



Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

“Death of Dignified Return and Political Process”

Displaced Syrians' Views on
Normalization of the Syrian
Regime

Briefing by Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity

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Introduction

The devastating earthquake that hit north-west Syria and south Turkey in February 2023 was a humanitarian catastrophe, which has swiftly turned into a political one, as the earthquake aid was used to rapidly normalize the Syrian regime by a number of regional and international actors. The grim reality affected by the earthquake, coupled with geopolitical shifts and fatigue over prolonged conflict, has led some countries to reassess their stance, considering normalization with Assad's regime as a pragmatic step towards perceived stability in the region.

For example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provided \$100 million in earthquake-related humanitarian assistance directly to the Syrian regime, and some countries like Saudi Arabia and even some European states provided earthquake relief via Damascus. A series of diplomatic engagements between Syria and Russia, Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE indicated that a new approach to the Syrian regime may be materializing. Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Syria in May, while in the same month the Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia invited Bashar al Assad as a full member, after 12 years of isolation.

It is worth mentioning that this tendency amongst regional state actors was originally encouraged by the lack of any clear political horizon or seriousness on behalf of the international community in the implementation of UNSC resolution 2254, and the lack of effective monitoring mechanisms to enforce sanctions on the Syrian regime, including the ones that stemmed from the United States' Caesar Act.

Although the regional normalization attempts had a mixed reaction in the West, ranging from official silence to mild reservations, there has been some expectation to see if such normalization will yield any tangible effects that would also serve the interests of some of the western governments themselves, namely: serious prospects for the return of Syrian refugees and the prevention of new displacement waves towards Europe.

In May 2023, Turkish officials agreed to improve ties with Syria following intensive brokering by Russia and Iran. At the same time, Western nations, particularly the United States and European countries, nominally continued to uphold sanctions and diplomatic pressure, citing human rights abuses and the regime's authoritarian nature. Their stance continued to be influenced by broader geopolitical considerations, including countering Iranian influence and addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria. However, it seems that the Biden administration had gradually opened a previously-shut door for its partners to normalize. Reportedly, senior State Department official communicated to the United States allies in the region to demand concessions from the Syrian regime if they were to engage with it in any case. European countries have

generally taken a more cautious approach. While condemning Assad's actions and imposing sanctions, they have also been involved in diplomatic efforts to find a political resolution. The European stance continues to be influenced by the humanitarian crisis, particularly the refugee situation, which has had significant impact within Europe. Lastly, senior UN official continued to **engage** with the Syrian regime causing a deep concern among displaced Syrians who looked to the UN for an unbiased leadership in the political process and addressing of the precarious situation with humanitarian access in the Northwest.

Such publicly promoted engagements, especially by the UN officials, drew furious reactions from the Syrian civil society organisations based in Northwest Syria in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. They issued statements rejecting the politicization of humanitarian aid that they claimed the UN and its agencies have been practicing over a long period of time, politicization which got exacerbated after the earthquake. The cited example of such policy was the **delay** of aid to NW Syria until after the UN received permission from the head of the Syrian regime to do so, a highly controversial act since the Syrian regime does not control NW Syria nor has the legitimacy to decide when or what urgent humanitarian aid can go to these areas.

These statements reveal that the main threat facing Syrians in the short term is the full normalization of the Syrian regime, which would materialize under the flawed notion of solidarity with the Syrian people resulting from the false equivalence that the Syrian regime equates the Syrian state/government, which in turn equates Syria and its people. It was made clear that a distinction must be made between the Syrian people and the Syrian regime who has been weaponizing humanitarian aid against its own people, committing war crimes against them for more than a decade, including the use of chemical weapons, and displaced more than half of the population.

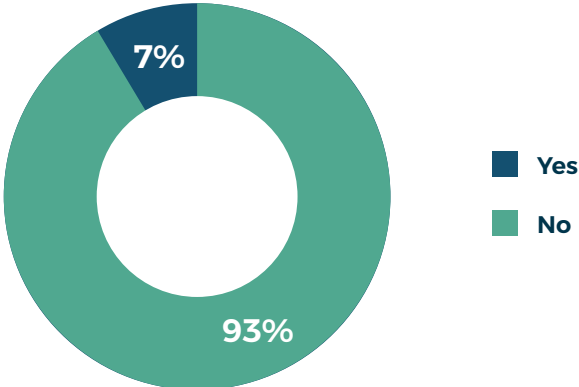
One major voice was missing from the discussion on normalization of the Syrian regime: that of more than 13 million displaced Syrians. This prompted the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity to conduct a survey of 3500 displaced Syrians in different locations in Northwest/Northeast Syria, in several Turkish provinces and in Lebanon in order to understand their views on the issue.

As customary in all SACD research, the surveys were conducted through direct interviews in person. The geographical locations chosen for this research were picked based on the overall distribution of displaced Syrians in Syria and in neighbouring countries based on official number provided by major UN agencies, as well as Syrian organization and SACD's own sources, especially in Northwest Syria.

The sample included participants living in five governorates in Syria: Aleppo, Idlib, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, Deir Ezzor; the 10 main provinces in Turkiye with the highest number of Syrian refugees according to official data including Istanbul, Gaziantep, Mersin, Urfa, Adana, Osmaniye, Hatay, Kilis, Marden and Bursa; and the main three areas in Lebanon with the highest presence of Syrian refugees: Beirut, Tripoli and Beqaa.

