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

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Abstract

Normative practice for forced displacement is to voluntarily repatriate refugees once conditions are stable in the country of origin, which typically translates to the end of violence. However, Syrian refugees have been returning over the past few years even though there is yet to be a definitive end to the Syrian civil war. Therefore, this paper asks how refugees form decisions on when and whether they should return despite ongoing violence and instability in their country of origin? For now, we focus upon one part of the picture: how prior exposure to violence in the country of origin affects their subsequent decision to return home from their host country. To explore this relationship, we designed an original survey, implemented among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon (N=2,000), 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 initially counterintuitive 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 to returning and are unwilling, therefore, to accept the risk of doing so.

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1 Introduction

We are observers to the largest forced displacement of persons globally since the end of World War II. Approximately one third of the more than 70 million forcibly displaced are refugees who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted at home, are residing outside of their country of origin and unwilling or unable to return. Given the intractable nature of modern conflicts and the undue burden being shouldered by neighboring host states, however, the international community is increasingly interested in better understanding when refugees might be willing and able to consider returning home. The ongoing Syrian Civil War lies at the heart of the current crisis, with more than five million refugees forced to flee the country, predominantly to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. This case reflects a broader trend in which more than 80% of refugees are hosted in countries neighboring their states of origin. These are typically countries that are themselves still developing economically and subject to their own political violence and contestation. This includes Pakistan and Iran, which host large numbers of refugees from Afghanistan, Kenya, which hosts many Somali refugees, and Bangladesh, which has become host to numerous Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar.

These neighboring countries are increasingly experiencing situations of protracted hosting. For those refugees experiencing protracted displacement (5 years or more), the average length of time away from their country of origin is now more than 20 years (Hyndman and Giles 2017). The difficulties and vulnerabilities that characterize protracted refugee situations highlight the need for more sustainable alternatives to neighbors shouldering the burden. The post-World War Two preferred solution was to facilitate the onward mobility of refugees through resettlement in third countries. However, with this key tenet of the liberal international order in decline and populism on the rise, resettlement has become vanishingly rare. The UNHCR has concluded that in 2018, just 55,692 of the 1.2 million refugees processed as eligible for resettlement were actually resettled (UNHCR 2017).

With hosts overburdened, protracted refugee situations likely unsustainable, and resettlement largely off the table, the repatriation or return of refugees to their countries of origin is identified

by many observers as the preferred solution (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). In recent years, we have seen a slight uptick in repatriation and returns to countries of origin. 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, returns have long been considered undesirable, as they can threaten violation of norms 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 discussion prompts 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? And what personal experiences from their time prior to displacement and during their time in the host country shape their preferences for potentially returning to their country of origin? To explore this relationship, we designed an original survey, implemented among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon (N=2.000), 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 initially counterintuitive 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 to returning and are unwilling, therefore, to accept the risk of doing so.

2 Repatriation as the Preferred Solution

There are many challenges to finding sustainable solutions for displacement. As the number of refugees continue 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 compo-

nents 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). Prospects moving forward look even more constrained, because with each passing year conflicts generate even more refugees, while developed countries restrict the number of displaced they are willing to take in.

The burden of refugee hosting is shared unequally between developed and developing countries. More than eight of every ten refugees are hosted in neighboring countries in developing regions. These are countries that require outside assistance if they are to meet demands for resources without lacking funds to support their own citizens. This pressure has prompted a number of 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 EU and Turkey and the EU, are designed to provide an opportunity for wealthier states to contribute resources to host states in return for hosts ensuring that refugees do not 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 great to be sustainable, especially when there is no foreseeable end to the intractable conflicts currently displacing civilians (Bradley 2013).

There are a number of domestic challenges associated with attempts at local integration of refugees (Hynie 2018). About a quarter of all refugees are from Syria, and are being 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 their own past with violence, and continuing issues with hosting Palestinian refugees, the Syrian refugee crisis has 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, this 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 when they stay longer than anticipated (İçduygu 2015; Ghosn, Braithwaite, and Chu 2019). As attitudes of governments harden and public opinion of hosting worsens, an alternative and more sustainable solution for refugees is required.

