



Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

BETWEEN HAMMER AND ANVIL

MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF
SYRIANS FORCED TO RETURN
TO ASSAD-HELD AREAS





Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

The Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD) is a civil-rights grassroots popular movement established by citizens from different regions of Syria. The Association has no political affiliation. It works to promote, protect and secure the rights of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) wherever they are.

The Association strives to present the vision, concerns and demands of the refugees and IDPs, and make sure that their voice is heard through advocacy, mobilization of necessary support, and influencing key policy and decision-makers. The Association embodies the diversity of the citizens of Syria, regardless of their social, religious or gender background.

The Association is fighting to ensure the right of a safe, voluntary and dignified return of all Syrian refugees and IDPs. We are against forced or premature return of refugees and IDPs. The Association believes that a popular movement for a dignified return, based on the recognition of the rights of refugees and IDPs as Syrian citizens, is central to any future solution in Syria

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Executive Summary

This report examines a number of reasons why some of Syrian refugees have returned home, despite the high risks involved, including the longevity of the crisis, the deteriorating living conditions in displacement, and the legal and security pressures they face. Some countries and international organizations have cited the number of returning refugees as proof that it is safe for them to go home, and to justify an immediate (coerced, and in some cases forced) repatriation of all Syrian refugees. Assad's regime, Russia and some international agencies have disseminated inaccurate or out-of-context figures about refugee returns to regime-held areas. These figures do not reflect essential details about why these individuals have decided to return.

The United Nations (UN) estimated that 8,070 refugees returned to Syria from Jordan during the first 9 months of the Russian initiative¹ to repatriate refugees (July 2018 to March 2019), an initiative that was closer to a forced return for the refugees and did not include any credible safety guarantees or monitoring mechanisms. This number is very close to the Jordanian government's estimates. The Russian government, however, has declared that 87,000 refugees returned from Jordan during this time. The UN has also estimated that 14,496 Syrian refugees returned home from Lebanon in the same period, compared with the Russian government estimate of 55,000 and the Lebanese General Directorate of Security figure of 100,000².

Yet even according to the Russian estimates, only 142,000 refugees returned to Syria from Lebanon and Jordan during this period, which accounts for only 2.7 per cent of the registered refugees at the start of the Russian initiative – which is far below Russian expectations. Settling this issue is Moscow's main concern, as

it is a key element of its effort to demonstrate the stability of areas under Assad's control, which should imply that the only obstacle to the full return of refugees is the devastation of residential areas. According to the Russian strategy, the European Union should finance the reconstruction, which should ultimately lead to the return of the remaining displaced Syrians – and the complete legitimization of a Russian victory in Syria. In this scenario, the regime and its Russian allies would guarantee refugees' rights, safety and dignity. From Russia's point of view, the return of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to regime-held areas under any conditions and without any guarantees is a key element for a political solution that would be granted international legitimacy, and that would consequently make the idea of elections plausible, but most importantly it would allow the flow of reconstruction funds to the Syrian Regime. The reality is considerably different. All international political initiatives that have been launched to date have failed to establish a solid basis for a process that responds to refugees' concerns regarding what constitutes the minimum conditions for a voluntary, safe and dignified return, as guaranteed under international law. There is also an acute lack of reliable and verified information available to refugees and IDPs to allow them to make an informed decision about whether to return under the current circumstances. There is a similar gap in the knowledge and information available to international policy makers on the motivations and experiences of people who have returned to Assad-held areas without the minimum conditions in place.

This is the second report in a series of thematic reports focusing on returning parameters that seeks to fill this gap. The Data Collection and Analysis Unit of the Syrian Association for

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1. Russian envoy urges Syrian refugees return, July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-refugees/russian-envoy-urges-syrian-refugee-return-idUSKBN1KG2C8>
 2. Jasmine M. El-Gamal, The Displacement Dilemma: Should Europe Help Syrian Refugees Return Home? European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2019. https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/the_displacement_dilemma_should_europe_help_syrian_refugees_return_home.pdf, accessed 7 November 2019

Citizens' Dignity (SACD) is conducting this ongoing study to investigate the reasons why Syrian refugees and IDPs have returned to regime-held areas despite the lack of minimum conditions, and the spread of reports and news about systematic human rights violations.

The researchers interviewed 112 returnees to regime-held areas, some of whom left again after they returned. The survey respondents represent a wide spectrum of Syrian society from different demographic segments and geographical regions. The first report in the series, *Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians* (October 2019), interviewed a different set of 165 people³.

The responses of the returnees compiled in this study illustrate the impossibility of voluntary mass returns in the current circumstances. An overwhelming majority of them are disappointed at the lack of sincerity of the promises made by the regime and its allies, in addition to the lack of reliable and comprehensive information from the international agencies operating in Syria, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

This report confirms the conclusion of the first report with a new set of respondents: the majority of those who have returned to Assad-held areas have regretted their decision and are actively looking for a way to leave again. One of the key findings of this report confirms that the returnees lacked the necessary information to make an informed decision about returning, and that the majority of the returns were motivated by the harsh living conditions and pressures in the displacement areas.

3. *Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to displaced Syrians* report is available at <https://syacd.org>



Introduction

Although Syria's nearly 22 million⁴ pre-war inhabitants make up less than 1 per cent of the world's population, they now comprise one-third of its refugees. Since 2011, more than 6.2 million Syrians have been subjected to forced internal displacement and 6.5 million have been externally displaced due to military attacks, targeting by security apparatus, and the insecure environment maintained by the Syrian regime. The refugee crisis has affected neighbouring countries: 3.3 million refugees are registered in Turkey, nearly one million in Lebanon, 650,000 in Jordan, and nearly one million in Europe⁵. Canada and the USA have also taken in around 50,000 and 18,000 Syrian refugees, respectively⁶.

These massive refugee flows have generated social, economic, and political changes in the host countries. In Europe these have motivated politically oriented populist reactions, which has led to an increase in hate speech against refugees and became a pivotal issue in European countries' domestic and foreign policies. The situation also pushed the European Union (EU) to persuade Turkey to host Syrian refugees in exchange for financial aid to prevent any further flows to Europe. Similar agreements were reached with Lebanon and Jordan, although through different mechanisms.

It is therefore not surprising that most international discussions about the future of Syrian refugees are based on a seemingly simple solution: repatriation back to Syria as soon as possible with minimum focus on the real fate that awaits returnees. That solution is being discussed in the political talks under way such as the UN-sponsored Geneva process and the Astana talks, co-sponsored by Turkey, Russia, and Iran. However, there is an apparent discrepancy among the influential parties in Syria over the determinants of a safe environment that guarantees the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees. In some cases, the concept of a safe environment is not even considered in discussions about returning displaced people, especially by Russia, Iran and definitely the Syrian regime who till late 2017 used to threaten refugees and IDPs thinking of returning to their places of origin⁷. Yet the crucial problem in all these political discussions is the absence of representation of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs); their fate is determined without considering their will or interests. This report is the second in a series written by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) to address this serious gap in knowledge by articulating the voices of displaced Syrians.

4. Vivian Tou'meh, Displaced by War, Syrians Endure Poor Living Conditions in Shelters, 12 May 2017, Geneva: UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/10495-displaced-by-war-syrians-endure-poor-living-conditions-in-shelters.html>, accessed 7 November 2019.

5. UNHCR, 'Population Statistics', ND, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/resettlement>, accessed 7 November 2019.

6. UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response', ND, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>, accessed 7 November 2019.

7. Syrian regime threatens to refugees and IDPs thinking of returning to their places, <https://bit.ly/34N8DUy>



Key Findings

- Two-thirds of returnees said returning to Syria did not meet their expectations. Overall, 65 percent of returnees did not achieve their desired goal due to the poor living and economic conditions, which was the decisive reason for a quarter of those interviewed to leave their countries of asylum and areas of displacement. Security branches and networks of organized crime under the cover of the regime also subjected them to harassment and security proceedings that may arise from malicious allegations. Furthermore, they feared military conscription, which has become a nightmare for males over 18. These factors motivated 68 per cent of returnees to advise other IDPs and refugees not to return.
- Most returnees expressed a high degree of insecurity, despite various guarantees they received from the regime and other sources. They felt they were deceived into returning. The security proceedings and the call for compulsory military service had a negative impact on the returnees' decisions to return. Only 37 per cent of the returnees who were themselves or one of their family members wanted dared to return just to escape misery in their places of displacement or asylum. However, despite the guarantees that they would be safe, they were not spared from forced recruitment into the military.
- A 'clean' security record check did not translate to security upon return. The study describes cases of returnees who had a security check of their situation through special channels or those who thought they were not to be subjected to any security proceedings because they were not part of any groups that opposed the Syrian regime. However, those returnees were still subjected to arrests, security abuses, and financial extortion, as documented in this report.
- 40 percent of returnees could not recover their original homes because they were partially or totally destroyed, or because security measures impeded their return.
- 33 percent were unable to reunite with their family upon return, which caused them to describe their return experience as "a wrong and disappointing decision".
- 19 percent of returnees to regime-held areas left once again due to the shock of the security and living conditions.
- The absence of a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian crisis and the lack of a safe environment to repatriate refugees do not encourage refugees to return under the current circumstances or conditions. The suspension of fighting has not led to the desired safe environment, and therefore has not eliminated the reasons for asylum, especially security abuses, arrests and repressive practices by the security branches. Other serious problems include the military conscription imposed by the Assad regime, the absence of citizenship rights and the continued seizure of private property.
- There is a discrepancy in the circumstances between IDPs and refugees, which demonstrates the need for a comprehensive understanding of their environments.
- The difficulty of reaching Syrian citizens in regime-held areas and their continued fear of expressing their opinions clearly makes it difficult to create an accurate picture of their reality. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) must reach these citizens immediately without the regime's supervision.