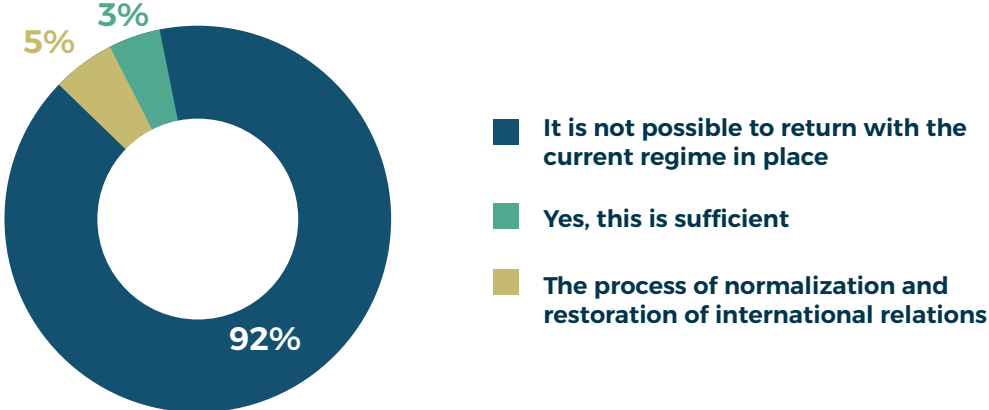
The most important conclusion of the survey is that vast majority of all surveyed displaced Syrians, in all locations, don't feel settled in their current areas, don't have living conditions they would regard as worthy of a decent human life, but still would not consider returning under the rule of the Syrian regime. They overwhelmingly believe that the return to regime-controlled areas is not possible even if normalization with the regime by Arab countries takes place. Approximately 93% of surveyed Syrians stopped making any effort to go back to their original places.

Are you actively working on your return?



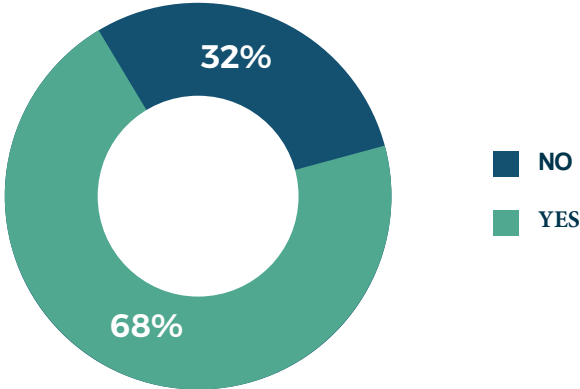
Most importantly, 92% of surveyed Syrians said that normalization by some Arab and regional countries with the regime will not change their position regarding the return, and 92% of the surveyed Syrians said that they will NOT go back to their original areas even if a full normalization by the international community takes place.

Is regional normalization alone enough to make you return?



The establishment of safe environment in Syria remains a pre-requisite for the return of 65% of the surveyed displaced Syrians, while the issue of the detainees remains a major concern for the vast majority of displaced Syrians, with 68% thinking that revealing the situation of the detainees and forcefully disappeared people is a pre-requisite of their return.

Is the release of detainees and the disclosure of the fate of the missing and disappeared considered a prerequisite for return?

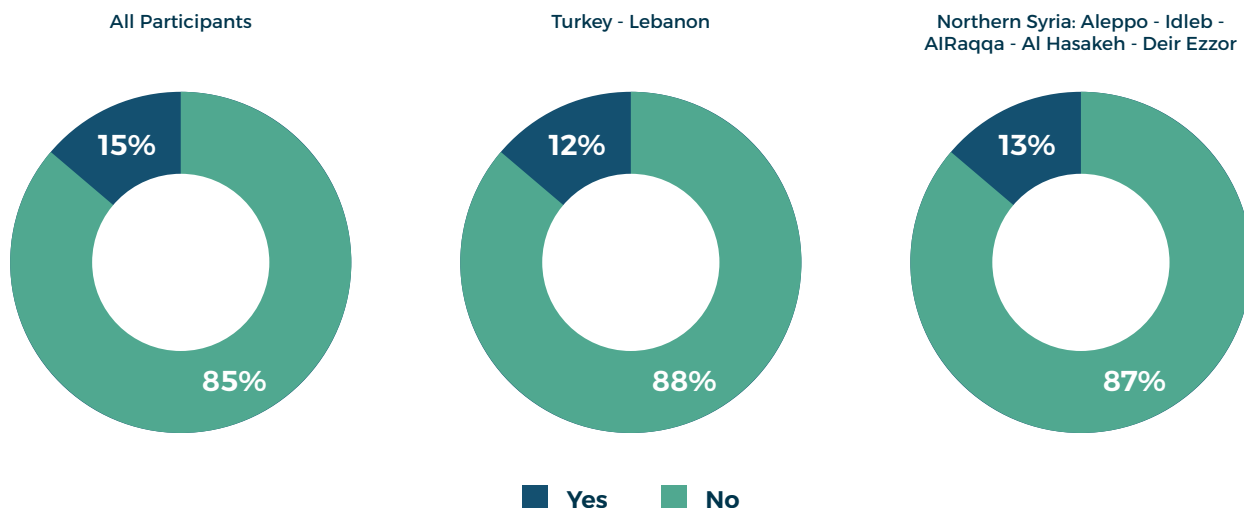


Lastly, the most worrying finding of the survey is that the huge majority of Syrians seems to be rapidly losing faith in a political solution. They, however, continue to insist on accountability and the vital importance of the fate of detainees. This is what the international community must take very seriously when engaging in new vague political initiatives such as the “step for step” or any other ad hoc solutions which ignore the need for a true representation of and consultation with more than 13 million displaced Syrians, the largest constituency within the Syrian population.

