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# The Syrian Refugees in Egypt and their Return

The Case of Syrian Refugees in Damietta

American University of CAIRO, March 26, 2026  
TRACHMED project presentation

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# Why Refugees in Damietta?

## ○ Why Damietta?

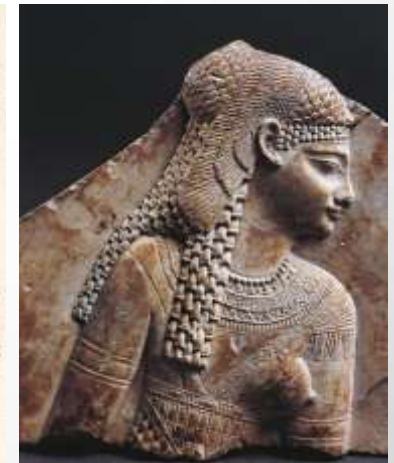
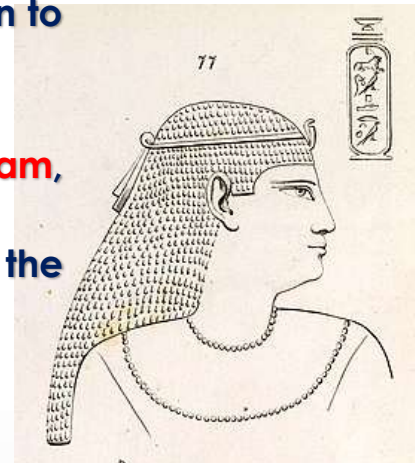
- I have worked with UN-Habitat on the **Local Economic Development of Damietta (and Qena)**
- Complementary to the **AUC/CMRS-EHUB+IOM** study on refugees that focused on **Cairo and Alexandria** (to be published).

## ○ Damietta

- Ranks 10/27 in Egyptian GDP/Capita ppp
- Assumed low unemployment rate
- Hub of an **active furniture industry**, exporting
- Important fish products development hub
- An active port, a shipyard, river transportation to central Egypt, ...
- **Historical social relations with Bilad al-Cham**, marriages
- Low number of Syrian and other refugees in the Governorates' population



## Cleopatra 1<sup>st</sup> the Syrian, the Goddess





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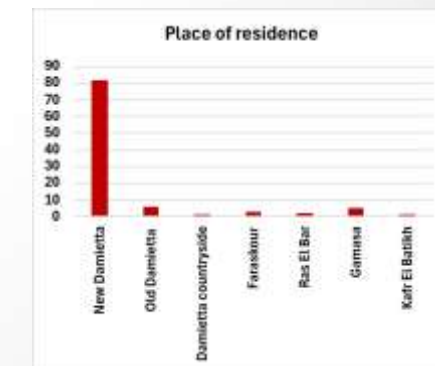
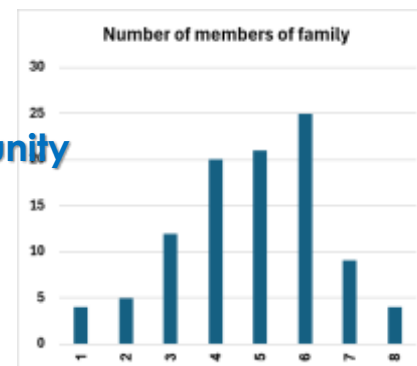
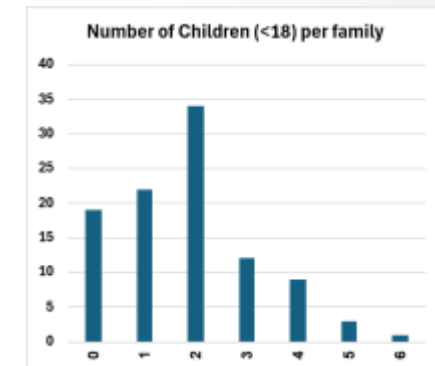
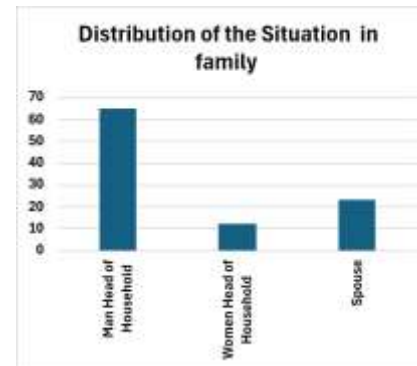
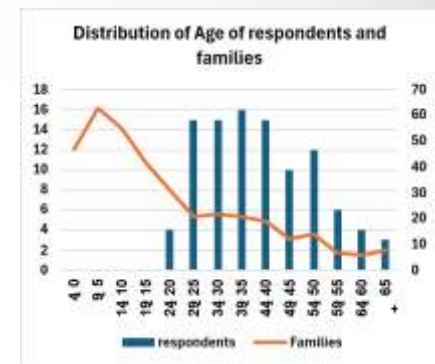
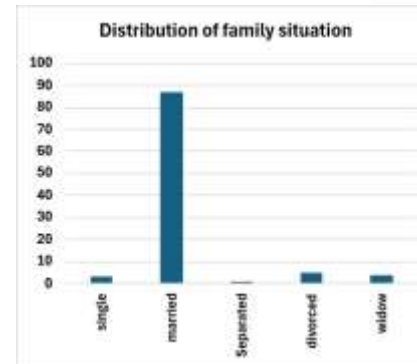
# The Sampling