- A quarter of IDP and refugee returns were driven by poor economic and living standards in their place of displacement. The same conditions prompted 23 per cent of refugees to return. This economic urgency undermines what international organizations and government institutions describe as a voluntary return, because returnees want to escape the poverty and destitution that most of them have suffered since they had to leave their country.
- The absence of job opportunities is the main reason that led to the poor living conditions refugees experienced in countries in asylum, which highlights the absence of international support and orientation programs that qualify Syrians to obtain or create jobs. The lack of sources of livelihood for these refugees negatively affects their decisions to return voluntarily. Legal restrictions – and refugees' inability to gain residency status in their countries of asylum – have also led them to return to regime-held areas.
- Respondents described their reasons for return as related to inspecting properties back home, settling financial obligations, obtaining official documents such as university degrees and school certificates, continuing children's education, and visiting or reuniting with family members. These motivations demonstrate the lack of international support to refugees in their places of residence to access educational services that take into consideration their special cases and that meet the standard level of quality.
- The Russian guarantees that supported the regime's false propaganda about the stable security situation and the cessation of clashes played a role in convincing only a fraction of the total number of returnees. They immediately expressed their disappointment with the situation on the ground, which contradicts those claims. Although clashes with opposition forces have ceased in areas seized by the regime supported by Russia, this does not bring security to residents of these areas or returnees who have found themselves victims of reprisals for returning to areas previously controlled by anti-regime forces. The incursion of the regime's military and security forces and its allied militias has become the returnees' biggest concern.
- The living conditions and services in regime-held areas were in some cases worse than those they experienced in their places of asylum or displacement. The UNHCR has indirectly contributed to the media discourse by drawing a misleading picture of the situation in regime-held areas and the possibility of returning to them. This discourse has inadvertently helped spread the regime's propaganda by affecting refugees' decisions to return, as illustrated by the respondents' testimonies. The UNHCR is supposed to play a transparent role that ensures the rights, security, and interests of refugees. The testimonies show that 31 per cent based their return decision on the regime's false propaganda about the stable security situation, which no UN agencies explicitly refuted.
- The study illustrates the limited role of the return initiatives conducted by the regime under a Russian cover as a way of returning refugees to certain areas to bring them into media focus. Only 6 per cent of interviewees returned through those initiatives; most returned for personal reasons based on information provided by relatives back home. There is a general lack of confidence in information disseminated by official or semi-official regime media.

Methodology

This quantitative research study is based on structured interviews conducted using identical questionnaires to collect the opinions of Syrian returnees⁸. Due to clear security threats and censorship challenges from Assad's regime, all interviews were held secretly through private remote communication, or in person when possible in order to protect respondents and interviewees from threats originating from the regime's security forces. All names have been changed. The hazardous situation was fully explained to both respondents and researchers, and the respondents' informed consent⁹ was obtained before commencing the study in accordance with the policies of SACD's Data Collection and Analysis Unit. The SACD-affiliated researchers all had at least 5 years' experience conducting similar research, and were rigorously screened to ensure they could perform such challenging research.

Sample Definition Approach

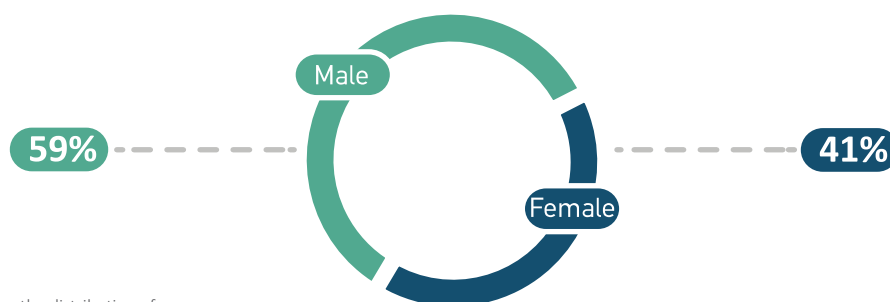
Respondents' Original Place of Residence

The 112 study respondents originally came from the governorates of Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and Rural Damascus. The largest number of interviews were conducted in Rural Damascus (more than 40 per cent) due to the area's demographic importance. It is the geographical extension of the capital, and the Syrian regime and Iran have subjected the area to systematic demographic change¹⁰. Preliminary data also indicate that over 15 per cent more IDPs and refugees have returned to Rural Damascus compared to the other areas studied.

Gender

The percentage of females interviewees was 41 per cent, which roughly reflects their estimated proportion of total returnees (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Interviewees by Gender



Note figure shows the distribution of participants by gender.

8. The criteria of respondents' selection assured the rational representation of heads of household and other family members to have a clear and sound picture of the actual and relevant information.
9. Informed consent is a voluntary agreement to participate in research after the participant has had the risks of taking part explained and he or she indicates their willingness to proceed.
10. Iran's Long Shadow in Syria, Khaled Terkawi <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2019/05/09/irans-long-shadow-in-syria/>

Age Group

Nearly half (45 per cent) of survey respondents were aged 26–42. The next largest age group represented was 43–60 (34 per cent). A total of 15 per cent of respondents were between 18 and 25, and 6 per cent were over age 60.

Educational Attainment

Post-secondary degree holders accounted for 30 per cent of all respondents, which is close to the pre-war percentage of residents with university degrees¹¹. In general, university-educated Syrians are not yet convinced it is safe to return.

Returning Status (Former or Current)

This study included two types of returnees according to their current area of residence after returning to regime-held areas (see Figure 2). Current residents of regime-held areas (81 per cent of respondents) returned and settled in regime-held areas and were interviewed in those areas. Respondents designated as former returnees to regime-held areas and currently leaving returned temporarily and then decided to leave to internal displacement areas or places of asylum. These study participants (19 per cent) were interviewed outside regime-held areas.

Figure 2. Returnees' Status



Note figure shows the distribution of participants in the study by their current returning state.

The governorate with the highest proportion of respondents who were former returnees was Homs, and Daraa had the lowest proportion (see Table 1).

Table 1. Returnees' Status, by Governorate (percent)

Governorate	Returned and currently reside in regime-held areas (current residents)	Previously returned and then left (former returnees)
Aleppo	86	14
Homs	63	37
Daraa	89	11
Rural Damascus	83	17

11. Mohammed Al Hessian, Understanding the Syrian Educational System in a Context of Crisis. September 2016. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences. https://www.oaaw.ac.at/fileadmin/subsites/Institute/VID/PDF/Publications/Working_Papers/WP2016_09.pdf, accessed 7 November 2019

Status Before Returning (IDP–Refugee)

Of the total respondents, 79 per cent were IDPs and 21 per cent were refugees (see Table 2).

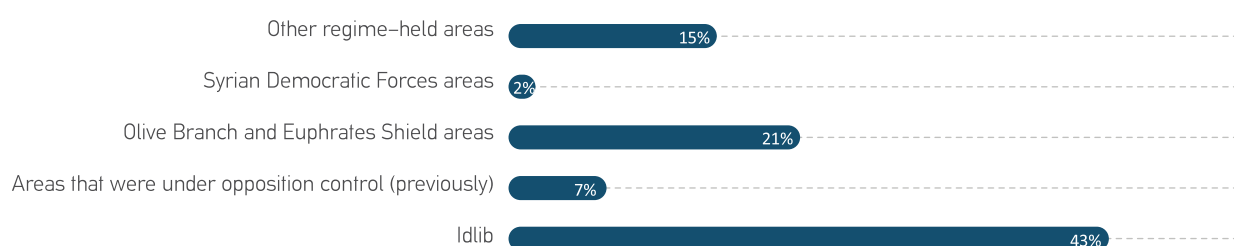
Table 1. Returnees' Status, by Governate (percent)

Governorate	Refugee	Internally displaced
Aleppo	43	57
Homs	19	81
Daraa	11	89
Rural Damascus	21	79

Area of displacement (for IDPs)

Half of the study respondents returned from Idlib governorate and 24 per cent returned from rural northern Aleppo (Azaz, Al-Bab, Jarablous, and Afrin areas) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Area of Displacement

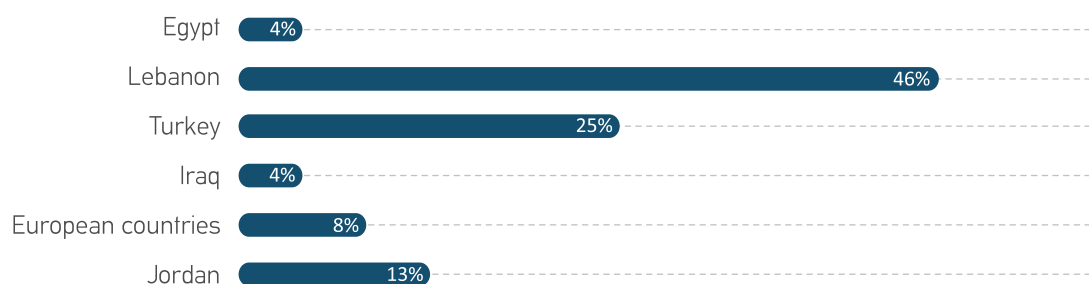


Note figure shows the distribution of IDP study participants by area of displacement.

Area of Asylum (for Refugees)

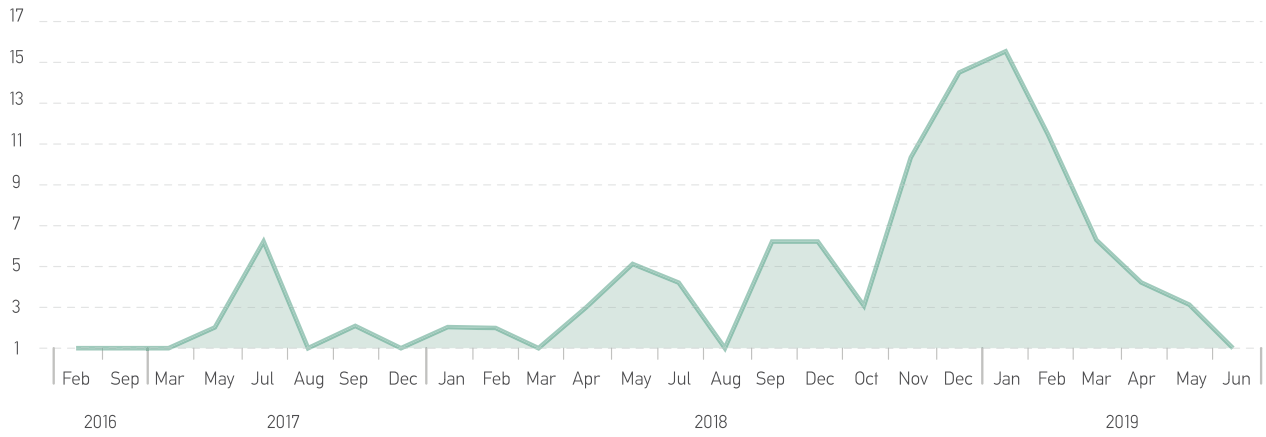
Individuals returning from Lebanon comprised 46 per cent of the refugees in the study. An additional 25 per cent returned from Turkey, 13 per cent from Jordan, and 8 per cent from European countries (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Country of Asylum



Return Period

The study respondents returned to Syria between 2/2016 and 6/2019; 85 per cent of the total responds returned in 2018 – 2019



Study Outcomes

Reasons that Prompted IDPs and Refugees to Return

The reasons for return are categorized by factors related to the place of displacement, or to the place they returned to in regime-held areas, and the kind of information and opinions that returnees received about the different conditions prevailing in those areas.

