



Syrian Association for  
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

# WE ARE SYRIA

Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the  
Reasons for Displacement and Minimum  
Conditions for Return







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**CITIZENS' DIGNITY**

## **“ABOUT SACD”**

The Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity (SACD) is a civil-rights grass-root popular movement established by citizens from different regions of Syria to serve the people of Syria. As a popular social movement, 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 international and regional 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, and the effective implementation of a safe environment according to the definition of the Syrian displaced people themselves.

We are against any forced or premature return of refugees and IDPs. The Association believes that a popular social 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

More than half of Syria's pre-war population is now displaced. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syrians<sup>1</sup> represent the largest number of forcibly displaced persons in the world. Some 13 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes since 2011, when the protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime began. Roughly half of them were forced to leave the country; Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Germany host the largest numbers of Syrian refugees. The other 6.2 million are internally displaced, mostly in the north-west and north-east of the country, in areas outside the control of Assad's forces. The fate of these displaced citizens is instrumental to the sustainability of any future political solution to end the conflict and ensure lasting, stable peace.

At least nine million displaced Syrians want to return home one day, but need to see significant changes in the conditions on the ground before that happens. Security is their number one concern, and this must form the basis of every conversation seeking to address this unprecedented displacement of civilians in conflict.

The rights of the displaced—primarily their right to a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homes—are even more important when considering the long-term consequences of the continuing suffering and prolonged displacement. The displacement continues: more than one million people were displaced in just three months at the start of 2020 in an onslaught of Assad's forces and their Russian and Iranian allies in the towns and cities in Idlib and north Aleppo. This has created untold suffering; children, women and men have been displaced multiple times, and forced to live in makeshift camps on the Turkish border in the harshest winter, in subhuman conditions.

The horror of Idlib provides only the latest reminder of the suffering endured by displaced Syrians over the last 9 years. Many of them have continued throughout this time to endure difficult living conditions, lack of access to employment, education and basic prospects for a dignified future while languishing in camps, with no end to conflict or hope for return in sight. In some refugee-hosting countries, displaced Syrians are seen as easy scapegoats for internal political and economic problems; opportunist political actors dehumanize them and fuel hostility against them for political gain.

Despite all this suffering, there has been no significant return to Syria, except in a statistically marginal number of individual cases in which people were forced, for various reasons, to choose this option. This is primarily due to the fact that the regime continues to repress the areas it controls. An earlier report in this series,<sup>2</sup> published last year documented the dangers faced by the few who have been forced to return to Assad-held areas. Since the report's publication in October 2019 the situation has deteriorated even further, with the complete collapse of the economy and basic services. Syria is now a failed state, with rampant effort at demographic change, almost entirely controlled by Russia and Iran.

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1- After 9 years of tragedy, resilience and solidarity, the world must not forget displaced Syrians <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e67ade92d6/9-years-tragedy-resilience-solidarity-world-must-forget-displaced-syrians.html>

2- "Vengeance, Repression and Fear..." <https://syacd.org/vengeance-repression-and-fear/>



The report you are reading describes the results of a survey of 1,100 displaced individuals and analyses their responses to questions about why they fled, how they feel in their places of displacement, whether they want to return home, and what conditions must be met in order for them to feel safe to do so in a dignified and voluntary manner.

The respondents' answers highlight how damaging and unsettling multiple displacements have been, and the reduction in protections and opportunities Syrians are facing in some host communities. As those circumstances decline, most respondents reported that they felt that they have access to the information they need in order to decide whether to return, but in reality they were unaware of critical factors that present enormous risks to them if they do so. The danger of this feeling of unease and poor information is premature return, before the conditions for return are met, with the potential for dangerous and even deadly consequences.

The analysis in this report is based on a large, representative sample; it provides uniquely rich information. The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity researchers invested enormous effort in reaching displaced Syrians in various countries, as well as inside Syria, to explore in depth what motivates their thinking about returning home and details the factors that need to change from displaced Syrians point of view in order to allow them to return home safely. The majority of these concerns relate to security, but some are social and economic too. This information is intended to inform policy-makers and advocates working to help end the conflict in Syria and help the displaced population return home safely. Taken together, the opinions presented in this report form a roadmap to help policy-makers and practitioners address these challenges and protect the rights of Syria's displaced, and have a realistic chance at shaping a comprehensive and sustainable solution that will secure those rights and legitimate concerns.

It is essential to develop a political solution that has the rights of displaced Syrians at its foundation, and the creation of an environment for safe, voluntary and dignified returns as its backbone. The solution to the difficulties of the majority of displaced Syrians involves ending the conflict in Syria. The process may be demanding, and the solutions complex and challenging, but this is the only sustainable, realistic way to prevent the war from becoming an unending conflict with recurring cycles of violence that destabilize the region and beyond.

As this reality gradually, but inevitably, starts informing the political process on the future of Syria, it will be of decisive importance to ensure that the views of displaced Syrians are comprehensively, genuinely and adequately represented to inform the key decisions and solutions. The displaced Syrians will define what constitutes the minimum conditions for their safe, voluntary and dignified return. They must be heard and taken seriously.

# Key findings

**Most displaced Syrians want to return home if the circumstances are right.** Some 73 per cent of survey participants declared that they would return to Syria if the right conditions existed. The overwhelming majority (80 per cent) were adamant that the security situation has to change for this to be possible. If this percentage is applied to the total number of displaced persons, this suggests more than 9 million people are prepared to exercise their right to a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homes in Syria. Internally displaced Syrians are the segment of the displaced population that is most interested in returning to their homes under the right conditions: 92 per cent of the IDPs participating in this study expressed this view. 62 per cent of refugees wish to return if the conditions for return they aspire to are fulfilled.

**Three-quarters of displaced Syrians want to see a comprehensive political solution guaranteeing their rights before feeling safe to return.** While the survey highlighted a range of specific concerns and conditions that Syria's displaced would want to see in place before they could safely return, (73 per cent) of respondents said that a formal agreement needed to be in place before they would trust those changes. This was true across those surveyed from all territories of control. The passage of time without a political settlement is making return seem less possible for most of the displaced.

**Security-related reasons were the largest cause of displacement throughout the years of the conflict.** Security reasons were the most prominent cause of departures in 2012 (98 per cent); this percentage fell only slightly to 94 per cent in 2018.

**Security concerns are the biggest barrier to return.** 90 per cent of participants cited feeling unsafe as one of the main reasons for their original displacement, while 33 per cent of the respondents mentioned that the 'social situation' was a factor in leaving home; 28 per cent of the study participants identified the 'economy' as one of the reasons for leaving. The vast majority of interviewees want to see significant improvements in security before they return. Different aspects of security dominated the five main conditions identified as minimum requirements for a safe, voluntary and dignified return.

**Under the umbrella of security concerns, the top conditions for return were:**

**Security sector reform:** The number one priority for the large majority of study participants (73 per cent) relates to the need to reform the security sector and curb its powers over civilian life; 82 per cent of these respondents called for the complete dismantling of the current security services and reforming them in ways that would "guarantee that their performance would be focused on an internal security function ensuring the security of citizens and protecting the people in accordance with the laws; without any privileges, violations or encroachment on the rest of the government agencies and the government's role in the structure of society".



**Compulsory military conscription:** 84 per cent of the study participants who wish to return want to see compulsory military recruitment either cancelled or suspended for at least 5 years.

**The departure of the Syrian regime:** More than 81 per cent of the participants who wish to return identified the “departure of the regime with all its key figures” as an essential condition for return; 12 per cent were satisfied with the “departure of the head of the Syrian regime”.

**Detainees:** The fate of detainees was a priority for 64 per cent of the displaced. Of this number, 82 per cent demanded “the full and unconditional release of all detainees who were detained for dissent or being accused of anti-regime activities or sentiment, revealing the fate of the forcibly disappeared persons, releasing them or handing over the bodies of the those who died in prison to their families”, which indicates the priority that a wide range of Syrians from all groups place on this issue.

**Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) lack access to appropriate independent information about the real conditions in their places of origin.** While 87% stated that they had the information they needed for returns decisions, only some 20% said they knew about critical returns procedures that most of them then found to be barriers to return, suggesting the displaced overestimate the quality and depth of information they have available to them for returns decision-making.

**The displaced feel most settled in Europe; the responses in other countries vary greatly, but appear to be linked to the degree of acceptance and permanence Syrians are afforded in each place.** Approximately 42 per cent of the study participants stated that they do not feel “settled”, in terms of a sense of safety, feeling satisfied with their living conditions, income level, basic services, contentment and stability in their new places of residence, a sense of assimilation into the new society, and that they have no legal problems with residency. However, 97 per cent of respondents currently living in EU countries do feel settled. 97 of the 117 IDPs from Idlib interviewed before February stated that they felt a sense of stability. In stark contrast, 90 per cent of the IDPs in Idlib who were interviewed in February 2020 (75 out of 80) reported no sense of stability, after more than a million new IDPs were displaced by the regime’s recent military campaign.

**Economic conditions were the fifth priority for returns decisions.** Conditions for return related to the “economic situation”, were chosen by 58 per cent of the studies participants.

**Social connections was an important condition for return, but its priority varied significantly between refugees and IDPs.** Social connections and family ties have always been extremely important to Syrians. They are still seen as essential, despite the harsh conditions in which they live: more than 71 per cent of the study participants chose the option of “the return of displaced relatives and acquaintances” as a condition for return. While 84 per cent of the IDPs interviewed for the study chose “the return of both displaced relatives and acquaintances” as a condition for return, only 59 per cent of refugees made this a condition; 34 per cent reported that “this point is not within their conditions for return”. This reflects the impact of displacement on refugees—particularly the weakening of the family structure amidst the progressively diminishing social ties for many of them.



# Methodology

## Thematic areas

This systematic research study involved conducting 1,100 structured interviews using a standard questionnaire to collect the opinions of Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees living outside the country. It examined three main factors:

1. The displacement experience: where they went, when and why
2. The current situation of the IDPs and refugees
3. Conditions for IDPs and refugees to return to Syria

The interviews were conducted in person. All names have been changed to ensure the participants' safety. The researchers who administered the interviews had at least 5 years of experience in conducting similar research, in addition to the technical qualification to carry out this type of study. The researchers had also been extensively trained to apply procedures that ensure the protection and privacy of the interviewees, and informed consent was obtained from respondents before they were interviewed in accordance with the policies of the Data Collection and Analysis Unit of the Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity (SACD).

## Sample

The study sought to ensure the equitable representation of different segments of Syrian society, including IDPs and refugees outside Syria, to ensure a fair representation of the following parameters:

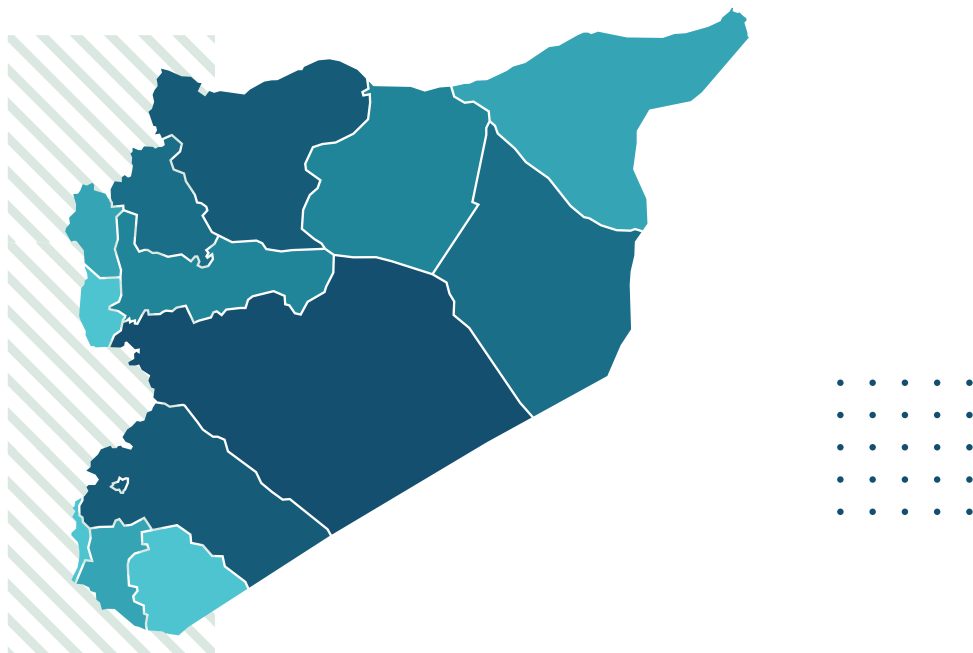
- Geographic distribution according to the intensity of displacement from each governorate
- Gender
- The period of displacement and number of years of displacement
- Distribution between inside Syria (IDPs) and outside Syria (refugees)
- Population distribution within the areas under the control of the Syrian opposition
- Population distribution in the countries of asylum
- Age

The study sample includes IDPs in Northern Syria, which is among the main areas of displacement in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib. It also includes refugees living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and France.

The inclusivity of the sample was achieved by including people from all Syrian governorates (Damascus, Damascus countryside, Aleppo, Deir Al-Zur, Hasakah, Homs, As-Suwayda, Daraa, Quneitra, Raqqa, Tartus, Latakia, Hama, Idlib), yet in varying numbers, due to variations in the distribution of IDPs and refugees throughout the country (Figure 1).

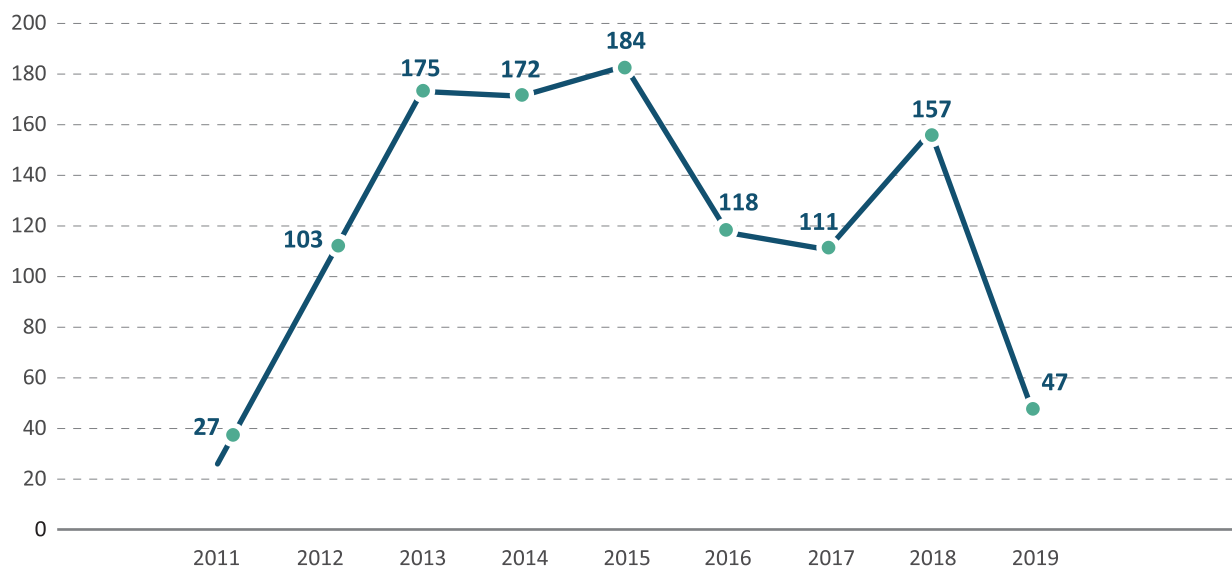


Figure 1. Respondents' Original Place of Residence



The displacement period of 1094 participants was between 2011-2019<sup>3</sup>. (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Year of Respondents' Displacement



The sample included 68 per cent males and 32 per cent females. It was also representative of different educational sectors and four age groups:

**Age group 1**

(18 to 25): 17 per cent

**Age group 2**

(26 to 42): 56 per cent

**Age group 3**

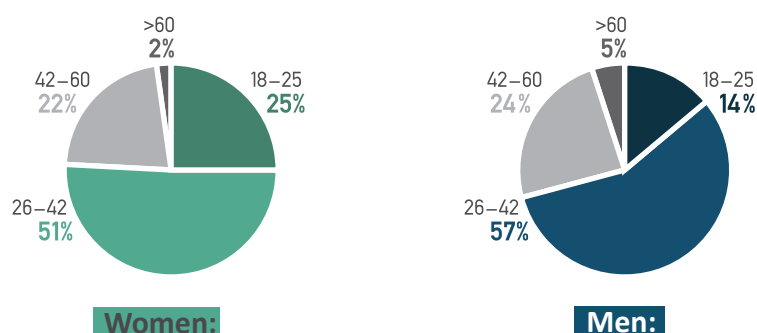
(43 to 60): 23 per cent

**Age group 4**

(60+): 4 per cent

3- The rest of the participants left the Syria outside this period.