Instability in displacement, fear of return

The lack of sense of stability amongst all displaced Syrians is amply patent throughout the survey results, where on average 85% of all participants expressed their lack of sense of stability in the areas in which they currently live. This percentage peaks in Lebanon and Turkey reaching 88%, slightly above the 87% in the north of Syria. The parity in the sense of lack of stability between displaced Syrians in Turkey and Lebanon on one hand, and in North Syria on the other hand is a very significant indication, despite the huge chasm between these two areas in terms of health, education and services infrastructure.

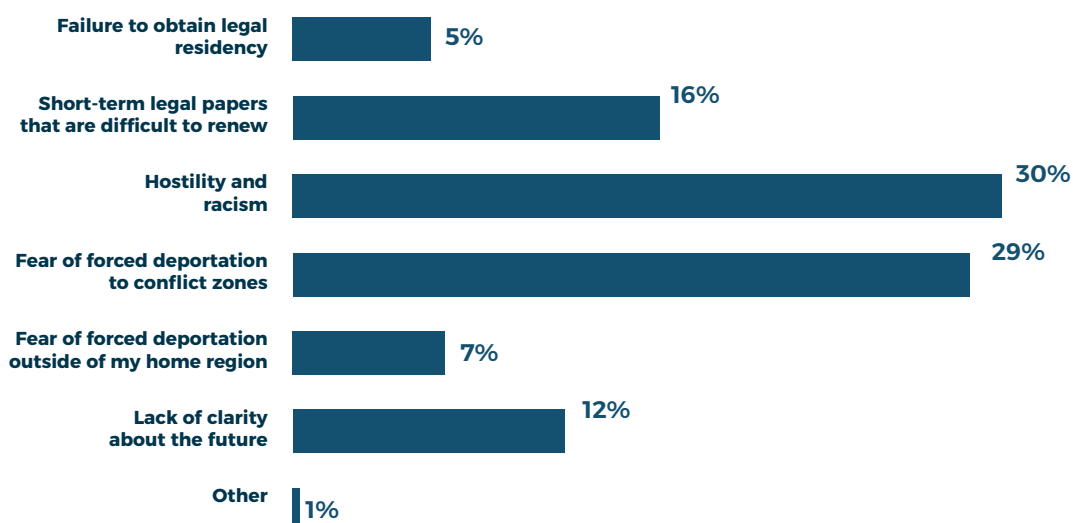
Do you feel stable in your current place of residence?



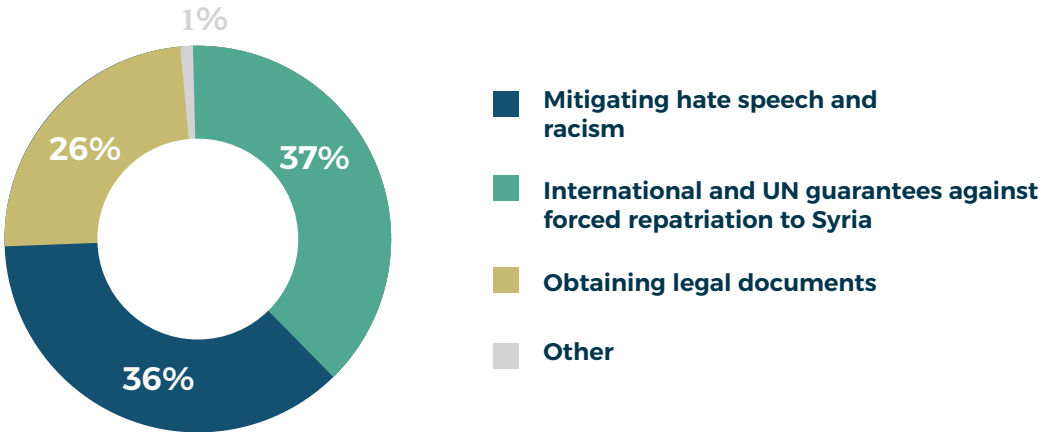
Based on the survey results, it is clear that the systematic discrimination against Syrian refugees and hate speech, along with the constant calls for their forced return, are the main factors behind the sense of instability amongst Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon.

The main threats facing displaced Syrians in Turkey and Lebanon as shown in the survey were: discrimination and harassment (30%), forced return (29%), lack of long-term legal status (16%) and unclear future in general (12%). It is clear that forced return is still a major threat which reflects the lack of intention of refugees to go back to their places of origin under the current circumstances.