Reasons Related to the place of displacement of IDPs and Refugees

The data show that several factors prompted IDPs and refugees to return to regime-held areas. These factors are categorized according to whether they were displaced inside Syria (IDPs) or outside Syria (refugees).

01 IDPs: Return Reasons Related to Displacement Areas

The study participants discussed a number of factors that weighed heavily on IDPs who were forced to leave their places of origin. They were forced to return for eight main¹² reasons :

- Poor living conditions in areas of displacement: unemployment and having no source of income in the displacement area were the main reason that 25 per cent of the respondents returned to regime-held areas. After their savings were depleted, they were unable to afford rent (which doubled in many areas due to the high demand and lack of supply) and high prices exacerbated by inflation.
- Continued military operations: 13 per cent of all IDPs returning to regime-held areas and 23 per cent of all returnees from Idlib governorate cited this as a reason for return.
- Poor service conditions in displacement areas: 12 per cent of the IDPs interviewed cited the lack of services including electricity, water, sanitation, transportation, and other public facilities as a reason to return to regime-held areas. The infrastructure in displacement areas is under pressure due to an unprecedented increase in the number of inhabitants, as well as a lack of funding under the pretext that these areas are under the control of extremist groups.
- Unstable internal security situation in displacement areas: 17 per cent of IDPs returned to regime-held areas due to being caught up in complex regional, tribal, and ideological conflicts as the infighting between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and different other opposition groups and other violation of human rights done by extremist groups¹³ in Syria.
- Reuniting with family motivated 10 per cent of the respondents to return. Many families are dispersed between displacement and regime-held areas, and elderly family members, women, and children mostly live in regime-controlled areas. Many IDPs were prompted to return to help care for vulnerable family members.
- Problems obtaining identification papers: 14 per cent of the IDPs returned to regime-held areas because they were unable to obtain identification papers or follow official procedures in displacement areas. The official opposition and international actors have been unable to end the Syrian regime's monopoly on officially representing all Syrians in terms of recognized legal documents. Many of these IDPs returned just to obtain those documents, or paid large bribes to obtain them from their places of displacement through intermediaries (much of this money goes back to the regime, indirectly funding its war machine.)
- Low educational quality and the lack of recognition of scientific degrees granted in displacement areas prompted 5 per cent of the returning respondents to come back.
- Other reasons: 5 per cent of the respondents returned for private or family reasons unrelated to the crisis.

12. The respondents were asked for their top 4 reasons, It was it a multi-choices question with open-ended option in the question choices which categorized by other entry.

13. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria>

I left Al-Waer neighbourhood to Idlib with my son and daughter. My son entered Turkey at the age of 20. He started to work with his relatives. I could no longer afford to live in Idlib House rent ... water Electricity, etc. I decided to return with my daughter to my house in Al-Waer neighbourhood, and then we returned.

Abo Mohammed, 59, returned from Idlib to Homs

I am a retired employee and I stayed with my children in the camp. My children could not find any job opportunity. I would have lost my salary if I hadn't returned. I returned because I wanted to secure my salary and my children could not find a job to feed their children. I wanted to ease the burden on them.

Said, 47, returned from Euphrates Shield to Aleppo

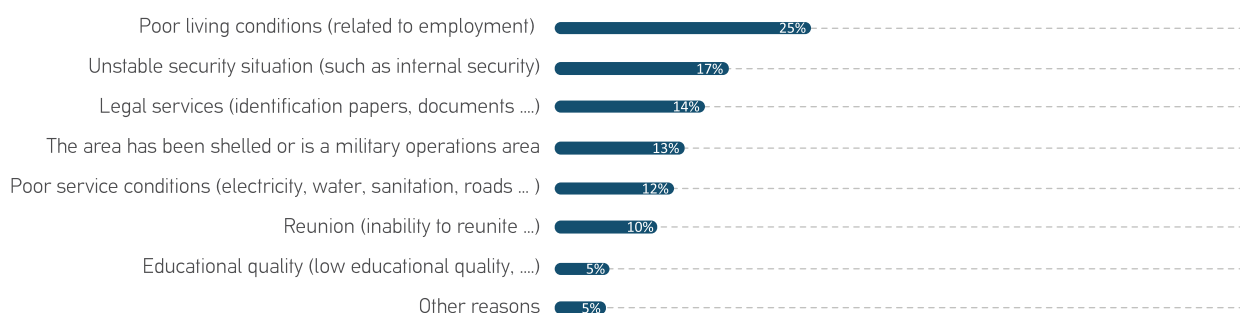
I am a retired employee and my pension is my only source of income to earn a living. I wanted to secure my pension, so I returned.

Om Nader, 62, returned from Idlib to Homs

After I lost my job in Aleppo, I came to Euphrates Shield region because my family has a field in it. We worked there, but later it burned and we lost a crop. Therefore, we returned to Aleppo.

Motasem, 32, returned from Euphrates Shield to Aleppo

Figure 5. Reasons for Returning



Note figure shows the reasons why participants left the displacement areas and returned.

02 Refugees: Return Reasons Related to Countries of Asylum

Several negative factors in countries of asylum prompted refugees to return (see Figure 6).

- Difficult living conditions for refugees in countries of asylum: this is the main reason why a total of 23 per cent of respondents returned home; 27 per cent returned from Lebanon and 25 per cent from Iraq – both of which have their own internal economic crises. Returnees from European countries that provide refugees with the basics of life did not cite this as a reason for return. Of the respondents who cited this factor as a reason for going home, 33 percent knew they were wanted by the security services but were the poor economic situation forced them to return anyway.
- Pressures or harassment in the country of asylum caused 20 per cent of the refugees interviewed for this study to return. The percentage increased in Lebanon to 30 per cent due to the recent increase in politicians' racist discourse. In Jordan, the figure was 22 per cent due to the internal debate about blaming refugees for the country's deteriorating economic conditions.
- Integration problems in the country of asylum caused 12 per cent of the refugees interviewed to return. Such reasons were cited by people returning from Iraq, Turkey and Europe.
- Reuniting with family motivated 12 per cent of the returning refugees as they could not reunite with their families in the countries of asylum.
- Other reasons for returning from abroad included inability to obtain a legal status in the country of asylum, problems obtaining official papers and lack of access to education and health services in countries of asylum.
- Other reasons: 10 per cent of the returning refugees longed to return for private reasons unrelated to the war. The largest proportion was recorded among returnees from European countries.



I needed jaw surgery and I found that medical services are very limited and I could not enter Turkey, so I decided to return.

Jawdat, 41, returned from Turkey to Damascus



My landlord asked me to leave and I had to return to my destroyed house in Al Sheikh Maskin. I returned to my house in Al Sheikh Saad because I was tired of paying rent.

Jasem, 29, returned from Jordan to Daraa

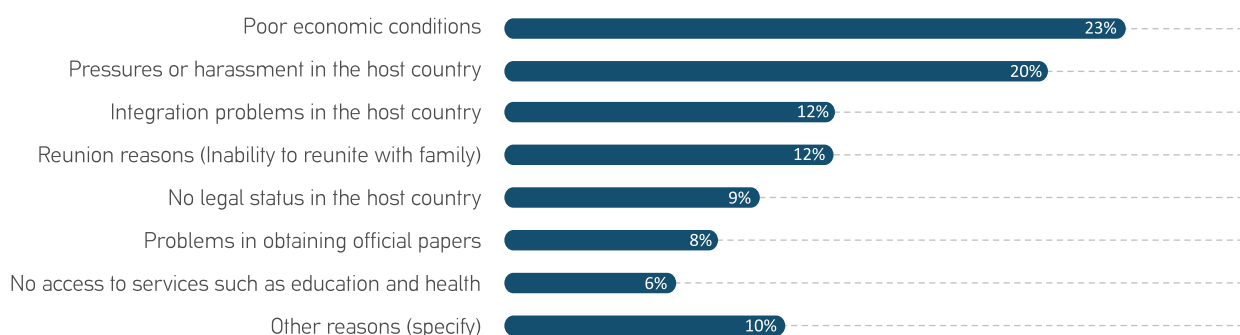
I returned because of my father's illness.

Samer, 43, from Homs

I returned to visit my relatives who reside in Aleppo and for buying and selling dealings.

Saif, 52, from Aleppo

Figure 6. Reasons for Return Related to Refugee Status



Note figure shows the factors related to countries of asylum that prompted participating refugees to return.

Return Factors Related to Regime-held Areas

Refugees and IDPs receive information about the current situation and conditions in regime-held areas from a variety of sources (the credibility of which is discussed below), which ultimately translates into the factors affecting their decisions to return. They include the following reasons (see Figure 7):

- Perceived stability of security situation and suspension of fighting: overall, 31 per cent of the respondents returned as they thought that the security situation in regime-held areas improved significantly. Notably, this factor had a different impact on refugees and IDPs.
 - For IDPs, 42 per cent of respondents from Aleppo and 20 per cent in Homs cited the stable security situation as a primary reason they returned.
 - More than one-third of all refugees interviewed (39 per cent) returned from their countries of asylum due to a belief that the security situation at home was stable. This was the reason given by 50 per cent of returnees from Egypt, 48 per cent from Lebanon, and 36 per cent from Turkey.

