

# SACD | Analysis

October 2019

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## Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians

SACD's new report and its underlying research comprise an **unprecedented** effort to gather testimonies from people who have returned to Assad-held areas (mostly due to dire living conditions in the displacement locations or because they believed the regime's promises of safe return) and those who remained in formerly opposition-controlled areas after they were retaken by regime forces under so-called reconciliation agreements. The report documents the security situation of returnees and those living in areas covered by "reconciliation agreements," as well as their access to basic services, the general living conditions in Assad-held areas, and the views of formerly displaced people on the return process and other relevant issues.

**The report has unique value as no international organization, including the UNHCR, has real, uncensored access to all areas under Assad's control.** Gathering information on the security situation, threats facing returnees and the general living conditions in these areas in a systematized way is virtually impossible. The Data Collection and Analysis Unit of the Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity (SACD), a movement fighting for the rights of displaced Syrians, worked in extremely challenging conditions to interview 165 people in Homs, Damascus countryside, Dara'a and Aleppo to obtain a valid, reliable and comprehensive picture of the situation facing returnees in Assad-held areas of Syria.

### Key findings

The main conclusion of this research is that **it is not safe for displaced Syrians to return to Assad-held areas.** Returnees and most people living in regime-held areas live in fear and feel extremely vulnerable and unsafe. Widespread and systematic human rights violations continue to be committed against Syrians in these areas by the regime, its security apparatus, militias and foreign forces. Arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment, extortion and the absence of basic services<sup>1</sup> are the main factors driving this fear and the returnees' desire to leave their homes again, this time permanently. Nearly 60 per cent of the interviewees (and 73 per cent of those living in areas the regime seized by

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<sup>1</sup> "A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees," Anchar Vohra, Foreign Policy, Feb 6 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/a-deadly-welcome-awaits-syrias-returning-refugees/>

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force) reported that they would seriously consider leaving if an opportunity presented itself. Returnees overwhelmingly asserted that they regret their decision to return, regardless of the hardship they faced in displacement; 63 per cent are actively seeking a way to flee again.

Several factors are driving another wave of displacement, this time among those who have returned or decided to stay under "reconciliation agreements".

The most destructive pattern of abuse is the indiscriminate arrests and detention by the security services without a charge. More than a quarter of those interviewed had been detained themselves or had a family member arbitrarily arrested by the security services. Of those respondents, 75 per cent had been arrested within the last 18 months. More than 70 per cent of those arrested had to pay a bribe to be released. Beatings and torture are common practices in detention. Several interviewees' relatives were taken to unknown locations, after which they were never heard from again.

Some 68 per cent of those interviewed are themselves or have a relative who is wanted for arrest by either the security services or Assad's military. Forced conscription<sup>2</sup> into Assad's forces is rampant, especially in areas integrated under "reconciliation agreements", where up to 75 per cent of those interviewed or their family members were wanted for recruitment. Conscripted fighters are almost inevitably sent to the most dangerous frontlines; many, especially young men, have been killed either in battle or in murky circumstances. Many of those wanted by the security branches for being perceived as "anti-Assad" are forced into the military and sent to the frontlines straight from detention and are never seen again.

Two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they live in constant fear of arrest or harassment from the security services and various militias that run a maze of checkpoints—particularly those in or from areas under "reconciliation agreements". People are arbitrarily stopped, harassed, threatened and arrested by these groups to extort money on the spot or from their families. Militias rely on a network of informants to identify returnees and those who accepted "reconciliation agreements" for targeting.

Corruption and extortion by the regime and militias permeate every aspect of life for returnees. Interviewees reported having to pay bribes to carry out

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<sup>2</sup> <https://medium.com/@SACD/reconciling-with-death-disappearance-and-fear-6e17fe2456aa>

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the most menial of activities, such as obtaining documents or transporting produce to the market. Almost all industrial and other economic activity in these areas has ceased, so farming is often the sole source of income. The regime is exploiting this situation by enforcing a ban on the transfer of goods and products beyond local areas under "reconciliation agreements", which forces returnees to sell their produce to the pro-regime monopolists. Two-thirds of the returnees have lost their former source of income and are now unemployed or engaged in manual, temporary work that cannot provide a basic standard of living for their families.

Most interviewees from areas covered by the regime's "urban development laws" consider themselves to be affected by the discriminatory laws and decrees governing the destroyed areas. They are systematically denied the right to their property in an openly retaliatory manner, especially in areas where the regime has seized control by force. Returnees to these areas are particularly affected, as regime officials know that one of the key reasons they returned was to officially document their property to ensure it is not lost.

## What next?

This report clearly demonstrates 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 uncertainty. Sending the displaced people to Assad-held areas is almost certain to expose them to further persecution and harassment. On the basis of our research and the everyday experience of our people, SACD is categorical that the following steps should be considered:

Any political solution to end the conflict, and to achieve a lasting and stable peace in Syria and the region, must include mechanisms to protect the rights of displaced Syrians. The voices of displaced Syrians should be included in constitution drafting and all workstreams within the UN-led Geneva process.

The international community (including European states, neighbouring countries, and humanitarian agencies) must increase and adapt their efforts to protect Syria's displaced from refoulement or increased pressure to return until the conditions for their voluntary, safe and dignified return are guaranteed.

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The international community must address the crisis created by the Syrian regime's refusal to give UNHCR unfettered access to monitor return conditions. It should consider creating a robust international mechanism to guarantee and monitor the conditions for return within Syria that protects the rights of displaced people and prioritizes protection concerns.

Given the high reported levels of arrest, detention, harassment, discrimination, conscription and violations of housing, land and property rights, the international community must halt discussion of return or preparation for return until an effective monitoring mechanism is in place. It must also provide reassurance that facilitated or supported return will not take place until the conditions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return have been met and independently verified via the international mechanism.

Timely and granular information about the security conditions and conditions for return in each of Syria's towns and cities must be urgently made available to Syria's displaced. Until this information is available, no returns can be considered safe or voluntary.

Numerous HLP violations are occurring, including the prevention of access to properties and the potential implementation of discriminatory planning laws. HLP concerns and mechanisms for solving Syria's HLP crisis must be included in the political process. Humanitarian and development agencies working inside Syria with international funding must not undertake work that perpetuates or consolidates these concerns and must actively prioritize work to protect the property rights of displaced people. Timely information on HLP issues must be provided to Syria's displaced.

Work to address the negative impact of forced conscription and to find a workable amnesty, as well as to end security sector overreach and harassment, must be pursued through all dialogues and political processes, including the UN-led Geneva process, Astana, and the small group.

The data collected in this research provide empirical evidence in support of a long-held position of SACD: the return of displaced Syrians is impossible without a comprehensive political solution that guarantees the rights of returnees, including their rights to be free of persecution, discrimination and harassment, their right to safety and dignity, their rights to their property and

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protection under the law, and freedoms guaranteed to them as citizens and human beings. This research gives international and regional decision makers working to help displaced Syrians a unique insight into the real consequences of ill-conceived policies, especially those that accommodate the Syrian regime and Russia's policy of forced return. The report's findings reinforce the need to protect the rights and dignity of Syrian refugees and to provide adequate living conditions in their places of displacement to protect them from forced return, and to ensure their wellbeing and dignity as a prerequisite for a lasting political solution and any hope of genuine stability in Syria and the region.

[Read the full report here](#)