



Upinion, 11.11.11, Women Now for Development, Basmeh & Zeitooneh, PAX, Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) & Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)

Caught between borders: Experiences of Syrians pushed away to Lebanon after the fall of Assad

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Key findings

This conversation, hosted on Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP), was held with newly arrived Syrian refugees in Lebanon who fled sectarian violence and instability in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Exploring the journey, needs, and plans of these refugees, their experiences are crucial for understanding the current Syrian context and potential conditions for refugee returns. From March 27 to May 1, 2025, 1056 Syrian participants, primarily originating from Homs (**55%**, n=1012), Latakia (**14%**), and Tartus (**12%**) used the platform to share real-time information about their situation and perspectives, becoming active agents in this exchange.

Reasons for departure

- The majority of newly arrived Syrians in Lebanon reported leaving Syria by **61%** (n=1001) due to violence or retaliation due to sectarian identity. **40%** feared detention, persecution, or targeting by security forces, and **36%** reported the takeover of homes and land by armed groups or local authorities.
- **77%** (n=1000) felt they had no choice but to leave, and **89%** (n=992) had to leave quickly without warning or preparation.

Journey and destination

- **45%** (n=985) went to a place in Lebanon where others from their community were going and another **31%** went wherever they could find refuge. The large majority of respondents (**84%**, n=975) arrived with all their family members who wanted to come.
- In total, **90%** (n=981) crossed the border without valid documents (irregularly).

Challenges during the journey (irregularly)

- When reporting challenges encountered during the journey, **45%** (n=877) of respondents travelling without valid documents were fearing detention and arrest, **36%** faced physical hardship, and **31%** were threatened with arrest or detention.

Challenges during the journey (regularly)

- Notably, **39%** (n=57) of respondents travelling with valid documents were also fearing detention and arrest, **35%** faced high travel costs, and **25%** had trouble at border checkpoints.

Current situation in Lebanon

- Regarding their current feelings of safety and security, **45%** (n=975) felt somewhat safe, **42%** did not feel safe, and **12%** felt safe. In terms of social cohesion and acceptance, the highest tensions reported were between newly arrived Syrians and other communities in Lebanon (**46%**, n=970).
- The top three priority needs across all respondents were shelter and housing (**74%**, n=970), job opportunities and employment (**64%**), and safety and protection (**56%**).
- Limited access to aid remains a critical issue, with **76%** (n=975) of respondents reporting they did not have access to aid despite needing it. **51%** (n=975) expressed they could not meet basic needs, with **46%** being able to meet them partially, and **3%** fully. Coincidentally, the overall lack of support network underscores the precarity of the participants, with **79%** (n=973) expressing they do not have a support network.

Decision to leave

- When asked about how they felt about their departure from Syria, **51%** (n=970) still believed it was the right decision, and **45%** who were not sure.

Future plans

- The future plans of the newly arrived Syrians in Lebanon show that **63%** (n=970) want to move to a third country, while **22%** are undecided.

Upinion support

- Finally, **60%** (n=965) of respondents indicated they want their perspectives presented in meetings and events with relevant actors, and **23%** desire more opportunities to speak directly to decision-makers.

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Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, a new wave of Syrian refugees has fled to Lebanon due to resurgent sectarian violence. This brief presents key findings from a recent conversation with these newly arrived individuals, many of whom are residing in provisional shelters (such as mosques, schools, and unfinished or abandoned complexes). The discussion explored their departure from Syria, their journey, and their initial experiences in Lebanon. The insights aim to provide an understanding of the unique challenges and circumstances faced by these refugees in the post-Assad era, including their reasons for leaving, possessions, journey, family situation upon arrival, current needs and feelings of safety, social tensions, future plans, and perspectives on Upinion's potential support.