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## ○ 100 structured interviews

- 58% female
- Average age: 41 years.  
Then most fled Syria when aged 20-30
- Most are married  
14 women heads of family
- Members of family: 4.6 in average
- Average number of children <18: 2.3
  - 81% have at least 1 minor child
  - Families without children are old or very young couples
  - The largest family is of 8 members with 5 children
- 82% live in New Damietta city
  - Furniture industry and the already resident Syrian community
  - Other places: Egyptian families, Lower rents, following a problem





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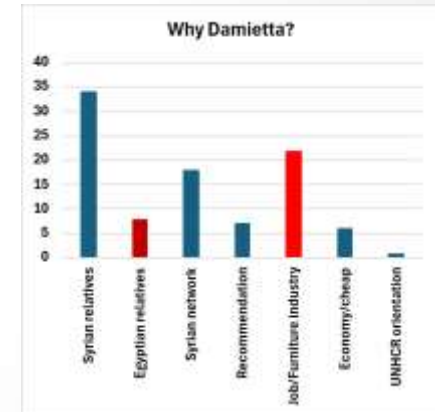
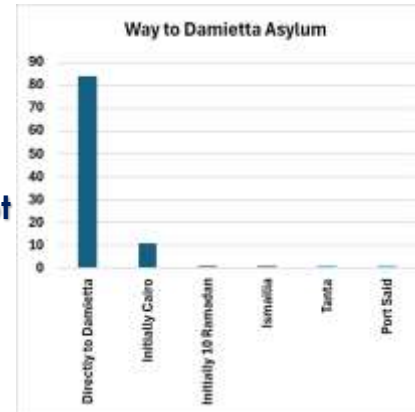
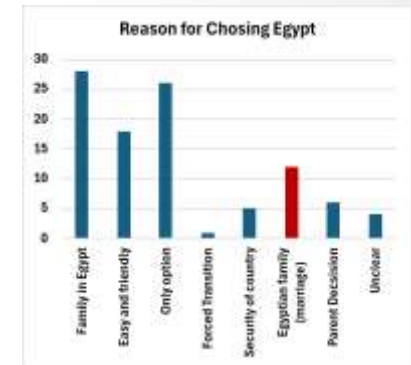
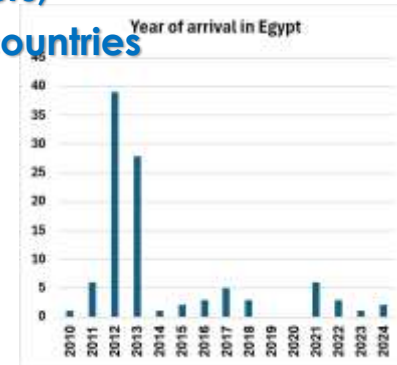
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والدراسات  
الشرق الأوسطية

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# Their Arrival to Egypt

- 67% arrived at a very **early stage** in Egypt
  - The later arrivals are mostly family members,  
Or due to the combats or passage by other countries
- Why choosing Egypt?
  - 47% social reasons  
including 12% Egyptian family
  - 26% no other alternative
  - 23% affinity with the country
- 67% came directly to Egypt, by plane from Beirut
  - 20% through Sudan... 10% Jordan...
  - 14% tried asylum in Jordan and Lebanon
  - One family stayed a year in Libya
- Why choose Damietta? And not elsewhere in Egypt
  - 84% directly to Damietta
  - 48% for family relations/network  
8% for Egyptian family ties
  - 22% for the furniture industry
  - 6% as it is cheap