Respondents' ages by gender were as follows:



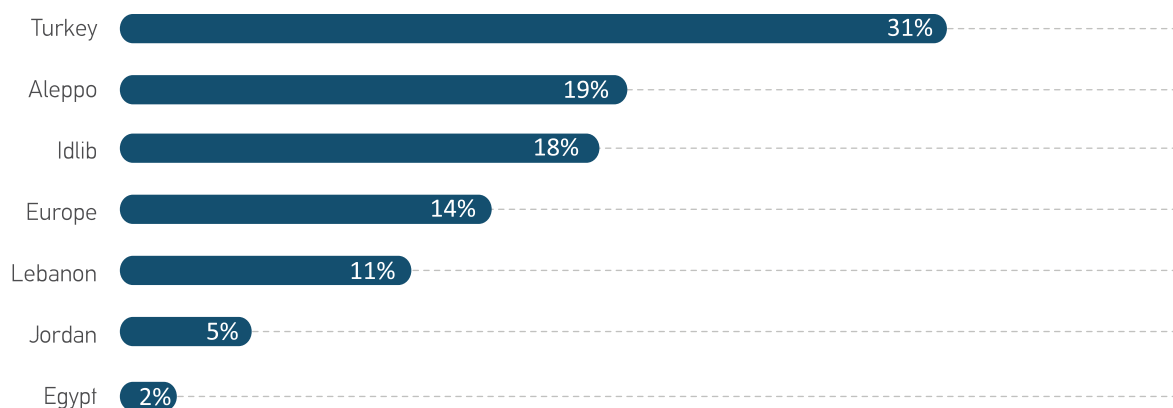
The study comprised 63 percent refugees outside Syria (62 per cent men, 38 per cent women); 37 per cent were IDPs within Syria (76 per cent men, 24 per cent women) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Respondents' Location at the Time of their Interview



IDPs make up 37% of the interviewed people, with the majority living in Idlib and Aleppo. Figure 4 shows that the refugees lived in Turkey (31 per cent of total), European Union countries (14 per cent), Lebanon (11 per cent), Jordan (5 per cent), and Egypt (2 per cent).

Figure 4. Refugee Respondents' Place of Residence at the Time of their Interview





# Circumstances of displacement



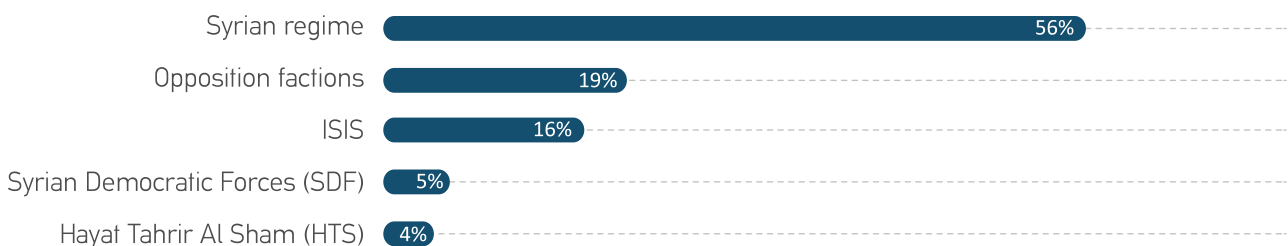
# Circumstances of displacement

## Reasons for displacement

The majority (56 per cent) of interviewees were displaced from areas under the control of the Syrian regime or fled while those areas were being conquered by the regime's forces during the conflict. This number includes people who were displaced from their homes in areas dominated by the regime's military and security apparatus as well as those who were forced to leave their homes after the so-called forced displacement agreements were concluded between the opposition factions and the Syrian regime forces in the governorates of Aleppo in December 2016, Damascus in May 2017, Damascus countryside in many waves from April 2017 till March 2018, Homs in many waves from 2014 till 2018 and Dara'a in 2018.

The remainder of the participants include the 19 per cent who were forced to leave opposition-controlled areas, while 16 per cent fled Islamic State (ISIS)-controlled areas. Those who left areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) constituted 5 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Military Forces Controlling Areas at the Time of Displacement



The study investigates patterns of destinations to which the displaced, driven out by different agents of displacement, relocated (Figure 6).

Europe: 63 per cent of the study participants and refugees currently in Europe were displaced by the Syrian regime, 18 per cent fled opposition-controlled areas, 13 per cent were displaced from areas controlled by ISIS, 5 per cent fled from areas controlled by the SDF, and 1 per cent fled from areas controlled by HTS<sup>4</sup>.

Turkey: 49 per cent of refugees participating in the study who currently live in Turkey fled areas controlled by the Syrian regime, 21 per cent fled areas controlled by ISIS, 17 per cent were displaced from opposition-held areas, 7 per cent fled areas controlled by the SDF, and 6 per cent fled the areas controlled by HTS.

4- At the time of the largest influx of Syrian refugees into Europe, various opposition factions controlled the north of Syria (including Idlib). Idlib was later overrun by HTS, but by that time the number of Syrians reaching Europe had declined significantly.

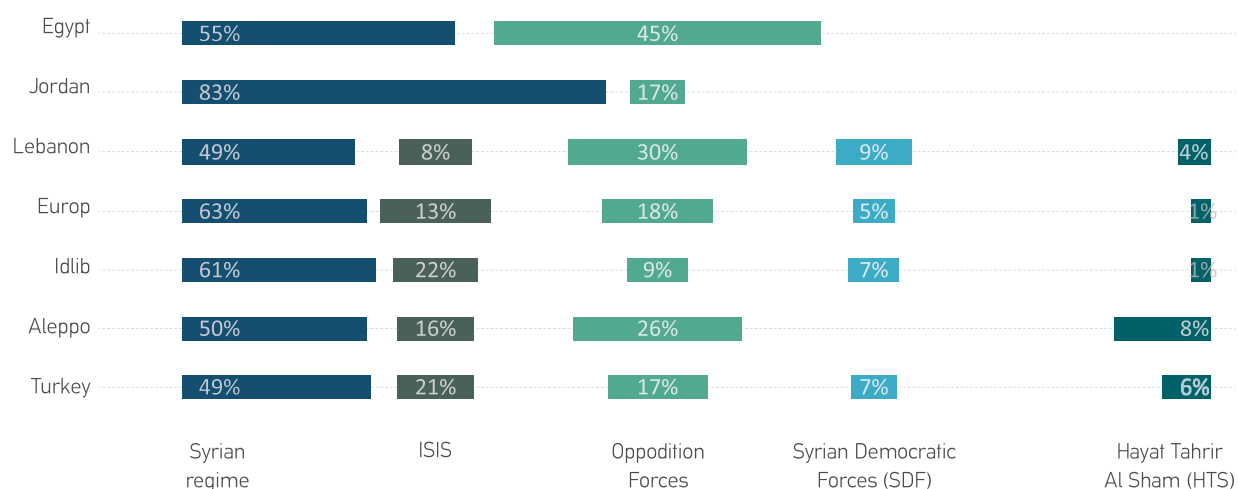
Lebanon: 49 per cent of refugees participating in the study who currently live in Lebanon fled areas controlled by the Syrian regime, 30 per cent were displaced from opposition-held areas, 9 per cent fled areas controlled by the SDF, 8 per cent were displaced from areas controlled by ISIS, and 4 per cent fled areas controlled by HTS.

Jordan: 83 per cent of refugee participants who now live in Jordan fled regime-held areas, while the remaining 17 per cent were displaced from areas controlled by the opposition.

Idlib: Of the IDPs participating in the study who presently live in Idlib governorate, 61 per cent arrived from regime-held areas, 22 per cent fled ISIS, 9 per cent left areas controlled by the opposition forces, 7 per cent left areas controlled by the SDF, and 1 per cent fled areas controlled by HTS.

Aleppo Governorate: In the governorate of Aleppo, 50 per cent of the displaced were from areas controlled by the Syrian regime, while 26 per cent were displaced from areas controlled by opposition forces, 16 per cent fled ISIS and 8 per cent fled areas controlled by HTS. Most of the IDPs in this area were displaced from towns and areas that came under attack in the most recent military campaign by the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies in opposition-controlled areas north of Hama Governorate and southern Idlib.

Figure 6. Military Control Over the Areas of Origin of Displaced People at the Time of Displacement, by Current Place of Residence





## Causes of displacement

In order to understand the main causes of displacement, we asked participants to explain the circumstances that made them flee their homes. These reasons can be broadly defined as security, economic and social concerns.

Overall, 90 per cent of participants chose 'security' as the main reason for their displacement, while 33 per cent of respondents also mentioned the 'social situation' as a reason for leaving their home; and 28 per cent added 'economy' as one of the reasons for leaving.

Security was the main motive to leave for 96 per cent of the interviewed IDPs and 86 per cent of the refugees.

In areas controlled by Syrian regime: These security reasons included various forms of security threats: the fear of arrest, unchecked power of security services, forced displacement, absence of the rule of law, and forced recruitment.

**I went out to northern Syria with my husband at a cost of more than \$1,800 per person in exchange for safe arrival, fearing that my husband would be arrested.**

**- Amina, 29 years old, from Damascus**

**I had the same reasons for fear of being arrested and fear of being driven towards the compulsory recruitment into military service for the ones who escaped and did not report to conscription. This has forced me and many young men to leave without hesitation.**

**- Saber, 34 years old, Aleppo**

**We could not wait for the militia to reach our homes; the displacement camps and the residence in the lands are still the best option.**

**- Samar, 36 years old, Hama countryside**

**It was my children that forced me to go on with this displacement; as I could not find a justification for this shelling and air strikes in front of my children.**

**- Tayseer, 48 years old, Idlib**

In areas controlled by ISIS, the most prominent security factor was the fear of death, arbitrary arrest, or other punishment resulting from being accused of apostasy and being subjected to the extreme interpretation of sharia law and arbitrary punishment.

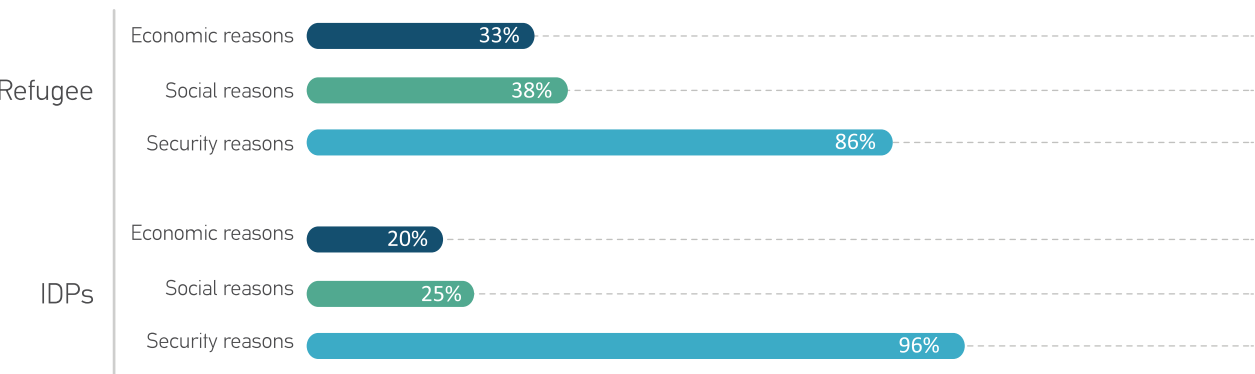
In areas controlled by the SDF, fear of compulsory recruitment and arbitrary arrests were among the most important security factors for leaving. Explosions, combat operations and military attacks, assassinations, robberies, gun violence and general insecurity were the main drivers of displacement from opposition- and HTS-held areas.

Social factors—such as family separation, divisions in the community resulting from the conflict and the political situation, changes in the way of life—were the second-most common reason driving the decision to leave. Some 38 per cent of the interviewed refugees and 25 per cent of IDPs cited social factors as a reason for leaving.

Lastly, 33 per cent of refugees and 20 per cent of IDPs listed economic causes as among the reasons for leaving. The testimonies of some interviewees demonstrate that the worsening economic situation, lack of employment opportunities, low exchange rates and increased inflation have forced many citizens to emigrate in search of a better life (Figure 7).

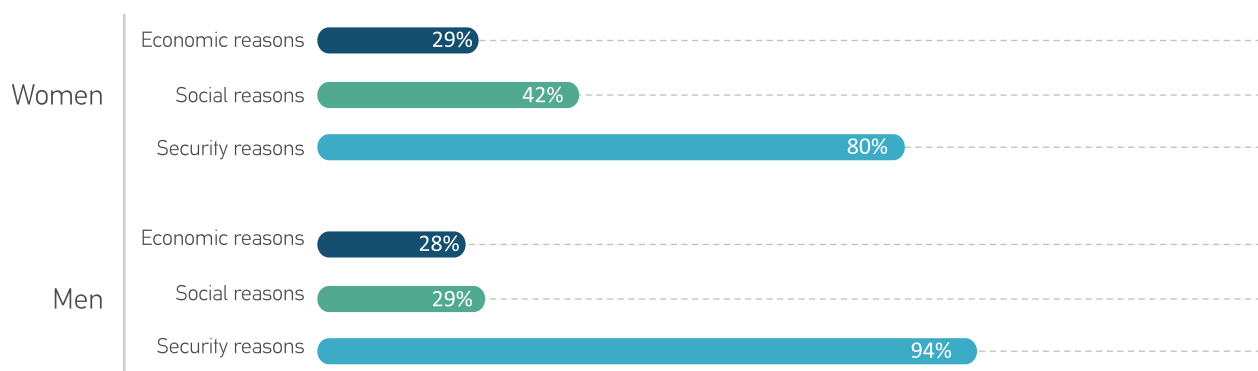
**There is an increase in the gap and disparity between people and social classes, in addition to the deteriorating financial situation.**  
- Hana, 49 years old, Daraa

Figure 7. Main Causes of Displacement for Refugees and IDPs



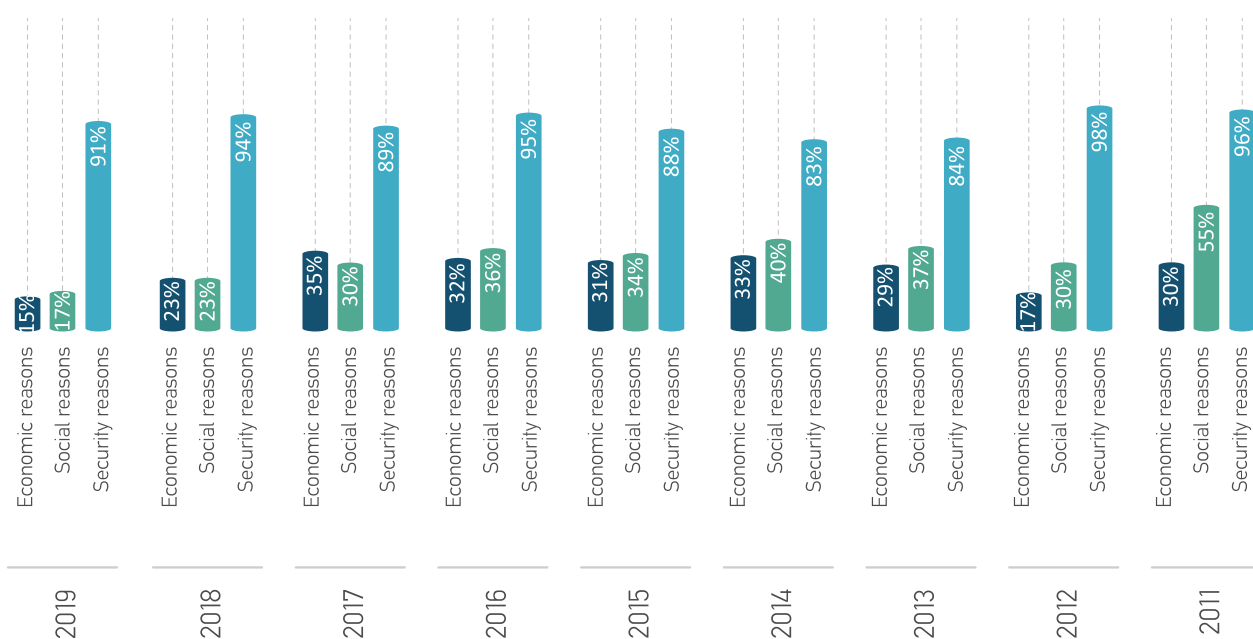
Security-related were dominant reasons that pushed both men and women from the same regions, while social factors had a greater impact on women taking the decision to leave their places of origin as compared to men (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Main Causes of Displacement, by Gender



Security-related reasons were the most important cause of displacement during all years of the conflict. The security conditions continued to deteriorate even as the areas under the regime's control expanded, marking the end of military operations in those areas. This situation illustrates citizens' lack of confidence in the regime's ability to provide safety and a decent living. The lack of security was the most prominent driver of displacement in 2012 (98 per cent), and fell only slightly to 94 per cent by 2018 (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Main Causes of Displacement, by Year



# Current circumstances



# Current circumstances

## Sense of safety and stability in new place of residence

When considering their sense of security and contentment in their place of residence during displacement, more than half of the study participants stated that they did not currently feel “settled”, a concept that entails a number of factors including a sense of safety, feeling satisfied with the living conditions, income level, basic services, contentment and stability in their new places of residence, a sense of assimilation into the new society, and lack of legal residency problems. The availability of services, the availability of the relief and humanitarian organizations working in them, and a sense of safety in their current place of residence during displacement all affected their general sense of settlement.