One alternative lasting solution is third-country resettlement. When registered with the UNHCR in their initial host country, refugees may request to be permanently resettled in a third state. These states tend to be in developed regions. Resettlement is typically permanent, with refugees not expected to return to their country of origin. Providing opportunities for resettlement has long been viewed as a responsibility of developed countries under principles of mobility that underpin the post-WW2 liberal international order. Even though it can be argued that there are strategic benefits associated with resettling refugees (Salehyan 2018), this outcome remains vanishingly rare. Most countries are reducing their contribution to this global solution. Perhaps most notably, the United States has cut back its resettlements. In 2016 they took in about 52% (96,900 out of 189,300) of refugees that were resettled in a third country, while in 2017 they took in only 27% (28,000 out of 102,800). Most states are limiting already small resettlement programs as part of broader restrictions on immigration policies. 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. In sum, the diminishing role of resettlement likely reflects the broader decline of the liberal international order.

Given that local integration appears unsustainable and third-country resettlement is increasingly rare, the repatriation or return of refugees to their countries of origin looks set to become the "preferred" durable solution to refugee issues globally. This is far from a novel declaration. Indeed, as the number of people displaced grew in the 1980s, the UNHCR declared the 1990s to be the "decade of repatriation" with the goal of reducing the burden on host states (Hammerstad 2000). The mainly successful repatriation of Bosnian and Croatian refugees largely convinced

the international community in the mid-2000s that repatriation is the gold standard for managing displaced populations. As a consequence, 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.

Nonetheless, this option has not been without its detractors. Some critics argue, for instance, that a focus upon repatriation encourages host states to push to violate norms of *non-refoulement*. They base this concern upon the observation that the legal pre-conditions are often not met. First, there are questions about whether observed returns of refugees are truly voluntary (Chimni 2004; Black and Gent 2006). As host states are increasingly burdened and refugee protection is 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 itself 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).

While repatriation as a program is reasonably problematic since all four aforementioned conditions are rarely met, critiques tend to overlook the realities on the ground and the preferences of refugees themselves. Indeed, perhaps against most preconceptions, many refugees tend to return in the midst of the same conflict that sent them fleeing in the first place (Stein and Cuny 1994; Stein 1997). 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 (Chu 2019). This is somewhat puzzling given most studies on forced displacement use a "push and pull" framework suggesting civilians are pushed out due to repressive action, violence,

[1]Reuters World News. July 6, 2018. "Jordan says 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."

and a loss of livelihood while civil conflict persists and are pulled toward settling in areas where their livelihoods would be better protected (Schmeidl 1997; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Moore and Shellman 2007). However, refugee return under such conditions perhaps ought to not be 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, commonly cite 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]

A niche 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. Building from this framework, these studies argue return is more likely when circumstances at home are better than conditions in exile (Koser 1997). Regular contact with individuals who stayed in their home town also increases the perception of return as an easier option, 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 were presented with the choice 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 variation across refugees in terms of exposure to violence and how decisions to flee were taken. The second set of questions relate to the timing of return. Some argue repatriation should only occur when the conflict is over. This, however, severely limits the scope of when return is observed, especially

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

since refugees are now more 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 as to when doing so might be most appropriate. Additionally, as refugees are observed to return 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 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 has been given to the agency of individuals making the decision 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. Similar to Kuhlman (1990), we believe factors that impact individuals' decisions to return can be grouped into 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 the purpose of simplicity we will discuss each category separately. A summary version of these factors is discussed in Table 1.

Table 1: Framework for Repatriation

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

With respect to *pre-flight characteristics of refugees*, several features could influence whether or not they wish to return to their countries of origin. A refugee's consideration of the option

of return is likely to affected by their individual characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and employment status prior to departure from their home. Given communitarian instincts and vulnerability to violence, women and children are commonly shown to be early movers when displacement occurs from countries of origin.This 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 may be more capable of fleeing before war escalates or reaches their hometown, which might also allow them to stay in exile in a host country for a longer period of time. By contrast, however, individuals maintaining gainful employment in their hometowns, may be more reticent to depart, whereas individuals who has lost the ability and opportunity to work might be expected to depart sooner in order to seek out such opportunities elsewhere. 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 ongoing conflict in their country of origin.

