The Journey Home: Flight Related Factors on Refugee Decisions to Return*

Tiffany S. Chu,[†] Faten Ghosn,[‡] Miranda Simon,[§] Alex Braithwaite,[‡] and Michael Frith[§]

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Abstract

The international refugee regime promotes voluntary repatriation as the preferred solution to refugee crises. It is commonly held that it is safe for refugees to return once conditions are stable in the country of origin, which typically translates to when the violence between combatants ceases. However, the empirical record suggests that refugee returns are far from uniform in relationship to the presence or absence or level of violence in a conflict setting. In other words, we know remarkably little about the conditions under which refugee returns actually occur. In response to this shortfall in knowledge, we ask: how do refugees form decisions on when and whether they should return despite ongoing violence and instability in their country of origin? We focus upon one crucial part of the picture, in particular: how does prior exposure to violence in the country of origin affect refugees' subsequent decisions to return? To explore this relationship, we designed an original survey, implemented among 2,000 Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon to causally identify the effects of prior conflict exposure on refugees' decisions to return. We find that Syrian refugees are more willing to leave Lebanon and return home when they have prior experience of violence in Syria. We explain this counter-intuitive finding as a reflection of these particular refugees as "experts" who are better able to understand and assess their risk tolerance of violence. In contrast, refugees more removed from violence before fleeing their homes harbor more uncertainty of the threats associated with returning and are unwilling to accept the risk of doing so.

1 Introduction

There are now more than 70 million individuals globally who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. This represents the largest forced displacement of persons since the end of World War II. More than one-third of these individuals are refugees, who, owing to a well-founded fear of living in a war zone or being persecuted at home, are residing outside of their country of origin and are unwilling or unable to return. Increasing proportions of refugees are now displaced for more than 20 years (Hyndman and Giles 2017) and neighboring countries are hosting more than 80% of these refugees (UNHCR 2017). For example, the ongoing Syrian Civil War lies at the heart of the current crisis, with more than five million refugees forced to flee, predominantly to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. At the same time, Pakistan and Iran both host large numbers of refugees from Afghanistan, Kenya hosts many Somali refugees, and Bangladesh hosts large numbers of Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar. The challenges posed by these and other similar cases of protracted refugee situations highlight the need for more sustainable alternatives to neighbors supporting the bulk of the refugee population.

Over recent decades, the international community favored the onward mobility of refugees through resettlement to third countries. However, with this key tenet of the liberal international order in decline and populism on the rise, resettlement has become vanishingly rare. Accordingly, the repatriation or return of refugees to their countries of origin is once again identified by many observers as a preferred solution (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). In recent years, we have seen a slight uptick in repatriation and returns to countries of origin, yet the numbers are marginal compared to the wider refugee population. The number of refugees repatriated to their country of origin increased from 552,200 in 2016 to 667,400 in 2017 (UNHCR 2017). Nonetheless, this is still just 5% of the total refugee population and remains far below levels required to eat into the global population (Chu 2019). Moreover, premature returns are considered undesirable, as they threaten the norm of *non-refoulement*. Accordingly, it is crucial that we better understand the conditions under which refugees may possess agency in making decisions to return to their countries of origin.

This observation prompts the research questions motivating our study: What factors inform refugees' decisions about the future? Specifically, under what conditions might refugees be willing to consider returning to their countries of origin? In comparison to the voluminous literature on the causes of forced displacement, relatively little research explores the conditions under which refugee repatriation to countries of origin is likely to take place; and even less attention to the agency of individuals deciding to return. This literature typically employs the same "push and pull" framework used to explain the initial displacement, comparing current conditions in the host and origin country.

However, when conflict is ongoing, repatriation may involve returning to conditions reminiscent of the violence and instability from which refugees fled. As such, past displacement experience is likely to play an important role in the decision to return. By neglecting the conditions of emigration, scholars are homogenizing refugee experiences when, in reality, there is variation in across refugees in terms of exposure to violence and decisions to flee. We argue that this variation will be an important predictor of future intentions and needs to be considered when answering these questions.

How personal experiences before displacement might shape preferences toward repatriation is an empirical question. On one hand, we expect people who have experienced a traumatic event will be more wary of experiencing it again. For example, Cameron and Shah (2015) find that victims of natural disasters display higher risk aversion and Callen et al. (2014) find that exposure to violence leads individuals to have a preference for higher certainty. On the other hand, existing research in psychology has shown that exposure to adversity can prompt refugees to develop adaptive skills to identify threats, such as those of continued violence and instability at home, and find ways to minimize them (Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012a; Brück, d'Errico, and Pietrelli 2018). Furthermore, experimental research has also shown that people who have not experienced violence often imagine the risks of return to be significantly worse than those who have (Reinhardt 2017).

We build on existing explanations of refugee return decisions by developing a theoretical framework accounting for pre-flight experiences. We test this theory using an original survey,

implemented among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon (N=2,000) to identify the effects of prior conflict exposure on refugees' decisions to return. We find that Syrian refugees are more willing to leave Lebanon and return home when they have prior experience of violence in Syria. We explain this initially counter-intuitive finding as reflecting a better understanding of their tolerance to violence because these refugees are "experts" and are more capable of assessing risk. In contrast, refugees that were not directly exposed to violence before fleeing their homes are unsure of the threats associated with returning and are unwilling to accept the risk of doing so. This paper contributes to the scholarship on refugee movement in several ways. First, most literature on refugee repatriation takes the perspective of states. We add to this literature by examining the agency and desires of the individuals affected — refugees themselves. Second, we build on existing theory on refugee repatriation by developing a novel theoretical framework that accounts for the effects of past experiences on the decision to return and test it using original survey data. Third, we contribute to the nascent literature on the micro-level factors of refugee decision-making.

2 Repatriation as the Preferred Solution

There are many challenges to finding sustainable solutions for displacement. As the number of refugees continues to increase worldwide, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) promotes three durable solutions: local integration in the host state, third-country resettlement, and voluntary repatriation to countries of origin. While all three solutions are key components of the refugee regime, they are not equally viable at present. In 2016, "only 2.5 percent of refugees (552,000) were able to return to their home countries . . . and even fewer, 0.8 percent (or 189,300), were resettled through formal settlement programs. An even smaller percentage (0.001 percent, or 23,000) were naturalized as citizens" in host countries (Ferris 2018). These inadequate rates speak to a notable flaw in the logic of the three durable solution model: that the prioritization of repatriation gives current and potential host states an excuse to discount and, thus, shirk their contributions to the integration and resettlement alternatives. Since repatriation is considered

the preferred solution, local integration has morphed into under-resourced, temporary hosting and resettlement quota numbers have receded.