Some 58 per cent stated they did not currently feel settled, while 42 per cent did feel settled in their current living conditions. The results of the study confirmed expectations: displaced people who made it to developed countries, such as in the EU, felt much more settled than those in other host countries, where their status is unresolved or they live in difficult conditions. The displaced felt most settled in Europe; the responses from other countries varied greatly, but appear to be linked to the degree of acceptance and permanence Syrians are afforded in each place. A very small percentage of refugees in Lebanon reported feeling settled, likely because they are facing increased hostility and difficult living conditions. A major shift appears to be occurring in Turkey, which hosts the largest number of Syrians. Whereas in previous years Syrian refugees felt welcome there<sup>5</sup>, the percentage of refugees that feel settled there has decreased to 34 per cent over the last two years due to the political turbulence there and the refugees finding themselves in the eye of the political storm involving the ruling party and the opposition.

For the IDPs within Syria, their sense of settlement directly relates to the living conditions in which they find themselves, especially after the recent mass displacements to makeshift camps and inadequate, temporary accommodations. This particularly applies to those fleeing cities and villages in Hama and Idlib governorates as a result of the recent military escalation by the regime forces and its allies. This indicates that the recent displacements are negatively impacting people’s sense of security and living conditions.

Figure 10. Sense of Feeling “Settled” in New Place of Residence



5- This sentiment is in direct correlation with the research of a Turkish polling agency Konda, which reported that the percentage of Turkish citizens saying they would have no problems with Syrian refugees in their city was 72 percent in February 2016. In 2019, it was below 40 percent. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/27/turkey-cant-host-syrian-refugees-forever-erdogan-as-sad-idlib-hdp-chp-imamoglu/>



Some 97 per cent of refugees in European countries feel settled, indicating that they enjoy a high degree of rights recognition and that their adaptation and integration into the new society is much easier, despite various issues they may be facing. The fact that they communicate their contentment with their families and communities displaced internally or in other countries explains the findings of our earlier report, *The Truth Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians*, which speaks of a large majority of Syrians displaced internally or in the region who dream of reaching Europe.

**I am settled here and I felt the value of citizenship in this country. I cannot leave my new place of residence and return to Syria except with the intention of visiting, and only after the fall of the Assad regime.**

**- Nisreen, 34 years old, Germany**

In a striking contrast, only 9 per cent of refugees in Lebanon feel settled (Figure 11). The situation for refugees there has been rapidly declining. The terrible living conditions and situation for Syrians in Lebanon stems from a range of bureaucratic hurdles, including a residency policy that makes it difficult for refugees to obtain a legal status, which in turn limits their access to education, work and health care and exposes them to the risk of arbitrary arrest. A Human Rights Watch report indicates that 74 per cent of them do not have legal status in Lebanon;<sup>6</sup> Lebanon stopped allowing refugees to register in 2015 meaning they have few protections. Increasingly hostile local political and media discourse about Lebanon's refugees compounds their sense of insecurity and raises the risks Syrians face there on a daily basis. The structural and social issues make it clear there are no durable solutions for refugees in Lebanon, which deprives them of the ability to live dignified and settled lives.

**Life in Lebanon is very difficult... People are beginning to lose their mind because of the abuse and humiliation.**

**- Maher, 33 years old, Lebanon**

**My educational opportunities are non-existent, so I cannot complete my university studies. There are no job opportunities. The authorities are chasing and arresting those who work, or imposing big fines, bearing in mind that the cost of living is very high in Lebanon. Consequently, for us, all aspects of life are affected; be it education, livelihood or medical care. In addition to security concerns, there is a high possibility that the Lebanese authorities will hand me over to the regime without any deterrence; simply because I work or out of many other allegations. Racism from the local people is a big problem... This can manifest itself in various forms, from verbal or physical abuse or bullying and discrimination.**

**- Khaled, 26 years old, Lebanon**

**I received a residence permit here under one condition: signing a pledge not to work. And when you sign a pledge not to work, you do not have an opportunity to work in this country except in secrecy. This country (Lebanon) is basically living in a state of chaos, and keeps you always in a sense of insecurity. I have a concern about my son, and I do not have much hope to secure a school for him that is not very expensive, giving him the appropriate knowledge and that has no sense of racism against him. This matter is almost nonexistent in this country.**

**- Nermin, 33 years old, Lebanon**

6- <https://www.hrw.org/ar/world-report/2019/country-chapters/325424>

Over 70 per cent of refugees in Egypt and Jordan feel settled. Many Syrians left Egypt during a second wave of displacement after 2013 when the hostility towards Syrian refugees in the country increased, meaning few are likely to have remained. In Jordan, which has blocked the entry of Syrian refugees for years now, many of the displaced live in camps and have greater access to assistance since it is simpler to reach them. Additionally, the Jordanian government has taken pains to cap the number of refugees and limit any social backlash. In Jordan all the participants had arrived before 2015, and the passage of time has certainly increased their sense of feeling settled. However, only 34 per cent of refugees in Turkey said they felt a sense of stability. Many of the study participants, primarily those who do not feel settled there, expressed a desire to migrate to Europe. They see their presence in Turkey as only a temporary, transitory phase. Many refugees in Turkey reported losing their sense of being settled over time, especially with the introduction of new procedures related to their legal status and when the country's political discourse became polarized over their presence. Following a long period of hospitality, the recent changes have served as a destabilizing force for refugees in Turkey.

**I would like to immigrate to Europe because I have a son in Sweden, and I am waiting for the appropriate opportunity.**

**- Tammam, 48 years old, Turkey**

**As far as I'm concerned, I am not settled here and am uncomfortable and will return at any time when conditions are right.**

**- Maii, 29 years old, Turkey**

**I hold a degree in law and I practiced as a lawyer for 12 years in Syria, but I cannot work with my degree in Turkey. I do not have capital that enables me to do commercial work and I cannot work in any manual profession. Also, I am unable to relocate myself and my family to any place outside the province in which I live because we need travel permission. According to the laws in Turkey, we cannot visit other family members residing in other provinces.**

**- Mohammed, 40 years old, Turkey**

**For me, as long as I have my fully owned house, I am fine. But I am always worried about the laws changing at any moment. The problem is that I have no (Turkish) nationality or citizenship that protects me. Certainly, I have no actual settlement, except the fact that we work and earn our living to survive day by day.**

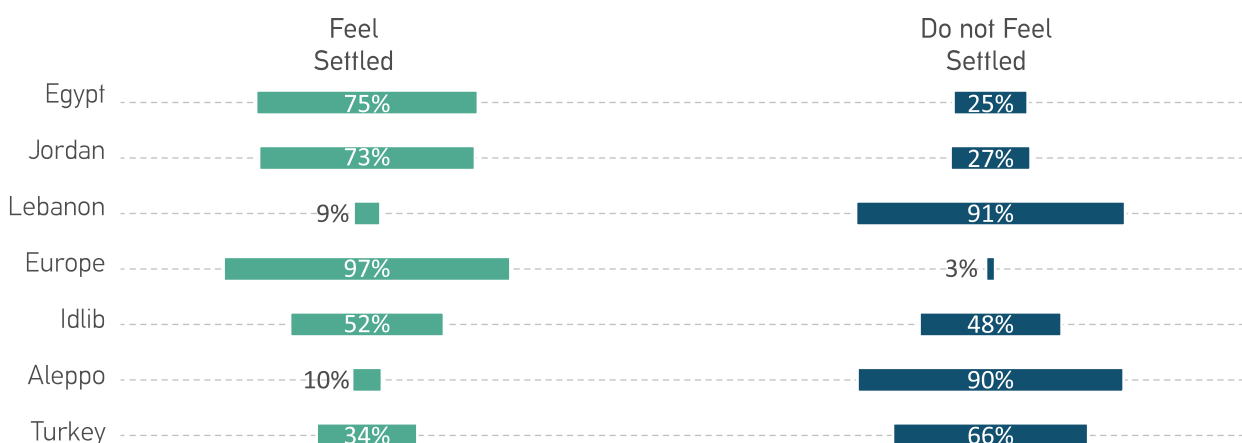
**- Ayman, 39 years old, Turkey**



Of the interviewees displaced in Idlib, 52 per cent indicated that they feel somewhat settled; fewer than 10 per cent feel settled in the rural areas of Aleppo Governorate. Most of the IDPs in Aleppo have been displaced relatively recently compared with most of those in Idlib Governorate. When we interviewed IDPs in Idlib before February 2020, 97 out of 117 people interviewed stated that they felt a sense of some stability. In stark contrast, 90 per cent of the IDPs in Idlib who were interviewed in February 2020 (75 out of 80) did not have any sense of stability (although they were all displaced before 2020), which reflects the situation of more than a million new IDPs displaced by Assad’s recent military campaign.

The instability of the IDPs overwhelmingly reflects the poor living conditions and the lack of access to their rights and the rights of their families including shelter, education and medical and community services, unlike the displaced in Europe.

Figure 11. Feeling Settled, by Current Residence



Women reported feeling more settled than men (Figure 12)—53 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively. The interview conversations centred on the impact of the recent trauma caused by the suffering and deterioration of the living conditions for women and their families in their original place of residence, and women’s focus on regaining some sense of normalcy in their current circumstances of displacement. The interviews revealed a convergence of a sense of settlement among both refugee and internally displaced women, despite their fundamentally different living conditions.

The interview conversations reiterated the importance of observing the specificity of women’s experience of the conflict and displacement, and ensuring that their needs are addressed and met, especially in the context of any future political solution. The conversations revealed that women’s safety (and that of their families) is a major factor in their sense of being settled, and that any political solution that does not take their specific needs and perceptions into account, or that forces the displaced into a return that is not safe and dignified, could generate strong push factors that drive secondary displacement towards perceived safety.

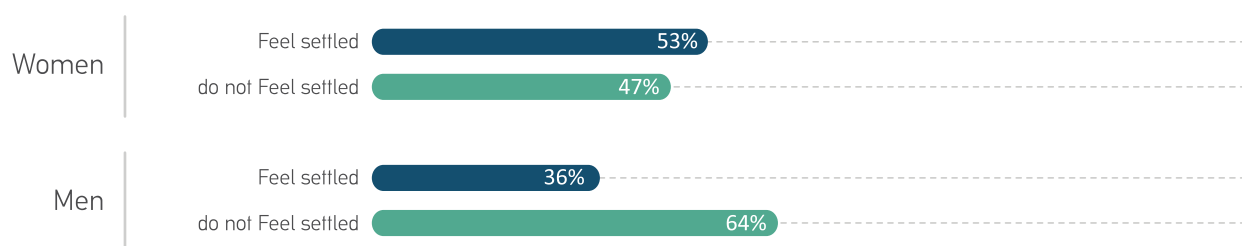
**I am now a university student in the Netherlands, and am waiting for a better life than I had in Syria.**

**- Sandra, 22 years old, Netherlands**

**Marriage, for example, made me feel more settled. I married a Turkish citizen. Education-wise, my children are more fluent in Turkish than Arabic.**

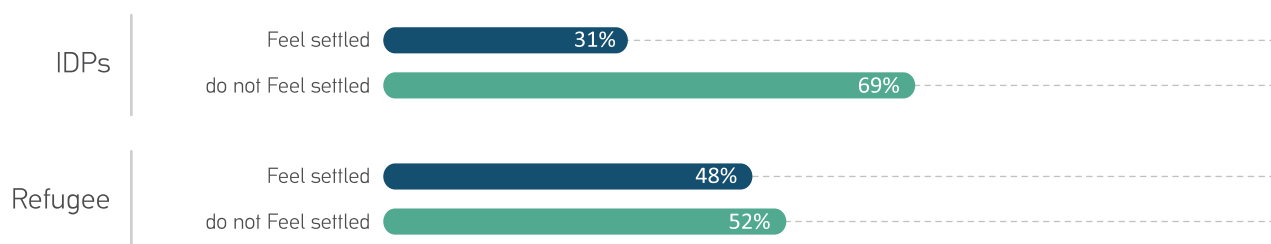
**- Sajeda, 26 years old, Turkey**

Figure 12. Sense of Feeling “Settled” among Women and Men



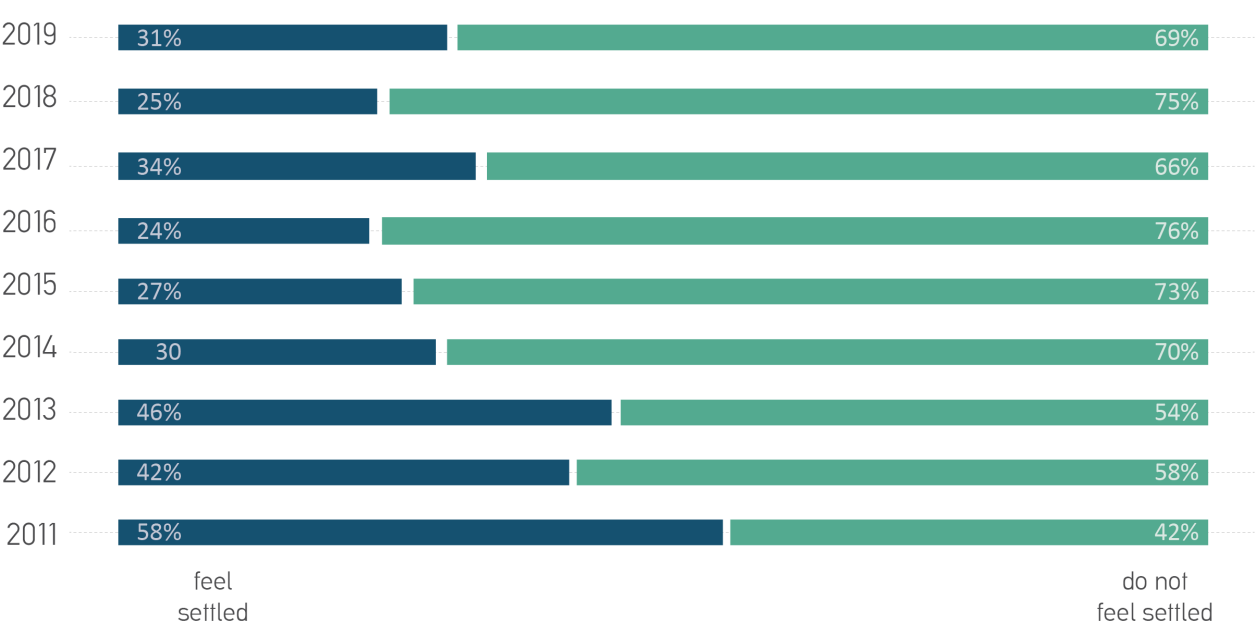
There is a noticeable difference in the sense of being settled between refugees and IDPs (Figure 13): 69 per cent of IDPs and 52 per cent of refugees stated that they do not feel settled and have not developed a sense of stability, safety and contentment in their new place of residence. This reflects the impact of the continuing deterioration of living conditions faced by the internally displaced, despite remaining in their home country.

