dialogues (Medium term: 6-12 months).

3. Infrastructure and Services: The policy makers and governmental authorities in Syria, in coordination with the international and national non-governmental organizations, to start restoring access to healthcare, water, education, and electricity. This could include emergency rehabilitation of schools, hospitals, and water systems, as well as taking into account the return areas in national development plans (Immediate and medium term: 3-12 months).

4. Economic Development and Revitalization: The policy makers and governmental authorities in coordination with the international and national non-governmental organizations, needs also to consider and plan for increasing employment opportunities which could be developed through vocational/educational training for employment and small and medium scale business start-ups, ensuring financial assistance as business-grants in the urban areas, and providing other livelihood support to those returning to rural areas. (Immediate, medium, and long-term: 3-24 and more months).

5. Information and Communication: The government authorities should utilize various media and social media channels to disseminate accurate and timely information regarding the situation and developments inside the country, as well as opportunities for voluntary repatriation based on the safety, dignity, and assistance to ensure sustainable return and reintegration. (Immediate and medium term: 3-12 months).

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Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and relevant data protection laws. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and the right to withdraw at any time. Refugee participants completed the questionnaires anonymously to ensure confidentiality. No third party, apart from the researcher and the publishing journal, had or will have access to the data. The study complied with national and international data protection regulations and academic ethical standards.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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