110/182 children = 60% born in Egypt





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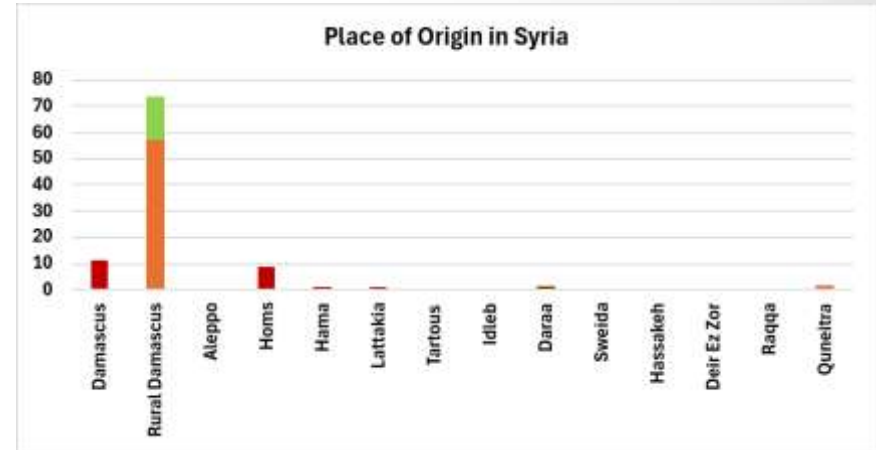
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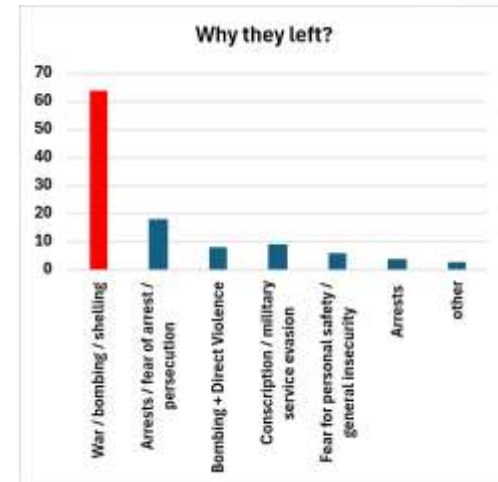
# Where do they come from?

- Where do they come from?
  - 68% from Damascus and its peripheries
  - Saqba alone 15%  
+ Douma 8%, HammouriyeH 7%
  - 9% from Homs:
  - So mostly from zones of fighting and destructions



**Why Saqba? The furniture industry hub in Syria as well as Douma and HammouriyeH**

- Why they left?
  - 64% war and bombing
  - 18% for direct persecution
  - 9% evasion from military service
  - 5% for family reasons  
Including fleeing family violence





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Trachinotus mediterraneus  
medicinal use in the Mediterranean

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# Saqba near Damascus

## ○ Saqba

- 26,000 in 2004 census
- 25-49% of housing damaged (UNHCR)
- Still active in furniture
- Suffered and suffers from Turkish competition





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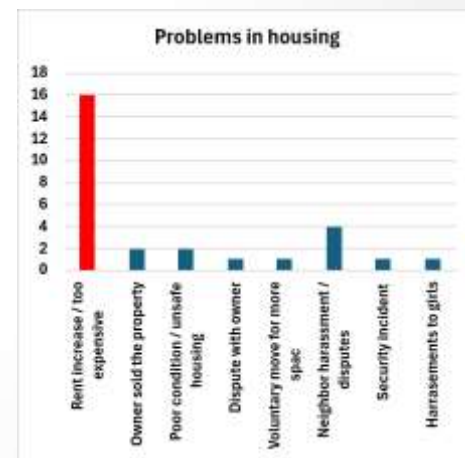
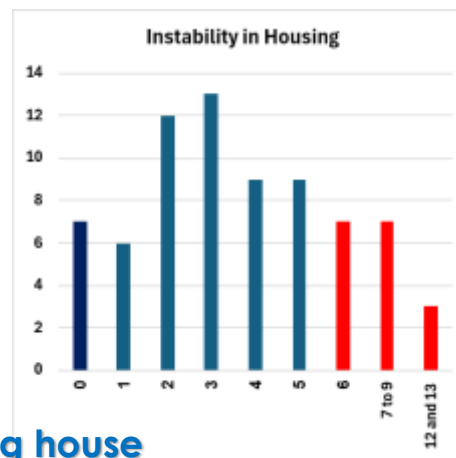
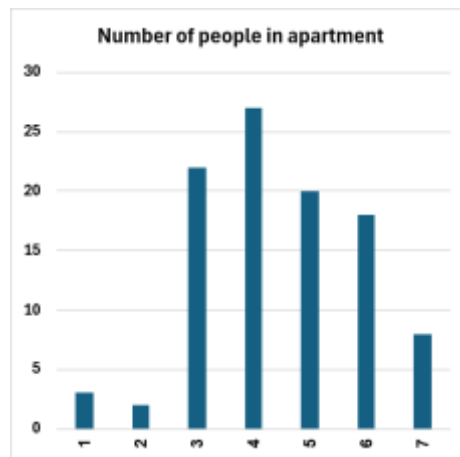
# Housing in Damietta