Figure 13. Sense of Feeling Settled among Refugees and IDPs



Naturally, the results show that there is a close correlation between the passage of time in displacement and individuals' sense of settlement: as time passes and individuals put down 'roots' in their new place of residence, their sense of settlement increases. This sense is strongest among those who were displaced early in the conflict and decreases among those who left later. The exceptions are the refugees in Europe, who seem to be developing a sense of contentment regardless of their time of arrival, which illustrates the crucial impact of living conditions and opportunities. This data also shows the danger that displacement will become permanent for a significant number of displaced Syrians who fled from their homes early in the conflict, despite the difficult life they may lead in their new places of residence.

Figure 14. Feeling Safe and Content, by Year of Departure





## Desire to return

This survey reiterates the consistently reported fact that a large majority of Syrians (73 per cent) want to return if the appropriate conditions are met (Figure 15); this research details what prevents them from being able to do so. The overwhelming majority named different aspects of security within the top four of their five main conditions for return. Applied to the number of people displaced by the war, this percentage suggests more than 9 million intend to exercise their right to a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homes in Syria. The results of this survey investigate the extent to which displaced Syrians are deprived of their right to a “safe, voluntary and dignified return”. The report enumerates the various conditions they consider to be the minimum for this threshold to be fulfilled, and how these priorities are impacted by factors such as the sense of stability, gender, their current location and quality of life.

**I am still waiting impatiently for a safe return to my country and my previous life.**

- Nabil, 57 years old, Turkey

**I can only feel safe in the neighbourhoods of my city in Aleppo.**

- Samer, 29 years old, Lebanon

**All the results of the asylum are negative effects from living in tents, to the details that relate to securing rent and the lack of work opportunities and the imposed policies of countries' governments on refugees and converting them to a 'pressure card' for their interests, and yet, leaving them in inhumane conditions.**

- Maryam, 52 years old, Jordan

**For me, as a person, I will return if the solution comes after 100 years. As for me as a man with a family, for a long time, children and grandchildren became more fluent in Turkish than Arabic, and they know Turkey much more than Syria, and they also got used to the services here.**

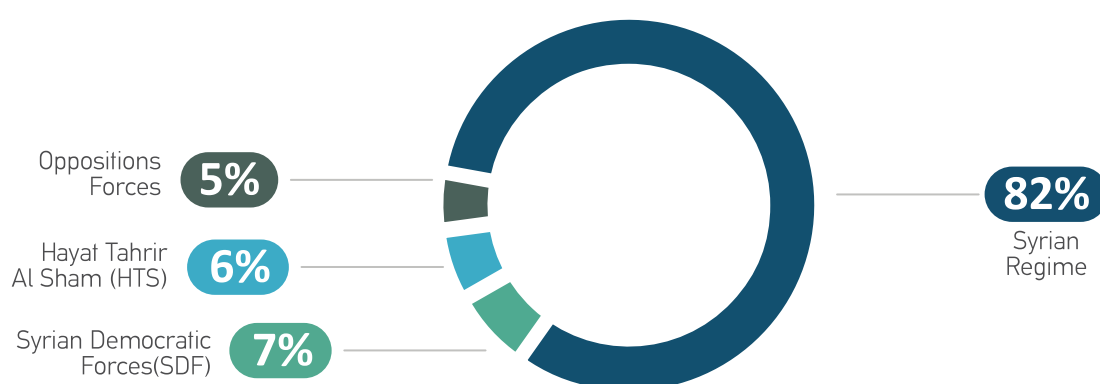
- Mazen, 63 years old, Turkey

Figure 15. Intention to Return if Conditions are Favourable



Although a large majority of the displaced want to return to their areas of origin, only a tiny fraction have returned so far, regardless of their current location or harsh living conditions.<sup>7</sup> This trickle of returns is despite the official claims of the Syrian regime and its Russian allies that stability and security reign in areas under regime control, and several decisions by the regime claiming to represent some sort of ‘general amnesty’. This fact is particularly significant as the vast majority of the displaced who wish to return (82 per cent) come from regime-controlled areas (Figure 16). Therefore displaced people and refugees do not feel it is safe to return to their homes in these areas; the regime has not yet provided substantive changes or adequate guarantees regarding the conditions for return, regardless of its narrative.

Figure 16. Current Military Control over Areas to which People Want to Return



IDPs are the most interested in returning to their homes if the right conditions are met—92 per cent, compared to 62 per cent of refugees (Figure 17). The study participants who said they did not wish to return even if the appropriate circumstances existed gave different reasons for this. The most common were the fear and trauma inflicted by their experiences in Syria and the painful memories they carry, and a high degree of satisfaction with their new life—including the economic, education, and legal circumstances and their successful integration into their new communities.

**I do not want to return to the place where my husband was executed in front of my eyes, nor return to where my children and I were oppressed. It had no mercy on me, I do not want to return to it whatever the conditions are good I can't live there again. Our souls are shattered.**

**- Zahraa, 50 years old, from Aleppo, currently refugee in Turkey**

7- United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, “Mobility and Needs Monitoring”, February 2020. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima/document/northwest-syria-mobility-needs-monitoring-hnap-feb-2020>

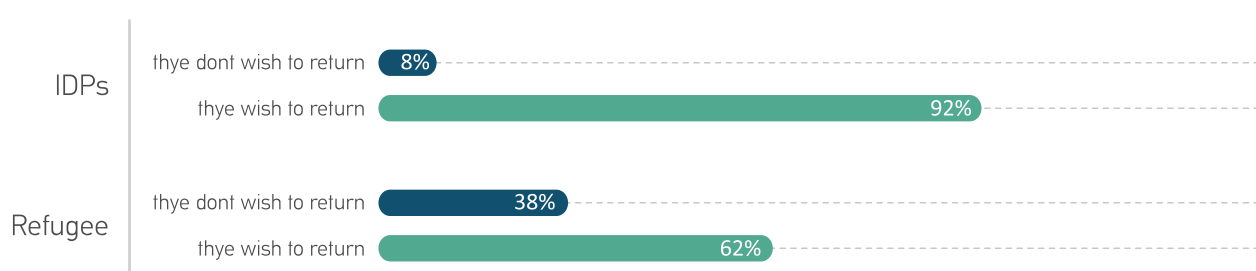
**I am now Dutch, I am happy here with my family in this country which respects all people and gives equal rights, and I and my husband have the opportunity to work here, probably I will visit Syria after the problems finish.**

**- Sara, 34 years old, from Homs**

**I don't want to live those tough days again, I faced very harsh circumstances before being displaced and I don't trust that any solution will be permanent.**

**- Ahmad, 45 years old, from Rural Damascus**

Figure 17. Intention to Return, Refugees and IDPs



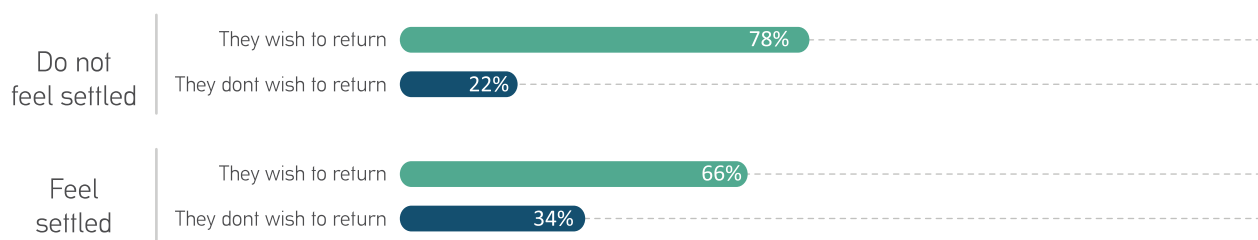
The divergence of return intentions between IDP and refugees is even more pronounced among women: 97 per cent of IDP women expressed their intent to return if conditions were right, compared to 51 per cent of refugee women (Figure 18). This difference is clearly motivated by the extremely harsh living conditions IDP women are facing, compared to the sense of stability and favourable living conditions many refugee women enjoy.

Figure 18. Intention to Return, by Gender and Displacement Status



Yet the motivation to return does not only entail living conditions: more than 66 per cent of those who feel settled in their current place of residence still want to return home (Figure 19). Indeed, this desire to return by those who feel they have a stable life in their current residence clearly indicates that the majority of the displaced people will not give up their right to a safe, voluntary and dignified return, as long as the right conditions—primarily that their security is guaranteed—are met.

Figure 19. Intention to Return, by Living Conditions in Current Place of Residence



At the same time, the opinions regarding the desire to return differed depending on where the displaced were living now. Refugees in Europe were the least willing to return (45 per cent), while 85 per cent of refugees in Egypt and 70 per cent of those in Turkey wanted to return if the conditions were favourable (Figure 20). These numbers show that while there is a significant degree of consensus on the conditions needed in order for a return to be considered, those currently living in unstable countries are more likely to want to return. This indicates that if instability and the pressure on these refugees increases, they may consider returning even if the basic conditions, including security, are not met.

IDPs were more eager to return: 99 per cent of those in Idlib governorate and 86 per cent in the countryside of Aleppo wanted to return home (Figure 20). Considering earlier data on the sense of stability and the harsh living conditions reported by the participants from Aleppo governorate, it is clear that the trauma of their displacement impacted the 14 per cent of the displaced so severely that they do not trust that the conditions for return will ever be met.

Figure 20. Intention to Return, by Current Place of Residence



## Information and returns process

A critical component of safe, dignified and voluntary return is access to reliable information about whether it is safe to return. This information helps the displaced understand whether their return conditions have been met, as well as the process involved. In particular, it might help highlight any inconsistencies between the process and their legal rights as refugees and IDPs to return home without fear of harassment or targeting. Figure 21 shows that a staggering 87 per cent of survey respondents were confident that they had enough information through informal channels to judge whether their return conditions had been met in their areas of origin; informal sources such as family and media were their main sources of information. However, further questioning revealed they were unaware of critical and potentially life-threatening components of the regime's requirements for return.

Figure 21. Information about Areas of Origin



**Note:** figure depicts answers to the question: "Do you feel you have sufficient information about your original place of residence?"

However, a closer examination of one key mechanism used by the regime in dealing with refugees who are considering returning now shows that their sense of being informed about the conditions on the ground is utterly misguided. The survey revealed a potentially dangerous lack of real information from those supposed to be informing them on all aspects of return conditions, including the UNHCR.

People who wish to return to Assad-held areas must now sign a "reconciliation document" in order to return—particularly those returning from opposition or former opposition areas, or who left the country without official documents or permission, as is the case for many refugees. The content of the document, which must be lodged with the Syrian embassy in the host country before being allowed to return, speaks of "addressing the situation of Syrians who left the country illegally, due to the current circumstances and (...) settling their military conscription and other security issues, regardless of the circumstances that compelled them to leave". Signing the document amounts to a confession of having committed a legal violation by leaving the country.



Some 80 per cent of people surveyed for this report stated they did not have any meaningful information about the content of this document. Of the 20 per cent who did have some information about it, most believed it was tantamount to an admission of committing crimes against the state. When asked if they thought that such an admission could later be used against them in criminal proceedings—either by raising a personal lawsuit or raising a public right claim—nearly 54 per cent reported that they were aware of the possibility of being prosecuted under the reconciliation document; 46 per cent indicated that they did not know if it was possible to be prosecuted according to this document (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Understanding of Risk of Prosecution under the Reconciliation Document



Study participants who wish to return were asked about their willingness to sign the reconciliation document, and 98 per cent of those wishing to return confirmed that they would not sign, and that this document would be an obstacle to their return.

This practice is seen as a major obstacle to return, epitomising the regime’s continued subjugation of potential returnees. The series of responses about the reconciliation process highlights another worrying trend. Despite 87 per cent of people stating that they had adequate information about returning and the conditions for return, nearly the same percentage had no information about the “reconciliation process”. When given the information during the survey, they then said this would present a major barrier to return. These responses make it clear that refugees and IDPs do not currently have adequate information about the conditions or returns processes and their potential to violate both their rights as IDPs and refugees, and to risk their personal security and freedom in the future.

# Perspectives on return



# Perspectives on return

## Main conditions for return

To understand the key factors influencing the participants' return intentions, they were asked to identify the five most important conditions they would deem acceptable, or want most be achieved, before they decide whether to return. All study participants wishing to return to Syria were asked the same questions, regardless of the party that currently controls their area of origin.

The participants were asked to choose five main conditions from the set of 10 key areas, and then to rank them. They were then able to choose several distinct options from within the broad themes of these five conditions. The 10 areas were:

- Legal and constitutional conditions
- Economic conditions
- Political conditions
- General security conditions
- Actions of security services
- Education
- Public services
- Communal conditions (return of relatives and acquaintances)
- Military conscription
- Fate of detainees
- Any other factor identified by participants

The results are striking, and together lay out a clear set of conditions from the displaced themselves, which must be incorporated into the conversations, policies, and planning of all actors involved in discussions on voluntary or organized refugee and IDP return to Syria.

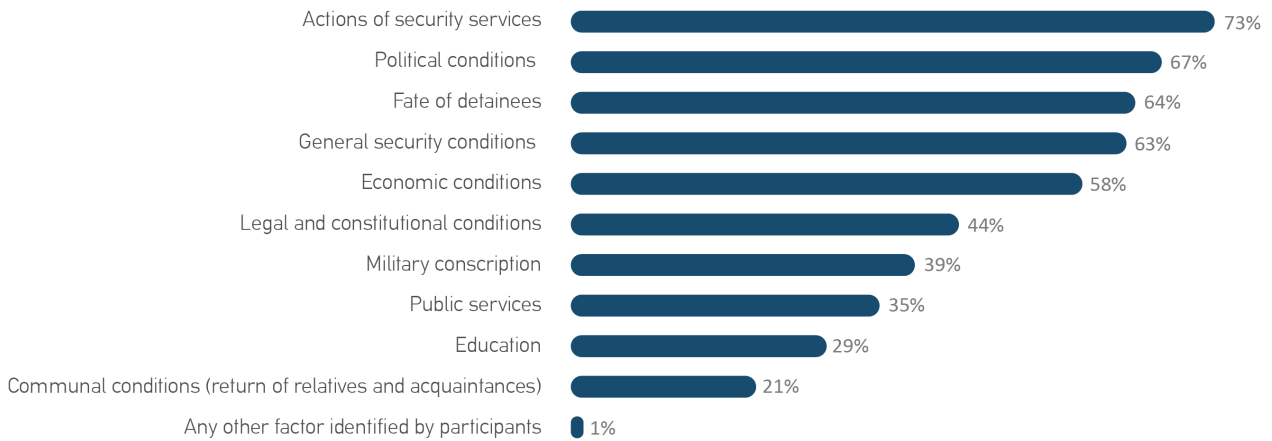
The top priority for nearly three-quarters of all study participants (73 per cent), regardless of their current location, sense of settlement or other factors, relates to the actions of the regime's security apparatus and the need to reform the security sector before any returns can take place.

This was followed by the political conditions: 67 per cent of participants identified the departure of the Syrian regime among their top five priorities. The fate of detainees was a priority for 64 per cent of the displaced. Some 63 per cent of the participants considered the general security situation as their fourth priority. The fifth priority was related to the economic situation, chosen by 58 per cent of the participants.

These results, reported in Figure 23, reaffirm that the essential conditions for return for the vast majority of displaced Syrians are related to security, including the fate of detainees and political conditions. Indeed, the top four priority areas are directly linked to the actions of the Syrian regime, its oppressive political rule and repressive use of the security services, including the use of detention to silence any opposition voices. Displaced people do not trust any security guarantees by the regime or its allies and are not willing to risk returning to their homes with Assad's regime still in power, given that its security services permeate all walks of life in areas under its control.

The continued detention of their relatives and neighbours, arrested for their political opinions or suspicions of belonging to the opposition, is a powerful and grim reminder for many of the displaced that the regime cannot be trusted on security-related issues.