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 conditions close to home (e.g., individual exposure to violence, experience of economic hardship, and inter-personal decision making context), conditions nearby (e.g., violence in neighboring towns or districts), 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). The direct targeting of civilians during war motivates individuals to flee to different areas where they will feel safe, whether internally or externally in the country (Moore and Shellman 2006; Steele 2009).

In addition to factors related to the journey of becoming a refugee, we also believe that *host*

[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

factors or aspects of the current situation in the host country strongly influence decisions regarding repatriation and potential return to the country of origin. This could include the local availability to refugees of economic opportunities, such as housing, employment, and social services provided by the state or non-governmental organizations. This also is reflected in whether or not refugees are exposed to verbal or physical assault by government agents or native populations, and whether they are forced into indentured servitude.

The final category of relevant factors relates to the portfolio of relevant *policies* in place to determine the rights of refugees in their host states as well as the conditions under which return might be expected to occur. With respect to policies in host country, this includes any laws restricting their ability to work or 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 minority and opposition groups would be granted amnesty by the incumbent government upon return. Finally, there are a constellation of policies more broadly within the international community that influence individual decision-making regarding the potential for return. This includes those dictating the ability of relief organizations to provide aid, or the openness and willingness of countries to allow for refugees resettlement.

Each of these factors is likely to play an important role in an individual's decision as to whether or not to return. In the section below, we focus on just one category, the flight. In particular, we narrow in on how exposure to violence impacts an individual's decision to return to their country of origin.

3.1 Flight Related Factor: Exposure to Violence

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; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). Ball and Asher (2002), for instance, demonstrate daily counts of killings in Kosovo in 1999 correlated very closely with the number of refugees who fled the country at the same time.

Research also demonstrates that refugees depart countries characterized as having 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).

Initial evidence shows that this displacement logic operates at the individual- and local-level. An individual's risk threshold and perception of such risk will inform how they make decisions. Numerous studies show that risk preferences of individuals from areas of conflict or natural disasters are altered due to their exposure (Eckel, El-Gamal, and Wilson 2009; Voors et al. 2012). In fact, 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.

Therefore, we might expect refugees directly exposed to violence in their country of origin before they fled are less likely to want 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. This is because individuals who have experienced violence are more likely to prefer avoiding re-exposure. In other words, those who understand the implications of violence should find the risk of living through it again all the more terrifying. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1a: *Individuals with exposure to violence are less likely to want to return.*

While first-hand exposure to adversity can alter individuals' perception of future risks (Callen et al. 2014; Voors et al. 2012), it also prompts refugees to develop adaptive skills to identify threats and find ways to minimize them (Brück, d?Errico, and Pietrelli 2018; Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012). These skills can increase refugees' perceived competence to tackle similar situations in the future. Several studies even find that individuals who have been exposed to violence are in fact, more risk seeking (Voors et al. 2012), or at least less loss averse than others (Bocquého et al. 2018). In other words, we might expect refugees who directly experienced violence are more

likely to prefer returning over those who did not.

A variety of literatures help explain why this might be the case. Scholarship on bounded rationality and adaptation (Gigerenzer and Selten 2002; Simon 1972) suggests, for example, individuals use simple heuristics to make inferences about a decision under constraints of limited time, knowledge, and capabilities. 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 harm.

Prospect theory suggests losses and gains are valued differently (Kahneman and Tversky 2013). According to prospect theory, people dislike losses more than they desire gains. This implies 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 even 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. With respect to refugees, the reference point can 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 in the host country.