- Fear of confiscation of assets and checking properties drove 25 per cent of all respondents to return – 3 per cent from Aleppo, 11 per cent from Homs, and 42 per cent from Rural Damascus (due to concerns over the regime’s “real estate development” laws in this area, which are meant to create a demographic change in areas previously outside the regime’s control) ¹⁴
Seeking better living conditions: this reason was documented by 14 per cent of the total returnees. A total of 17 percent of IDP returnees documented this factor as a return reason; they left Homs and were displaced in the Euphrates Shield area. They had no job opportunities and a limited income, and therefore chose to return to Homs.

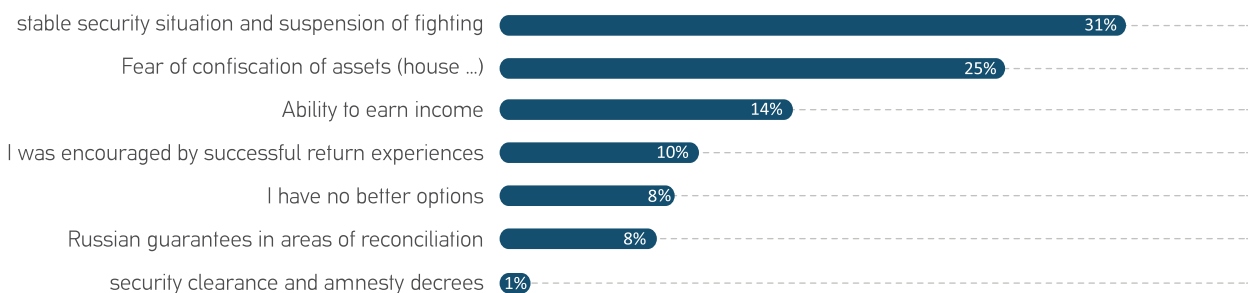
Successful returns of relatives or acquaintances inspired 10 per cent of respondents to return.

- This percentage varies according to other determinants as follows:

- Areas they returned from: 33 per cent returned from Syrian Democratic Forces areas, compared to 25 per cent from European countries and 21 per cent from Turkey.

- No better options: 8 per cent of the returnees cited this as the main reason for their return; this percentage declined to 2 per cent of returnees who returned and then left regime-held areas again.
- Russian guarantees contributed to the return of 8 per cent of all respondents.
In reconciliation areas; Russia facilitated the return of refugees and displaced people to areas that accepted the reconciliation .for example 14 per cent of the returnees from Jordan to Daraa and 20 per cent of returnees to Homs came back after the Russian guarantees.
- Regime security clearance and amnesty decrees: only three respondents returned because of this reason, due to returnees’ widespread mistrust of the amnesty decrees.
- Private or family reasons encouraged 3 per cent of returns.

Figure 7. Reasons for Return to Regime-held Areas



Note: figure shows the factors related to regime-held areas that prompted participating IDPs to return.

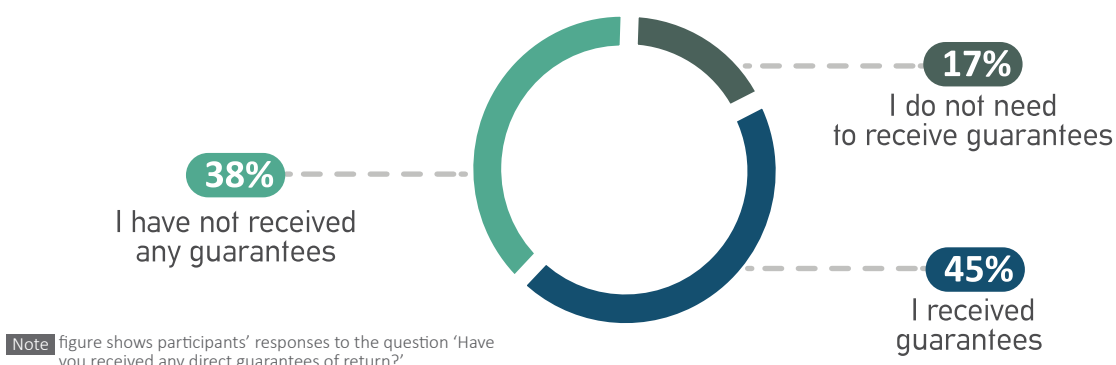
14. The New Urban Renewal in Syria,” SLJ, Syrian Law Journal, 14 May 2018 <http://www.syria.law/index.php/new-urban-renewal-law-syria/>

The background image shows a busy street in what appears to be a conflict-affected area. Numerous trucks, some loaded with goods, are parked or moving along the road. Several soldiers in military uniforms are visible, some standing near the trucks and others walking. In the foreground, a soldier stands next to a red and white striped barrier. In the background, there are multi-story buildings, some of which appear to be under construction or in a state of disrepair. A sign with Arabic text is visible on one of the buildings.

Return Guarantees

The survey results reveal that 45 per cent of the returnees received some sort of guarantee before their return that they would not be harassed upon their arrival; 17 per cent of the study respondents stated that they felt they did not need any guarantees because they were not affiliated with the opposition, not wanted by the security services or for compulsory military service. A further 38 per cent of respondents said they had no choice but to return without receiving any guarantees. In all cases, returnees had valid traveling documentation and entered the country legally (in the case of refugees)

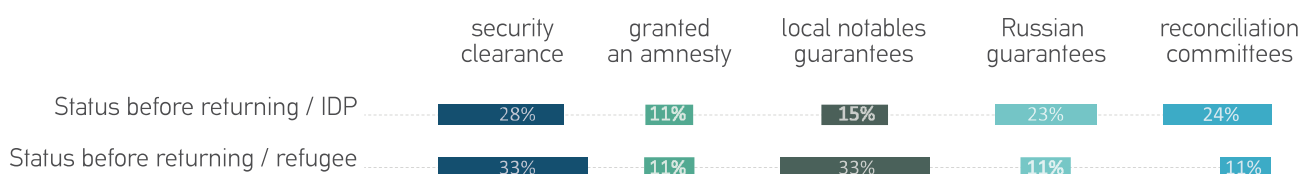
Figure 8. Guarantees of Return



The most common type of guarantee was a security clearance issued by the regime¹⁵, accounting for 29 per cent of all guarantees reported by study participants. Reconciliation committees provided 23 per cent of all guarantees made to survey respondents (11 per cent for refugees and 24 per cent for IDPs). The next most common type was Russian guarantees¹⁶, which accounted for 21 per cent overall (11 per cent for refugees and 23 per cent for IDPs), followed by guarantees from local notables¹⁷, which account for 17 per cent of total guarantees (33 per cent for refugees and 15 per cent for IDPs). Finally, 11 per cent for each of IDPs and refugees were granted an amnesty¹⁸ from Assad's regime .

These figures illustrate the impact of the guarantees from Russia, local notables, and reconciliation committees on IDPs. The regime's intelligence agencies, in coordination with Russia, are effectively using these mechanisms to to exploit the deteriorating conditions of these IDPs in an attempt to convince them to accept the guarantees and return as part of the Russian-led return initiative (see Figure 9).

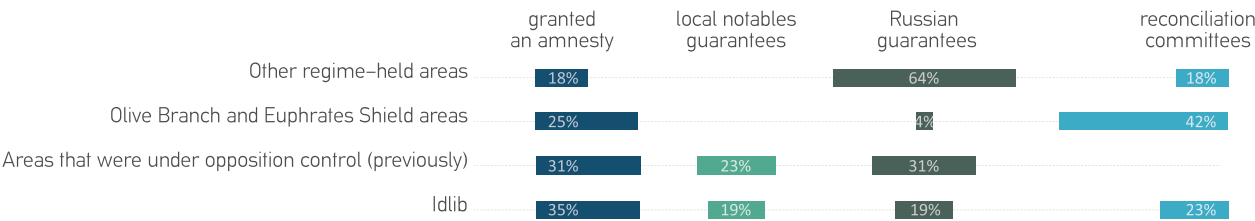
Figure 9. Guarantees by Status before Returning



15. Security clearance is given upon a request submitted to various concerned parties authorized by the regime to issue such clearances. Security branches usually issue security clearances, but also Al-Baath party branches and offices in governorates, embassies, consulates, and the areas that were subjected to reconciliation agreements under Russian pressure. They are called 'reconciliation agreements' and carried out in special offices that have been opened to accelerate the process.
16. Chatham House report on "reconciliation agreements" in Syria <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-details-of-reconciliation-deals-expose-how-they-are-anything-but-a-closer-look-at-the-regimes-process-reveals-its-real-goal-retribution-and-control>
17. The regime and the Russians cooperate with public figures in some cases to convince those opposing the regime of returning and submitting a security clearance request with their guarantee. In most cases, the regime chooses to cooperate with tribal public figures.
18. Syrian opposition skeptical of Assad's "amnesty" <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/amnesty-decision-syrian-regime-political-detainees.html>

The guarantees provided to IDP returnees from Idlib governorate and former opposition-held areas were largely security clearance procedures (35 and 31 percent, respectively). IDP returnees from other regime-held areas were largely provided guarantees by Russia (64 per cent).

Figure 10. Guarantees for IDPs



Note figure shows the type of guarantees participants received by the area they returned from.

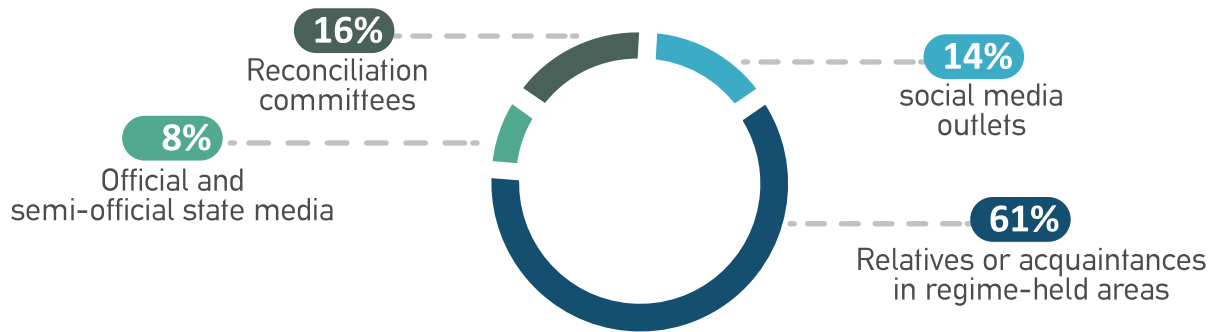
As for guarantees granted to refugees, 60 per cent of the total guarantees were through local notables for returnees from Lebanon. Security clearance represented the largest percentage of guarantees for returnees from Jordan (67 per cent).