What are the main threats/challenges in your current location



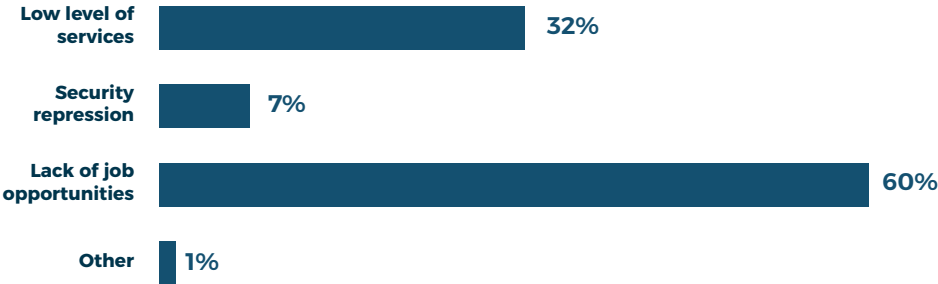
The three main changes that Syrian refugees would like to see in their current circumstances in Turkey and Lebanon: crack down on hate speech and discrimination (36%), international guarantees against forced return (37%), support and facilities to obtain legal documents (26%). It is clear that refugees are looking for stability and a clear legal status in their current locations, but at the same time they need assurances that forced return will be prevented.



On the other hand, the survey indicates a totally different type of challenges facing displaced Syrians in north Syria, where most of their concern are centered around living conditions in terms of services and job employment opportunities.

The main threats and difficulties facing displaced Syrians in NW and NE Syria: the lack of job opportunities (60%), bad services (32%), and security conditions (7%)

What are the main threats/challenges in your current location

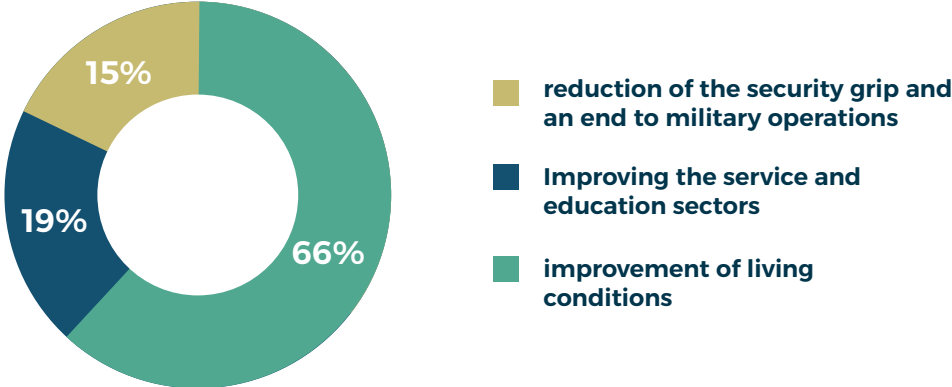


It is safe to say that the key issue to prevent new waves of displacement of Syrians from North Syria is to improve the living conditions and infrastructure, while it is imperative to urgently address the targeted discrimination of Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon and work on protect them from the constant threat of forced return. The most probable destination of new waves of displacement whether from North Syria or Turkey and Lebanon would be Europe.

Based on the challenges and threats identified through this survey it was logical to expect the following request of improvements by displaced Syrians, with clear differences according to their current location.

In North Syria, the main focus was the living conditions and employment opportunities as well as education. The three main changes that Syrian IDPs would like to see in NW and NE Syria: improvement of living conditions (66%), improvement in services and education (19%), reduction of the security grip and an end to military operations (15%). This goes to confirm that the humanitarian and social development projects as well as capacity building in North Syria should target the infrastructure and must be planned with sustainability in mind rather than emergency-centric and reactionary aid policies. North Syria requires true recovery and reconstruction programs in parallel with good governance initiatives targeting the de-facto authorities in the area, to the possible extent, taking into account the intrinsic dynamics of power and the foreign intervention.

What are the main changes needed in your current location?

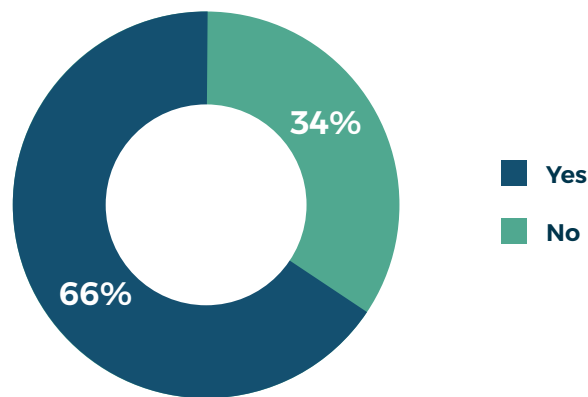


These demands not only reflect a clear failure of domestic policies in these countries to provide the minimum levels of protection and welfare to Syrian refugees, but also the failure and shortcoming of the UN programs and efforts in addressing fundamental rights and needs of approximately 5 million refugees in these two countries after more than 12 years of conflict.

The nature of challenges and improvement demands that displaced Syrians have, whether in Syria or in neighbouring countries, provide a perfect of explanation to why the vast majority don't feel stable in their current location, and they are the type of issues that will provoke new waves of displacement or social unrest if not addressed promptly and in a systematic and sustainable manner.

The previously mentioned circumstances provide an explanation to the response of displaced Syrians to the "return question". Despite the fact that more than twelve years of conflict have passed, yet, 66% of surveyed displaced Syrians have shown their willingness to go back to their original areas given the right conditions and circumstance.

Do you wish to return to your original residence in Syria if the conditions are suitable?



When asked about the top changes that they would need to see in their original areas, an overall of 90% of demands were related to the security and political situation in their hometowns.

42% of the participants demanded a change in the current authorities controlling their original areas, while 27% asked for the implementation of UNSC resolution 2254 as a sustainable and comprehensive political solution for the entire country. 21% were more specific and focused on the security policies and practices by the authorities controlling their original areas.

What are the main conditions that you need in order to return to your original place?