Methodology

The study's methodology consisted of a conversation held through Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP), as part of a broader series of monitoring conversations conducted with Syrian individuals in Lebanon over the past four years. Upinion has developed this online platform that allows it to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalised or hard-to-reach communities, including people in crisis and displacement-affected countries. The in-house developed platform enables Upinion to engage real-time with people in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, which are also widely used by Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Important to mention is that the DEP enables Upinion to send tailored, neutral information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. This sets the study's methodology apart from traditional surveys, as participants become active agents engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange, rather than being simply providers of data.¹

¹ For more information on the recruitment of participants and Upinion's DEP, please contact info@upinion.com.

Demographic information

It is essential to interpret the results while considering the sample characteristics unique to this conversation.

The sample consists of **1056** Syrian nationals who started the conversation, and **964** respondents who completed it. The data collection took place from the **27th of March till the 1st of May 2025**.

Of those who provided their demographic information, **70%** (n=1049) identified as male and **30%** identified as female, resulting in a male-to-female ratio of 1 : 0.43.

The largest group of respondents (**33%**, n=1054) were aged between 26 and 35. Smaller proportions fell within the age ranges of 36–45 (**26%**), 18–25 (**18%**), and 46–55 (**16%**). Only **6%** of individuals were aged 56–65, and 5 respondents were 65+.

Regarding respondents' areas of residency, individuals in this sample are currently living in Akkar (**42%**, n=1012), Baalbek-Hermel (**34%**), or Bekaa (**11%**). A remaining **6%** are staying in North Lebanon, and the rest distributed equally between other areas.

Representativeness

Upinion does not aim to establish statistical representativeness through its findings, as the conversations conducted for research purposes constitute qualitative or quantitative inquiries that do not simulate a reflection of the actual population. When comparing our distribution to actual country distributions, readers are invited to see for themselves how our samples can be reflective of a larger tendency.

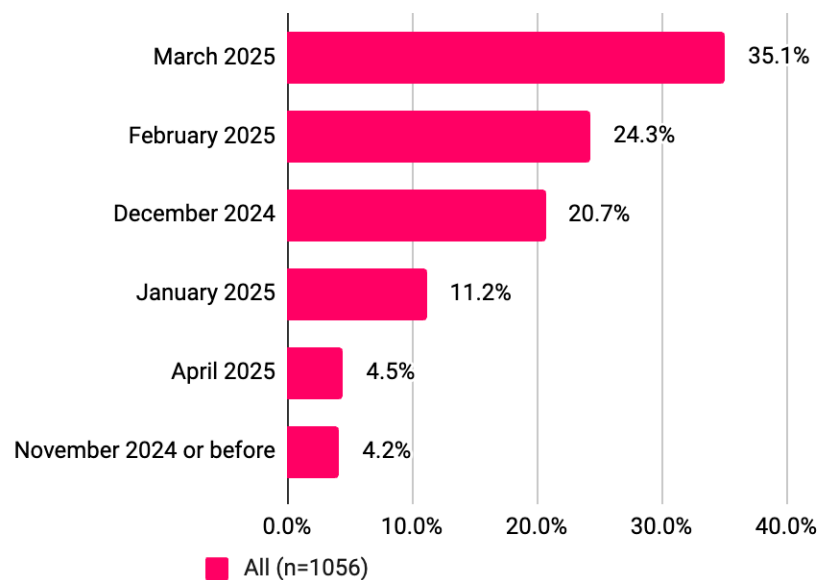
Data findings

Reasons for departure and circumstances of leaving

Time of departure

At the start of the conversation, respondents were first asked to indicate the date they departed from Syria, in order to ensure only participants who arrived in Lebanon from December 2024 onwards would receive the next questions.