Figure 23. Main Change Required for Displaced People to Return



## Security issues

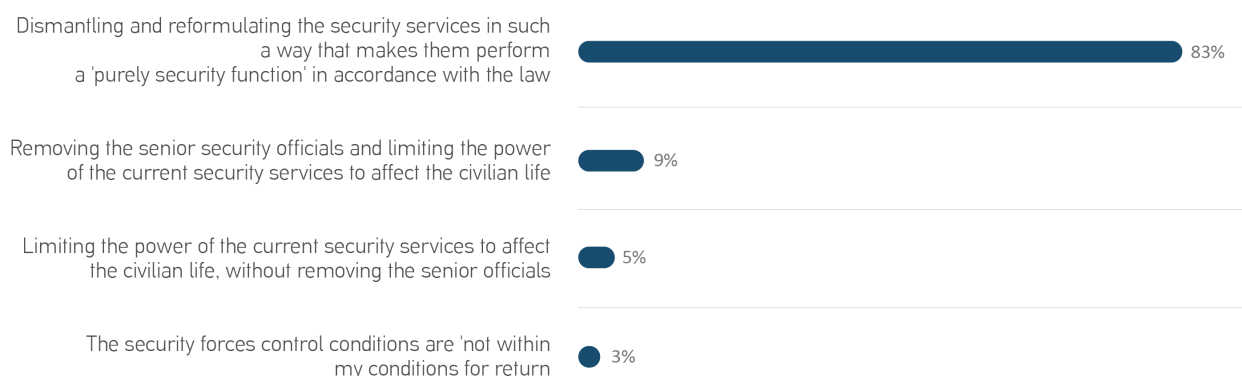
### Security reform

Reform of the security sector was listed as a key condition for return, informed by the experience of displacement as well as life under the Assad regime and its oppressive use of the security apparatus against the population. The following actions were identified by the respondents as needed for people to consider returning in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner:

- Dismantling and reformulating the security services so that they perform a “purely security function” in accordance with the law.
- Removing the senior security officials and limiting the power of the current security services to affect civilian life.
- Limiting the power of the current security services to affect civilian life, without removing senior officials.
- Conditions related to the control of the security forces are “not within my conditions for return”.
- Other options.

The results reveal widespread distrust of the security apparatus: more than 83 per cent of the study participants who wish to return opted for the complete dismantling of the current security services and reforming them in accordance with laws that would “guarantee that their performance would be focused of an internal security function ensuring the security of citizens and protecting the people in accordance with the laws; without any privileges, violations or encroachment on the rest of the government agencies and the government’s role in the structure of society”. Only 9 per cent of participants would be content with “removing the senior security officials and limiting the power of the current security services to affect civilian life”. Only 5 per cent chose the option of “limiting the power of the current security services to affect the civilian life, without removing the senior officials”.

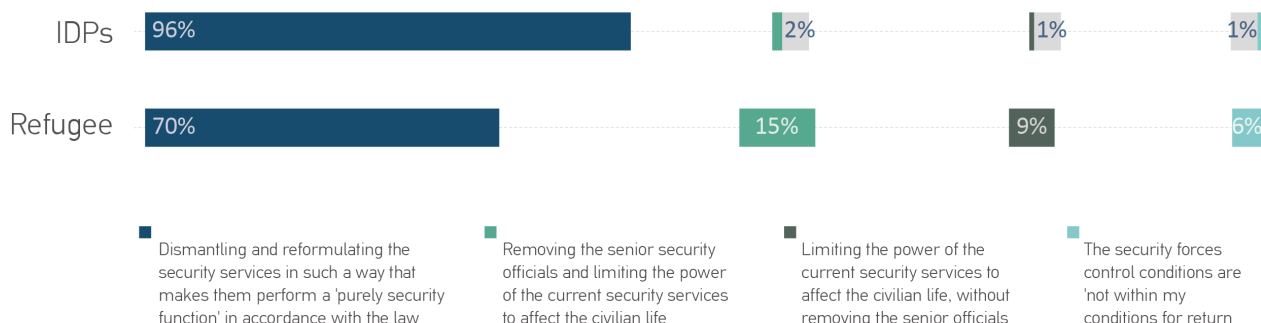
Figure 24. “Main Reforms of Security Sector Identified as Conditions for Return” by Displaced People



The discrepancy between IDPs and refugees can be explained by the proximity of the internally displaced to abusive security forces, while the refugees are now subject to the rule of other governments. However, all of the displaced citizens are fully aware of the repression suffered at the hands of the security apparatus. An overwhelming majority of 96 per cent of the IDPs chose the “necessity of dismantling the security services and reformulating them in a way that guarantees their performance of an internal security function related to the security of citizens and protecting the people in accordance with the laws” as a priority, while 70 per cent of the refugees chose this option. Some 15 per cent of refugees reported that it would be sufficient to “remove the senior security officials and limit the power of the current security services over the civilian life” as a minimum acceptable condition for return. And 9 per cent of them were content with “limiting the power of security services over civilian life” but without removing the senior officials. This element was not “within the conditions for the return” for 6 per cent of the refugees.

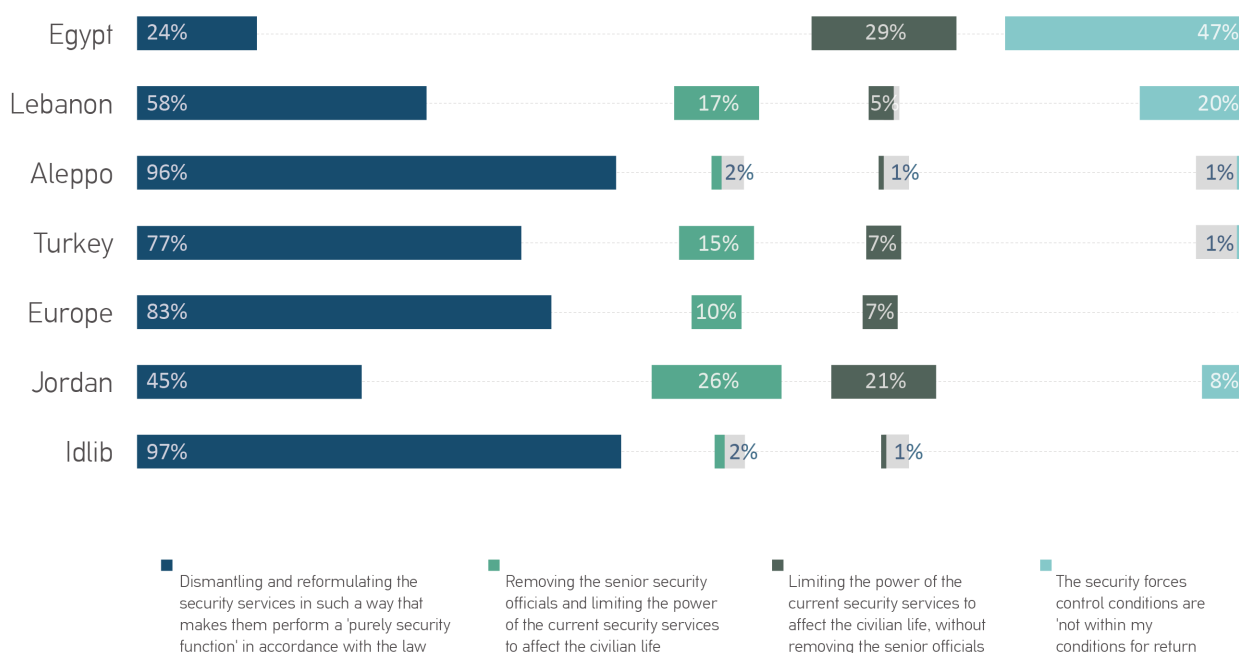


Figure 25. “Main Reforms of Security Sector Identified as Conditions for Return” by Refugees vs. IDPs



More than three-quarters of the refugees in Europe and Turkey insisted on the “necessity of dismantling the security services and reformulating them in a way that guarantees their performance of an internal security function related to the security of citizens and protecting the people in accordance with the laws” (Figure 26). Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan had somewhat different views. Of the participants currently in Lebanon, 80 per cent ranked the dismantling and reformulating the security services, and limiting the power of the security apparatus over civilian life (with or without the senior officials in their positions) as main conditions. By contrast, 45 per cent of those in Jordan chose the dismantling and reformulating of the security services, 26 per cent opted for the removal of senior security officials and limiting the power of the current security services, and 21 per cent selected restraining the powers of the current security services over civilian life, with senior officials still in place.

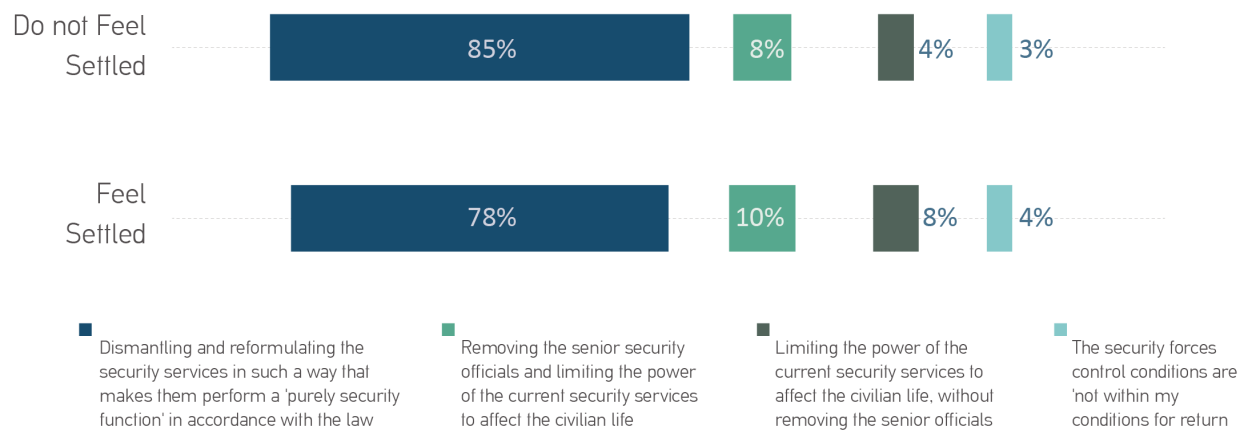
Figure 26. “Main Reforms of Security Sector Identified as Conditions for Return”, by Current Place of ResidenceIDPs



The various manifestations of harsh living conditions or the sense of settlement experienced by the displaced Syrians in the vast majority of cases did not cause them to lower their demands and conditions for return. For instance, 85 per cent of people who did not feel settled in their current place of residence chose “dismantling the security services” as a priority condition for their return. Only 8 per cent were satisfied with “removing the senior security officials and restraining the hands of the current security services away from the civilian life”.

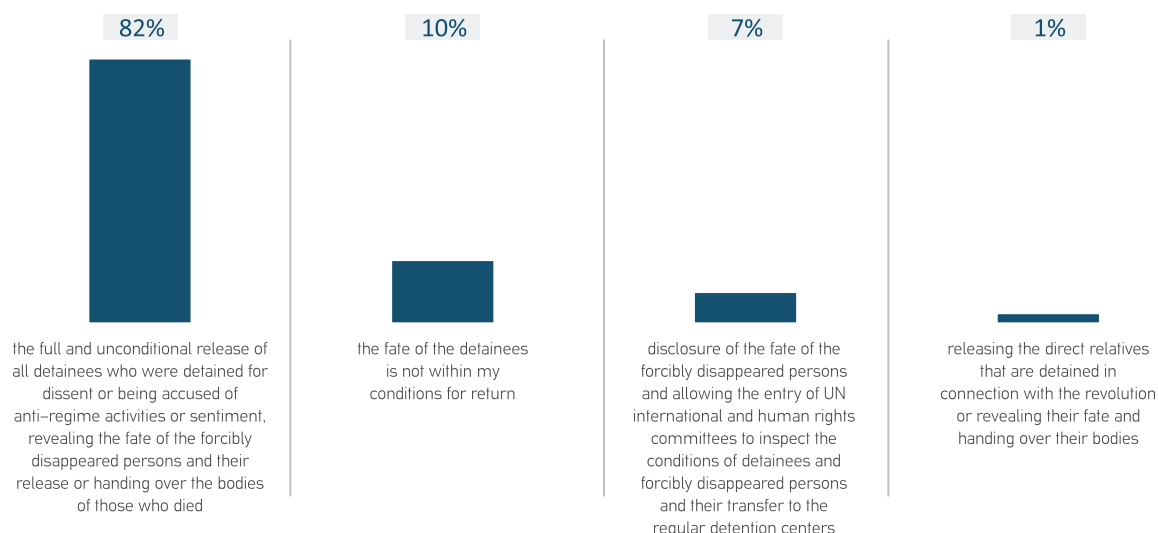
The rankings of those who felt settled in their places of residence were not significantly different: 78 per cent chose “dismantling the security services” and 8 per cent selected “restraining the hands of the current security services away from civilian life”, while 4 per cent did not include this condition as a condition for return.

Figure 27. “Main Security Sector Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return” by Displaced People, by their Sense of Feeling Settled in their Current Place of Residence



## Detainees

Figure 28 displays how respondents ranked the minimum conditions for return related to the fate of detainees:



- The full and unconditional release of all detainees who were detained for dissent or for being accused of anti-regime activities or sentiment,<sup>8</sup> revealing the fate of forcibly disappeared persons and their release or handing over the bodies of those who died in prison to their families (82 per cent of all participants chose this option).
- The fate of the detainees is “not within my conditions for return” (10 per cent).
- Disclosure of the fate of forcibly disappeared persons, and allowing the entry of UN, international and human rights committees to inspect the conditions of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, and their transfer to regular detention centres in preparation for the settlement of their status (7 per cent).
- Releasing immediate relatives who are detained in connection with the revolution or revealing their fate and handing over their bodies (1 per cent).

These results confirm that the issue of detainees is hugely relevant to a large segment of displaced Syrians citizens. The regime’s prisons are currently detaining at least 130,000 individuals for political reasons;<sup>9</sup> some studies have estimated that the true figure is twice this number. These people have not been released despite several “amnesty decrees” that have affected a limited number of detainees. Furthermore, detentions continue unabated in regime-held areas, especially in those subject to reconciliation agreements.

8- Although the regime claims that it holds no “political prisoners”, the tens of thousands of detainees referred to here were arbitrarily arrested and forcibly disappeared, most often without a formal charge, or on charges of “terrorism” and “sedition”.

9- See the recent report from the Syrian Network for Human Rights, available at: <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2020/03/15/54765/>

## General security situation

The general security situation would need to change or improve in order for returns to be possible. Most participants identified five important elements of general security (Figure 29):

- Bombardment must stop
- Combat operations must stop
- Significant reduction in assassinations and other crimes
- Return of societal sense of safety and security
- Restricting the right to bear arms to the Internal Security Forces

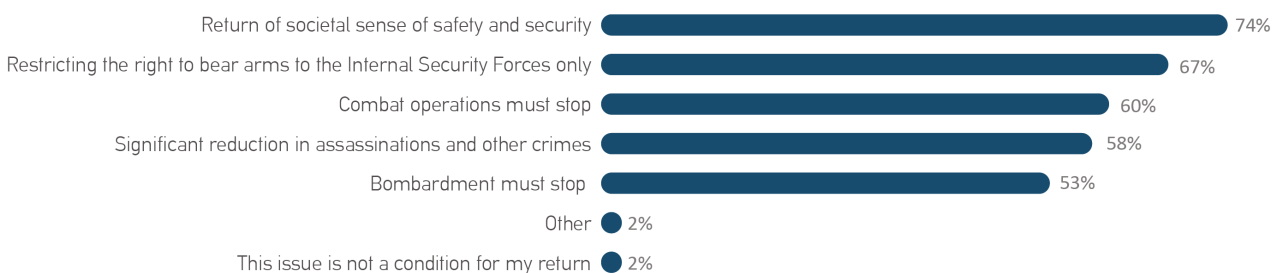
A small sample of interviewees chose other elements, including the departure of all foreign fighters and the rebuilding of relations between Syrians on opposing sides. They were also offered the option of stating that “general security issues are not among my conditions for return”; fewer than 2 per cent chose this option.

The majority of participants (74 per cent) referred to the general sense of societal security as the main precondition for return. Most interviewees understood this to include restoring trust within communities and between family members after the long conflict.

Roughly two-thirds (67 per cent) of participants indicated the importance of “restricting the right to bear arms to the Internal Security Forces only”, and removing various organizations and militias that spread across Syria, and are controlled by multiple parties, including the regime, the opposition forces and the SDF.

The option of “ending the combat operations” was classified as a condition for return by 60 per cent, followed by an end to bombardment, explosions, assassinations and other crimes.