The burden of refugee-hosting is shared unequally between developed and developing countries (Ineli-Ciger 2019). States neighboring civil conflicts located in developing regions host more than eight of every ten refugees. These are countries that typically lack the economic means to support their own citizens and, thus, require outside assistance to accommodate and meet demands associated with hosting refugees. This pressure has prompted many host and transit countries to negotiate and sign compacts and arrangements with wealthier developed countries. These compacts, such as those signed between Jordan and the E.U. and Turkey and the E.U., are designed to provide an opportunity for wealthier states to contribute resources to host states in return for hosts minimizing the likelihood that refugees will attempt to continue their journeys towards the West. However, even these deals are insufficient to resolve the pressures on host states. Subsequently, the burden upon host states to provide sanctuary is too significant to be sustainable, especially when there is no foreseeable end to the intractable conflicts currently displacing civilians (Bradley 2013).

There are several domestic challenges associated with refugee hosting and integration (Hynie 2018). About a quarter of all refugees globally are from Syria and are hosted primarily in three countries: Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Lebanon and Jordan rank first and second, respectively, with the highest concentrations of refugees to citizens globally. In Lebanon, 1 in 6 residents is a refugee; in Jordan, it is 1 in 11. Given Jordan and Lebanon's past with violence and continuing issues with hosting Palestinian refugees, the Syrian refugee crisis has only deepened the economic, political, and social problems facing these two small nations. In Turkey, most refugees are hampered by additional issues that refugees commonly face in resettlement countries, particularly "by language skills, cultural shocks and a low level of education" (Akar and Erdoğdu 2018). Furthermore, the scarcity of resources generates dire conditions in refugee camps that threaten to undermine host security (Milton, Spencer, and Findley 2013). As is also true in developed countries (Dempster and Hargrave 2017), citizen populations in developing countries struggle to accept refugee populations within their borders, especially given the large number of refugees in

4

protracted scenarios (İçduygu 2015; Ghosn, Braithwaite, and Chu 2019).

The other alternative solution is third-country resettlement, which is more permanent than local hosting. When registered with the UNHCR in their first host country, refugees may request permanent resettlement in a third state. These third-country options tend to be in developed regions. Resettlement is considered permanent, with refugees initiating the naturalization process in their destination country and, thus, opting not to return to their country of origin. The provision of resettlement opportunities for refugees began after the mass exodus of Russian civilians during the formation of the Soviet Union and its implementation of widespread repression and detention against opponents and minorities. Issues with providing refuge for Russians lead numerous states to subsequently turn away Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. This poor performance during World War II, prompted the institutionalization of resettlement in the international refugee regime as a responsibility of developed countries under principles of mobility. Resettlement was a popular option until the 1980s when the scale of refugee numbers skyrocketed due to individuals fleeing new civil wars across many regions of the world. In response, countries once again retreated from their commitments and reduced their contribution to this global solution.

The onset of the Syrian civil war witnessed a renewal of states limiting resettlement numbers. Most states are limiting already small resettlement programs as part of broader restrictions on immigration policies. Perhaps most notably, the United States reduced the number of refugees they were willing to resettle. In 2016 the United States took in about 52% (96,900 out of 189,300) of refugees that were resettled globally, while in 2017 they took in only 27% (28,000 out of 102,800). In Europe, this backlash to resettling refugees has contributed to the election of populist and nativist political parties. In the USA, it lies at the heart of President Trump's Executive Order 13679, which temporarily eliminated the entry of Syrian refugees into the country. The UNHCR concluded that in 2018, just 55,692 of the 1.2 million refugees globally processed as eligible for resettlement were allowed to move to a third-country (UNHCR 2017). The diminishing role of resettlement likely reflects a broader decline of support for the liberal international order. Although there are a variety of studies essays demonstrating the positive economic, political, and social benefits of accepting

refugees (Jacobsen 2002; Cortes 2004; Taylor et al. 2016; Salehyan 2018), the international refugee regime suffers from a lack of cooperation by states willing to accommodate the displaced. This is reflected in a general trend toward states refusing to classify refugees as a unique class of immigrants deserving of protection. Instead, refugees are perceived as entering illegally or abusing international asylum law (Orchard 2014).

Given, thus, that developing host states are stretched to a limit and developed states lack the political will or moral courage to open their doors, it makes sense that repatriation is isolated as the preferred solution for refugee crises within the international community. The shift toward repatriation occurred in the 1980s because of the changing characteristics of refugee inflows from impoverished and distant civil conflicts. The UNHCR declared the 1990s to be the "decade of repatriation," intending to reduce the burden on host states (Hammerstad 2000). The mainly successful repatriation of Bosnian and Croatian refugees mostly convinced the international community in the mid-2000s that repatriation ought to be viewed as the gold standard for managing displaced populations.

Repatriation as a solution is not without its detractors. Critics argue such a strong focus upon repatriation encourages host states to push to violate norms of *non-refoulement*. As host states are increasingly burdened and refugee protection is considered temporary, many states push for refugees to leave as soon as possible (Barnett 2001). Already, both Jordan[1] and Lebanon[2] have targeted the return of Syrian refugees. Second, repatriation is considered to be a way for host states to release theselves from their duty of hosting refugees, thus eroding the human right to asylum (Adelman and Barkan 2011; Hathaway 2007). During the European migrant "crisis" in 2015, for example, there were recommendations for intervention in Syria in order to end the war and stem the flow of asylum seekers to their borders (Pollack 2016). As attitudes of governments harden, public opinion toward hosting worsens, and refugee numbers continue to increase, local integration becomes increasingly unsustainable as a solution for refugees. Due to this lack of

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[1]Reuters World News. July 6, 2018. "Jordan says the return of displaced Syrians in southern Syria is top priority."
[2]XianhuaNet News. January 1, 2019. "Lebanon's president calls for Syrian refugees' return amid Arab economic summit."

feasibility, governments frame hosting as a temporary solution until conditions in the country of origin allow for repatriation (Orchard 2014).