Figure 1. Timeline of departures across newly arrived Syrians in Lebanon - All respondents (n=1056)

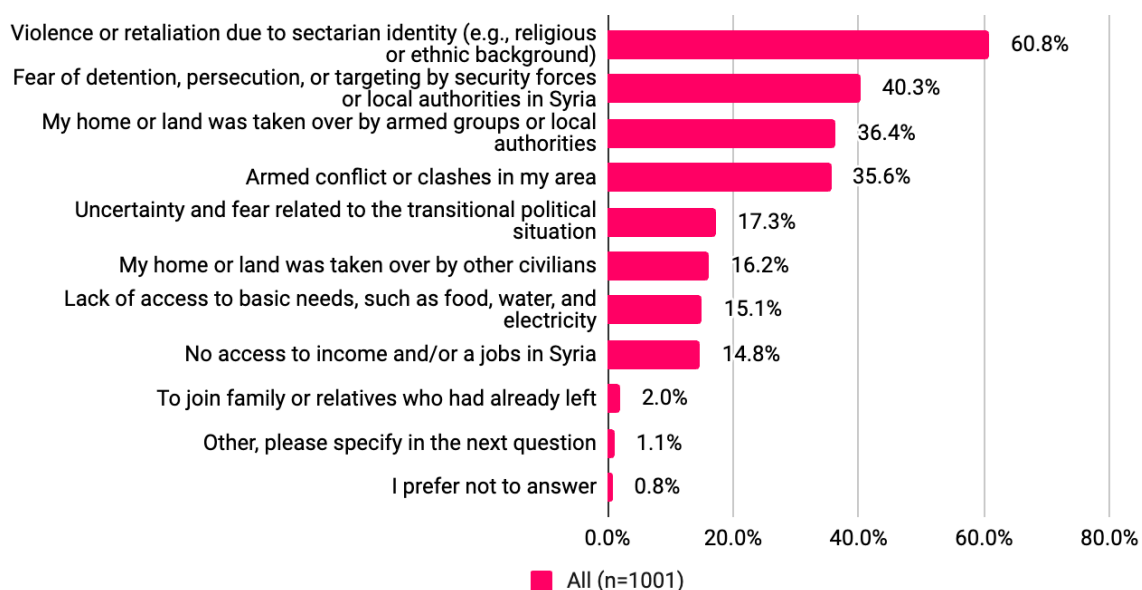


Most respondents leaving Syria after November 2024 were from Homs (**55%**, n=1012), **14%** from Latakia, and **12%** from Tartus.

Main reasons for leaving

The primary reasons for leaving were violence or retaliation due to sectarian identity (**61%**, n=1001), fear of detention, persecution, or targeting by security forces (**40%**), the takeover of homes and land by armed groups or local authorities and armed conflict or clashes in their area (**36%** respectively), forcing them to leave.

Figure 2. Could you indicate the main reasons why you decided to leave Syria? - All respondents (n=1001)



A large majority (**77%**, n=1000) felt they had no choice but to leave, and **89%** (n=992) had to leave quickly without warning or preparation. Only a small percentage (**8%**) indicated that they either had some or enough time to prepare their departure.

Choice in leaving

Respondents who indicated they had no choice in leaving Syria were asked to describe why they felt this way in an open answer format. Some of the key factors and reasons why people felt they had no choice but to leave Syria include:

- Violence or retaliation due to sectarian identity.
- Fear of detention, persecution, or targeting by security forces.
- Takeover of homes and land by armed groups or local authorities.
- Armed conflict or clashes in their area.
- Direct death threats.
- Threats due to sectarianism or ethnic cleansing.
- A general lack of safety and security.
- Being expelled from their villages.
- The spread of illegal weapons and armed groups.
- Fear for their lives and the lives of their families.
- Seizure of property and assets.
- Threats of kidnapping and harassment.

"Because of the violence, revenge, and heinous crimes that occurred, death threats, and the seizure of homes, shops, and lands by armed groups." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

"I fear for my life and the lives of my children due to house theft and identity-based murder that was rapidly approaching the village in which I live, so there is no longer safety in any way." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

"Threats and insults from the groups present in Syria, most of whom are of foreign nationalities, the lack of security, preventing us from carrying out our work, and forcibly displacing us." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

