

From Involuntary Mobility to Voluntary Immobility? Understanding the Complex Dynamics of Refugees' Stay or Return Intentions

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Topic & Theoretical background

A crucial topic in migration studies is the exploration of migrant's further mobility over the life course and the possibility of voluntary and permanent return to their country of origin at some point in life. Limiting the analysis to voluntary mobility, return has been defined by Dustmann and Weiss as the 'situation where the migrants return to their country of origin by their own choice, often after a significant period abroad' (Dustmann and Weiss, 2007, p. 238). However, among migrants, refugees¹ may present a higher level of uncertainty about the possibility of return and lack of concrete alternatives, as they have been forced to flee their countries of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution, violence, or conflict (Hamlin, 2021). Refugees' return intentions has gained significant attention in academic research and policy discussions in the last decades (Fortunato & Ambrosetti 2023). Understanding refugees' aspirations to return to their home countries or remain in the host countries is crucial for designing effective programs and policies that facilitate their voluntary repatriation and successful reintegration, outlining the different paths refugees may choose following displacement. However, researchers face several methodological challenges in studying refugees' return intentions, such as data availability, sample bias, and the complexity of the multi-dimensional dynamic of decision-making for forcibly displaced migrants. Several studies have focus on return intentions in terms of capabilities (policies and conditions in home country) and opportunity (portability of social and economic benefit, human capital). Different socio-political factors have been considered for their influence on refugees' return intentions in post conflict areas, such as political environment and stability in both the home and host countries, changes in the legal and policy frameworks related to refugees' repatriation, and access to basic services (education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities). Different studies point out that refugees often seek international protection and asylum in other countries in order to ensure their safety, and they are typically unable or unwilling to return to their home country unless the conditions precipitating their flight have ended and the situation at home has improved significantly (Zetter 2021). So that the primary drivers of return aspirations are pull factors from origin, whilst push conditions in refugee-hosting country play a minor role (Alrababah et al. 2023). The fundamental base for returning home is that only when a basic threshold of safety at home is met refugees compare other factors in the host and home, such as the economic prospects and the attachments to land and property (Zetter 2021, Krasniqi and Williams, 2018), the availability of public services and confidence in personal networks (Alrababah et al. 2023, Zetter 2021). When exploring stay or return intentions, it is important to take into account the hypothesis of a lower return capability of refugees compared to other categories of migrants, given the high perceived intrinsic value of the international protection recognition after strenuous bureaucratic procedures to obtain it, and given the restrictions of the Dublin treaty and the impossibility of return to the country from which the international protection has been disposed, with a subsequent lower return organisational capacity (Fortunato & Ambrosetti 2023). Finally, when analysing intentions or aspirations (conceived here as synonyms), it is important to keep in mind that they differ from actual mobility behaviours as they represent temporally limited wishes or expectations, referred to

¹ Entitled to have the international protection regime as recognised by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees adopted by 148 signatory states and the 1967 Protocol.

a given point in time only, they may change rapidly depending on a wide range of factors and therefore needing to be investigated in repeated surveys over time (de Haas 2021).

Aims of the project

In the following sections we propose a preliminary design for the study on refugees return intentions with detailed information about the intended samples, variables, hypothesis and methods to be selected for the analysis' implementation.

We set our analysis in the context of large-scale displacements of people fleeing war-torn zones, using observational survey data from a representative sample of refugees migrated from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, living in Germany and interviewed for the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in 2016, 2017 and 2018. We focus on the predictors of return or stay intentions for refugees exploring the complex interplay of individual, political and socio-cultural drivers of return decision-making process, addressing multiple objective and subjective factors impacting return intentions.

Our research questions are: i) What is the role of policies and institutional settings in shaping refugees' return intentions? ii) What achievements in countries of origin are essential conditions for refugees to consider the opportunity of return? iii) How individual characteristics, living conditions and socio-cultural factors impact the return decision-making process?

To answer the first research question, we investigate the effect of different policies on stay or return intention outcomes: the current legal status, the intention of German citizenship acquisition, the intention of family reunification and the awareness about return counseling. We formulate the following hypothesis: H1) We expect to find higher uncertainty about return before obtaining legal residence status; H2) refugee status can be negatively associated with return intentions; H3) German naturalization and H4) family reunification are negatively associated with return intentions; H5) Knowledge about assisted return opportunities can be positively related to return intentions as reflects engagement and agency in finding concrete solutions for return. For the second research question we analyse respondents' idea about the necessary conditions in country of origin for them to be able to return and the relationship with the dependent variable of return intentions. Our hypothesis are: H6) Valuing the "End of the war" as a necessary step may be associated with a more immediate aspiration of return, whilst H7) "Change of Government", "Free elections" and "Better general economic situation" can be associated with the aspiration of return in the long term. To answer the third research questions, we will assess the impact of differences among individuals on return intentions outcome. H8) We expect to have different scenarios in determining return intentions when controlling for socio-demographic variables (gender, nationality, education, spouse/partner residence -time constant- and age and duration of stay - time variant), socio-economic variables (salaries, working conditions and income satisfaction) and socio-cultural factors (language level, perception of disadvantage and discrimination due to ethnic origin).