Figure 29. Main Safety and Security Changes Identified as Conditions for Return



## Military conscription

The options for expressing the minimum acceptable changes to the current laws and practice on military conscription as a condition for return were as follows:

- Abolishing compulsory recruitment in all its forms (compulsory service, reserve service).
- Guarantees to stop reserve listing for a period of no less than 5 years.
- The recruitment issue is “not within my conditions for return”, in addition to other options added by the participants, including:
  - Ensure that the reserve withdrawal operations are stopped or at least paused for a specified non-adjustable time period.
  - If there is a political solution, a legitimate government, and a national army, then I do not have a problem with any forms of recruitment.
  - Cancel the recruitment and reserve of those who have returned from asylum for a period of no less than 5 years.
  - The existence of a constitution and a law that guarantees freedoms, rights and duties.

Compulsory military recruitment has always been a major obstacle to the return of many young Syrians, and an important reason that large numbers of men aged 18–42 fled their homes. This group expressed a great deal of interest in the issue of military recruitment as a condition.

58 per cent of all study participants chose the option of “cancelling the compulsory recruitment in all its forms” (compulsory service, reserve service), while 26 per cent of chose “guarantees to stop reserve listing for a period of no less than five years”. This point was not within the conditions of return for 16 per cent of the participants; of these, most were women and men aged 42 or older.

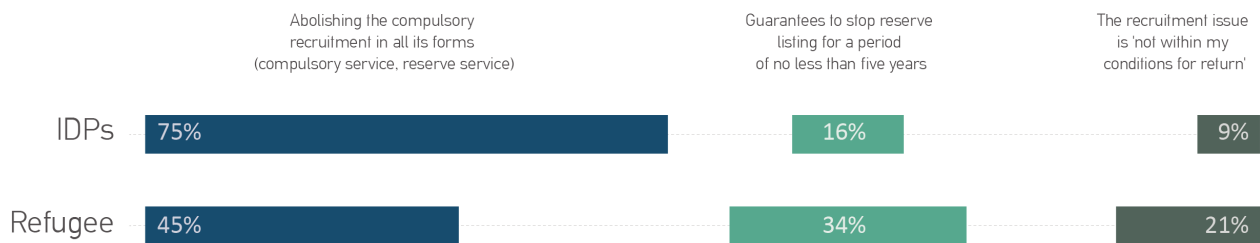
Figure 30. Main Reforms of Military Conscription Laws Identified as Conditions for Return by Displaced People of ResidenceIDPs





The issue of military conscription reveals a divergence of views among the different categories of displaced Syrians (Figure 31). Three-quarters of IDPs chose the option of “cancelling the compulsory recruitment in all its forms (compulsory service, reserve service)”, compared to only 45 per cent of refugees. In addition, 34 per cent of refugees opted for “guarantees to stop reserve listing for a period of no less than five years”, while only 16 per cent of IDPs were in favour of this option as a condition for return. Most of IDPs questioned the credibility of applying similar measures, especially after witnessing experiences in the so-called reconciliation areas (Damascus countryside, Daraa, Homs). The regime’s failure to uphold provisions of the agreements that guaranteed the suspension of military conscription, and the rampant forced recruitment in these areas, significantly influenced their views.

Figure 31. Main Reforms of Military Conscription Laws Identified as Conditions for Return, by Refugees vs. IDPs







# Political and constitutional reform



# Political and constitutional reform

The current political process features discussions about a new constitution for Syria as one of its main tracks. Although there are differing views on the relevance of these discussions in Geneva and the commitment of the parties, especially the Syrian regime, to any genuine solutions that would guarantee a sustainable political solution and the rights of all citizens, a large number of respondents identified constitutional reform as a condition for return. They also mentioned existing laws enacted by the regime as an obstacle to return. Additionally, a significant number of interviewees ranked political reform, and the removal of the current Syrian regime in particular, as one of their key conditions for return. This is a natural consequence of the fact that the majority were displaced by the regime, which is seen as the biggest obstacle to a safe, voluntary and dignified return.

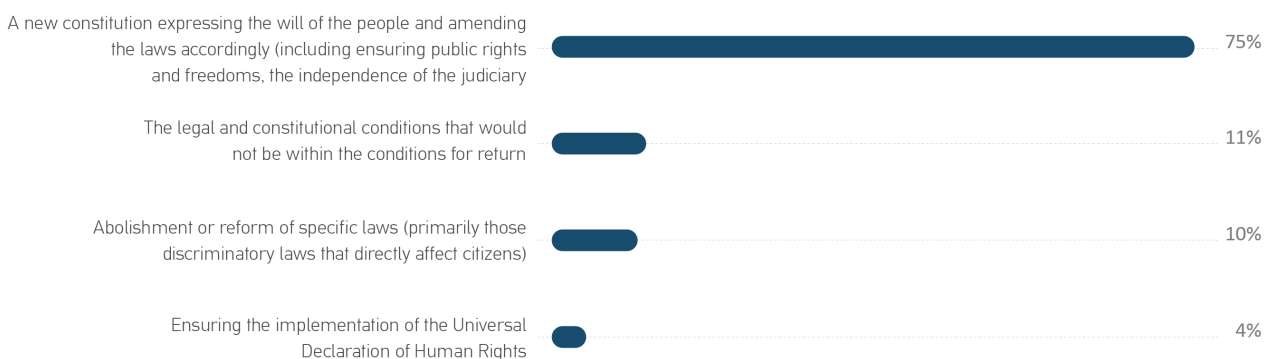
**The main options to express the required changes to the legal and constitutional framework as conditions for return were as follows:**

- A new constitution expressing the will of the people (i.e. prepared by elected specialists without external influences or pressures, and adopted with popular approval) and amending the laws accordingly (including ensuring public rights and freedoms, independence of the judiciary, etc.) (75 per cent of respondents chose this option).
- Legal and constitutional conditions are not a condition for return (11 per cent).
- Abolishment or reform of specific laws (primarily those discriminatory laws that directly affect citizens) (10 per cent).
- Ensuring the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (4 per cent).

Participants who would be satisfied with fair legal amendments that dealt with the most prominent regime laws that harmed citizens instead of constitutional reform ranked three laws (listed in order of importance):

- Cancelling military trials for civilians and closing the military prisons.
- Abolishing exceptional (emergency) laws.
- Abolishing the terrorism law.

**Figure 32. Main Legal and Constitutional Reform Identified as Conditions for Return**



Of the interviewed IDPs, 90 per cent chose the option of a new constitution, compared to 63 per cent of refugees (Figure 33). In addition, 17 per cent of refugees opted for the reform and abolishment of particular laws, while 13 per cent of the interviewed refugees did not include legal and constitutional reform among their conditions for return.

Figure 33. Main Legal and Constitutional Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return by Refugees vs. IDPs

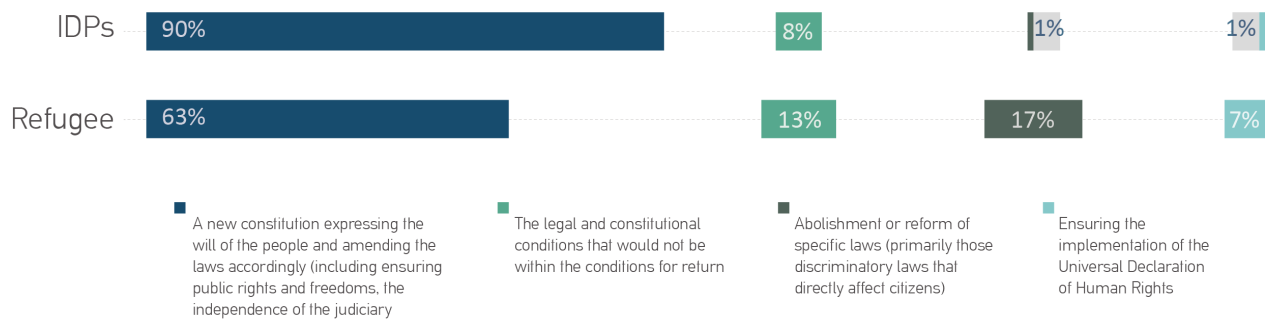
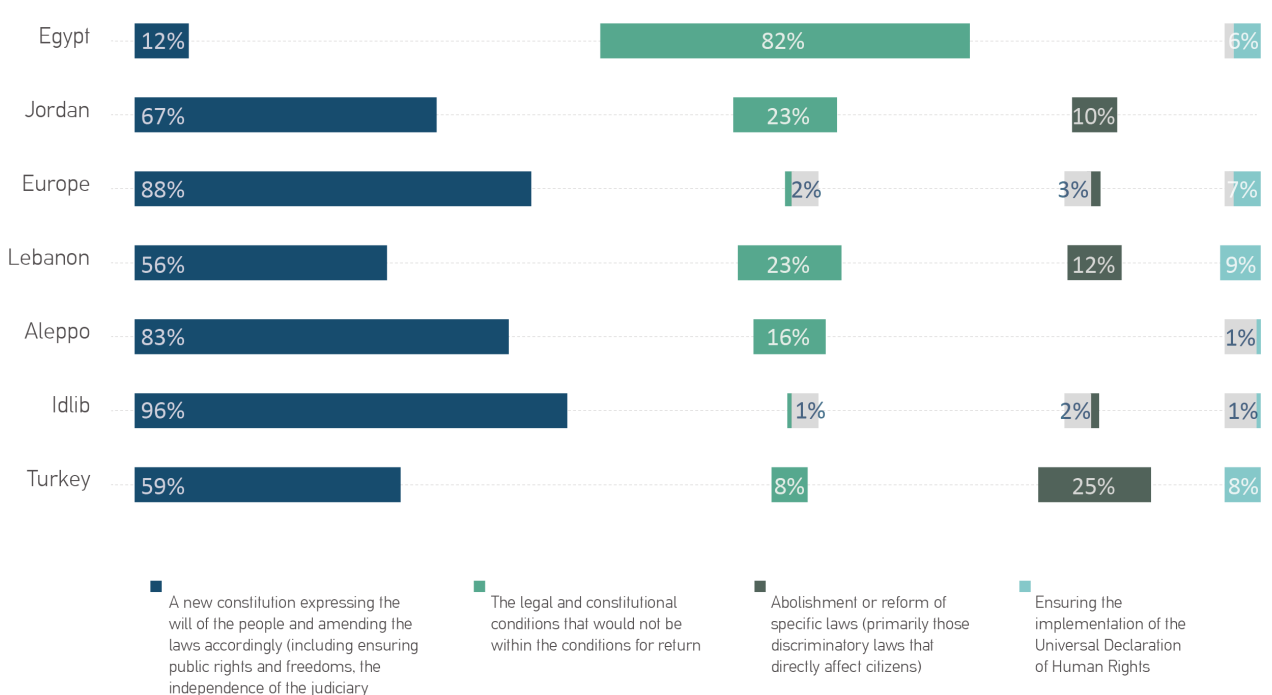


Figure 34 illustrates that among refugees, those currently living in Europe were the most interested in having a new constitution that reflects the will of the people (88 per cent). However, 96 per cent of the interviewees currently in Idlib selected this option.

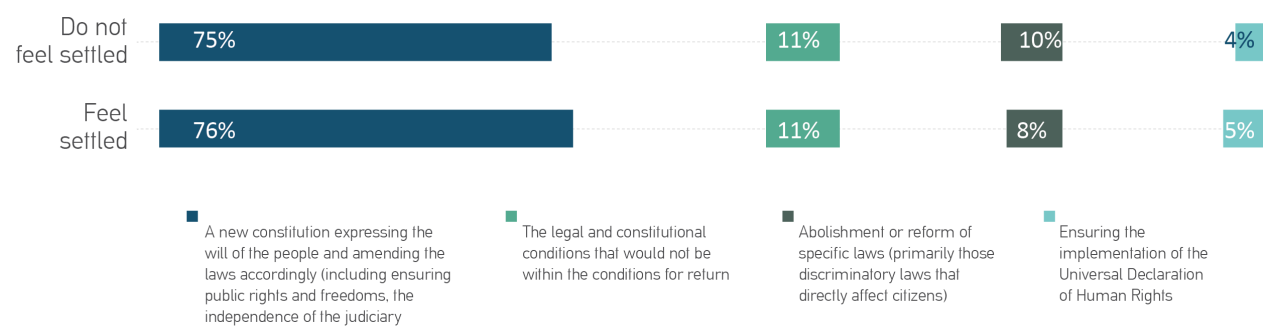
Figure 34. Main Legal and Constitutional Reform Identified as Conditions for Return, by Current Place of Residence





It is striking that the current circumstances of the displaced did not affect their desire for a new constitution as a condition for return. The survey revealed nearly identical percentages among those who feel settled and those who do not.

Figure 35. Main Legal and Constitutional Reform Identified as Conditions for Return, in Relation to Feeling Safe and Content in their Current Location



In the discussion of political reform, the majority of participants focused on the fate of the current regime. Figure 36 displays how respondents ranked options in this category:

- The departure of the existing regime (this includes the figures involved in the operation and abuses of the security apparatus, and the corruption networks that developed under the regime) (81 per cent chose this option).
- The departure of the head of the existing regime (12 per cent).
- The political conditions are “not within my conditions for return” (5 per cent).
- Modifying the behaviour of the existing regime with international guarantees (2 per cent).

These results suggest that the international community faces a huge challenge in convincing the displaced Syrians that any future political solution is possible with the current regime in power, regardless of international guarantees.

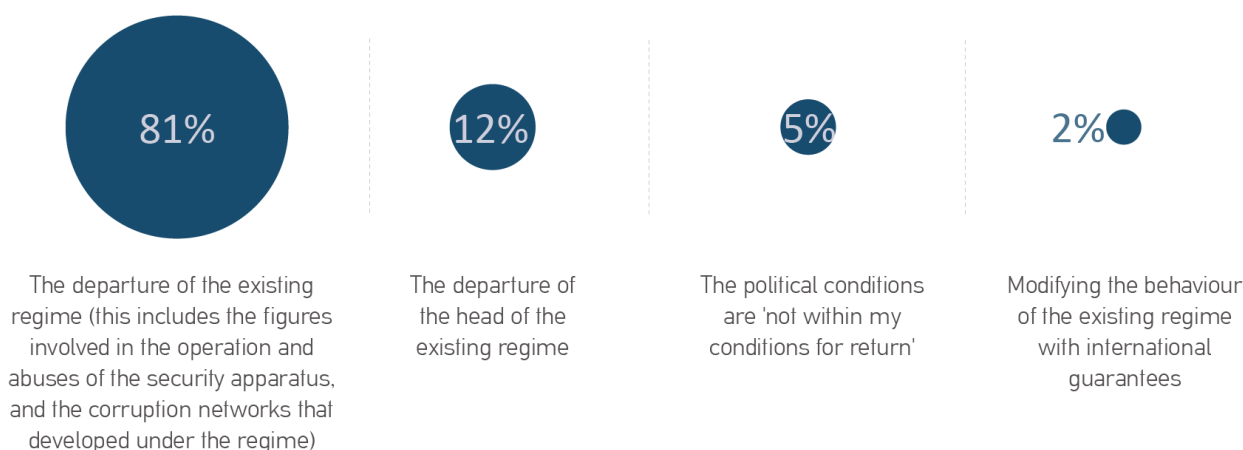
**I worked in the commercial field throughout my life and my financial and social conditions were very good. Suddenly, everything collapsed and I was taken, and I entered with my son (35 years old) to the security branches. We suffered a lot, and I went out almost blind, suffering from many diseases. I came to Turkey with my entire family, and here we started a new life and settled in an acceptable way.**

**Nevertheless, I did not hate my homeland. I never forgot it, and I hope to return to my country, to my city, to my home. Sources back home told me that my business was looted by the security services.**

**Therefore, I will never venture after this bitter experience to return until the end of this regime and its final collapse with all its leadership, arms, and supporters. I do not trust and I do not believe in partial solutions, false amnesty, or collateral international guarantees. There will be no peace or calm as long as the regime remains, even if only a small part of it.**

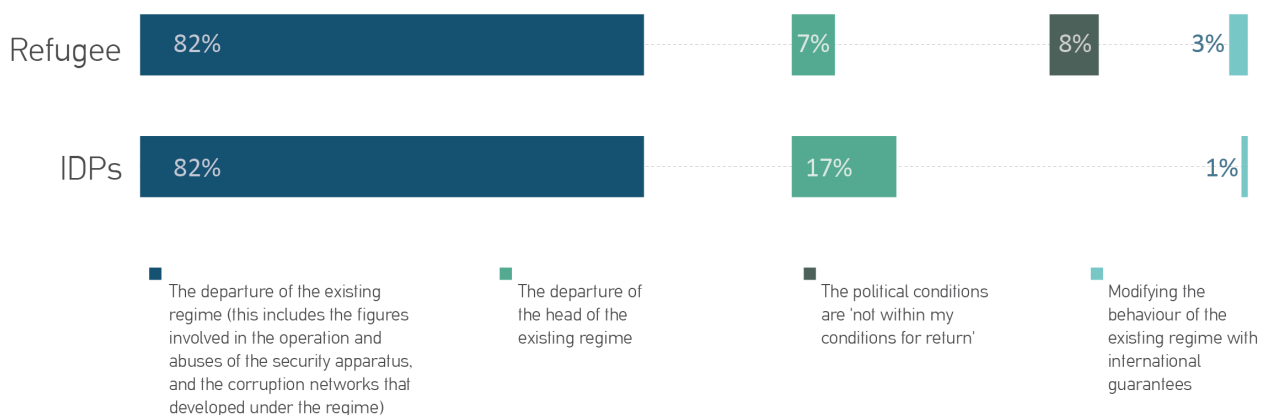
**- Fahd, 65 years old, Latakia**

Figure 36. Main Political Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return by All Displaced People and Refugees



While 82 per cent of both IDPs and refugees insisted on “the departure of the existing regime” as a condition for return, 17 per cent of IDPs, compared to 7 per cent of refugees, favoured the “departure of the head of the existing regime” (Figure 37). An additional 8 per cent of refugees stated that political reform is not among the conditions for their return.