International law dictates four preconditions for the initiation of large scale repatriation programs: (1) there is a fundamental change of circumstances in the country of origin that would reduce the risk associated with return, (2) the decision to return is voluntary in nature, (3) a tripartite agreement is signed between the origin state, host country, and the UNHCR, and (4) the return process happens in safety and dignity. In practice, all conditions are rarely met, especially when host governments pressure both the UNHCR and refugees themselves to return. The lack of accountability toward upholding these conditions leads to commentary questioning whether observed returns of refugees are truly voluntary (Chimni 2004; Black and Gent 2006). While repatriation as a program is reasonably problematic since all four conditions mentioned above are rarely met, critics tend to overlook the realities on the ground and the preferences of refugees themselves. While shifts towards democracy and turnover in leadership, perhaps intuitively account for large volumes of returns, many individuals opt to return while violence continues in their country of origin (Stein and Cuny 1994; Stein 1997; Chu 2019).

A small literature explores the conditions under which refugees opt to return to their countries of origin. Typically, these studies employ the same "push and pull" framework used to explain the initial displacement (Schmeidl 1997; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Moore and Shellman 2007). Drawing upon this logic, it makes sense that return is more likely when circumstances at home are better than conditions in exile (Koser 1997). Under this framework, refugees returning during conflict may at first blush appear somewhat puzzling. However, refugee return under continued duress in the country of origin may not be so surprising given the dwindling opportunities for resettlement in third countries and the worsening conditions on the ground in neighboring host countries. Syrian refugees who have returned while their civil war is ongoing, for example, have commonly cited limited opportunities in the host state and a shift in aid resources to areas in Syria as reasons for their return (Al-Khateeb and Toumeh 2017).[3] Elsewhere, it is shown that regular

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[3]CBS News. February 2, 2018. "Safe or not, Syrian refugees slowly start coming home."

contact with individuals who stayed in their home town also increases the perception that return may be plausible, because there is a stronger sense of belonging and social capital in the area. In addition, evidence suggests that host state restrictions on movement, economic opportunities, and access to welfare provisions such as medical care to refugees, also make it difficult to sustain livelihoods abroad, in turn increasing the likelihood of return (Parkinson and Behrouzan 2015; Zetter and Ruaudel 2016). In some instances, it also appears that ultimatums by host states may motivate return migration. For example, Sudanese refugees in Israel must choose between repatriation with a stipend or the threat of detention (Gerver 2014).

Ultimately, existing scholarship on refugee return has not addressed several pressing questions. The first set of questions reflect how the causes of displacement might influence preferences for return. Current studies homogenize refugees' experiences when, in reality, there is often vast variation between refugees in terms of exposure to violence and factors motivating decisions to flee. The second set of questions relate to the timing of return. Some argue that repatriation should only occur when the conflict is over. This perspective, however, severely limits the scope of when return is observed, especially since refugees are quite likely to return while conflict is ongoing. Surveys show that the majority of Syrian refugees want to return home (Berlin Social Science Center 2015; Alsharabati and Nammour 2017), yet there is no clarification regarding when doing so might be possible and appropriate. Additionally, as refugees are observed returning while violence continues in their country of origin, a more comprehensive understanding of why this is happening is required. In the next section, we develop several arguments about when refugees are likely to want to return to their countries of origin.

3 Framework for Refugee Repatriation

In comparison to the voluminous literature on the causes of forced displacement, relatively little research explores the conditions under which refugee repatriation to countries of origin is likely to take place; and even less attention to the agency of individuals deciding to return. Drawing

on Kuhlman's (1990) framework for the study of refugee integration in developing countries, we propose a preliminary model of repatriation to begin to help fill this gap. We suggest factors impacting individuals' decisions to return can be grouped into at least four main categories: (1) pre-flight characteristics, (2) flight-related factors, (3) host-related factors, and (4) overarching policies. While we acknowledge that the factors across the different categories may be interrelated, for simplicity, we will discuss each category separately. A summary version of these factors is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Framework for Repatriation

Pre-flight Characteristics	Flight Related Factors	Host Related Factors	Policies
Demographic variables	Root causes of flight	Access to employment, housing, services	Host
Socio-economic background	Decision-making context	Physical/Verbal assault	Home
Ethno-cultural	Social ties	Wage theft/Forced labor	International

Concerning *pre-flight characteristics of refugees*, several features could influence whether the displaced wish to return to their countries of origin. A refugee's consideration of the option of return is likely affected by individual characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and employment status before their displacement. Given communitarian instincts and potential vulnerability to violence, women and children are commonly shown to be early movers when displacement occurs from countries of origin. This dynamic explains, in part, why such a high proportion of the global refugee population is made up of women and children.[4] For Syrian refugees, 76% are women and children.[5] Wealthier individuals have more resources, capabilities, and opportunities to flee before war escalates or reaches their hometown (Schon 2019), which affords them the ability to stay in exile in a host country for a more extended period. Individuals maintaining gainful employment in their hometowns, may be more reticent to depart, whereas individuals who have lost the ability and opportunity to work might be expected to depart sooner in order to seek out such opportunities elsewhere (Adhikari 2012). Finally, individuals with ethnic or similar ties to kin groups outside of the country may be more likely to travel to join those groups as a means of more sustainable fleeing

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[4]www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/29/
americans-like-refugees-better-when-theyre-women-and-children-especially-republicans/
[5]data2.unhcr.org/en/news/13033

ongoing conflict in their country of origin. Each of these logics ight lead us to expect that women and children, wealthy individuals, those without prospects at home, and those with stronger kin ties to other displaced individuals would be much less likely to want to return home early.

Flight factors refer to elements of an individual's decision to flee. These overlap, naturally, with *a priori* characteristics of refugees. These decisions are driven in the aggregate by the root causes of flight (e.g., conditions close to home, including individual exposure to violence, loss of safehaven, and experience of economic hardship (Moore and Shellman 2006; Steele 2009)). Decisions are also affected by the nature of one's inter-personal decision-making context, as well as actions taken by others within their familial and social networks (e.g., departure of family, friends, and neighbors). Most flight factors deal with changes in one's status or conditions directly linked to the conflict. The outbreak of war destroys infrastructure and inhibits economic opportunities, making an individual feel as if they have no choice but to leave (Adhikari 2012). In turn, it seems logical to anticipate that any decision regarding whether or not to return home must implicitly or explicitly involve a re-assessment of these flight factors and perceptions of likely safety or harm associated with returning to origin locations.