Individual perceptions of competence within a given domain are important determinants in a refugee's willingness to gamble on uncertain events (Heath and Tversky 1991). According to Bandura (1977), successfully overcoming obstacles will tend to promote greater self-efficacy or a perception of control over adverse events. Individuals that are self-efficacious will tend to tackle threats head on, while individuals with a lower sense of self-efficacy will tend to avoid them. As such, 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. Another related explanation that helps understand why refugees returning while conflict is ongoing is the concept of anchoring. Individuals who experienced violence may have been those who waited until there was no option but to flee because they waited until they were met with violence. Anchoring suggests a strong commitment to a certain location and therefore, since these individuals waited until the last minute possible, may also feel connected to return as soon as possible.

Individuals who did not experience the violence first-hand, 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 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). In contrast, countries experiencing "chronic" terrorism are less likely to exhibit such fear and uncertainty over 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 afraid they are likely to be of such events. Slovic (1987) argues this is why risk assessment is different for experts and the public on a wide variety of issues. Holman, Garfin, and Silver (2014) found "repeated bombing-related media exposure [after the Boston Marathon bombings] was associated with higher acute stress than was direct exposure." 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 similar in nature (Strang 2014).

Taken together, 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. They understand their tolerance due to being "experts" and are more capable of assessing risk. In contrast, refugees who were not directly exposed to violence are more unsure and unwilling to accept the risk; their uncertainty and anxiety about the situation makes them less willing to return to their country of origin.

Accordingly, we present a competing hypothesis:

H1b: *Individuals with exposure to violence are more likely to want to return.*

4 Research Design

4.1 Survey Sample

During the months of 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 is distributed across the governorates with the goal of reflecting the official village-level records of the UNHCR. Based on 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 is applied; after the first tent is chosen enumerators skip the next three before selecting the second.

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

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 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 the baseline comparison category as returning to Syria.

4.3 Independent Variables

Our primary independent variables are meant to capture each refugee's exposure to violence and context at the time of flight. We generate four independent variables from our survey to evaluate these factors. The first, *experienced violence*, is a dichotomous indicator coded 1 if the refugee experienced violence in Syria prior to departing their home town and 0 otherwise.[6] 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, nearby municipality, or district.

[6]Each individual 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.

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 that capture the context in which their decision to flee was taken. *Discussed fleeing* is a binary variable coded 1 if 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 set of variables accounts for the individual's time in Lebanon. The first is the length of time, in years, the individual has been displaced from Syria. The rest, all binary, are whether the individual is registered with the United Nations,[7] believes the Lebanese/Syrian border is easy to cross, thinks the situation in Lebanon has gotten worse since their arrival, and their current (at the time of the survey) employment status. The next batch of variables are demographic characteristics and their pre-war situation. This includes their gender, whether they have children, age, education, and their pre-war income and employment status. We also include Syrian district fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity based on their hometown location.

This list of controls may appear top be lacking some intuitively important factors. While the 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 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. Yet, all refugees reported being Sunni Muslim. While these factors may certainly make an individual more likely to return in other contexts, we are unable to test this explicitly given the homogeneity in responses.

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

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.[8] In other words, individuals who experienced violence can be thought of as being more willing to return to Syria at some time as compared to individuals who never experienced violence prior to being displaced from their hometowns. This 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 circumstance. This is now a comparison of these individuals 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 greater 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,

[8]Results are robust to whether the respondent's family member or if either themself or a family member experienced violence.