Figure 37. Main Political Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return by Refugees vs. IDPs



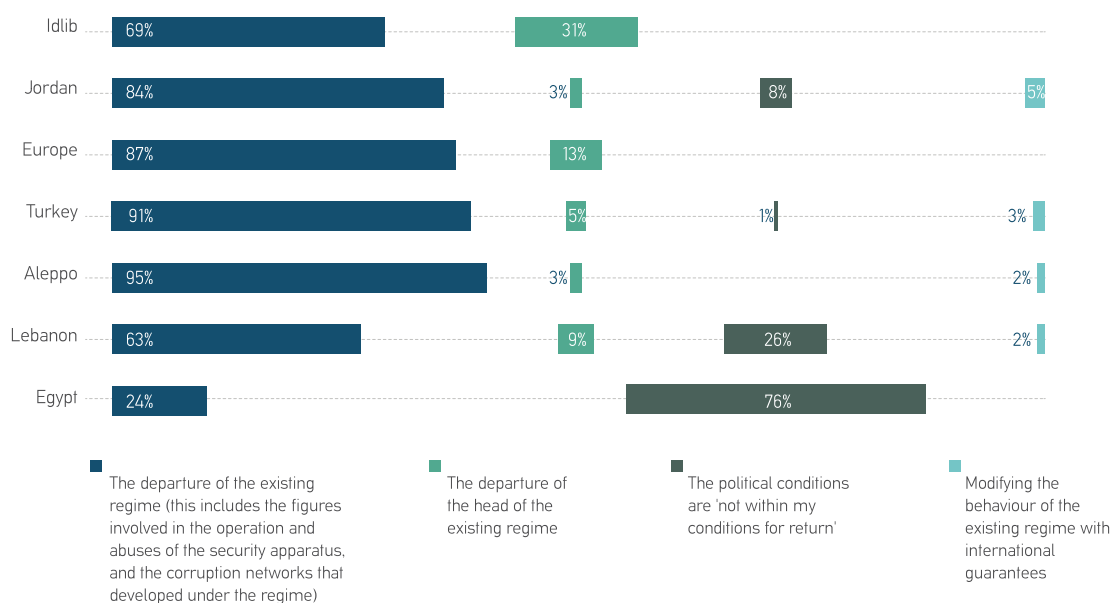
Nearly one-third of the IDPs in Idlib (31 per cent) would accept the “departure of the head of the existing regime” as a minimum acceptable condition for return, while 26 per cent of the refugees living in Lebanon reported that “the political conditions are not within their conditions for return” (Figure 38). By contrast, more than 91 per cent of refugees in Turkey demanded the “departure of the existing regime” as a condition of return.

**The survival of the Syrian regime means the survival of the security grip, the continuation of arrests, and the exploitation of the country’s wealth for the benefit of the Russians and the Iranians.**

**Tawfiq, 36 years old, Turkey**

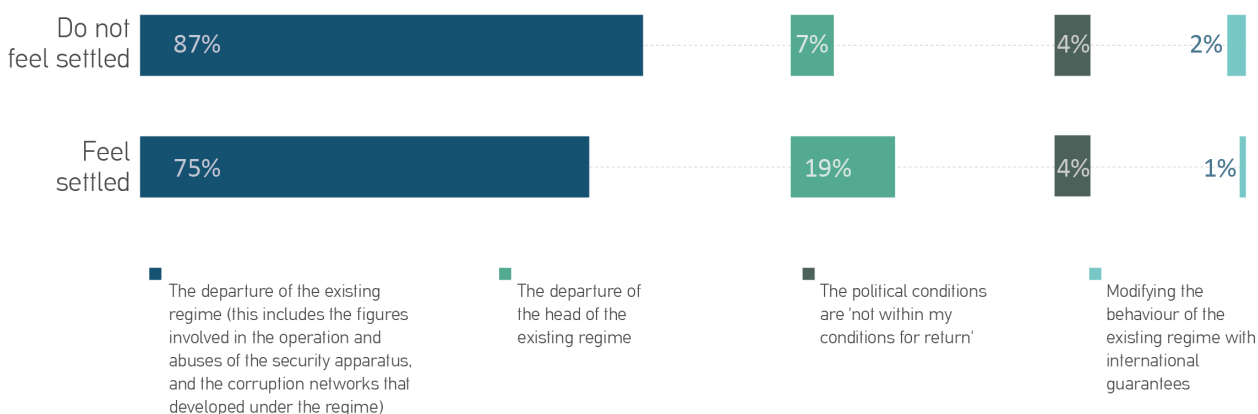


Figure 38. Main Political Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return, by Current Residence



Displaced individuals' current living conditions and sense of being settled in their new residence did not significantly impact their demands for the regime's removal as a condition for return (Figure 39). Some 87 per cent of people who did not feel settled in their current place of residence chose the "departure of the existing regime", compared to 75 per cent of those who are settled. For 19 per cent of the respondents who feel settled, the "departure of the existing regime's head" was a sufficient minimum acceptable condition for return.

Figure 39. "Main Political Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return", According to the Sense of Feeling Safe and Content in the Current Place of Residence



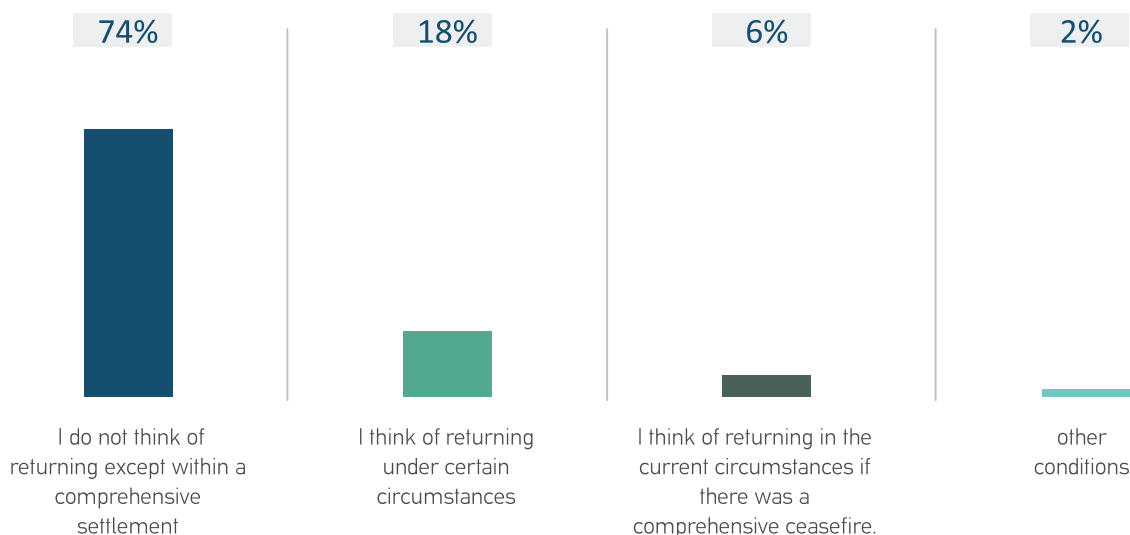
More than 60 per cent of study participants believe the delay in reaching a political settlement to the conflict will delay the return of the displaced. As time passes with no solution in sight, the displaced tend to establish new businesses and lives, and integrate into their new societies, especially when their children acquire the language and culture of the host country. Additionally, it will become increasingly difficult for them to return to their homes, where most of their property was severely damaged and the regime's new laws impede their ability to reclaim their assets, in addition to the loss of their previous social ties and connections.

Approximately 75 per cent of the participants who come from areas that are controlled by factions other than the regime, such as SDF and HTS, have indicated that they would not return except with a "comprehensive settlement" and certain conditions that fulfil their aspirations and hopes. They do not trust the forces in their areas at all, and believe that without a settlement they are vulnerable to more conflict due to the regime's continuing threats to continue fighting until it conquers all the territory of Syria.

Respondents originally from areas not currently under regime control were asked if they would consider returning if there were a comprehensive ceasefire (Figure 40).

- 74 per cent responded with "I do not think of returning except within a comprehensive settlement".
- 18 per cent said "I think of returning, but under a number of certain circumstances".
- Only 8 per cent said they would consider returning in the current circumstances if there was a comprehensive ceasefire.

Figure 40. Willingness to Return to (Non-Regime-Held Areas) Based on Comprehensive Settlement



More than half of respondents (60 per cent) confirmed that a delay in reaching a political solution affects their intention to return (Figure 41).

**I am settled in France. I learned the language, and I work here. I got married, and now I am striving to complete my life here... I may return to Syria as a visitor only.**

- Tawfiq, 35 years old, France

**I work here and have projects for a new life free from fear and anxiety.**

- Khaled, 42 years old, Turkey

**The longer it takes before the return, the more people will settle in their country of asylum.**

- Nahed, 28 years old, Germany

**A new life was created in the liberated North of Syria.**

- Khaled, 43 years old, Idlib

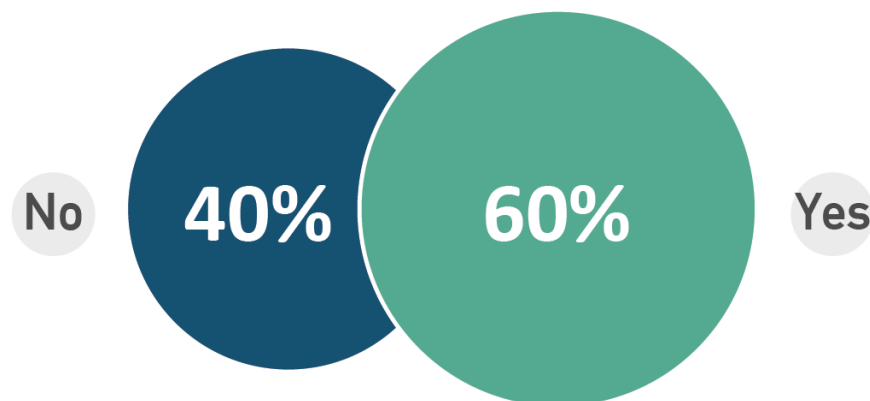
**Regarding the integration with other societies, there are issues, e.g. school languages for children are different. Yet, the fear of a return adventure and the demolition of what was built in the asylum years are also pressing matters.**


- Salah, 48 years old, Turkey

**The longer the period spent outside home, the more the person searches and knocks at new doors hoping for a decent living, economic and social welfare, and to improve his condition... and the more his settlement gets rooted, as in a fixed job, project, nationality, or otherwise.**

- Samah, 31 years old, Jordan

Figure 41. How Delays in Reaching a Political Solution Affect Intentions to Return





# Public services reform and social conditions



# Public services reform and social conditions

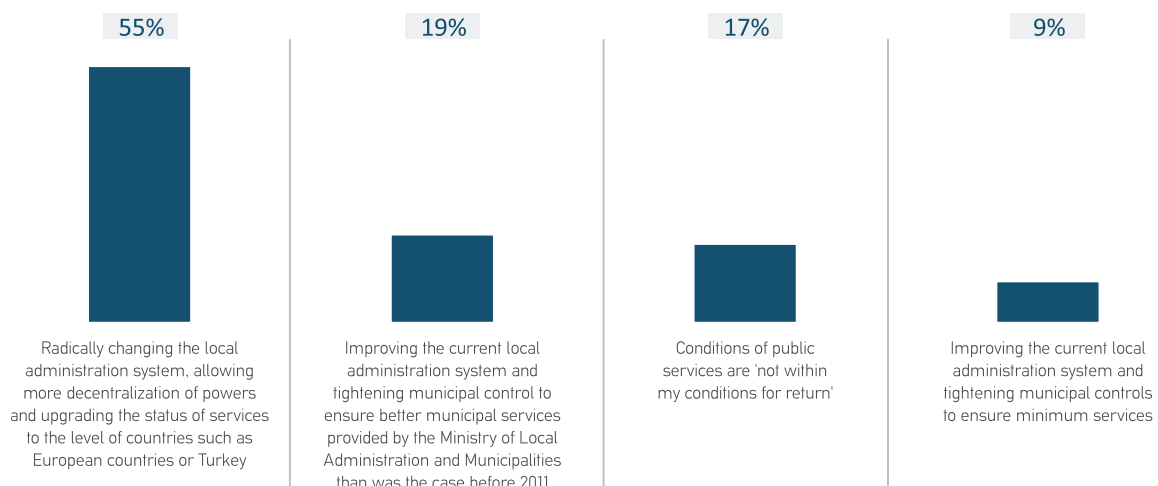
## Local administration reform

Public services cover a broad range of issues—from how municipalities and their services are run to the access to education—for most of the participants, and represent a very important element of change needed in order for the return to be safe, voluntary and dignified. The respondents identified the following issues related to local administration reform (Figure 42):

- Radically changing the local administration system, allowing more decentralization of powers and upgrading the status of services to the level of European countries or Turkey (55 per cent of respondents selected this option).
- Improving the current local administration system and tightening municipal control to ensure better municipal services provided by the Ministry of Local Administration and Municipalities than was the case before 2011 (19 per cent).
- Conditions of public services are “not within my conditions for return” (17 per cent).
- Improving the current local administration system and tightening municipal controls to ensure minimum services (9 per cent).

While these opinions are based on dissatisfaction with current service delivery and the foundations governing the work in the local administration, they are also developing as a result of the experience of a large portion of the displaced people in other countries, where the local administrations are more organized and effective compared to their previous experiences in Syria.

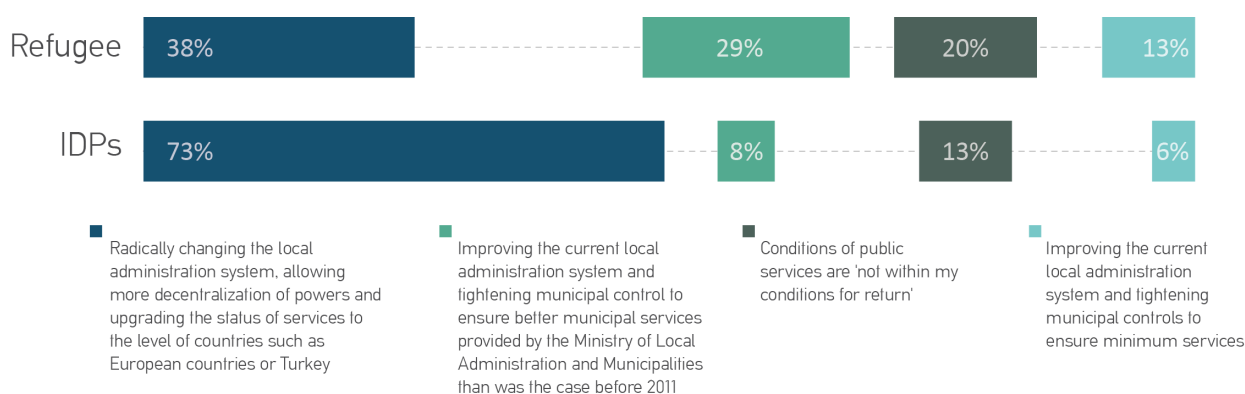
Figure 42. Local Administration Reform Identified as Conditions for Return”  
by All Displaced Persons”



Refugees' opinions varied regarding the acceptable minimum conditions for return: 38 per cent chose the option of "radically changing the local administration system and allowing more decentralization of powers and advancing the services to the level of civilized countries" (this number increased to 69 per cent among those now living in Europe), while 29 per cent preferred the option of "improving the current local administration system and tightening supervision on municipalities so as to ensure better services than that was the case before 2011" (Figure 43).