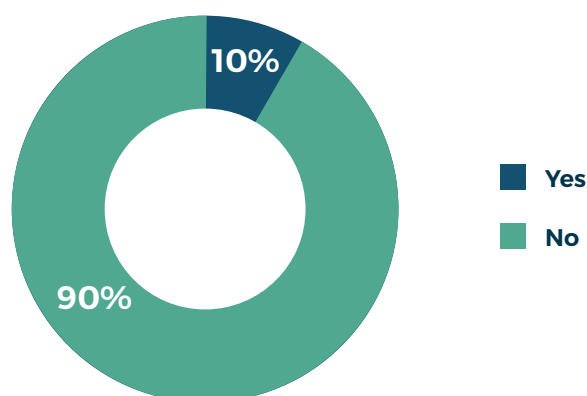


These responses confirm yet again, that the root cause of the displacement is still political in nature manifested in the worst possible types of security policies and practices, and that a true comprehensive and sustainable solution for the entire country is still needed, and effectively is the only path for the return of displaced Syrians.

Normalization and return: threats and obstacles

When addressing the key question of this research, a staggering 90% of surveyed displaced Syrians affirmed that their decision regarding the return to Syria will not be affected by a normalization with the regime.

Will normalization with regime change your decision regarding return?



And since the only official normalization taking place with the Syrian regime so far is a regional one, more specifically led by some Arab countries; the surveyed displaced Syrians were asked about if a “regional” normalization would impact their decision to return home.

Approximately 92% were very categorical in rejecting the idea of return if the current regime is still in power even if a regional normalization takes place. The three main conditions for returning to the places of origin for the surveyed displaced Syrians: change of the ruling authorities (42%), a political solution in accordance with the UNSC resolution 2254 (27%), international and regional guarantees for not being arrested by ruling authorities (21%).

This response varied between Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and IDP, where 89% of Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon showed their rejection to the idea of return in case of a regional normalization, while an astounding 98% of surveyed IDPs expressed their rejection to the idea of return if regional normalization becomes a reality.

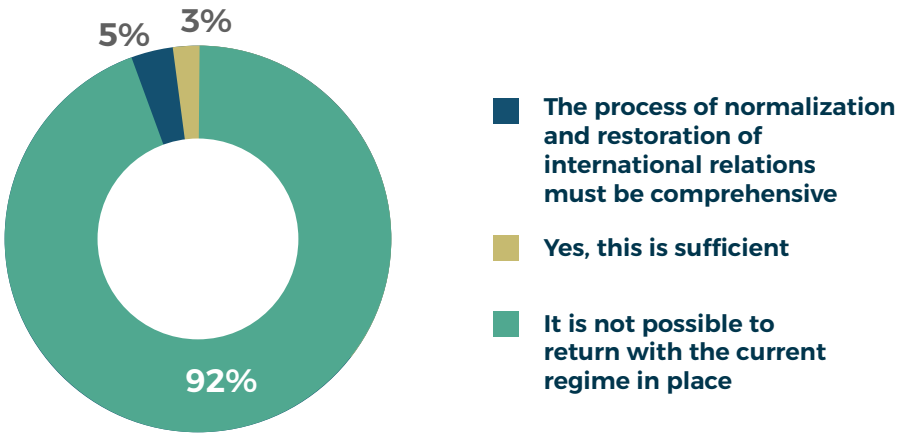
Although both percentages are very high and debunk any rationalization for the normalization from the displacement issue point of view, it is important to understand the reason for that approximate difference of 10% between refugees and IDPs.

While security concerns and fear of arrest and torture are equally prevalent for both refugees and IDPs, there are two main reasons for such disparity in the answers regarding the return question:

- The main challenge that IDPs face is economic in nature. Moving back to regime areas will not solve such issue, and normalization is not likely to improve the living conditions in Syria in general including regime-controlled areas.
- On the other hand, the main challenge for refugees in Turkey and Lebanon is their current legal status and the wave of discrimination and racist attacks, which will not exist in Syria, although a different type of discrimination will be faced.

When asked more in detail about the reasons why regional normalization is not enough, it was patent that security is still at the heart of the concerns of the displaced Syrians, and 48% of surveyed participants expressed their lack of trust in any promises the Syrian regime might make as part of the normalization, while another 32% of the participants echoed again the fear of security reprisals in case of return.

Is regional normalization alone enough to make you return?



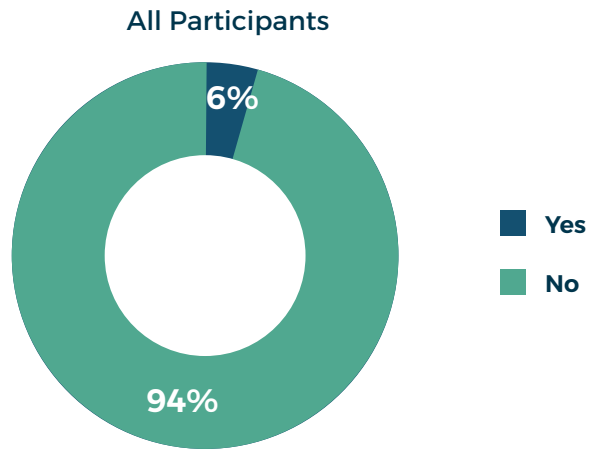
In the eyes of more than half of the surveyed Syrians (52%), the biggest threat of the regional normalization is that it will kill any possibility of a real change in Syria or of a political transition. Syrians also view normalization as a big threat to the future of the detainees, where 18% of the participants pointed out the fact that the normalization would prevent the disclosure of the fate of the detainees and missing persons.