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- 99% live in apartment buildings
  - One in roof top
- 10% own their apartments
- 4.5 persons per apartment in average
  - Up to 7 for 8%
- Average monthly rent 4,468 EGP/month
  - = US\$ 89... around US\$ 20 per person
  - Often more than 50% of revenue
  - Min : 2 000 — Max : 8 000 EGP
- Extreme Precarity in Housing
  - Only 7% never moved
  - >75% moved at least 3 times
  - 17% moved at least 6 times
  - Sudden rise in rent → moving
- 25% still have problems with housing
  - Rent rise major problem
  - Few problems with the neighbors
  - One case of an armed person entering house

## Most cheap apartments are outside New Damietta





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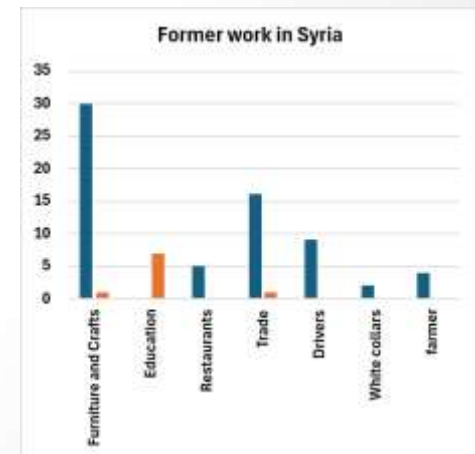
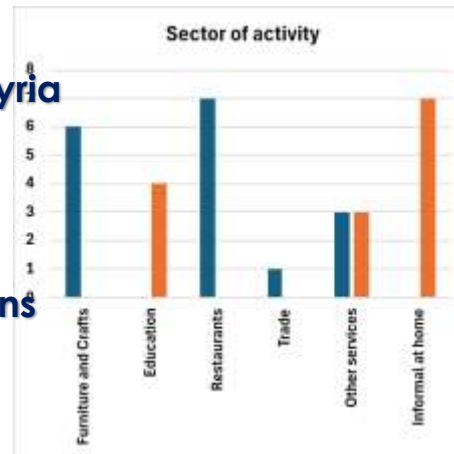
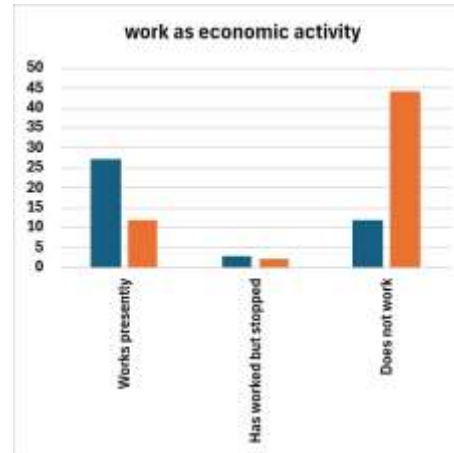
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# Economic Activity

Work in Egypt is almost as in Syria, but disqualification

- 64% of men, 21% of women are working
  - 5% worked but stopped health, failure,
  - Women work mostly informal at home
  - Men primary breadwinners
- Average Salary 6,600 EGP = US\$ 130
  - Range 200 to 12,000 EGP
  - Rent alone 68% of average income
- All working in furniture are men
  - Most women are informal home
- 77% of men, 31% women used to work in Syria
  - 45% of men in furniture and crafts
  - Some multiple jobs
  - Some men and wife working
- Only 19% of working employed by Egyptians
  - 32% by Syrian employers
  - And 48% own-employment