Possessions brought and left behind

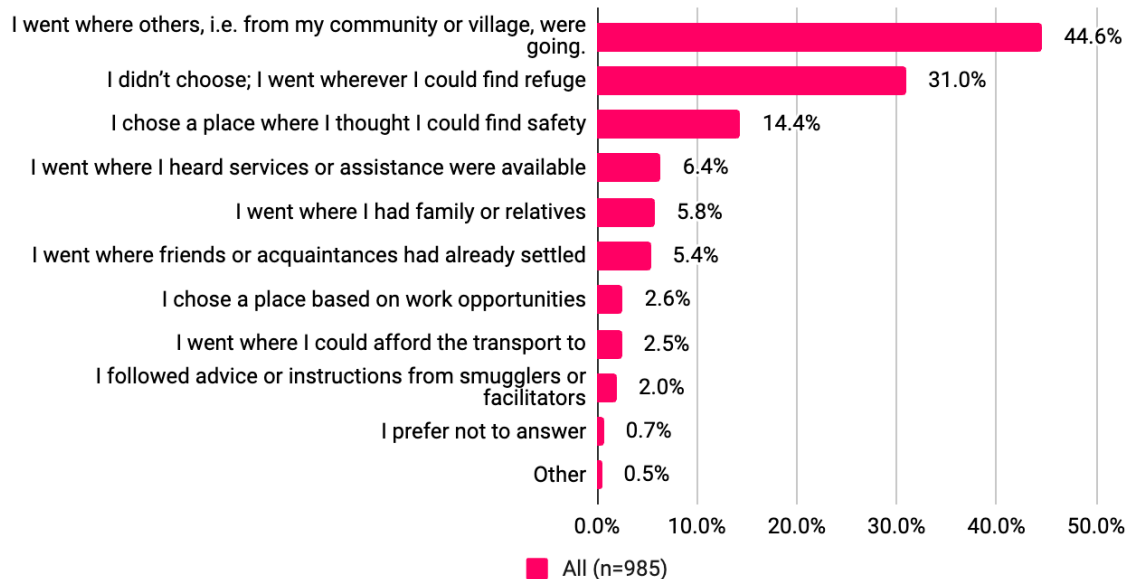
A significant proportion of respondents (**54%**, n=990) did not bring any specific items due to the urgency of their departure; they had to leave quickly and did not have time to decide what to bring along. Among those who did bring specific items, identification documents were the most common item brought (**29%**). The most frequently mentioned items left behind, besides nothing specific which concerned **43%** (n=978) of respondents, were money or valuables (**31%**) and clothes and personal belongings (**28%**).

Journey and destination in Lebanon

In this next section, the conversation explored people's journey in more detail, introduced with a disclaimer contextualizing why these questions are being asked, and reiterating to respondents that they can skip questions at any point.

Regarding their journey plan and destination in Lebanon, **45%** (n=985) went where others (i.e. from their community or village) were going. Another **31%** did not choose but went where they could find refuge. **14%** chose a place where they thought they could find safety.

Figure 3. How did you decide your destination inside Lebanon? - All respondents (n=985)



A large majority (**90%**, n=981) crossed the border without valid documents, compared to only **6%** that did. Participants were then asked to describe their journey from Syria to Lebanon in an open answer format. The overwhelming majority of respondents described their journey from Syria to Lebanon as difficult, dangerous, and traumatic. Key themes included:

1. **Fear and insecurity**, with the constant fear of armed groups, violence, death, arrest, and the unknown future. Many recounted feeling terror and panic.
2. **Hardship and fatigue**: The journey was often described as tiring, arduous, and long. It often involved walking for extended periods, sometimes through difficult terrain like mountains, with people facing harsh weather conditions such as cold and rain.
3. **Exploitation and danger** faced from smugglers and the risks associated with illegal crossings. Encounters with armed checkpoints and groups posed significant threats, including robbery, insults, and even shootings.
4. Many expressed a deep sense of **loss, grief, and sadness** leaving their homes, belongings, and homeland.
5. Many traveled with children, elderly, or sick family members, increasing the difficulty and their **vulnerability** during the journey. Some pregnant women and infants faced dire situations.
6. Many **lacked resources** such as money, food, water, shelter, and adequate clothing during their journey, exacerbating their suffering.
7. The experiences caused immense **stress, anxiety, and psychological trauma**, with some likening the journey to a nightmare or the Day of Judgment.
8. Some respondents reported being **shot at, arrested, witnessing violence, or having their property seized** during their escape. One woman reported her mother dying during the journey.
9. While reaching Lebanon brought some **relief and a sense of safety upon arrival** for some, others immediately faced **new challenges** like lack of shelter, resources, and legal status issues.