The Impact of Initiatives on Return

the study shows the limited impact of the repatriation initiatives as a reason to return. Only 6 per cent of the total returnees were influenced by the initiatives, where 14 per cent of them were refugees; the rest are IDPs from Homs to Al-Bab and Jarablous areas who returned in July 2018. These initiatives have not created the expected impact: 43 per cent of returnees through initiatives were not satisfied with their decision to return, and do not recommend others to return based on their personal experiences.

Sources of Information for Returning

Figure 11. Most Important Source of Information about Returning



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'What are the most important sources of information you used when you took the decision to return?'

The sources of information on which returnees based their return decision varied:

- Acquaintances and relatives residing in regime-held areas: this is the most frequent source of information as the regime generally used the acquaintances and relatives as a channel to deliver its guaranties and other deceptive promises; 61 per cent of returnees relied on this source due to its trustworthiness and credibility compared to other sources. The SACD report on Rukban camp gave a clear example of how relatives of IDPs were forced to make calls to the IDPs themselves and press upon them the misleading fact that "going back is safe".
 - The percentage was higher for IDPs than refugees (63 vs. 54 per cent, respectively).
 - Returnees to Rural Damascus relied the most on their relatives as a source of information – 77 per cent of the sources.
 - Returnees from Idlib relied the most on their relatives as a source of information – 75 per cent of the sources.
- Reconciliation committees served as the source of information for only 16 per cent of returnees.

The regime propaganda machinery kept a consistent misleading triumphant narrative about the war in general, but in particular about the living conditions, and the huge potential of foreign direct investment that would take place once they have declared victory¹⁹.

The regime used official and loyalists social media channels to encourage the return of refugees and IDPs, and deny any economic crisis, and downplayed the electricity, gas, and fuel crisis²⁰, and insisted that the living conditions in the areas under his control are improving, and that the temporary economic effects of the war are wearing off, to the point that the Internal Commerce Minister Deputy, Jamal Al-Deen Shuaib, asserted the the cooking gas problem was a “moral” one due to greedy and self-ish attitude by corrupt merchants and businessmen²¹. The minister deputy insisted that the regime will provide the necessary support to re-activate the “economic development and production” of the country, and that the regime will not allow any corruption by merchants.

These claims have been strongly contested not only by reality and facts on the ground, but also by regime loyalists themselves, including some prominent loyalist figures. this reality was also discovered by refugees and IDPs who returned to regime-held areas, and 68% of them expressed that the reality they found did not match the expectations that were created before going back.

Recently, the head of the regime himself in an interview claimed that the level of return of refugees and IDPS is bigger than the economic recovery that the country have seen. Yet, in the same interview he contradicted himself and the official line of the regime and admitted having big economic challenges²².

The regime state media reports and social media which amplified this propaganda had a significant impact on the decision-making process of those who decided to return from displacement shaping the way they were informed about what they thought would be the reality on the ground. Some 22% of those interviewed for this study stated that their decision was directly impacted by the information they got via these channels. At the same time, the narrative promoted by the regime media has significantly affected what the families perceive as the “allowed narrative” in the conversations with their family members in displacement, often fearing that the communication is being monitored by the regime and that only the official interpretation of reality can be safely relayed to answer the question “What is the situation like?” especially when it comes to security-related issues and the economic situation.

“When I used to watch Al-Dunia TV (Pro-regime TV channel) and Al-Mayadeen Channel (Hezbollah sponsored TV channel), they showed that life (in regime-held areas) is fine, and that markets and crowded with people, but when I went back I realized that those crowds were to buy cooking gas”

Abu Saeed, 40 years, a returnee to Homs

“Their (regime) social media channels are full of lies and distorted reality, they keep saying (Syria is OK), but the wealth of the entire country is for them, while we and our children only get poverty and fear. It was a dark hour when I believed them and went back”

Sameera, 38 years, returnee to Daraa

Syrian media and social media outlets contradict reality.

Sahar, 26, returned from Iraq to Rural-damascus

19. WP article, <https://wapo.st/2pRAOSY>

20. Medium SADC article, <https://bit.ly/2CyKQLW>

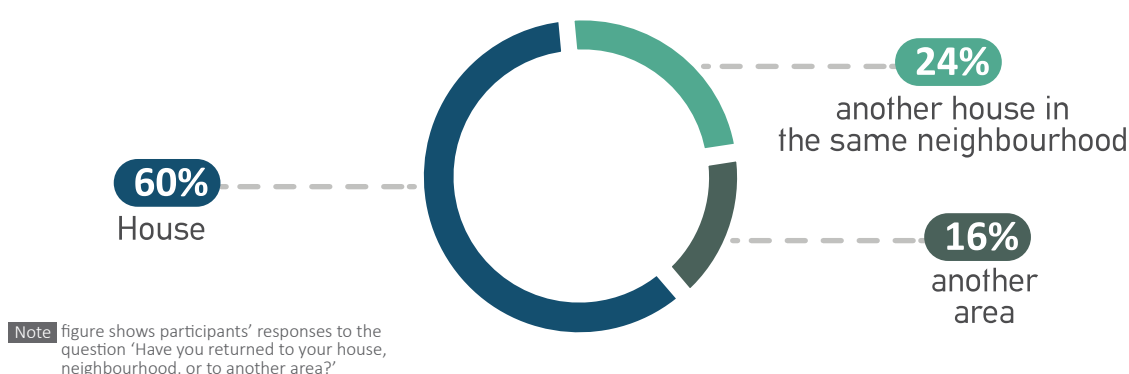
21. Al-Alam article, <https://bit.ly/2Qd6zkl>

22. Midline interview, <https://bit.ly/32xG1x2>

Returns to Original Place of Residence

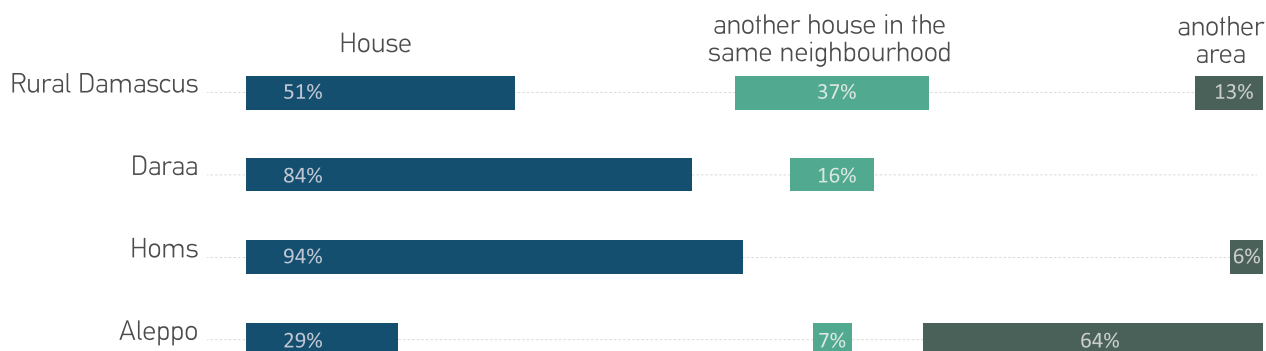
60 per cent of interviewed returnees were able to come back to the place of residence they lived in before leaving (Figure 12); 24 per cent returned to the same neighbourhood, but not the same house. A further 16 per cent could not return to their neighbourhoods or towns; they returned to other areas. The reason of not returning to the same house or neighbourhood was mostly that they were affected by destruction or the regime's security measures that limited the return to some areas under the pretext of security concerns²³.

Figure 12. Place of Return, All Respondents



The lowest rate of return to the same house was in Aleppo (29 per cent); 71 per cent had to leave their demolished houses that are no longer suitable for accommodation after the regime's military campaign in late 2016.

Figure 13. Place of Return, by Governate

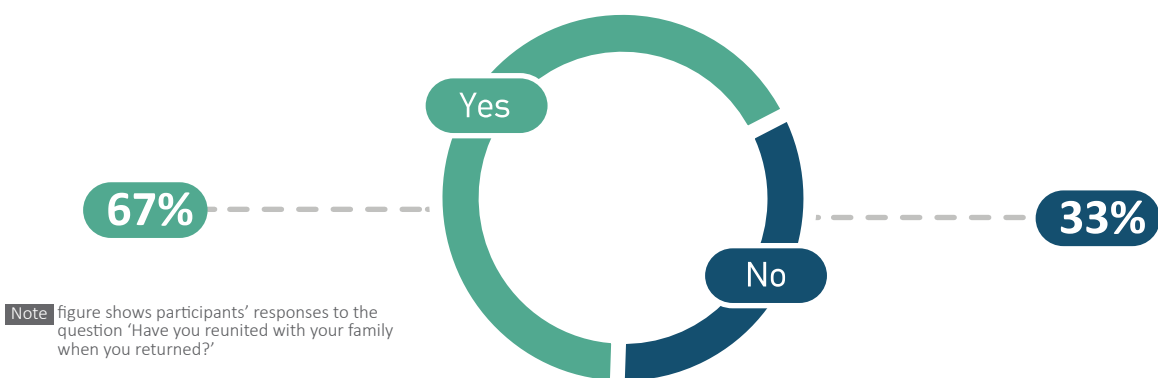


23. For more details see "Vengeance, Repression and fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians" (Housing issues – page 20)

The Impact of Return on Family Reunions

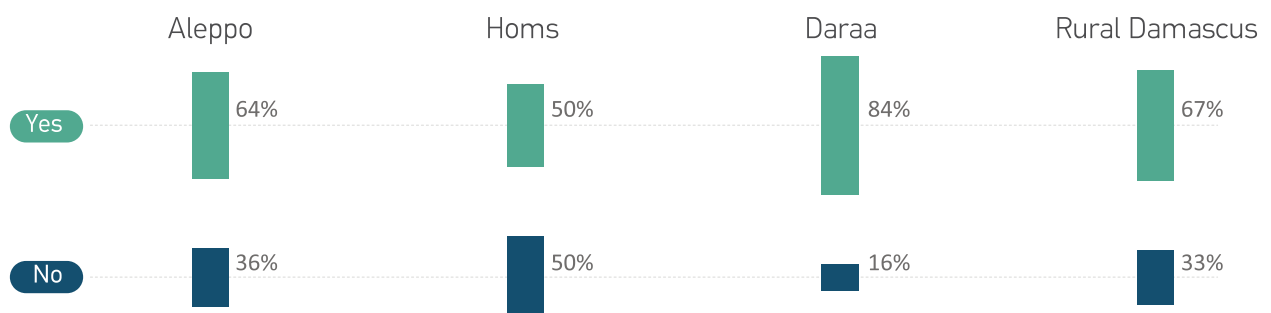
One-third of the study participants could not reunite with their families after they returned for several reasons, such as the inability of other family members to return because they are wanted by the security services or for compulsory military service (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Reunions with Family upon Return, All Respondents



The highest rate of an inability to reunite was recorded in Homs, where half of the returnees were disappointed with their inability to achieve their primary goal of returning, which was to reunite with their family as more than 30 per cent of young men aged 18–42 are wanted by the security services or for compulsory military service which makes them stay away (see Figure 15).