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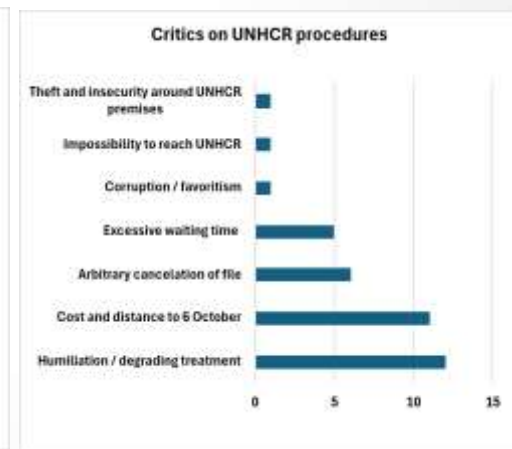
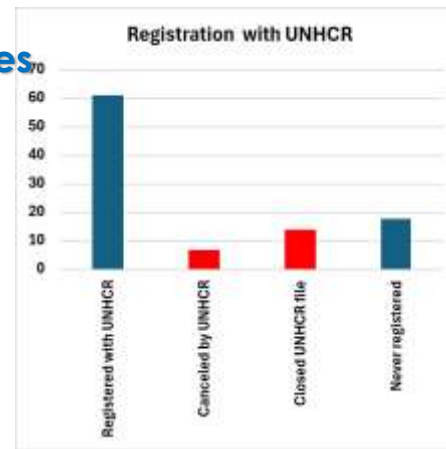
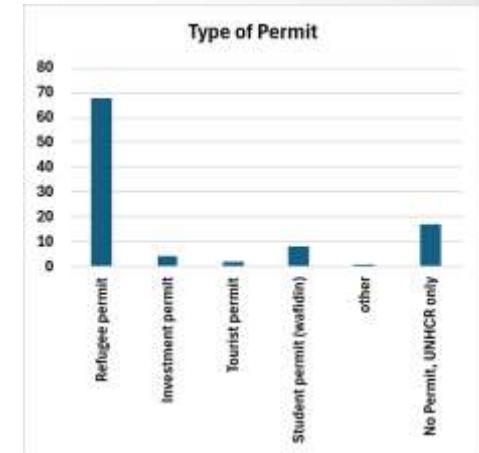
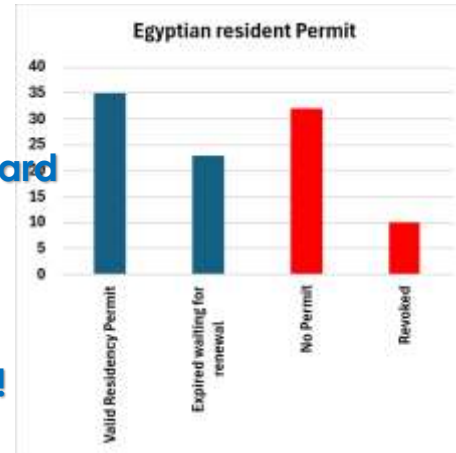
# Legal residency, UNHCR

- Only 35% have valid residency permit
  - +23% waiting renewal
  - 10% revoked
  - 32% no permit, most UNHCR yellow card
- 68% of permits are as **refugees**
  - 4% investment, 8% students
- 82% were registered with UNHCR
  - 21% have their registration  **canceled!**  
often arbitrarily
- Severe critics on UNHCR procedures
  - And on the permit renewal procedures

**Appointments 2028 !!!**

  - Massive legal precarity for residency (renewal)
    - ➔ Arrest and deportation
  - The yellow card permit procedures  
Create severe vulnerability
    - HCR is perceived as hostile, non-transparent
    - Distance to registration is a real obstacle
    - Arbitrary cancellation is the main threat

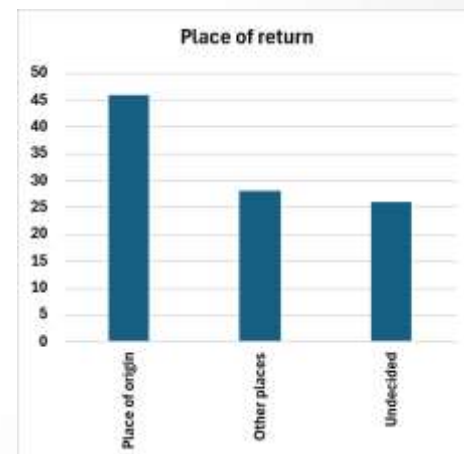
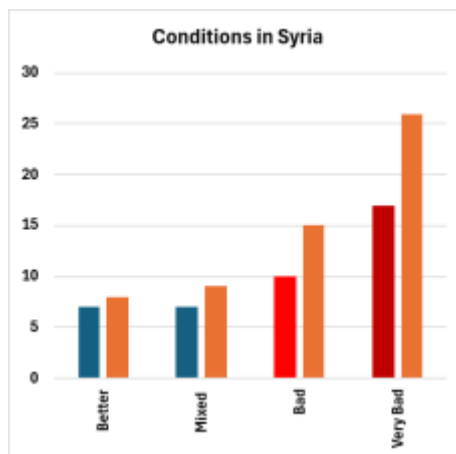
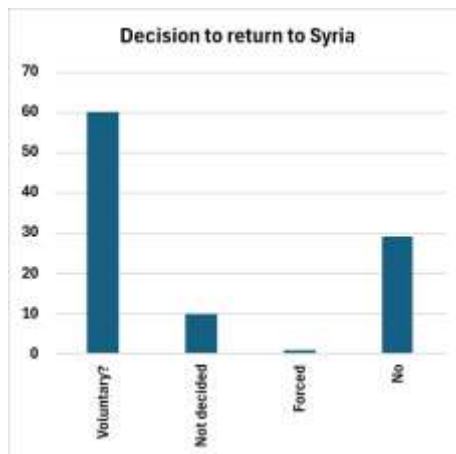
## Humiliation and Disrespectful Treatment