By contrast, most IDPs (73 per cent) choose the option of "radically changing the local administration system and allowing more decentralization of powers".

Figure 43. Local Administration Reform Identified as Condition for Return by Refugees vs. IDPs





# Education

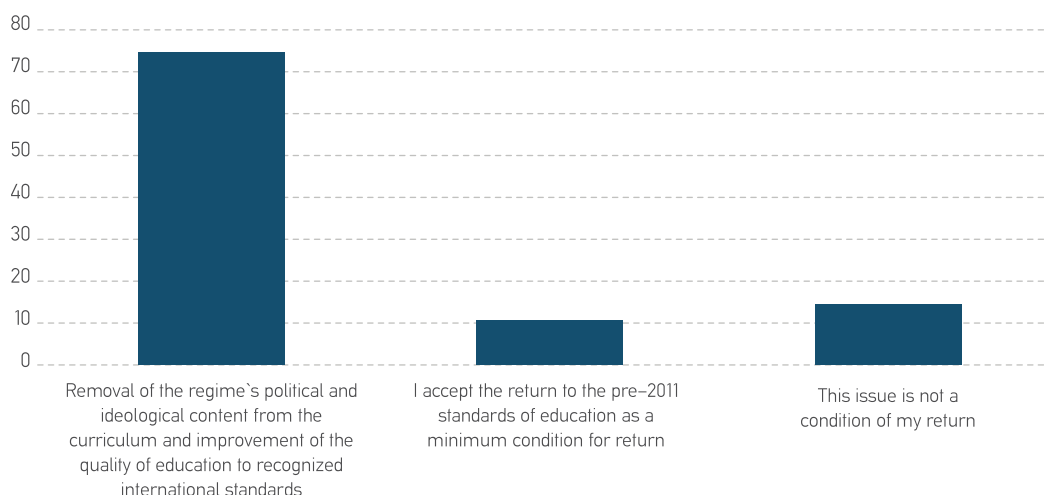
Education was a significant condition for return for many interviewees. This is in line with previous research<sup>10</sup> and the shared experiences of refugees in other contexts, as it directly affects children, whose wellbeing is very high on the list of priorities for displaced people.

Prior to 2011, Syria's education system was generally thought to sufficiently prepare the country's young people for a successful life. Yet the politicized curriculum reinforced and consolidated the ruling party's ideology and explicitly venerated the "teachings" of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad and the ideas of the Baath Party. After the onset of conflict, schools were regularly targeted and destroyed, huge numbers of teaching staff were imprisoned or displaced, and the curriculum became even more politicized to cement the regime's ideological tenants. The experience of displacement revealed the shortcomings of the education system to millions of Syrians who fled the country, and created a set of expectations that have become conditions for return.

Figure 44 shows that a large majority of respondents (75 per cent) named the removal of the regime's political and ideological content from the curriculum and improvement of the quality of education to recognized international standards as a condition for return. Only 10 per cent of displaced persons would accept a return to the pre-2011 standards of education as a minimum condition for return, while 15 per cent stated that this is not among their conditions for return.

This data shows the importance that both refugees and IDPs place on education as a key concern for their children's future. It also indicates the continued emphasis and hope that displaced Syrians place on the young, well-educated generation as the key to the country's recovery.

Figure 44. Education Reforms Identified as Conditions for Return Identified by All Displaced Persons



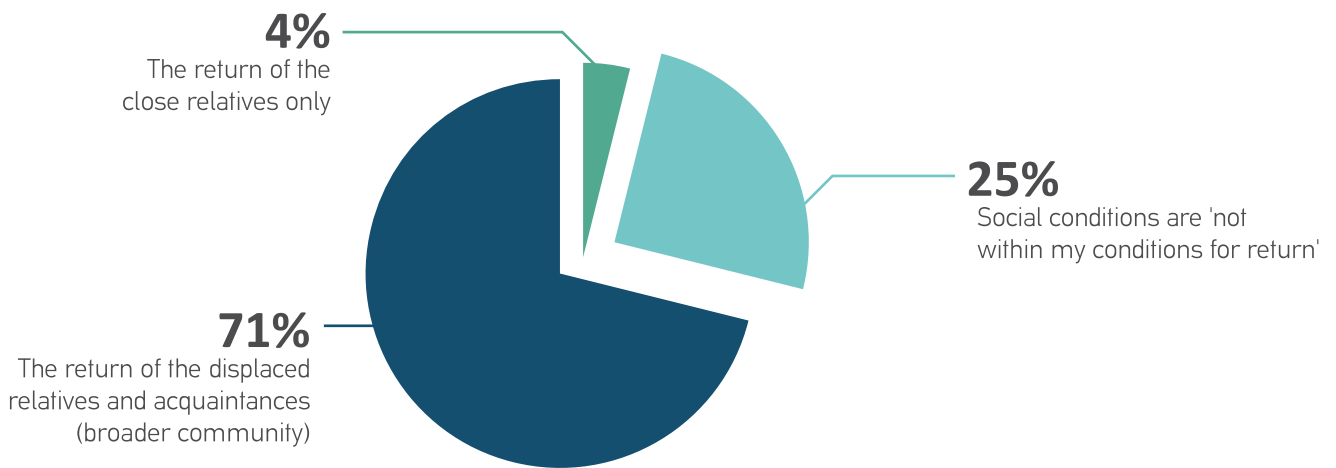
10- "Hear it from the teachers: Getting refugee children back to learning", Save The Children, <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/ed-cp/hear-it-from-the-teachers-refugee-education-report.pdf>

## Family reunion

The family unit is the backbone of Syrian society, and it has been greatly affected by the conflict and repression, with members dispersed in displacement, detained or killed. Family reunion, therefore, plays an important role as a condition for return. In discussions of its importance, two options materialized as primary (Figure 45):

- The return of displaced relatives and acquaintances (broader community) (71 per cent of interviewees chose this item).
- Social conditions are “not within my conditions for return” (25 per cent).
- The return of close relatives only (4 per cent).

Figure 45. Family Reunion as Conditions for Return Identified by All Displaced People



While 84 per cent of the IDPs chose “the return of both displaced relatives and acquaintances” as a condition for return, only 59 per cent of refugees made this a condition; 34 per cent of refugees reported that “this point is not within their conditions for return” (Figure 46). This reflects the impact of displacement on refugees, and particularly the weakening of the family structure amidst the progressively diminishing social ties for many of them.

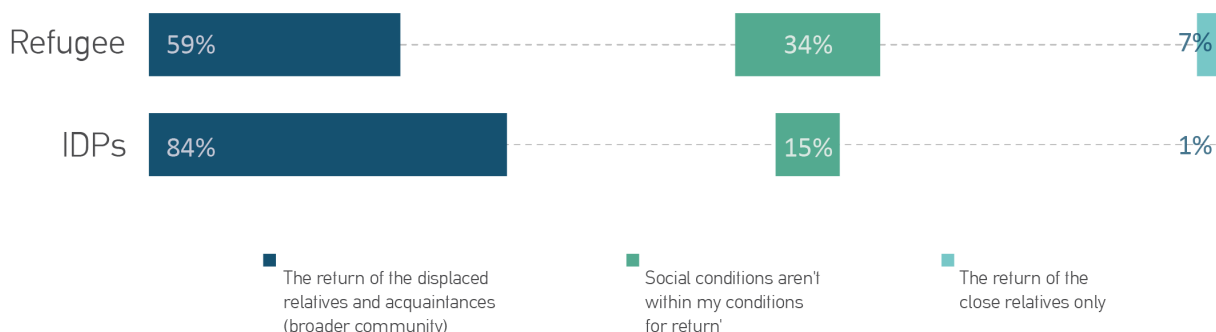
This is a focal point in understanding the social impacts of migration and displacement; it also highlights the social conditions necessary to achieve a collective return in Syria. The issue of return cannot be addressed at the individual level; it should be handled through a comprehensive solution and an organized collective, voluntary, safe and dignified return.

**I am a widow whose husband was killed seven years ago. I have four children from him, and I have no breadwinner or supporter; I rely only on Allah, and I get some social assistance and some money from my brothers and my husband’s family... I have no settlement here at all, and my life is difficult financially and socially as a widow and in many other respects. I hope to return immediately once things become calm, but my return is linked to the collective return before anything else.**

**I am a widow and the decision to return is related to several factors; the most important of which is the return of my relatives and close friends.**

**- Hala, 43 years old, Damascus countryside**

Figure 46. Family Reunion as Conditions for Return Identified by Refugees vs. IDPs





# Conclusions

The findings of this survey can serve to clearly chart a roadmap for international policymakers, host countries, UN agencies, and NGOs in addressing both the current needs and priorities of displaced Syrians, but, above that, in developing a solid basis of a sustainable, lasting political solution to the conflict in Syria.

As the pressure on the Syrian regime increases, firstly with the rampant corruption and high costs of financing the war on the Syrian people crushing an already decimated economy, and secondly with the effects of the EU and US sanctions imposed for the human rights abuses committed by the regime, it becomes clear that the United States and the European Union have an opportunity to redouble efforts to secure a comprehensive political solution in Geneva, which would include a mechanism to secure the rights and minimum conditions for return expressed by refugees and IDPs, some which were detailed in this survey.

In doing so, the EU and the US need to use their decisive influence to reshape the mission of the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) and the political process led by it. As it is evident from the survey, the majority of Syria's displaced see a political settlement as a core component of their ability to return home, but two-thirds see their chance to return slipping away as the peace process drags on. This highlights the enduring importance of reformulating a process many believe to be stalled or stagnant, so that the rights of the displaced Syrians (who form a majority of the country's population), including the right to a safe, voluntary and dignified return, as defined by the displaced themselves, become a fundamental element of the process. Those most negatively affected by the war depend on renewed efforts by the OSE to move the process forward and deliver a comprehensive and timely political settlement that not only takes their views into account, but requires their active participation and representation.

This is also a clear signal to international NGOs and civil society activists to focus their advocacy on a comprehensive political settlement that includes mechanisms to secure the rights and minimum conditions for return expressed by refugees and IDPs as part of any political settlement. A key goal of such an advocacy effort must be the inclusion of refugees and IDPs in all discussions about Syria's future, particularly those related to setting the minimum conditions for returns or any returns programming or policy.

In parallel to the revitalisation of the political process which will seek a lasting political settlement with the rights of the displaced Syrians at its heart, it is of paramount importance to secure lasting ceasefires that prevent new rounds of conflict and displacement. The psychological impacts of continued and recent displacement are clear from this survey, which underscores how critical it is for the US, EU and the United Nations to redouble their efforts to secure lasting ceasefires that prevent future rounds of displacement and unsettle Syria's currently displaced population. A lasting ceasefire in Idlib, solidified by the necessary diplomatic efforts and the increase of humanitarian aid and support for socioeconomic projects in northwest Syria, is a fundamental prerequisite for any potential opening in the current political track.



This also applies to prevention of premature or forced returns from the neighbouring host countries or the European Union. Countries like Lebanon and Turkey need to abandon any and all policies that encourage or force premature or unsafe returns, with a clear role in this for the EU, the US and the UNHCR. For example, given that 84% of the people interviewed for this survey say that conscription into regime's military is a major obstacle to return, it is clear that the Syrian regimes continuation of forced conscription should, in and of itself, represent grounds for protection in third countries in the interim.

The Western donors can effectively use their funding leverage to ensure that host countries maintain services and allow aid, provide legal rights, and limit negative and dehumanizing rhetoric and politics regarding refugees. They need to ensure appropriate funding for the work that collects appropriate information about conditions on the ground in Syria and returns procedures, and provides it to refugees and IDPs to inform their decisions about whether to return. This information is equally important for countries hosting Syrian refugees in order to shape their immigration policies taking into account security and living conditions in Syria, and prevent premature or forced return.

In addition, the survey results highlight the importance of adequate funding for work that helps realize refugees' minimum conditions for return, taking concrete steps through all channels—political, humanitarian, advocacy, diplomacy—to ensure these conditions are met, including security sector reform and mandatory conscription.

One of the key roles that donor countries should play is the strengthening of the oversight of the work of UNHCR and including representation and participation of the displaced Syrians in such oversight mechanisms.

The UNHCR must undertake returns work based on the priorities of refugees and IDPs' concerns and conditions; work on security, as amply illustrated by the findings of the report, should take the highest priority. UNHCR must accept that increasing service provision as an incentive to return does not address the main concerns of Syria's displaced and serves to incentivize unsafe and premature returns.

The displaced Syrians clearly do not have sufficient information on some of the crucial aspects of the security conditions when considering possible return, which can be seen as a failure of the UNHCR to deliver on one of the key elements of its mandate. The UNHCR must, therefore, improve communication, information, and counselling with Syria's displaced to ensure they are aware of all factors and conditions that might impact their returns decisions, including information about how current conditions and returns procedures impact their rights, and make this communication approach an integral part of future media campaigns.

Lastly, there are key lessons for the NGOs and civil society actors in this survey, especially in relation to the need for them to undertake and promote work that addresses how minimum conditions can be actualized and work which informs refugees and IDPs about the current conditions and returns procedures, including how these relate to their rights, to help inform returns decisions and prevent premature returns.





# Recommendations

## United States and European Union

- The lack of a safe environment is the main driver of displacement of Syrians and the greatest obstacle to their safe, voluntary and dignified return. Consequently, a sustained diplomatic effort, coupled with economic and political pressure should prioritise producing a realistic road map that result in moving the country from its current state to a true “safe environment” for all Syrians.
- Help establishing formal mechanisms within the Geneva political process to incorporate in a direct and effective manner a legitimate participation of displaced Syrians in the process, and make the rights of the displaced Syrians an integral part of the discussion shaping up the future of the country and the fate of its citizens. Such mechanism should ensure the direct participation of the displaced Syrians in defining the conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return, and the definition of a safe environment.
- Ensure effective and meaningful participation of displaced Syrians in the work of the Office of the Special Envoy and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), particularly relating to the minimum conditions for return and returns policies or mechanisms.
- Increase and continue funding to neighbouring host countries to ensure appropriate living standards and services are available to refugees during their displacement, but ensure conditionalities are included in relationships that prevent the politicization and dehumanization of refugees in these host countries.
- Maintain targeted sanctions as fundamental tools in keeping pressure on the Syrian regime and its main allies to start making significant changes in the security conditions, engage in a meaningful political negotiation that would lead to a sustainable and comprehensive solution, prevent further escalations and displacement of Syrians and ensure the direct delivery of aid to the Syrian population in the entire country in order to alleviate any indirect suffering that civilians might endure.

## Office of the Special Envoy

- Negotiate and deliver a mechanism that secures the rights and minimum conditions for return expressed by refugees and IDPs as a fundamental part of any political solution and its individual elements, such as the new and credible Constitution or elections.

## UNHCR

- Any minimum standards or return thresholds must take into account the minimum conditions for return defined by the displaced Syrians. Engage with Syria’s displaced to assess the current thresholds and adjust these in line with their views. Continually engage displaced Syrians in the process of monitoring and updating thresholds and return conditions.
- Provide clear and timely information about the current conditions and work that needs to be undertaken to meet any baseline conditions for return.

## **Host countries**

- Ensure services, aid, and legal rights are afforded to refugees and work to provide continuity of care to these communities to prevent premature and unsafe returns.
- Prevent the politicization of refugees and work to combat hateful and dehumanising rhetoric and behaviour against them, which causes negative psychological impacts and may lead to premature and unsafe returns.

## **Civil society and international NGOs**

- Advocate and work toward securing a comprehensive political settlement for Syria, including mechanisms to meet the returns conditions of refugees and IDPs, so they can return home safely, voluntarily, and with dignity.
- CS Provide aid to and advocacy for refugees and IDPs inside Syria and in neighbouring countries and work together to pressure host countries, donors, and political actors to increase assistance and protections for Syrians in displacement, and to advocate for an increase in resettlement places.



# WE ARE SYRIA

Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the  
Reasons for Displacement and Minimum Condi-  
tions for Return







# WE ARE SYRIA