In addition to factors related to the journey of becoming a refugee, we also believe *host related factors*, or aspects of the refugee's situation in the host country, strongly influence decisions regarding repatriation and the potential return to the country of origin. Conditions in the host state that influence the preference for return include the local availability to refugees of economic opportunities, such as housing, employment, and access to other social services provided by the state or non-governmental organizations. Moreover, refugees that are exposed to verbal or physical assault by government agents or native populations are surely likely to feel less safe in the host country and more likely to consider returning home. The same could surely be said for individual experience of wage theft and forced labor.

The final category of relevant factors relates to the portfolio of relevant *policies* in place across multiple domains that are collectively designed to support refugee populations or define their rights and mobility. With respect to policies in the host country, this includes any laws affecting their abil-

10

ity to work, their freedom of movement, as well as any rights afforded to them to pursue permanent residency and naturalization processes. In the home country, relevant policies include whether individuals would be subject to forced conscription, as is the case broadly for males in Eritrea, and whether the incumbent government would grant minority and opposition groups amnesty upon return. Finally, there is a constellation of policies more broadly within the international community that influences individual decision-making regarding the potential for return. These policies include the ability of relief organizations to provide aid or the openness and willingness of countries to allow for refugee resettlement.

Each of these factors plays a crucial role in a refugee's decision-making and preference for return. In the section below, we focus on one category that we believe to be of special importance, namely factors that affected their flight in the first instance. In particular, we narrow in on how individual exposure to violence prior to displacement may affect an individual's decision-making regarding the potential to return to their country of origin.

3.1 Pre-flight exposure to violence and assessment of the risk of return

Perhaps the most robust expectation in the refugee studies literature is that populations are forced to flee from their homes as conflict closes in upon them (Schmeidl 1997). Empirical evidence reflects that countries experiencing conflict produce larger refugee populations (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). For instance, Ball and Asher (2002) demonstrate that daily counts of killings in Kosovo in 1999 correlated very closely with the number of refugees who fled the country in subsequent days. Research also demonstrates that refugees depart countries mired by an absence of civil liberties and rights, as well as those in which citizens (especially minority groups) are targeted by repressive actions by their governments (Neumayer 2004 2005; Moore and Shellman 2007).

This displacement logic operates not just in the aggregate for populations and countries as a whole, but also at the level of the individual citizen (potential refugee). An individual's risk threshold and perception of such risk will inform how they make decisions. Numerous studies show how individuals from areas of conflict or natural disasters alter their risk preferences based

on their prior exposure to similar types of events (Eckel, El-Gamal, and Wilson 2009; Voors et al. 2012). Cameron and Shah (2015) For example, victims of violence display strong preferences for high degrees of certainty regarding future decisions (Callen et al. 2014), and victims of natural disasters subsequently display higher risk aversion in anticipation of future events (Cameron and Shah 2015).

Extrapolating from these bodies of research, we might expect refugees directly exposed to violence in their country of origin before they fled are less likely to desire to return while conflict is ongoing. Fearing for their lives, and being directly exposed to such violence, these individuals will refuse to return unless conflict ends, or may not even wish to return, at all. Their experiences with violence lead these refugees to prefer avoiding re-exposure. In other words, those who understand the implications of violence should be deterred by the risk of living through it again. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1a: *Refugees exposed to violence before they were displaced are less likely to want to return to their countries of origin.*

While first-hand exposure to adversity can heighten individuals' perception of future risks (Callen et al. 2014; Voors et al. 2012), it can also prompt them to develop adaptive skills to identify threats and find ways to manage and absorb them (Brück, d'Errico, and Pietrelli 2018; Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012b). These skills can increase individuals' perceived competence to tackle similar situations in the future. Several studies even find that individuals are more risk-acceptant if they have previously been exposed to violence (Voors et al. 2012), or at least that they are often less risk-averse than others (Bocquého et al. 2018). In the context of refugee decision-making, this equates to anticipating that refugees who were exposed to violence prior to their displacement may be more likely to prefer returning to the locus of that violence than are individuals without such prior exposure.

A variety of literatures help explain why this might be the case. Scholarship on bounded ratio-

nality and adaptation suggests, for example, individuals use simple heuristics to make inferences about a decision under constraints of limited time, knowledge, and capabilities (Gigerenzer and Selten 2002; Simon 1972). Rather than optimizing over a range of outcomes,"individuals will tend to 'bet' on the environment on the basis of past experience and a little probing" (Gigerenzer and Todd 1999). That is, individuals develop tools to assess and act within a specific domain based on experiential learning. For example, individuals exposed to military shelling may learn how to gauge the distance of shells from the various sounds they make. Recognizing these sounds can help them evaluate when to take cover. If this simple strategy matches reality, individuals will be able to make quick, adaptive decisions that they perceive protect themselves against potential harm.

Prospect theory suggests that losses and gains are valued differently (Kahneman and Tversky 2013). According to prospect theory, people dislike losses more than they desire gains. This finding implies that people are generally more willing to accept higher risks to avoid losses than to secure an equivalent gain. Heath and Tversky (1991) found, for instance, individuals would reverse their preferences depending on whether outcomes are framed as generating gains or losses. Outside of the lab, people make decisions based on a reference point, which can be assumed to be the status quo. For refugees, this reference point might be their current situation in the host state. Under this framework, when thinking about the possibility of return, a refugee may be more likely to accept the risk of returning home if they perceive an objectively deteriorating relative situation locally in the host country.

Individual perceptions of competence within a given domain are essential determinants in an individual's willingness to gamble on uncertain events (Heath and Tversky 1991). Successfully overcoming obstacles will tend to promote higher self-efficacy or perception of control over adverse events (Bandura 1977). Self-efficacious individuals will tend to tackle threats head-on, while individuals with a lower sense of self-efficacy will tend to avoid them. In the context of a Syrian refugee's decision-making about the future, knowledge of how to identify threats and act accordingly will allow individuals to bet on a return to Syria even while the threat of violence persists. Furthermore, individuals who experienced violence prior to fleeing Syria may have been those who

waited until there was no option but to flee. The notion of "anchoring" suggests that individuals enjoy a strong commitment to a specific location and therefore, since these individuals waited until the last minute possible, may also feel driven to return there as soon as possible.