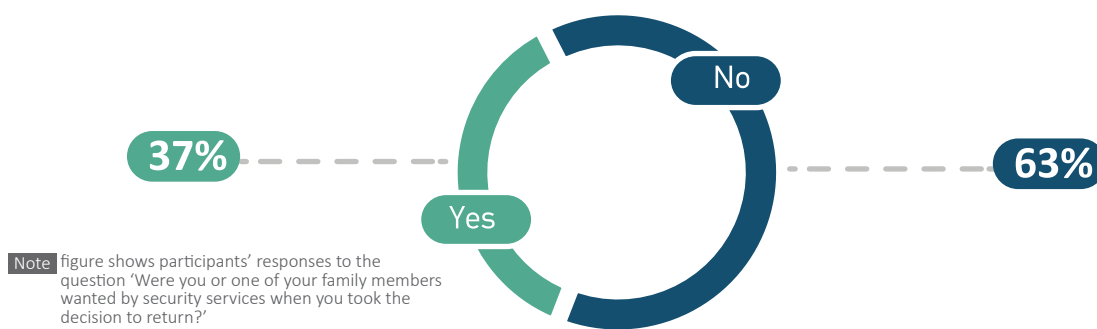
Figure 15. Reunions with Family upon Return, by Governorate



The Impact of Security Proceedings on Decisions to Return

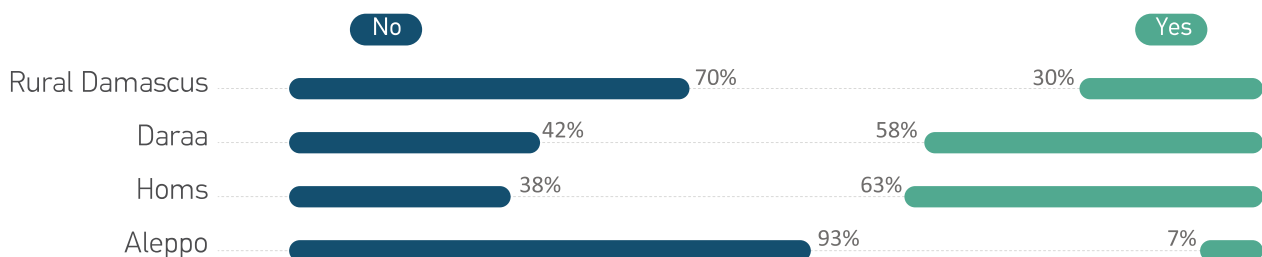
The study outcomes show the negative impact of security proceedings on decisions to return, considering that only 37 per cent of returnees who were themselves or had a relative wanted by the security services and had dared to return because they could not endure life in areas of displacement or asylum.

Figure 16. Returnees Wanted by the Security Services, All Respondents



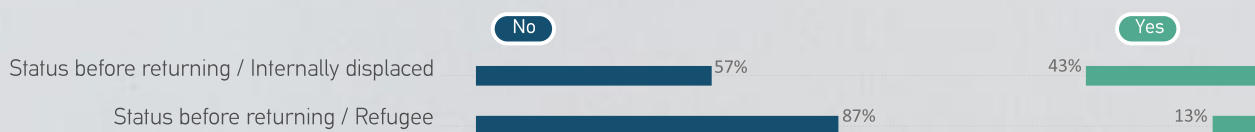
Most returnees who were wanted by the security services were from Homs, comprising 63 per cent of the wanted returnees, most of whom returned through initiatives under the supervision of the regime and the Russian guarantor after they left Al-Waer neighbourhood (see Figure 17). These IDPs experienced harsh displacement that were not properly equipped to ensure a minimum standard of living after their arrival in rural Aleppo, and which forced them to risk their lives by returning, considering they were wanted by the security services. In addition, 58 per cent of the returnees to Daraa returned through Russian guarantees and reconciliation agreements. The increasingly deteriorating security situation in Daraa suggests that those promises and guarantees were not reliable.

Figure 17. Returnees Wanted by the Security Services, by Original Governate



IDPs comprised 43 per cent of returnees who were wanted by the security services, and refugees 13 per cent (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Status before Returning



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Were you or one of your family members wanted by security services when you took the decision to return?'



Impact of the Call for Military Service on Decisions to Return

The study shows the negative impact of whether the returnees or one of their family members were wanted for compulsory military service. Of the returnees surveyed, 61 per cent were not wanted for military service – i.e. they were not on a “wanted” list that is distributed to all security checkpoints (see Figure 19) In view of the list of 18-year-old males who are called for military service, it should be noted that there are other lists for reserve military service, and these lists are constantly updated by the regime with no clear determinants. Some returnees completed their military service, but they were dragged into this service upon arrival. Moreover, legislative decree no.12 in 2019 specified a maximum age for students regarding military deferment, which made them more intimidated to return because they would be dragged into the regime’s military service²⁴.

Figure 19. Returnees Wanted for Military Service



Note figure shows participants’ responses to the question ‘Were you or one of your family members wanted for compulsory or reserve military service when you took the decision to return?’

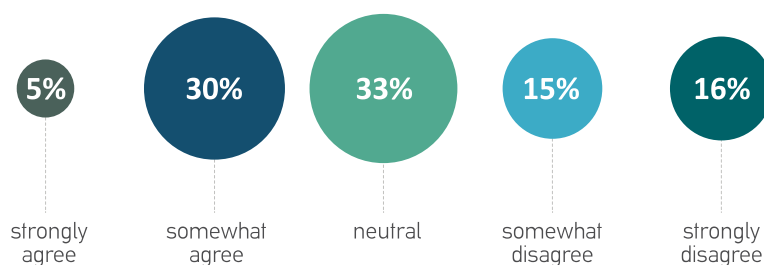
Considering that this category of returnees received guarantees, we find that these guarantees played a significant role in respondents’ decisions to return: 76 per cent of the returnees who were wanted for compulsory military service received guarantees about postponing their duty or exempting them from service, and this convinced them to return.

24. <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5516&cat=21054&>

The Extent of Achieving the Goal to Return

The study shows a prevailing disappointment among returnees based on their personal experiences; only 35 per cent of them achieved the goal that motivated them to return. Returnees' goals varied according to the samples surveyed; some returned just to obtain official papers and to secure and protect their property rights from the new decrees.

Figure 20. Success of Return



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Has your return paid off?'



Satisfaction with Decisions to Return

The study shows that more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of participants were not satisfied with their decision.



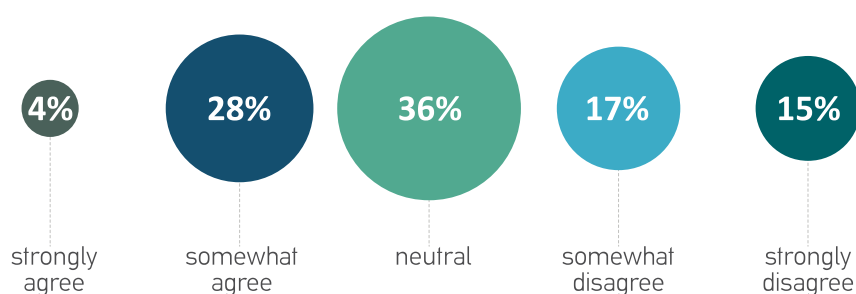
The conditions in places of asylum are better, but I had to come to sell my assets and follow some official procedures in the public sector.

Shawkat, 45, returned from Turkey to Aleppo



“We were deceived and talked into returning. The UNHCR has not given us a realistic picture of the bitter reality we ended up in.” Majeda, 45, returned from Lebanon.

Figure 21. Satisfaction with Return

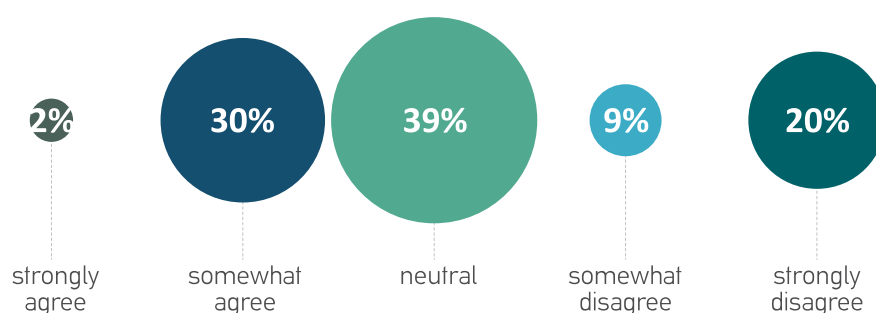


Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Are you satisfied with your decision to return?'

Previous Expectations vs. the Reality of Returning

When asked whether the return matched their previous expectations about life on the ground in regime-held areas based on their sources of information, 32 per cent of returnees stated that the reality matched their expectations, which were often negative. The remaining 68 per cent stated that the situation upon their return was very different from their expectations. They thought they had been victimized and deceived into returning to regime-held areas, which are characterized by a deteriorating economic situation, poor services, unemployment, corruption, and the incursion of security intelligence and services²⁵.