# Willing to Return to Syria

- **29% don't want to return to Syria**
  - **27% of women**
  - **with 8% not decided yet**  
**All women**
- **24% have at least one member of family who already returned**
- **68% judge the conditions in Syria**  
**Bad and very bad !!! 71% women**  
→ **Pressures in fact to return**
- **Only 46% of those wanting to return**  
**Will go to their original locality**
- **Differences in appreciation Men/Women**
- **Undecided are only women**
- **Women have more ties with Egypt**
- **Place of return be strongly damaged**  
**Jobar, Daraya, Saqba, ...**
- **Family support, services, job opportunities may be elsewhere**





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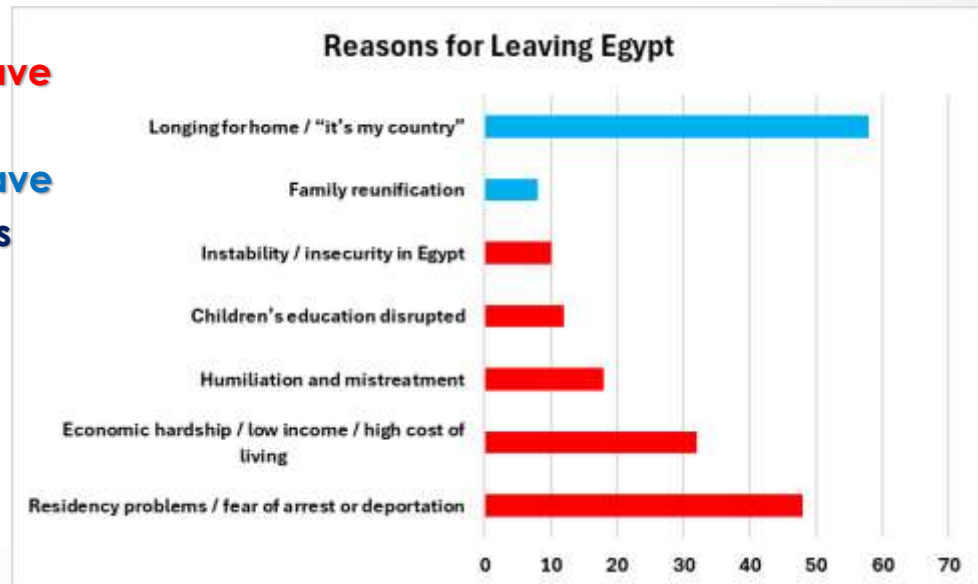
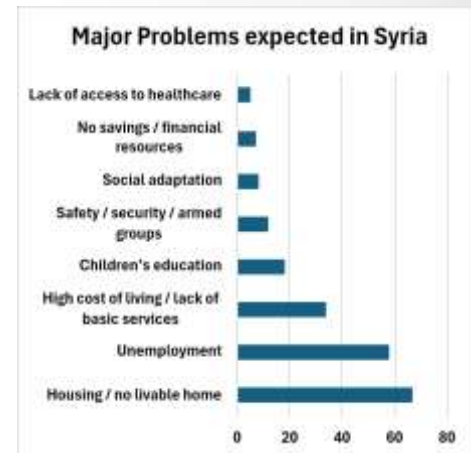
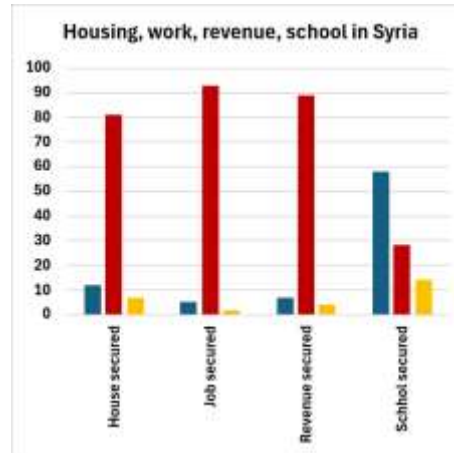
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# Staying or Returning?