Data & Methods

Data stem from the German nationwide IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, carried out between 2016 and 2020 by the joint research group of the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the Integration and Asylum Research Centre at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ), and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). A first wave was conducted in 2016 (3,336 households, 4,527 respondents) with asylum seekers and refugees arrived in Germany between January 2013 and January 2016 (M3 and M4), followed by a refreshment of the M3/M4 population as well as an enlargement sample of asylum seekers and refugees (M5) who arrived in Germany between February 2016 and the end of December 2016 (adding 1,519

households and 2,252 individuals). Together, the samples are representative of the population of refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2016 and were registered in the Central Register of Foreigners by January 2017.

We select only refugees and asylum seekers migrated from Syria (11,606 observations for 4,191 individuals), Iraq (2,725 obs. for 1,125 ind.) and Afghanistan (2,365 obs. for 966 ind.), between 16 and 65 years old, migrated to Germany between 2013 and 2018 and interviewed on average 3.4 times in 5 survey waves between 2016 and 2020. We obtain a final sample of 16,696 observations for 3,591 households and 6,282 individuals (58.9% males and 41.1% females).

In SOEP questionnaires the issue of migrants' further mobility is posed in terms of remigration from Germany rather than providing information about the possibility of return, through questions about the intention to stay in Germany permanently or move again to another country. We therefore select the intentions to stay in Germany as the response variable for our models, analysing the answers to two slightly different questions for different survey waves. In 2016-2017 respondents were asked: *Would you like to stay in Germany permanently?* The options were: 1= YES (stay permanently in Germany); 2= NO (return or onward migration); 99= No details. In 2018 respondents were asked: *When you think about your future, where would you like to live?* The options were: 1= I definitely want to move to another country; 2= I probably want to move to another country; 3= I'm not sure whether I want to stay in Germany or move to another country; 4= I probably want to spend the rest of my life in Germany; 5= I definitely want to spend the rest of my life in Germany; -1= No answer.

As we analyse different types of dependent and independent variables, we develop a multi-method approach in a multi-step analytical design, exploiting data both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Through logistic regression analysis, we want to predict the probability of each category of the response variable given a set of explanatory variables. We apply binary logistic regression analysis to predict the two-levels dependent variable for the survey years 2016 and 2017 and multinomial logistic regression to predict the five-levels dependent variable for the year 2018. The multinomial logistic regression estimates separate binary logistic regression models for each category, calculating the odds ratio for each category and comparing the probability of belonging to one category against a reference category (Paparusso & Ambrosetti 2017). As we have observation for three consecutive years, we will apply fixed effect regression analysis to control for between variation among different groups of respondents and estimate the average within groups effect on return intentions of time-variant variables, such as duration of stay and achievement in country of origin in previous years in different socio-cultural and institutional spheres. Fixed effects logistic regression models treat each measurement on each subject as a separate observation eliminating subject coefficients through conditional methods, and control for all time - invariant characteristics in order to "absorb" variation among subjects, reducing as well omit variable bias issues (Wilson & Lorenz 2015).

Preliminary findings

From preliminary descriptive statistics we first recognise low levels of response rates for every selected variable, as expected considering the survey length and level of detail and considering the sensitive nature of the population and the topics under study. However, we are confident that the size and the level of representativity of the sample will allow for the designed analysis on targeted subgroups after nonresponse analysis and weighting and imputations techniques to mitigate the impact of nonresponse bias.

Full analysis and final paper will be ready for EPC 2024.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables (yy. 2016, 2017, 2018)

Sample N=6,282 (Syria N=4,191; Iraq N=1,125; Afghanistan N=966)	% (of total obs.)	M
Return intentions (only for 2016-2017)		
Stay permanently in Germany	44.21	
Return or onward migration	2.59	
No details	53.20	
Return intentions (only for 2018)		
Definitely move to another country	0.19	
Probably move to another country	0.24	
Not sure	1.04	
Probably stay permanently in Germany	2.93	
Definitely stay permanently in Germany	13.75	
No answer	81.86	
Individual information		
Age		35.1
Gender		
Male	58.90	
Female	41.10	
Marital status		
Currently not in partnership	29.86	
Currently in partnership	69.45	
No details	0.69	
Place of residence of spouse/partner		
In country of origin	3.32	
Elsewhere abroad	1.49	
In Germany	64.25	
No details	30.94	
Duration of stay		2.91 yy
Current residence status (only for 2016-2017)		
Recognised refugee	27.04	
All other residence status	17.26	
No details	55.70	
Current residence status (only for 2018)		
Recognised refugee	27.83	
All other residence status	26.23	
No details	45.94	
Naturalization intention (only for 2017-2018)		
Yes	77.21	
No	1.32	
No answer	21.47	
Family reunification intention		
Yes	2.63	
No	0.23	
No answer	99.65	
Awareness about return counseling (only for 2017-2018)		
Yes	11.35	
No	67.77	
No details[20.89	
Achievement in country of origin in previous years		
Political freedom	Response rate 31.77	[0,10] 0.55
Freedom of expression, assembly and independent judiciary	Response rate 31.82	[0,10] 0.68
Freedom of press and expression	Response rate 31.67	[0,10] 0.87
Equality of ethnic minorities	Response rate 30.99	[0,10] 1.70
Equal treatment of men and women	Response rate 32.38	[0,10] 2.88
Necessary conditions in country of origin for the return		
End to war and violent conflict	Selection rate 52.46	
Change of Government	Selection rate 38.52	
Free elections	Selection rate 34.94	
Better general economic situation	Selection rate 34.67	
Other things need to change	Selection rate 35.25	

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