By contrast, refugees who did not experience violence first-hand in Syria, but fled regardless, may be more anxious and uncertain about return. Individuals tend to be intolerant of risks perceived as uncontrollable, having catastrophic potential, and having fatal consequences (Slovic 1987). As a demonstration of this, societies experiencing rare large-scale terrorist events are more likely to have higher stress and anxiety levels due to the uncertainty shock of the event (Galea et al. 2002; Rubin et al. 2005). However, countries experiencing "chronic" terrorism are considerably less likely to exhibit such fear and uncertainty regarding future violent events (Spilerman and Stecklov 2009).

In other words, the more familiar an event is and the more knowledgeable the individual experiencing it, the less likely they are to fear similar events in the future. This is why risk assessment is different for experts and the public on a wide variety of issues (Slovic 1987). For example, "repeated bombing-related media exposure [after the Boston Marathon bombings] was associated with higher acute stress than was direct exposure" (Holman, Garfin, and Silver 2014). In a different domain, research shows that residents who refused to evacuate, despite impending warnings of a natural disaster, were those who had successfully overcome previous disasters that were deemed similar (Strang 2014). In addition, individuals who were surveyed about hypothetical disasters exhibited exaggerated beliefs and took opposite decisions as compared to those who had actually lived through one of these events (Reinhardt 2017).

Taken together, these logics imply that refugees who directly experienced violence in their country of origin may be the ones who are more willing to leave the host country and return to the country of origin. This may be the case, because their prior exposure and "expert" status helps to ensure that they can better assess and tolerate risk associated with the potential for future exposure. By contrast, refugees who fled their homes prior to direct exposure to violence are likely to feel greater uncertainty regarding future potnetial exposures and, thus, be unwilling to accept the risk.

Their skepticism and anxiety about the situation make them less willing to return to their country of origin.

Accordingly, we present a competing hypothesis:

H1b: *Refugees exposed to violence before they were displaced are more likely to want to return to their countries of origin.*

4   Research Design

4.1   Survey Sample

During June and July 2018, we deployed a survey of Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon. According to the official statistics of the UNHCR, over 1,000,000 Syrians are living in Lebanon. They are distributed all over the country, with 70% living in residential buildings and 30% in unofficial settlements and camps (See Table 2 for distribution across the Governorates). Our full sample of 2,000 surveys was distributed across the governorates to reflect the official village-level records of the UNHCR. Based on the information provided by municipalities about the distribution of Syrian refugees in their towns across different neighborhoods, samples were selected according to the proportions provided by the UNHCR. Random neighborhoods were chosen, and after the first house with a respondent who is 18 years and older is willing to participate is selected, enumerators skip the next three houses to go to the fourth. This selection process to identify respondents is then followed in each new town selected. In unofficial settlements, the same method was applied; after the first tent is chosen enumerators skip the next three before selecting the second.

4.2   Dependent Variables & Modeling Strategies

We rely upon two of our survey questions to test our hypotheses. The first assesses each respondent's feelings about the possibility of returning to Syria at all. The question asked was: "How

Table 2: Distribution of Survey Sampling Population For Syrian Refugees by Governorate

	Refugee Population	Syrian Refugee Population	Sample
North Lebanon & Akkar	251299	25%	503
Beirut & Mount Lebanon	287651	27%	545
South Lebanon & Nabitieh	117750	12%	232
Bekaa & Baalbek-Hermel	360733	36%	720
Total	1017433	100%	2000

much do you disagree/agree with the following statement: I would NOT return to Syria under any circumstances." Respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly agree (meaning they would NEVER return to Syria) to strongly disagree (meaning they WOULD return to Syria). From the responses, we generate our first dependent variable, *never return ordinal*, for which we run a series of ordered logistic regressions.

The second question provides information on the refugee's preferences for the following year. We asked: "Refugees in Lebanon have three alternatives: remain in Lebanon, resettle in a third country, or return to Syria. Whether or not you think you are able to do any of these things, which of these things would you LIKE to do next year? Please give me your first, second, and third choice." This leads to our second dependent variable, *next year first choice*, which is a categorical variable coded as reflecting the respondent's first choice for the following year. To analyze this second dependent variable, we use multinomial logistic regressions, with "returning to Syria" treated as the baseline comparison category.

4.3   Independent Variables

Our primary independent variables are meant to capture each refugee's exposure to violence and the broader context of their time in Syria prior to becoming displaced and fleeing to Lebanon. We generate four independent variables from our survey to evaluate these factors. The first, *experienced violence*, is a dichotomous indicator coded one if the refugee experienced violence in Syria before departing their home town and 0 otherwise. Each respondent was asked if they experienced the following: physical assault/beaten, physical and mental torture, abduction, sexual violence,

forced labor, wage theft, shot at, or shelling. If the respondent answered that they experienced at least one of these types of violence, the variable is coded as 1. The next variable breaks down the baseline 0 category of *experienced violence*. If an individual claimed they or any of their family members did not experience any of these forms of violence, we asked if they were aware of such violence taking place in their town, elsewhere in their municipality, or elsewhere in their broader district. Accordingly, *aware of violence* identifies those refugees who knew violence was occurring nearby but did not experience it directly. The baseline category for this variable identifies those refugees who did not experience nor were aware of such violence taking place nearby.

We then code two variables capturing the context in which the respondent decided to flee. *Discussed fleeing* is a binary variable coded one if, prior to their displacement, the individual talked about fleeing with either their household, neighbors, family, community leaders, local authorities, or on online forums, and 0 otherwise. Next, we generate a categorical variable, *proportion of hometown that fled*, which differentiates individuals who fled when almost none/a small proportion (baseline), half, or most/all of their hometown had already fled.

We control for a variety of other factors that may influence the decision-making process. The first group of control variables accounts for the individual's time in Lebanon. This includes the length of time, in years, the individual has been displaced from Syria. The rest, all binary, indicate whether the individual is registered with the United Nations,[6] whether they believe it is easy to cross the Lebanese/Syrian border, whether they think the situation in Lebanon has gotten worse since their arrival, and whether they are currently (at the time of the survey) employed. The next batch of variables measure individuals' demographic characteristics and their pre-war situations. This includes their gender, age, whether they have children, and their pre-war income, education, and employment statuses. We also include Syrian district fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity based on their hometown location.