Figure 22. Expectations vs. Reality



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Did your return expectations match reality?'



25. For an overview of the general situation in regime-held areas, see SACD, *Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians*, October 2019, <https://syacd.org>- Living Conditions and General Rights- page 15

Reasons of Leaving after Returning

The discrepancy between their expectations created on the basis of information available from UN agencies, regime media sources, and “outreach” efforts by its intelligence and other sources, and the reality that awaited them caused the departure of 48 per cent of the participants who left again to their former places of displacement or asylum or to other areas outside the regime’s control.

Reasons related to poor economic and living conditions came second at a percentage of 19 per cent. Military conscription and security proceedings came third and fourth, respectively.



“Neighborhoods are severely lacking many services, let alone the scarcity of job opportunities and the high life expenses.”

Om Nizar, 63, returned from Syrian Democratic Forces areas to Aleppo.



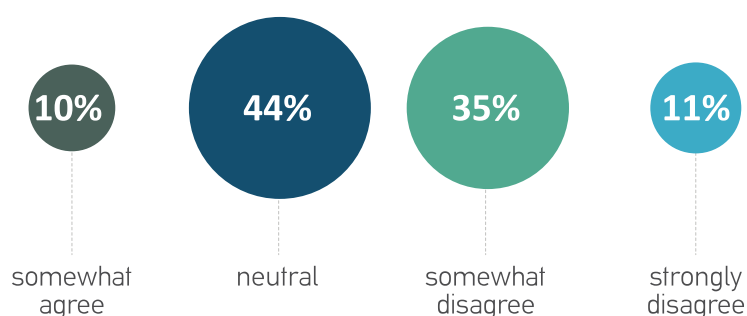
“The return can be for a specific purpose such as reunion. Selling assets is another possible reason, but to return in order to settle is very difficult under poor economic conditions.”

Shaymaa, 44 , returned from Turkey to Aleppo.

Feeling safe after returning

The reasons shaping this reality included poor economic and living conditions, and feeling unsafe due to forced conscription and being wanted by the security apparatus. After their return based on the Russian guarantees and the promises of the Syrian regime, 90 per cent of returnees did not feel safe (see Figure 23).

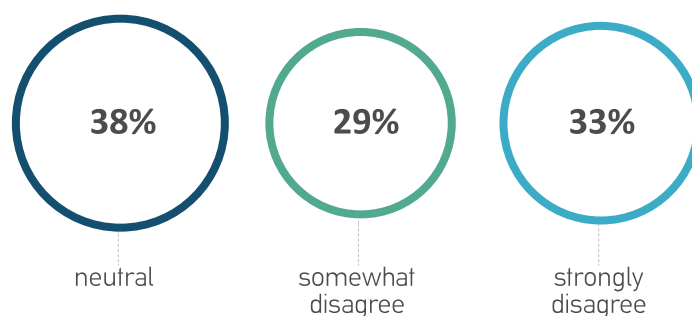
Figure 23. Perceptions of Safety upon Return



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Do you feel safe after returning to regime-held areas'

The lack of security is one of the main reasons that prompted returnees to leave regime-held areas once again. The questionnaire shows that none of the returnees who left again felt safe during the period of his return (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Perceptions of Safety upon Return, before Leaving Again



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Did you feel safe after returning to regime-held areas before you left again'

One of the main reasons that led to the lack of security is the widespread phenomenon of arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances on the grounds of opposing the regime, as documented by returnees and their families.

— “

We were interrogated and called for investigation for a week and then they called my son for military service.

Om Mazen, 47, returned to Al-Ghouta

— “

We were reported to the security branches once we arrived and then we were called for investigation.

Amira, 35, returned to Al-Ghouta

— “

I was detained and interrogated about my wanted son and my reason for returning.

Sahar, 45, returned to Al-Ghouta

— “

I was detained for 20 days when I wanted to obtain a limitation of succession certificate

Ibtisam, 50, returned to Aleppo

— “

I was called twice for investigation and the questions were all about my relatives in the north.

Fakriye, 47, returned to Al-Ghouta

— “

My son was detained for six months and then he was released.

Sawsan, 41, returned to Al-Ghouta

— “

I was detained for hours and interrogated in one of the security branches in Damascus.

Rawan, 32, returned to Homs

— “

We were called for investigation and my son was recruited for reserve military service after that.

Sadieh, 47, returned to Rural Damascus

— “

Upon arrival, we were called for investigation and my son was detained and recruited for reserve military service.

Om Mohammed, 65, returned to Rural Damascus

— “

Nothing is encouraging about returning because they are robbing returnees as much as possible and harassing them in all kinds of ways if they are civilians, not involved in the revolution. If they are involved in the revolution, they will be detained immediately and then murdered.

Nabil, 29, returned from Idlib to Rural Damascus

— “

They shouldn't return for the fear of detentions and malicious reports.

Kawthar, 39, returned to Daraa



The survey results show that more than half of the all participants (56 per cent) or a relative were wanted for compulsory or reserve military service after returning to regime-held areas (see Figure 25).

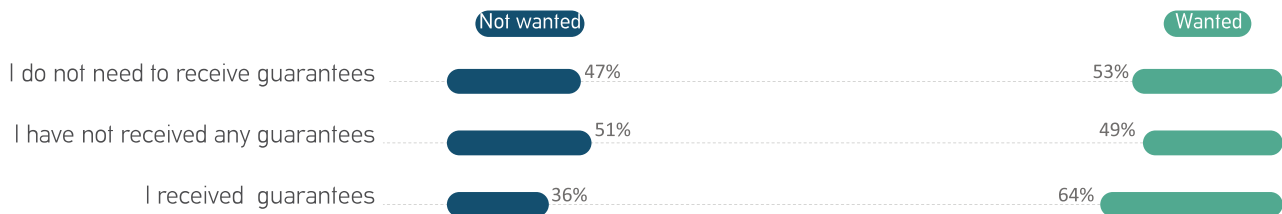
Figure 25. Compulsory Military Service upon Return



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Were you or any of your family members called for compulsory or reserve military service after returning?'

Additionally, 64 per cent of returnees who already received guarantees from the regime, were wanted themselves or their family members for military service , which openly flouted those guarantees. Half of those who declared that they needed no guarantees were themselves or one of their family members called for compulsory or reserve military service upon their return (see Figure 26).

Figure 26. Compulsory Military Service upon Return, with vs. without Guarantee



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Were you or any of your family members called for compulsory or reserve military service after returning?'



A third of all returnees interviewed reported that they were subjected to at least some form of harassment after returning to regime-held areas, such as financial extortion, arrest threats, or insults at the regime's military checkpoints.

The highest rate of harassment was recorded among returnees to Homs, where harassment were documented by half of them; the regime still considers Homs to be the cradle of the revolution and blames returnees to the city for what happened to it. In addition, 30 per cent of returnees to Rural Damascus were subjected to harassment as a revenge tool against its people, who have been out of the regime for nearly six years. The highest rate of harassment for IDP returnees from opposition-held north Syria was recorded by returnees from Idlib (37 per cent) and from Afrin, Jarablous, and Al-Bab areas (43 per cent). Similarly, 33 per cent of returnees from Jordan to Daraa were subjected to harassment.



Here, they rob citizens under the laws of the state, in addition to the humiliation we suffer because of rampant sectarianism.

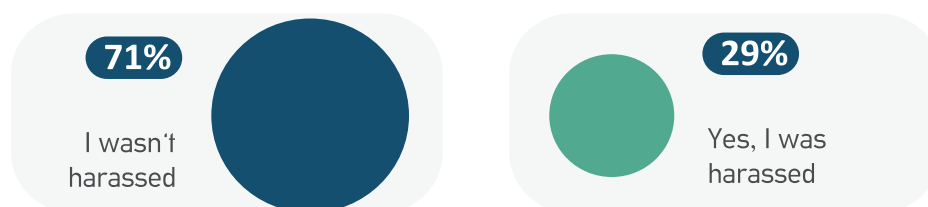
Amera, 51, returned from Idlib to Rural Damascus



In my village Al-Sheikh Maskin, many malicious cases are meant to blackmail people for money. For example, returnees opposing the regime are told that they were unwelcome and that they were wanted for security proceedings; they were asked to pay a compensation for houses that were destroyed by terrorists, otherwise they would be sued by 50 people, which means they would have to pay a big compensation.

Jasem, 50, returned to Daraa

Figure 27. Harassment after Returning to Original governorate



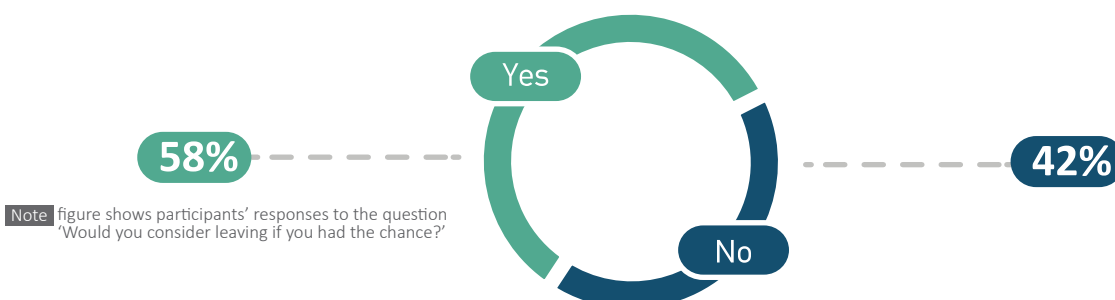
Note figure shows participants' responses to the question 'Were you subjected to any kind of harassment after returning, original governorate.'

Most returnees who were subjected to harassment (79 per cent) would consider leaving if they had the chance.

Considering Leaving after Returning

Generally, 58 per cent of returnees are seriously considering leaving regime-held areas if they have the chance (see Figure 28).