- 81% have **no secured housing in Syria**  
Destruction, repair, no house
- 93% have **no job expected**  
High unemployment, old job lost
- 89% lack revenue when returning  
No savings, selling own equipments
- 58% expect schools for their children  
But bad quality
- 48% evoke residency permits  
And fear of arrest as main reason to leave
- 32% evoke economic hardship  
low wages, high rent, and inability to save
- 18% evoke humiliation and mistreatments  
treated with disrespect by  
officials, employers, or neighbours  
lost their dignity
- 58% are resigned as Syria is finally  
Their country





# Staying or Returning?

## ○ Typical statements

### ▪ Feelings about Egypt

*Egyptians are like brothers. I would stay if I could. I have friends here, I have work. But I cannot live in fear.*

### ▪ Residency permit pressures in Egypt

*We are leaving because of the arrests and deportations. I am afraid for my husband*

### ▪ Economic hardship in Egypt

*We cannot pay rent anymore. We have no savings. Here we are dying slowly; at least in Syria we will be in our own country*

### ▪ Humiliation in Egypt

*I have had enough humiliation. The officials treat us like criminals. We are not criminals!*

### ▪ Syrian Patriotism

*Syria is my country. I don't care if it's hard – it's my home*

### ▪ Housing destroyed in Syria

*My house is rubble. I will have to stay with my brother, 14 people in two rooms*

### ▪ Work scarce in Syria

*There is no work in Syria. Everything depends on money, and we have none*

### ▪ Basic services in Syria

*No water, no electricity, no gas. How will we live?*



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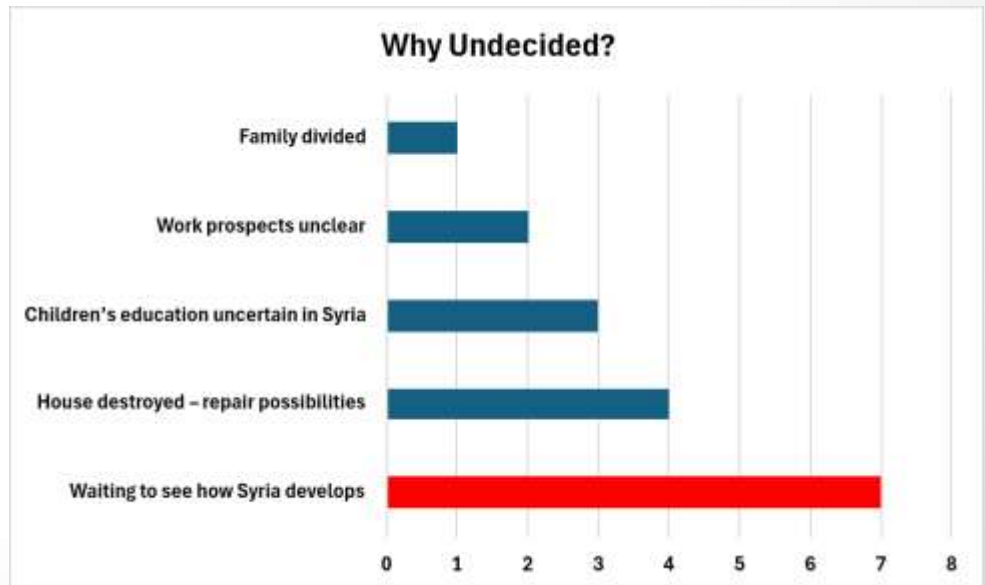
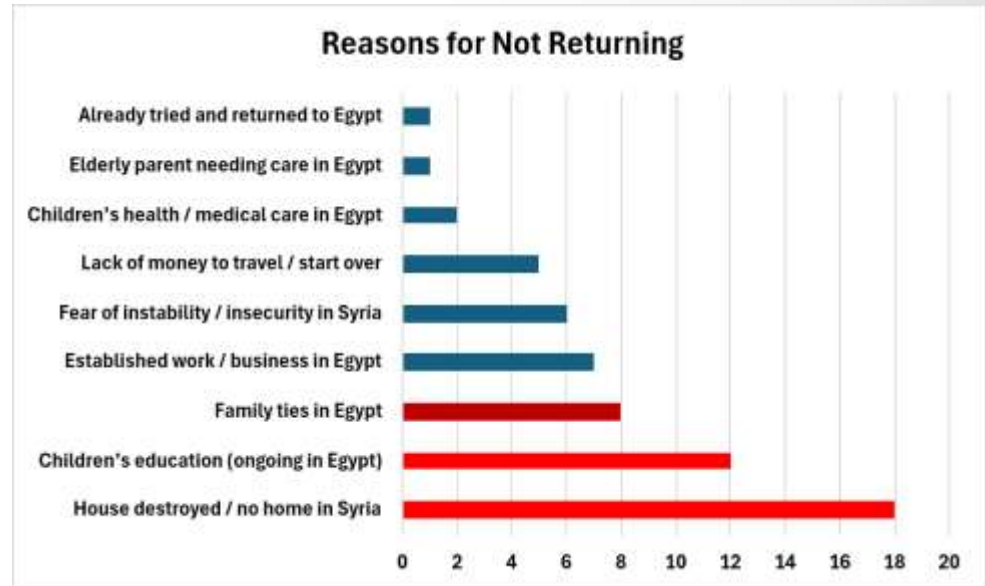
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# Not Returning/undecided