This list of controls may appear to be lacking some intuitively important factors. While the

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[6]The Lebanese government voted in 2014 to halt the UNHCR from registering any more Syrian refugees. This took effect January 2015, which means those arriving at this time could no longer receive benefits and aid from the UNHCR.

literature on refugee repatriation highlights a lack of economic opportunities in the host state and having social networks at home as drivers for return, our survey sample shows no variation on this front. Almost all respondents find that Lebanon has few economic opportunities for refugees. Similarly, almost all refugees still have family and connections living in Syria. Additionally, differentiation in ethnic/religious similarity may also make one more or less likely to return. In our sample, all refugees reported being Sunni Muslim. Thus we have no variation in identity to leverage. However, this is entirely representative of the broader Syrian refugee population in Lebanon and not, thus, a limitation of the study. While these factors may indeed be expected to affect an individual's likelihood of returning, we are unable to test this explicitly given the homogeneity in responses. If anything, it allows us to capture dynamics of the individual's context of flight more explicitly given there is no variation in these other factors.

5 Results

Table 3 presents the results of our ordered logistic regression assessing whether our Syrian refugee respondents agreed with the statement that they would never return to Syria under any circumstances. Column (1) displays results of our primary independent variable capturing whether they experienced violence. Column (2) adds awareness of violence and whether the respondent discussed fleeing before doing so. Our final ordered logistic regression in Column (3) includes the proportion of the hometown that had fled by the time the individual decided to flee.

Our primary independent variable of interest, *experienced violence* is positive and significant across all three model specifications. Recall that our dependent variable captures increasing disagreement with the sentiment that they wish to never return to Syria. Our results reflect that refugees who experienced violence are more likely to disagree with the sentiment that they would never return to Syria under any circumstances.[7] In other words, individuals are more willing to return to Syria at some point if they experienced violence before being displaced from their home-

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[7]Results are robust to whether the respondent or one of their family members experienced violence.

Table 3: Decision to Flee on Desire to Return to Syria at Some Time

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Experienced violence	1.025***	0.620***	0.534***
	(0.116)	(0.135)	(0.138)
Aware of violence		-1.159***	-0.684***
		(0.180)	(0.197)
Discussed fleeing		-0.533**	-0.478**
		(0.170)	(0.171)
Half hometown fled			1.145***
			(0.215)
Most hometown fled			1.178***
			(0.209)
Registered with UN	0.285*	0.195	0.106
	(0.120)	(0.122)	(0.124)
Living in camp	0.082	0.135	0.180
	(0.124)	(0.126)	(0.128)
Displaced duration	0.022	0.008	0.012
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.030)
Employed	0.387**	0.402**	0.434**
	(0.132)	(0.134)	(0.137)
Easy border crossing	-1.019***	-0.795***	-0.617***
	(0.130)	(0.134)	(0.142)
Situation in LBN is worse	0.618***	0.594***	0.374*
	(0.138)	(0.137)	(0.147)
Married	0.355†	0.377*	0.306
	(0.188)	(0.190)	(0.191)
Male	-0.512***	-0.452***	-0.408**
	(0.124)	(0.126)	(0.128)
Children	-0.365†	-0.328†	-0.302
	(0.187)	(0.189)	(0.191)
Age	0.001	0.002	0.003
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Pre-war income: $201-$500	0.888***	0.519***	0.183
	(0.133)	(0.142)	(0.161)
Pre-war income: Greater than $500	0.743***	0.269	-0.158
	(0.157)	(0.169)	(0.195)
Employed before war	-0.300*	-0.234†	-0.168
	(0.126)	(0.128)	(0.131)
Intermediate school dropout	-0.074	-0.096	-0.059
	(0.118)	(0.120)	(0.121)
Secondary school dropout	0.387*	0.351*	0.240
	(0.161)	(0.162)	(0.166)
Secondary school & above	0.382	0.375	0.424
	(0.250)	(0.252)	(0.259)
N	1503	1499	1477

$^\dagger p < 0.1$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$. Syrian hometown fixed effects omitted.

towns. This finding provides initial support for Hypothesis 1b.

Interestingly, if an individual refugee did not experience violence themselves but was aware of these acts nearby, they are less likely to report that they would return to Syria under any cir-
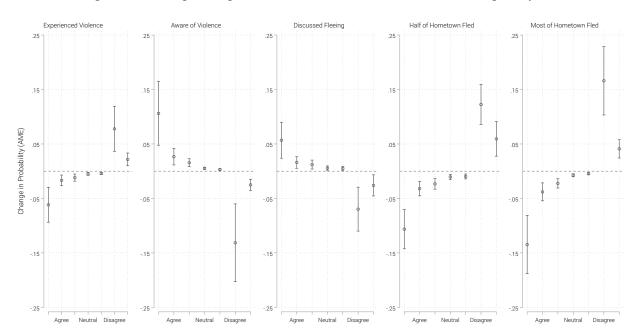
Figure 1: Average Marginal Effect of Factors on Never Returning to Syria