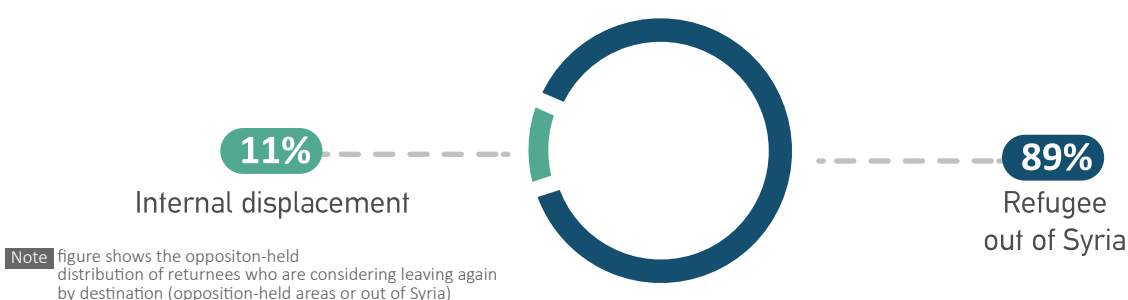
Figure 28. Returnees Considering Leaving Again



Most returnees who consider leaving are refugees who were disappointed by being unable to achieve their goal of returning; 75 per cent of refugees and 55 per cent of IDPs who returned are considering leaving again.

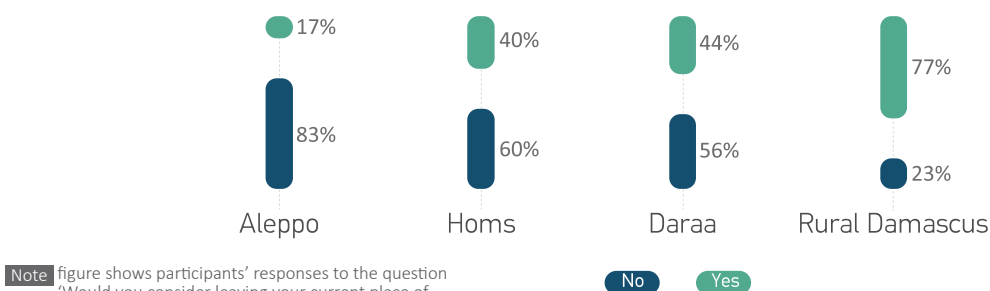
Furthermore, 89 per cent of those who consider leaving from returnees are aiming to reach an asylum out of Syria, especially in Turkey and Europe, whereas just 11 per cent aim to escape to opposition-held area.

Figure 29. The distribution of returnees who are considering leaving again by destination



Most returnees who are considering leaving are those who returned to Rural Damascus (77 per cent), Daraa (44 per cent) and Homs (40 per cent) (see Figure 30).

Figure 30. Returnees Considering Leaving Again, by Original Governate



The Impact of Returnees' Advice for Others to Return

The majority of returnees interviewed (77 per cent) do not encourage other refugees and IDPs to return under any circumstances, because they have had a negative personal experience of returning that did not meet their expectations.

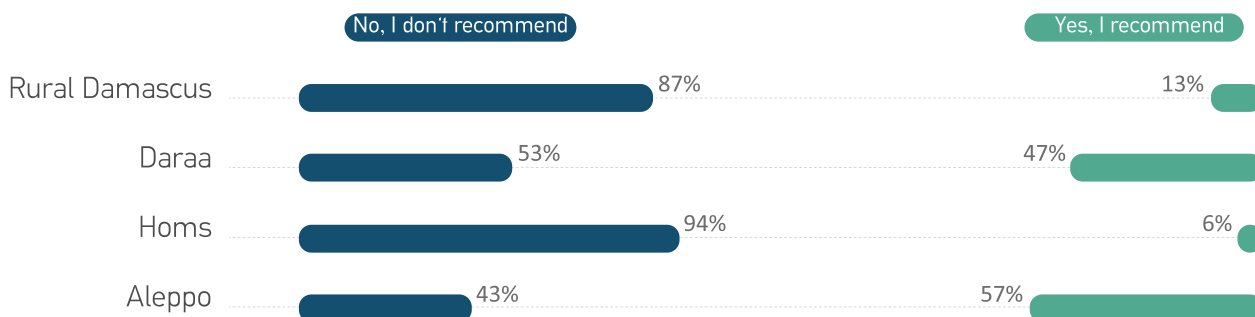
Figure 31. Advice to Others on Whether to Return, all Respondents



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question "Do you recommend others to return?"

The vast majority of returnees to Homs (94 per cent) and Rural Damascus (87 per cent) do not recommend that others return (see Figure 32).

Figure 32. Advice to Others on Whether to Return, by Original Governate



Note figure shows participants' responses to the question "Do you recommend others to return?"

The ages of returnees advising others about whether to return and providing a realistic analysis of life in regime-held areas varied: 95 per cent of returnees over 60 and 82 per cent of those aged 26–42 urged others not to return.

Participants' Statements

Participants' statements summarize the return process and the real-life experiences of returnees.



I do not recommend anyone to return. We all hope Syria returns to its former state before 2011, but let us face it, it is not the right time for people to return.

Afraa, 35, returned from Turkey to eastern Ghouta



Life is expensive, income is limited, and no dignified life is guaranteed. Therefore, and based on my own experience, I do not advise others to return.

Abo Khalil, 50, returned from Euphrates Shield area to the city of Aleppo.



I am an elderly man over 68 years old. I returned with my wife and daughter. I wish I had stayed with my other children, but poor living conditions forced us to return and live on my pension because of the lack of stability.

Abo Awni, 69, returned from Euphrates Shield area to Homs.



So far, security, economic, and military conditions are still unstable.

Samir, 43, returned from Idlib to Rural Damascus.



I do not recommend returning now because the situation in countries of asylum is better and more stable. For me, I did not feel comfortable and that is why I decided to return to Syria.

Raed, 27, returned from Sweden to Aleppo.

— “

They should not return because of the instability and the absence of security, judicial, and municipal institutions that provide public services.

Khawla, 30, returned from Idlib to Rural Damascus

— “

I advise them not to return because the regime will not let us enjoy a quiet life and will track us until we are killed.

Asaad, 34, returned from Idlib to eastern Ghouta

— “

I advise them not to return because reality as depicted by the official propaganda contradicts life on the ground.

Nadia, 27, returned from Olive Branch area to Rural Damascus

— “

I do not want them to return because they are threatening people after the regime seizes Idlib.

Samira, 30, returned to Daraa

— “

There is a disparity in maintaining people's dignity between the north and the regime-held areas. People are respected in the north, but respect is for rich and powerful people in the regime areas.

Nidal, 50, returned from Idlib to Rural Damascus





Conclusions

The data obtained from the study show that the regime is not seriously interested in a massive return of refugees and IDPs based on the negative experiences the returnees have faced that prompt them to either leave again or advise others not to return. The regime tries from time to time to return thousands of people to promote its victory in the war, and nothing more. Its Russian ally tried to prop up Bashar Al-Assad's regime by pushing Syria's neighbours and European countries to force Syrian refugees to return home. However, the Syrian regime still carries out what the opposition describes as "criminal policies" against those whom circumstances forced to return. This reduces the chance of returning for millions of Syrians who are awaiting a UN-sponsored political solution. Hence, it is necessary to emphasize the illegality of this return and the prosecution of those who promote it through the available judicial methods because of the disastrous consequences on the returnees, such as military conscription, arrests and forced disappearances. Moreover, such a return can have a negative effect on Syrians who refuse to support the regime through deem it "legitimate".



Recommendations

The following recommendations start from the need for decision makers in host countries and at the international level to re-examine their positions and policies regarding Syrian refugees, who are increasingly being forced to return into a situation of sheer insecurity and uncertainty²⁶.

- All returns should be safe, dignified, and voluntary and any political agreement has to include refugee and IDP voices and be based on the right of refugees to the judge of their own interests. The voluntary repatriation should respect the fact that refugees are 'purposive actors', and gives the scope for independent, rational decision-making about their future and for their new opportunities, values and visions fostered during exile.
- UNHCR have so far not been able to achieve an acceptable minimum of unfettered access to assess the conditions of Syrian refugees return. The international community should push towards have an unvarnished and objective assessment from UNHCR about its possible role to probe these actual conditions and to provide a rational risks analysis for those circumstances for assessing any possible returns, this urging of UNCHR will be as a challenge to evaluate its possible capabilities in this issue. However, of the international community, especially EU and European countries dissatisfied with UNHCRs information, they should consider alternative effective means for assessing conditions on the ground. Eventually, addressing this gap is an essential first step in any conversation on refugee and IDP return and should form a pre-condition to any work on returns
- The majority of returns decisions are being made due to 'push' rather than 'pull' factors. Maintaining and increasing support for IDPs and refugees, and renewing efforts to identify and support durable solutions for them in areas of displacement, is essential to ensure that premature returns due to 'push' factors are halted.
- Any upcoming political agreement must entail radical changes to the regime's security and judicial structure. Genuine mechanisms must be established to ensure transitional justice to address returnees' grievances, under which refugees and IDPs returning to regime-held areas should be granted the right to appeal to the judiciary to report abuses before or after their experience of return.
- Refugees and IDPs who voluntarily return prematurely and find that it is not safe or dignified should not be discriminated against during secondary displacement on return to neighbouring countries or areas in Syria outside government control now or in the future.

26 For an overview of the general situation in regime-held areas, see SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians. October 2019. <https://syacd.org/>- Living Conditions and General Rights- page 15

- The international community, especially the EU, should increase economic assistance and preferential partnership agreements with host countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to alleviate the burdens caused by their massive population growth, which has cast a shadow over infrastructure and employment. Social cohesion should be addressed within this programming and support.
- Greater attention and support should be given to the issue of family unity, which is a key driver of premature return and a frequently identified failure of the returns experience. The indicators underpinning the UNHCR's Protection Thresholds regarding family unity and refugee return should be revisited in consultation with refugees and IDPs to ensure that their work better matches the concerns of returning refugees and IDPs.
- Any funding for the reconstruction process must be conditional on the return of refugees and IDPs to their homes and the property they left. This process has to be monitored and sponsored by the UN to ensure that the regime will respond to the demands, and not impose the facts on the ground policy through demographic and housing changes the regime has brought about during the last eight years.

BETWEEN HAMMER AND ANVIL

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