

# Still a Trickle, But Refugees Sick of Exile Return to Syria

Stream of returnees may grow as stability returns to the country

By Bassem Mroue  
Associated Press

ALEPPO, Syria — Desperate to escape Syria's terrors, Ammar Maarawi bolted. In early 2016, he paid smugglers and endured a dangerous sea crossing to Greece and an exhausting journey by train, bus and foot through Europe.

Two years later, the 36-year-old is back home in Aleppo. He returned last summer — depressed, homesick and dreading another winter, he couldn't bear life in the German city of Suhl.

Germany, he said, "was boring, boring, boring."

Maarawi is among a small number of refugees who have come back to Syria from among the more than 5.4 million who fled their homeland since the civil war erupted in 2011. So far, they are just a trickle, numbering in the tens of thousands. The United Nations and host governments in Europe are not encouraging returns, saying the country is not safe.

But the stream of returnees may grow over the coming year as stability returns to Syria and as hostility grows to refugees in host nations. The Russia- and Iran-backed military of President Bashar Assad has retaken almost all major cities, and the Islamic State group has been driven out of almost all the territory it once held.

Motivations for going back are many. Simple homesickness is one. Many refugees have burned through whatever savings they have and either can't find or aren't allowed to work. Hundreds of thousands languish in camps in the neighbor countries. Those who make it to Eu-

rope often get assistance, but some find the West doesn't hold the opportunities they hoped — or they face discrimination or they feel alienated in a different culture with language barriers and harsh weather.

Still, the reasons to remain in exile also weigh heavily. The calm in some parts of Syria relies on tenuous local truces. Fighting still rages in some areas, including between Assad and rebels in the northwest and other pockets. Many young men won't come back fearing they'll have to do their compulsory military service. Even in parts where fighting has stopped and seems unlikely to return for the moment, cities have suffered massive destruc-

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tion. An estimate 6.1 million Syrians still in the country are displaced from their homes — so refugees are not the only ones waiting to go back.

Figures on returnees are difficult to pin down. Syrian officials say they do not have exact numbers, adding that many come back through Lebanon and are not questioned if they were refugees or simply travelling Syrians. European countries and Turkey do not track whether Syrians leaving are returning home.

The UNHCR has observed some 68,000 refugees who returned on their own from neighboring countries from January to October 2017,

the most recent figures available, according to spokesman Andrej Mah-ecic. He said the number of returnees is dwarfed by those remaining in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Europe, and those still leaving Syria.

Turkey, home to 3.5 million Syrian refugees, seized a pocket of territory in northwest Syria along the countries' shared border last year. Since then, some 130,000 Syrians from that area have returned.

From Jordan, home to 650,000 refugees, only around 8,000 Syrians returned home in all of 2017, according to UNHCR figures. Most went soon after a local truce was reached in part of southern Syria in July, then the numbers tapered off

later in the year. In Lebanon, the UNHCR said last month that the number of registered refugees dropped to below one million for the first time since 2014. Some had resettled in third countries or had died, but a few thousand returned home.

Not all are going back because they are ready.

One woman, Umm Wisam, told The Associated Press she returned to Syria in August after six years in Jordan. Her husband was deported several months earlier — one of around 2,300 deported by Jordan in 2017. He had been working in construction in Jordan and without his income, Umm Wissam and the couple's five children couldn't continue to live there. The family is from Aleppo, but the

cost of living there has forced them to settle in the southern Syrian city of Daraa.

"The situation here, unfortunately, is no water, no electricity, no work. Our situation is very tiring, I swear to God," she wrote on WhatsApp.

Maarawi, meanwhile, is happy to be home. He sat behind a desk in his tire repair shop near Aleppo's main Saadallah al-Jabiri Square. The city is largely at peace now after government forces defeated rebels there in December 2016.

Like many others, Maarawi embarked on an epic journey to reach safety in Europe. He left Syria in January 2016. From Turkey, he took one of the crowded, inflatable smugglers' boats to the Greek island of Lesbos — an especially hazardous trip, because he doesn't know how to swim. He made his way across Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia and Austria, enduring long train rides and walks through forests.

In Germany, he began



In this Jan. 19, 2018 photo, Adeb Ayoub, 13, who had left Syria in 2015 to Germany, runs next to homemade cannon, in Aleppo, Syria. A small but growing number of refugees are returning to Syria, including some who made a dangerous sea journey to Europe to flee the war. Unable to stand the cold weather, language barrier, unemployment and depression, they have chosen to return to their war-torn country rather than stay in Europe.

learning the language and training for work. The Germans provided food, clothes and a stipend, but, "in the town where I was staying there was no life, there were few people, you suffer psychological pressure, depression, and it is cold," he said.

He lasted just a few months, returning in July.

Adeb Ayoub, a 13-year-old, took the sea trip to Greece with his uncle in 2015. "I felt that the pos-

sibility of surviving the sea is bigger than surviving in Aleppo," said his father, Firas Ayoub.

"Before, if you had given me Europe, America and all the continents of the world, I would not leave my country," said Firas, who owns a chocolate shop in central Aleppo. "The idea of leaving came when the war crushed everything. Can someone stay and live in a ball of fire? Wherever you go, it's fire, shells and rockets."

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