The unplanned nature of the journey is evident, with many simply seeking immediate refuge or following familiar networks. The high percentage of undocumented crossings indicates a lack of formal and safe pathways for displacement.

Challenges faced during the journey

For those **without** valid documents (who crossed the border irregularly), the main challenges were the fear of detention and arrest (**45%**, n=877), physical hardship during the journey (i.e. walking long distances, crossing rivers or rough terrain) (**36%**), and threats of arrest or detention (**31%**).

"It is very difficult with two young children and my wife, especially when we pass through the checkpoints for fear of being exposed and arrested, as happened with others." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

"It was a journey full of fear, panic and fatigue. We could not bear the extreme cold weather and hunger. Our bodies were tired of walking without water and food. My children had harsh nights of cold and fear from the sound of bullets and shells." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

For the small minority of respondents **with** valid documents, the top challenges were the fear of detention and arrest (**39%**, n=57), the high travel costs (**35%**), and trouble at border checkpoints (**25%**).

"It was difficult and we stayed at the border for three days, climbing the mountains and being exposed to scammers who took advantage of our situation." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

Among those who faced trouble at the border across both groups, **44%** (n=91) reported issues on the Lebanon side and **39%** on the Syria side, whilst **17%** could not remember.

The pervasive fear of detention and arrest highlights the precarious legal status of those crossing, regardless of documentation. Undocumented individuals also faced significant physical risks. Border crossing challenges were experienced on both the Syrian and Lebanese sides.

Family situation upon arrival

A large majority (**84%**, n=975) of respondents arrived in Lebanon with all of their family members who wanted to flee. **8%** left family behind who wanted to flee, **4%** came by themselves, and **2%** left family behind who wished to stay in Syria.

Current situation in Lebanon

Safety

When asked about their current safety, **45%** (n=975) indicated that they felt somehow safe, **42%** said they did not feel safe, and only **12%** answered that they did feel safe.

Basic needs

Regarding basic needs (like food, water, shelter, healthcare), **51%** (n=975) of respondents said they could not meet their basic needs at all, for **46%** who could partially meet them, and only **3%** that felt that they could completely meet their basic needs.

Access to aid

Correspondingly, **76%** (n=975) of respondents expressed that they did not have access to aid in their current location, albeit needing it. Only **14%** did have access to aid, and a remaining **5%** did not, but did not feel that they needed it.

For those who did receive aid, whilst many did not remember who provided it (**23%**, n=137), those who did, said it was primarily through local residents or volunteers (**22%**), followed by UN agencies (**18%**) and religious institutions (**15%**).

Support network

The conversation moved to asking people about their support network, which was defined as people or groups you can rely on for help, advice, or emotional support in your current location. The majority of respondents indicated that they did not have a support network in their current location (**79%**, n=973), for **17%** that did have one.

Those with support networks were asked a follow up question to describe what this support looked like.

Many respondents said they relied primarily on neighbors and local volunteers for help. Some also received support from organizations, associations, religious communities, or municipalities, although the extent and consistency of this aid varied. Others mentioned getting help from friends who had arrived in Lebanon earlier, and a few respondents emphasized the importance of psychological support.

Several individuals noted that support had stopped or was insufficient for their needs, particularly regarding housing and financial assistance. Negative experiences were also reported, including theft and a feeling of being a burden. A lack of sufficient support networks continued to be a significant issue for many.