The issue of detainees is a major obstacle for displaced Syrians when discussing the issue of return as it has been shown in many SACD reports in the past few years.

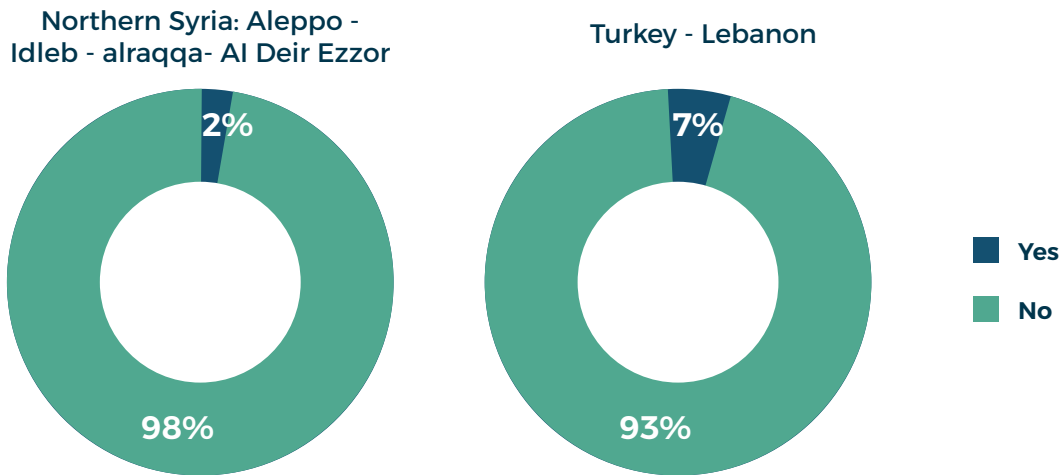
Furthermore; a total of 91% of consulted Syrians do not believe that normalization will bring any real gains or benefits to displaced Syrians, where 45% think that only the Syrian regime will benefit from such normalization.

When displaced Syrians were asked if they would return in the case of a full normalization with the regime (not only regional), 94% of the overall answers indicated that participants will not return to Syria. Clearly affected by the paralysis of the political process and the looming discourse on normalization, approximately 93% of surveyed Syrians stopped making any effort to return to their places of origin.

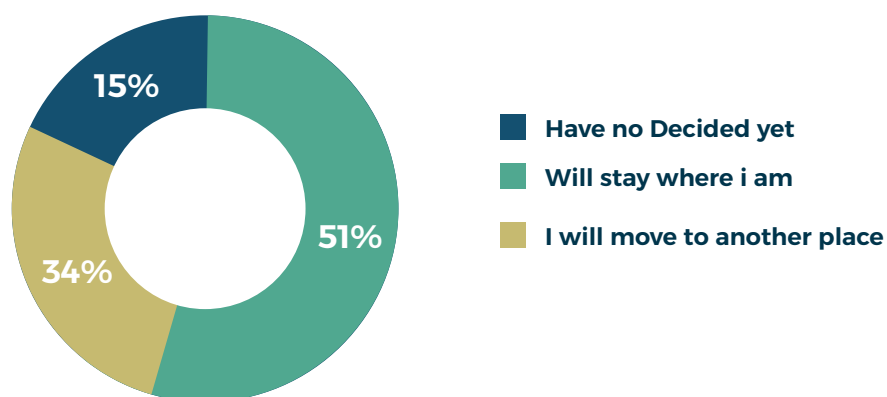
Will you return if full normalization takes place?



Similarly to the question of whether Syrians will return in the case of a regional normalization, there was a slight variation in the percentage of displaced Syrians refusing to return based on their displacement area. Approximately 93% of refugees in Turkey and Lebanon expressed their negative position regarding return in the case of a full normalization, while 98% of IDPs echoed the same sentiment.

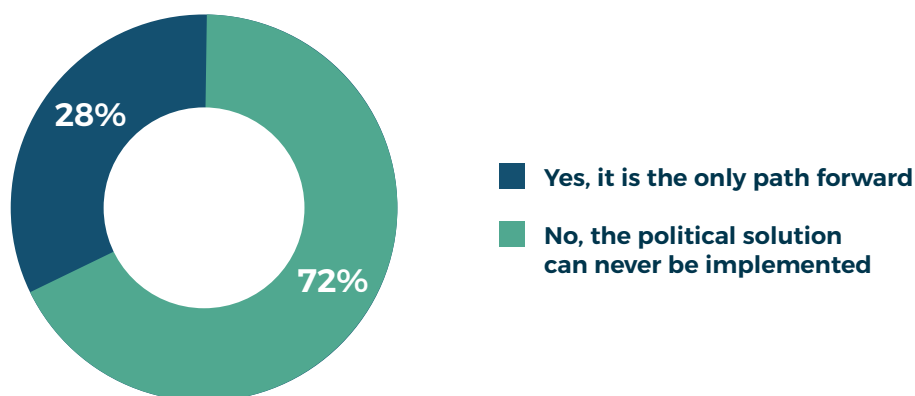


When participants who expressed their intention of not returning to Syria in the case of a full normalization were asked about their intentions if such event happened, 51% of them said that they would stay where they are, while 34% expressed their desire to move to a new location, most likely a third country.