- **29% do not want to return**
  - **62% lack of housing... Jobar**
  - **41% children education**
  - **28% children/spouse Egyptians**
- **10% Not decided**
  - **70% uncertainty on Syria's future**
  - **40% unclear possibilities housing**
  - **30% unclear children education**
- **Comments**
  - *My house is gone. I have nothing there. Here at least I have a roof, even if I pay rent.*
  - *My daughter is in her last year of university. I cannot take her away now. After she graduates, maybe we will think about it.*
  - *My husband is Egyptian, my children are Egyptian. My life is here.*
  - *I have my workshop here. I built it from nothing. In Syria, I would start from zero with no money.*
  - *I hear there is still no safety. People are fighting over houses, There are armed gangs. I am scared to go back.*





# Impact of children education

- **57% have children in Damietta schools, and 15% youngs at university**
  - **24% of them are not sure that schooling is insured in Syria for their children**
- **1/3<sup>rd</sup> of families are facing school problems in Egypt**
  - **13% families have children who have had to drop out of school or have been unable to enroll.**
    - Seven-year-olds are out of school,**
    - teenagers are without a high school,**
    - And students are stuck just months away from graduation**
  - **Children are directly affected by the anti-Syrian climate in schools**
- **The Wafidin platform system is perceived as Kafkaesque**
  - **15,000 EGP paid, refused without explanation, without recourse, with a debt for the family**
- **University fees of \$1,200–\$2,000 are an insurmountable barrier**
  - **A huge debt for the family**
  - **In many cases, these fees are the sole reason why a family cannot either remain in their country with dignity or leave freely.**



# Process of Staying/Returning

- **Residency Permits...** → no regular process for citizenship despite new Law
  - **Education:** cost US\$ 150 + University fees of \$1,200–\$2,000
  - **Investment:** very expensive
  - **Refugee:** Yellow card UNHCR → 1 year for appointment → Abbasiyah, 1 year appointment... Syrians only yellow cards, no white or blue?!
  - **Tourist:** stopped, while initial solution for old refugees 1963 → UNHCR → no renewal
  - **Marriage to Egyptians:** New regulation, most leave Egypt to be brought back
  
- **Leaving Egypt**
  - **Egyptian authorities** Getting the University files = US\$ 1,200-1500 + US\$ 50 /paper
    - **Procedures:**
      - If no valid residency... **most cases because of delays**
        - If a valid passport: can leave
        - If no valid passport: Circulation paper by embassy → fines
        - If yellow card: Needing to close the file, unless by road
      - Process to close the UNHCR file
        - UNHCR at 6 October (transport, cost) appointment with all family → **request for closing**
        - Separating files for those not returning
        - Wait for the **MOFA letter** → Abbasiyah for date of departure: 4-5 months
        - Or **quick permit** US\$ 65/family member to leave within 15 days
        - When date of departure → Abbasiyah, leaving passports, paying fees, waiting for passports → risk of arrest



# Process of Staying/Returning

- **Forced return**
  - **Son *deported* 14 days before his scheduled IPN renewal appointment. Husband later left voluntarily after his liberation. Women remains alone with her grandchildren.**
  - **Son *deported* despite having proper papers. He returned to Syria ill, suffering from malnutrition due to the poor conditions of detention.**
  - **General fear of deportation**
- **UNHCR: Aid for relocation in Syria ???**
- **Returning to Syria**
  - **Syrian authorities in Egypt**
    - **Procedures:**
      - High fees for passports: US\$ 200-300
      - High fees for Circulation paper US\$ 50 per family member
      - High fees for passport renewal
  - **Syrian authorities in Syria**
    - **Procedures:**
      - Difficulties in reintegrating children/students in Education at proper level
    - **Livelihood:**
      - No housing, especially in the highly damaged/destroyed localities



# What these refugees want?

## ○ Leaving Egypt in Dignity

### ▪ Procedures:

- Ease paper procedures UNHCR/Abbassiyah, birth certificates
- Wait for end of year at schools, i.e. July
- Don't leave people without passports or residency
- MOFA office at exit points
- No need for arrests and humiliations

### ▪ Cost of returning:

- Savings exhausted by procedures
- Selling Equipment at a very low price
- Cost of shipping is very high
- High cost of land traveling through Jordan

Organize return properly

## ○ Returning to Syria in Dignity

### ▪ Procedures:

- Ease circulation paper at no cost
- Ease other necessary certificates

### ▪ Conditions of return:

- A provisional housing against rent



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