Social tensions

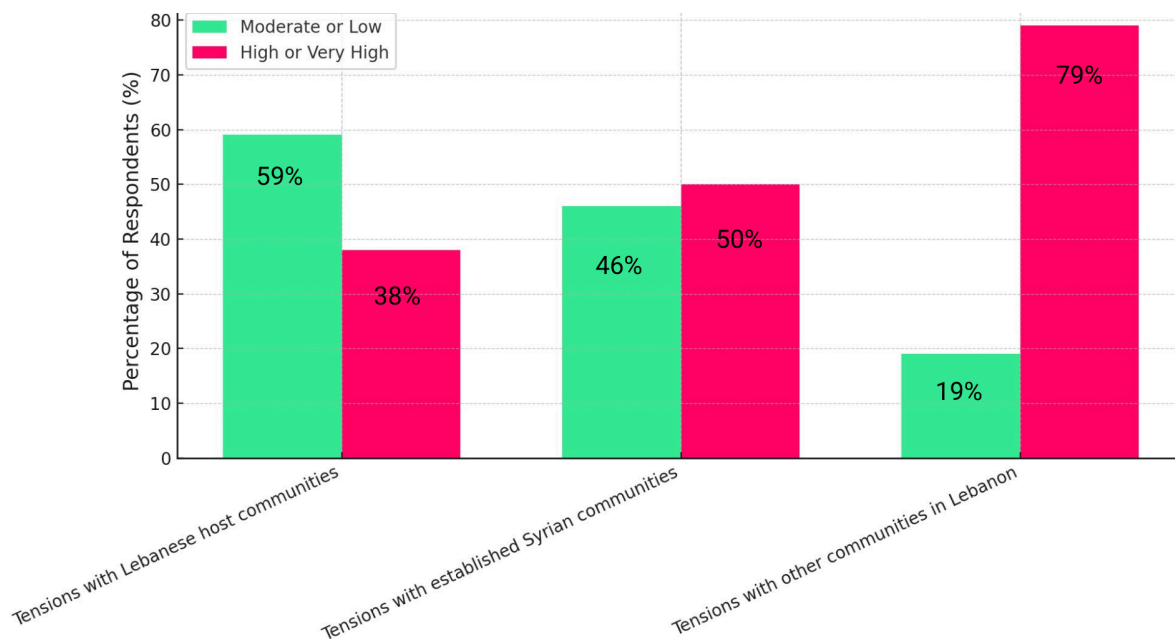
When discussing tensions between newly arrived Syrian communities and other groups living in Lebanon, the most chosen answer was that there were tensions with other communities in Lebanon (**46%**, n=970), followed by **22%** who said they felt no tension, **10%** with Lebanese host communities, and **9%** with Syrian communities who have been in Lebanon since before November 2024.

Tensions between newly arrived Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities were rated as moderate or low by **59%** of respondents (n=101), and high or very high by **38%**.

Tensions between newly arrived Syrian refugees and Syrian communities well established in Lebanon were rated as moderate or low by **46%** of respondents (n=82), and high or very high by **50%**.

Tensions between newly arrived Syrian refugees and other communities in Lebanon were rated as moderate or low by **19%** of respondents (n=441), and high or very high by **79%**.

Figure 4. Comparison of perceived tensions between newly arrived Syrians and other groups in Lebanon - All respondents except those reporting no tensions (n=624)



The current situation in Lebanon is characterized by a lack of overall safety and a significant struggle to meet basic needs for a large proportion of the newly arrived Syrians. Access to aid is limited for most, and support networks are largely absent. Reported high tensions with other communities present in Lebanon further compound their vulnerability.

Current needs and future plans

Current needs

When asked about their main needs at the moment, the majority of respondents picked shelter and housing (**74%**, n=970) or job opportunities and employment (**64%**), followed by safety and protection (**56%**) and clothing or hygiene items (**43%**).

Decision to leave

When asked about the decision to leave Syria and how they felt, **51%** (n=970) of respondents still believe that it was the right decision, despite the challenges, while **45%** said they were not sure. Only 10 respondents (**1%**) said that they regretted this decision.