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

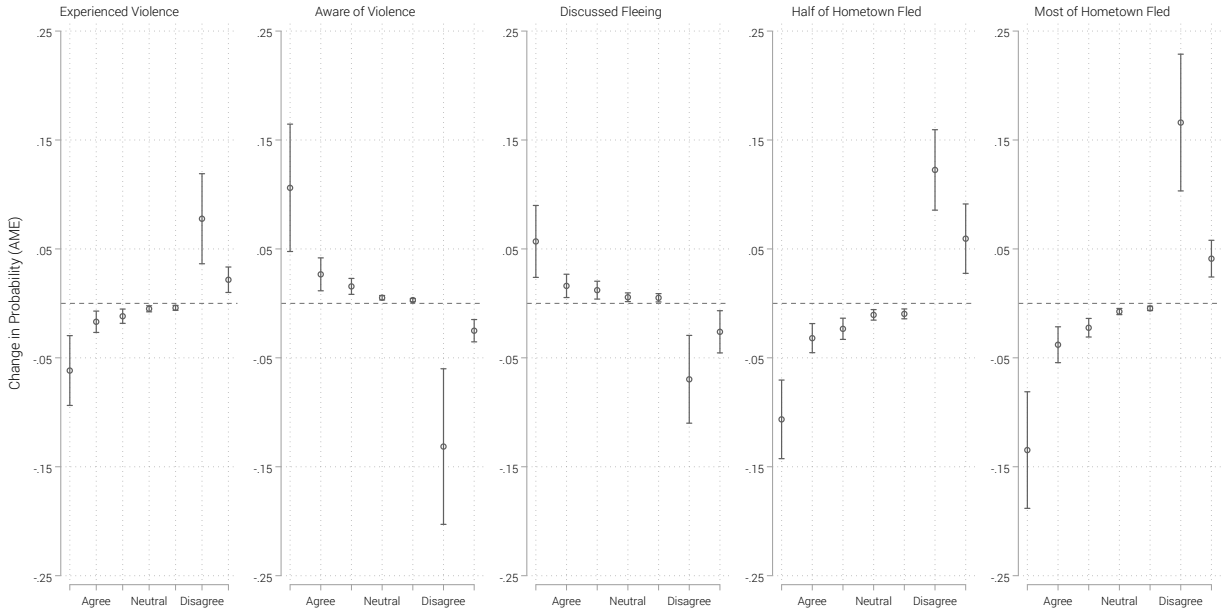
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Experienced violence	1.025***	0.620***	0.534***
	(0.116)	(0.135)	(0.138)
Aware of violence		-1.159***	-0.684***
		(0.180)	(0.197)
Discussed fleeing		-0.533**	-0.478**
		(0.170)	(0.171)
Half hometown fled			1.145***
			(0.215)
Most hometown fled			1.178***
			(0.209)
Registered with UN	0.285*	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.

these results appear to also 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 is