cumstance. This relationship is a comparison to those that neither experienced nor were aware of violence nearby. Additionally, if the refugee discussed fleeing with others before doing so, they are now less likely to return to Syria under any circumstance. Finally, the higher the proportion of individuals who had already fled the respondent's hometown, the more likely that individual reports that they would return to Syria at some stage. From our theoretical framework, these results also appear to confirm that individuals with more direct experience of violence are more likely to desire to return.
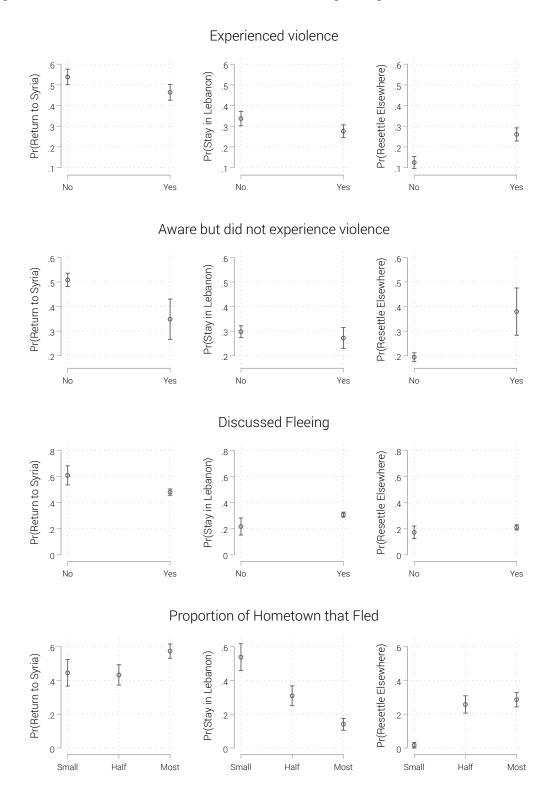
Figure 1 displays the average marginal effect of our primary covariates from model 3. This graph is the visual representation of the substantive size of the results discussed previously. The first three panels demonstrate the substantive distinction between individuals exposed to violence, those that were aware of violence, and those that neither experienced nor were aware of the violence. The data reflect more descriptively that 67.7% of refugees who experienced violence disagree with the statement that they would never return to Syria. This is compared to 43.8% and 57.8% of individuals who were aware of violence (but did not experience it) and those that neither experienced nor was aware of violence, respectively.

20

The fourth and fifth panels of Figure 1 also show clear and stark differences between individuals who have previously discussed fleeing (as compared to those that took the decision individually) and those who fled after others had already fled. Of those who discussed fleeing beforehand, 20.4% agree that they would never return to Syria under any circumstances compared to 29% that did not have such discussions. Finally, 41.8% of refugees who were among the first to flee their hometown disagree that they would never return to Syria, compared to 65.4% and 66.1% of those where half or most of their hometown had fled, respectively.

Next, we turn to discuss our multinomial regression results comparing refugee respondents' preferences regarding the three potential choices they face in the coming year: to return to Syria, to stay in Lebanon, or to resettle elsewhere. The ordinal logit provided a sense of how refugees felt about returning overall. With the multinomial logit, we can capture their preference for the near future. We employ the same nested model specifications as with our first set of tests. We present the results of our full model using predicted probabilities (Figure 2) and average marginal effects (Table 4). Full results tables can be found in Table 5 and Table 6 of the Appendix. Table 5 provides results that compare the first choice preference of resettlement to return, whereas Table 6 shows the estimates comparing staying in Lebanon with return.

In general, refugees are more likely to prefer to return to Syria in the following year instead of staying in Lebanon or seeking resettlement in a third-country. This preference is demonstrated by the higher probabilities reflected in the left-hand panel of the figure (return to Syria), as compared to the middle (stay in Lebanon), and the right-hand panel (resettle elsewhere). However, contingent on the context of their flight, we see variation in these probabilities. Those who did not experience violence nor were aware of violence nearby and refugees who did not discuss fleeing having higher probabilities of choosing return than do their counterparts. Alternatively, those who fled after the majority of their hometown had fled have the highest probability of seeking return. These findings, we would suggest, present contradictory evidence concerning our test hypothesis. On the one hand, the experience of violence appears to depress (admittedly already high) preferences for return. On the other hand, those refugees that remained in Syria longer than most locals before fleeing appear

Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities of Factors Influencing Refugee's Preferences for Future

to harbor an increased desire to return, which could be consistent with the explanation that these individuals developed more considerable expertise of the conflict in their ability to assess risk.

On average, remaining in Lebanon is a less popular preference than returning to Syria. Here we see the most variation between individuals in terms of the proportion of their hometown that fled before them. Refugees who fled earlier than others in their hometown are more likely to want to stay in Lebanon than individuals who stayed until after a majority of others had already fled. Moving to resettlement, those who experienced violence have a higher probability of preferring resettlement than those who did not. Similarly, those aware of the violence are more likely to desire resettlement options than those who did not. Refugees who were among the first to flee their hometown are the least likely to prefer resettlement, compared to those who waited.

Table 4 displays the average marginal effect of these factors on preferences for the future. In general, we find the context of flight boosts the predicted probability that refugees will prefer resettlement in a third-country and decreases the likelihood that refugees will want to return to Syria. However, these relationships should be compared to the predicted probabilities presented in Figure 2. While we see these positive and negative changes in predictions, refugees overall overwhelmingly prefer returning to Syria than the options of staying in Lebanon or finding asylum in another country.

Table 4: Average Marginal Effect of Factors on Preferences for Future

	Return to Syria	Stay in Lebanon	Resettle Elsewhere
Experienced violence	-0.076	-0.062	0.138
Aware of violence	-0.162	-0.038	0.199
Discussed fleeing	-0.129	0.086	0.042
Half of hometown fled	-0.013	-0.229	0.242
Most of hometown fled	-0.398	0.128	0.270

6 Conclusion

There are now more than 22 million refugees globally; the largest such number since the end of World War II. Existing policies dealing with refugee crises neither ease the disproportionate burden

on neighboring countries serving as hosts nor strengthen temporary protections until repatriation is deemed feasible. As refugee situations become protracted, neighboring host states cannot sustain the vast number of refugees that they host, especially since third-country resettlement is mainly off the table as an alternative(Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Indeed, even though we have witnessed a slight uptick in levels of repatriation and return to countries of origin, this still benefits no more than 5% of the total global refugee population and remains far below levels required to uphold commitments to refugees (Chu 2019). While policy-makers and other commentators criticize premature repatriation as a solution for displacement, it is unclear what accounts for refugee preferences to return to their homes.

This paper addresses this gap in our knowledge by seeking answers to the following research questions: What factors inform refugees' decisions about the future? Specifically, under what conditions might refugees be willing to consider returning to their countries of origin? Moreover, do personal experiences before displacement and conditions in the host country shape preferences toward repatriation? To begin to answer these questions, we designed an original survey, implemented among 2,000 Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon, to causally identify the effects of prior conflict exposure on refugees' decisions to return. We find initial evidence that Syrian refugees are more willing to leave Lebanon and return home when they have prior experience of violence in Syria. We explain this initially counter-intuitive finding as reflecting that they better understand their tolerance to violence, because they are "experts" and are more capable of assessing risk. In contrast, refugees who were not directly exposed to violence before fleeing their homes are more unsure of the threats associated with returning and are unwilling to accept the risk of doing so.