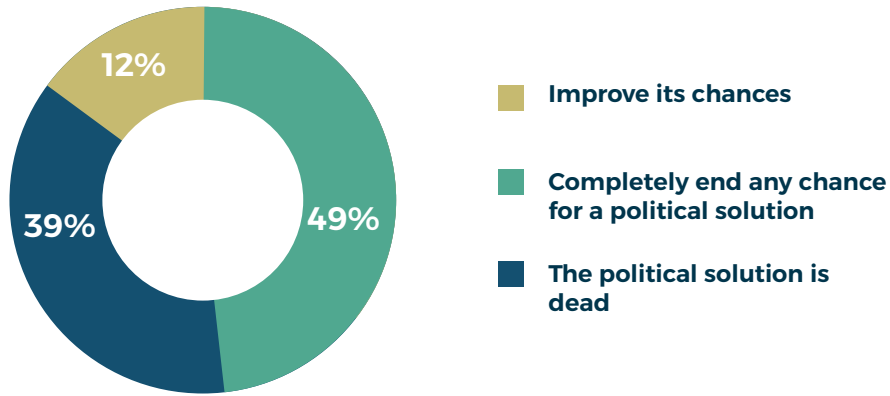
Normalization Signals the Death of Hopes for Political Solution

The common consensus amongst the main state stakeholders in Syria is that the future of country can only be decided through a political solution, although very little progress has been achieved in that regard in the last few years, and there is a predominant sense of political stagnation amongst Syrians themselves and a feeling of despair, where 72% of the consulted displaced Syrians believe that a political solution will never be implemented, while the rest still see the political track as the only path forward.

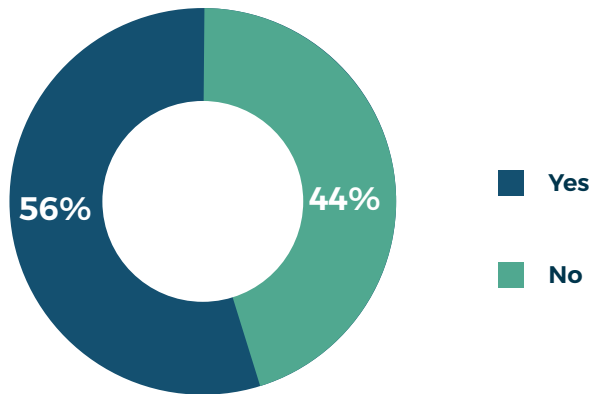


Furthermore, the general impression amongst Syrians is that normalization will end any chances to revive the currently stalled political process and would effectively end any possibility of having a political solution in the future. Approximately half of the consulted Syrians think that a normalization means the end of the political solution, on top of the 39% who think that the political process is already dead and there is no hope of any solution. Only 12% of the participants think that a normalization might improve the chances of achieving a political solution. Nevertheless, and despite the negative outlook of the majority of consulted Syrians regarding the political process, 56% of participants consider the implementation of a political solution a pre-requisite for their return.

How will normalization affect any future political solution in Syria?



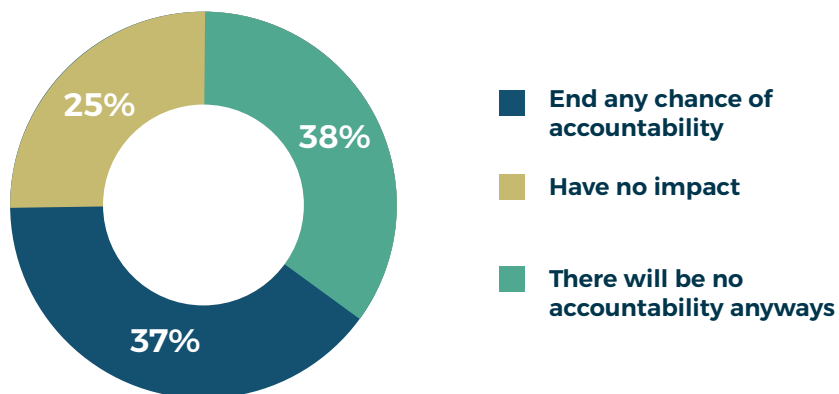
Is a political solution a pre-requisite for return?



One of the most relevant underlying issues that make displaced Syrians very mistrustful of any conversation on the subject of normalization is the issue of the systematic violation of human rights that they or somebody close to them has suffered at the hands of the Syrian regime, and the absence of accountability for such violations.

There is a predominant sense amongst Syrians that accountability for crimes committed against them will never take place in Syria. 37% of surveyed participants believe that any normalization means that end of any chance of accountability, while additional 38% think that there will not be any accountability anyway regardless of the normalization process. This means that 75% of Syrians effectively don't think that there will be any accountability in their country regardless of regional or global normalization with the regime.

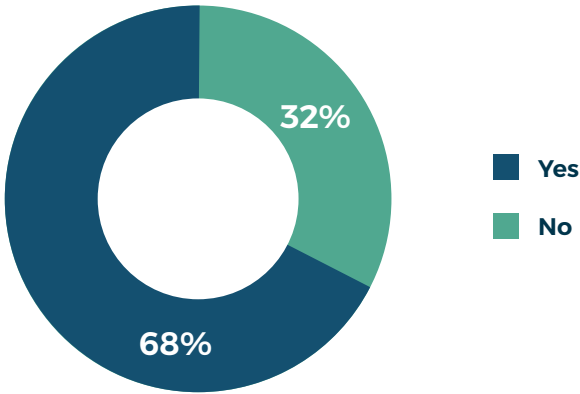
How will normalization impact accountability?