Future plans

When asked about their future plans, **63%** (n=970) of respondents expressed wanting to move to a third country, **22%** do not know yet, and **12%** plan to stay in Lebanon. **2%** plan to move to another place within Lebanon. Only 7 respondents (**<1%**) said they were planning to go back to Syria.

International support

At the end of this conversation, respondents were asked about what kind of international support people in their situation needed most in an open answer format. Their answers (n=583) can be classified in the following categories:

1. Resettlement / asylum

"We want to seek refuge in a country where we can find housing, work, and opportunities for education." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

2. Basic needs

"Material assistance and securing the necessary needs of food, medicine, cleaning materials, shelter, and most importantly, education for children, and providing papers to travel within Lebanese territory so that we are not subjected to arrest and return to Syria to be killed by armed groups." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

3. Livelihood / economic opportunities

"Job opportunities for people, as the situation is exploitative in the worker's wages. Open interests for people with professional experience. I work in the field of selling clothes, and I love my job, but I lost it when I left Syria" - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

4. Healthcare

"I want medicine for me and my family. I have a child with a chronic disease" - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

"Help with my treatment, I am a patient with insufficiency, I do not have someone to help me with my treatment, including medicine, food, transport, money for treatment, and house rent" - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

5. Education

"Official documents that enable me to move within Lebanese territory, providing children with educational opportunities and job opportunities" - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

6. Legal status / protection / safety

"We want to seek refuge in a country where we feel safe, reassured, and psychologically comfortable, and to provide my children with safety, security, education, and culture, and to feel our humanity and regain our dignity" - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

7. Psychological / moral support

"Material, moral and psychological support." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

"Traveling to a safer country, money, food, medicine, education, and a decent life. In addition to the life we live, there are no minimum necessities of life, psychological fatigue, nothing we have, and it is very difficult in these circumstances. We hope for help. Thank you." - Newly arrived Syrian in Lebanon

Across all respondents' answers can be observed an overall intent of expectation to achieve those needs by resettling to a third country.

Upinion's role in supporting newly arrived Syrians

The conversation concluded by exploring how respondents wished Upinion to support them, given the organization's mission to amplify their voices to decision-makers and its inability to provide direct aid.

The most preferred form of support, chosen by **60%** of respondents (n=965), was ensuring their perspectives were presented in meetings and events with important actors, closely followed by creating more opportunities to speak directly to decision-makers (**23%**), third by sharing useful and trusted information (**21%**), and fourth by making sure their voices is part of reports or research (**20%**).

This indicates a strong desire among newly arrived Syrians to have their experiences and needs directly communicated to those with the power to influence their lives, and be correspondingly informed. It underscores the importance of advocacy and representation in addressing their challenges.

Conclusion

The brief reveals a dire situation for newly arrived Syrians in Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime. Their current circumstances are largely determined by the urgency and trauma of their departure, characterized by fear of persecution and sectarian violence, leading to hurried and often undocumented journeys. The current situation in Lebanon is characterized by a lack of overall safety and a significant struggle to meet basic needs for a large proportion of the newly arrived Syrians. Access to aid is limited for most, and support networks are largely absent. Reported high tensions with other communities present in Lebanon further compound their vulnerability.

The uncertainty of respondents' future is underscored by the high incidence of irregular border crossings and the difficulties encountered at both Syrian and Lebanese borders. A prevailing desire for resettlement in a third country reflects a perceived lack of safety and stability within Lebanon.

Correspondingly, the intentions and future plans of newly arrived Syrians in Lebanon overwhelmingly point towards seeking resettlement in a third country to secure safety, livelihood opportunities, and access to basic necessities. While some express uncertainty about the future, the very low number planning to return to Syria or stay permanently in Lebanon highlights the gravity of their situation and the desire for a more secure future elsewhere. Their preference for

Upinion's support reflects a strong need for their voices and experiences to reach decision-makers, demonstrating an understanding of the importance of advocacy and representation in addressing their complex challenges.

Contact

Noor Lekkerkerker
CEO
noor@upinion.com

Augustine Hacques
Researcher
augustine@upinion.com