We also find that individuals that endured the difficulties of the Syrian Civil War longer than most of their hometown's fellow residents are more likely to desire to return to Syria. However, we also reveal evidence that exposure to violence may decrease a desire to return to Syria as compared to the option of potential resettlement to a third country. In combination, it may well be that individuals with the greatest "expertise" regarding the violence of the Syrian Civil War are sorting themselves into two distinct categories: those that desire return and those that desire

resettlement. This potential sorting mechanism warrants further investigation moving forward.

While the international refugee regime identifies three durable solutions to refugee crises, only one option seems to be promoted by the international community and considered accessible to refugees: repatriation. Moreover, our study demonstrates that refugees residing in neighboring countries have internalized the lack of prospects of alternative solutions, leading to a preference toward return. Counter-intuitively, this is particularly the case with individuals who more directly experienced the ongoing violence.

The right for asylum seems to be eroding, particularly since developed states refuse to contribute to providing safe haven and instead move toward closing off their borders. As developing states continue to take on most of the physical responsibility or accommodating refugees, we offer several tentative policy recommendations. First, more attention needs to be paid to the conditions on the ground in these over-burdened neighboring states. Organizations are overwhelmed, living situations are over-capacity, and resources are dwindling. Beyond these issues, the lack of economic opportunities for refugees in these situations provides a stronger incentive for refugees to seek alternative options. Second, industrialized countries need to allow for more asylum-seekers to settle within their borders and politicians should stop dehumanizing migrants and refugees for this only exacerbates the problem. Third, the international community should work on ending protracted civil wars rather than arming different sides of the conflict.

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7 Appendix

Table 5: Resettlement Compared to Return as First Choice

	(4a)	(5a)	(6a)
Experienced violence	0.974***	1.154***	1.059***
	(0.178)	(0.209)	(0.214)
Aware of violence		0.654*	1.441***
		(0.312)	(0.358)
Discussed fleeing		0.514*	0.535*
		(0.234)	(0.237)
Half hometown fled			3.004***
			(0.601)
Most hometown fled			2.748***
			(0.593)
Registered with UN	-0.029	-0.027	-0.047
	(0.182)	(0.184)	(0.188)
Living in camp	-0.153	-0.147	-0.085
	(0.178)	(0.179)	(0.184)
Displaced duration	0.061	0.067†	0.064†
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Employed	0.358†	0.384*	0.364†
	(0.191)	(0.193)	(0.198)
Easy border crossing	-0.692***	-0.823***	-0.620***
	(0.172)	(0.176)	(0.182)
Situation in LBN is worse	0.662***	0.635***	0.419*
	(0.172)	(0.173)	(0.181)
Married	0.446	0.403	0.349
	(0.299)	(0.302)	(0.312)
Male	-0.073	-0.116	-0.026
	(0.182)	(0.184)	(0.188)
Children	0.025	-0.028	-0.054
	(0.268)	(0.271)	(0.278)
Age	-0.016*	-0.016*	-0.016*
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Pre-war income: $201-$500	-0.688***	-0.505*	-0.712***
	(0.189)	(0.196)	(0.210)
Pre-war income: Greater than $500	-1.322***	-1.124***	-1.339***
	(0.256)	(0.265)	(0.277)
Employed before war	-0.148	-0.196	-0.115
	(0.185)	(0.187)	(0.191)
Intermediate school dropout	-0.118	-0.093	-0.079
	(0.179)	(0.180)	(0.184)
Secondary school dropout	0.128	0.098	-0.022
	(0.229)	(0.232)	(0.238)
Secondary school & above	0.036	0.076	-0.005
	(0.352)	(0.355)	(0.365)
Constant	-0.663	-1.196*	-3.781***
	(0.465)	(0.514)	(0.770)
N	1503	1499	1477

$^\dagger p < 0.1$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. Syrian hometown fixed effects omitted.

Table 6: Staying in Lebanon Compared to Return as First Choice

	(4b)	(5b)	(6b)
Experienced violence	-0.559***	-0.232	-0.231
	(0.165)	(0.201)	(0.222)
Aware of violence		0.741**	0.105
		(0.235)	(0.271)
Discussed fleeing		1.055***	0.854**
		(0.308)	(0.321)
Half hometown fled			-0.639*
			(0.281)
Most hometown fled			-1.897***
			(0.278)
Registered with UN	-0.334†	-0.331†	-0.151
	(0.175)	(0.179)	(0.192)
Living in camp	-0.052	-0.052	-0.190
	(0.184)	(0.186)	(0.199)
Displaced duration	-0.018	-0.015	-0.038
	(0.045)	(0.047)	(0.049)
Employed	0.199	0.205	0.161
	(0.188)	(0.190)	(0.202)
Easy border crossing	0.921***	0.692***	0.229
	(0.183)	(0.188)	(0.212)
Situation in LBN is worse	-0.749***	-0.752***	-0.346
	(0.200)	(0.200)	(0.220)
Married	-0.142	-0.173	-0.146
	(0.268)	(0.276)	(0.287)
Male	0.138	0.088	0.064
	(0.174)	(0.178)	(0.189)
Children	0.378	0.340	0.248
	(0.265)	(0.273)	(0.286)
Age	-0.004	-0.004	-0.003
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Pre-war income: $201-$500	-1.804***	-1.495***	-0.924***
	(0.185)	(0.195)	(0.219)
Pre-war income: Greater than $500	-3.896***	-3.515***	-2.506***
	(0.414)	(0.424)	(0.443)
Employed before war	0.516**	0.439*	0.330†
	(0.174)	(0.177)	(0.188)
Intermediate school dropout	-0.065	-0.030	-0.135
	(0.168)	(0.170)	(0.179)
Secondary school dropout	-0.901***	-0.910***	-0.943***
	(0.251)	(0.255)	(0.271)
Secondary school & above	-0.512	-0.498	-0.644
	(0.403)	(0.406)	(0.442)
Constant	0.236	-0.879†	0.594
	(0.444)	(0.526)	(0.590)
N	1503	1499	1477

†$p < 0.1$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. Syrian hometown fixed effects omitted.