Figure 1: Average Marginal Effect of Factors on Never Returning to Syria

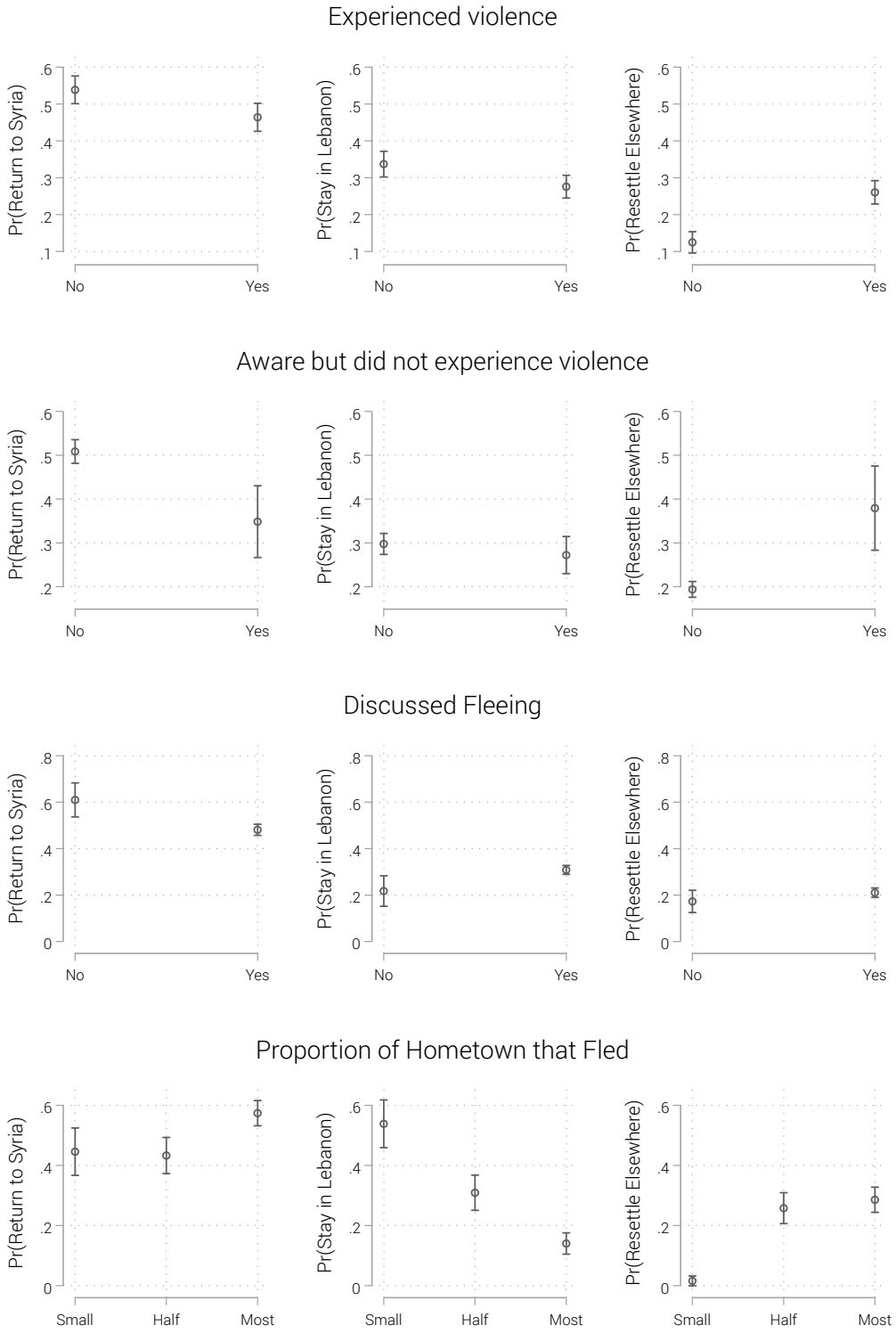


the visual representation of the substantive size of the results discussed previously. The first three panels clearly demonstrate the substantive distinction between individuals exposed to violence, those that were aware of violence, and those that neither experienced nor were aware of violence. The 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 were aware of violence, respectively.

The fourth and fifth panels of Figure 1 also show clear and stark differences between individuals who has 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 discussing our multinomial regression results comparing refugee respondents'

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



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 are able to 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 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. This 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 only after the majority of their hometown had fled have the highest probability of seeking return. These findings, we would suggest, present contradictory evidence with respect to our test hypothesis. On the one hand, experience of violence appears to depress (admittedly already high) preferences for return. On the other hand, having remained in Syria for longer than most other locals prior to fleeing, which could be thought of as consistent with developing greater expertise regarding the conflict, appears to increase desire to return.

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. Those who fled before 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 amongst the first to flee in 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 should be compared to the predicated 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

The largest forced displacement of persons globally since the end of World War II has resulted in more than 22 million refugees. More than 80% of these individuals reside in host countries neighboring those of their origin. The ongoing Syrian Civil War lies at the heart of the current crisis, with more than five million refugees forced to flee the country, predominantly to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. With hosts overburdened, protracted refugee situations likely unsustainable, and resettlement largely off the table, the repatriation or return of refugees to their countries of origin is identified by many observers as the preferred solution (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). In recent years, we have seen a slight uptick in repatriation and returns to countries of origin. The number of refugees repatriated to their country of origin increased from 552,200 in 2016 to 667,400 in 2017 (UNHCR 2018). 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). 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 paper addresses this need 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? And what personal experiences from their time prior to displacement shape their preferences for potentially returning to their country of origin? To explore this relationship, we designed an original survey, implemented among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon (N=2,000), 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 counterintuitive 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 to returning and are unwilling, therefore, 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 actually sorting themselves into two distinct categories: those that desire return and those that desire resettlement. This potential sorting mechanism warrants further investigation moving forward.

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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

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