Based on the SACD previous reports and surveys, accountability has always been one of the top conditions demanded by displaced Syrians to return, since it will give them a clear signal of whether there will be an end to impunity in the future for those who would commit human rights violation against Syrian citizens, and whether there will be hope for a rules-based society.

In a similar fashion and following an analogous rationalization, some two thirds of the surveyed participants (68%) still demand the release of detainees and the disclosure of the fate of forcefully missing persons as an essential prerequisite for their return. The vast majority of displaced people consider themselves in a similar or identical legal situation to the current detainees and believe that their return will most probably result in their detention.

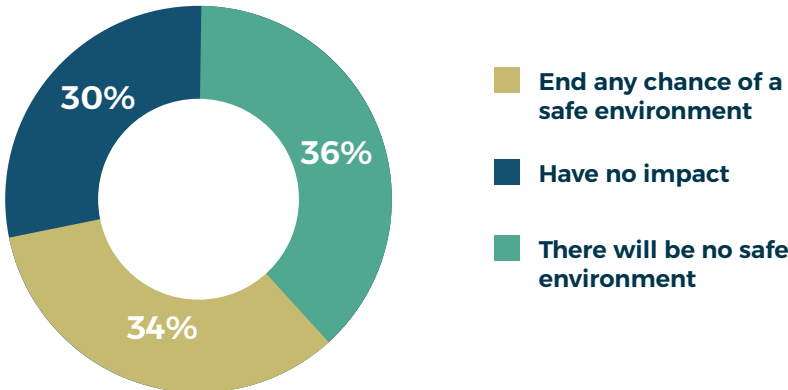
Is the release of detainees and the disclosure of the fate of the missing and disappeared considered a prerequisite for return?



When discussing normalization within the context of the implementation of safe environment in Syria for all Syrians, the distribution of the answers was similar to the obtained when talking about accountability; where 34% believe that normalization is the virtual end of any hope of a safe environment, in addition to 36% who think that there will never be any safe environment in any case.

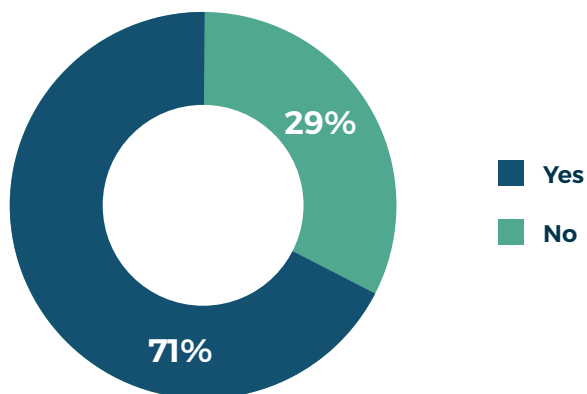
The remaining participants (30%) thought that normalization will have no impact on the implementation of the safe environment at all. But further discussion with them revealed that the vast majority didn't see -based on current circumstances and the track record of the political process- any chance of success regarding the implementation of the safe environment.

How will normalization impact achieving a safe environment?



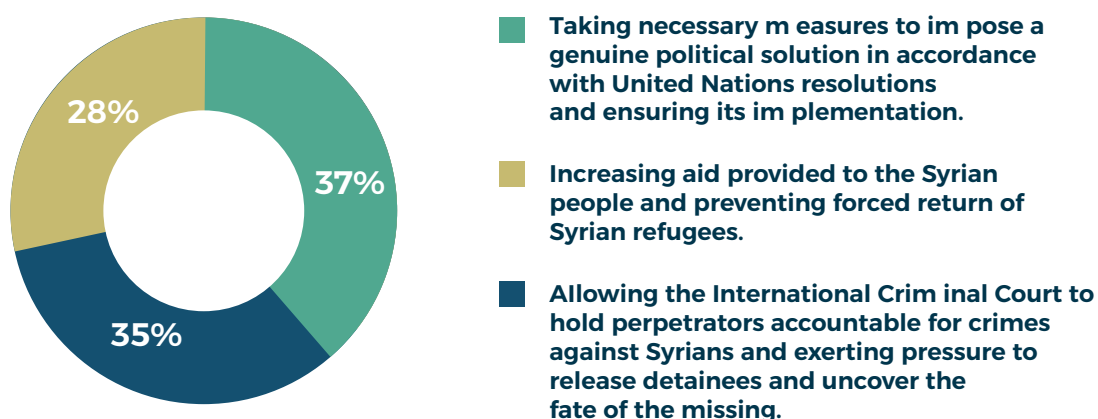
Similarly to the positioning of the surveyed displaced Syrians towards the political solution (i.e. the vast majority not believing that such solution would ever materialize but still insisting on it as a pre-requisite of return), in the case of the safe environment 71% think that it is a vital prerequisite for their return, regardless how implausible it looks right now.

Is safe environment a pre-requisite for return?



When participants were asked about their main demands from the international community and main stakeholders in Syria, the vast majority of demands stemmed from the need for a new political and security reality in Syria, where 37% demanded that the international community would impose a political solution in accordance with the UNSC resolutions, while 35% of the demands focused on accountability. A considerable 28% expressed their concern about forced return and demanded measures to be taken by the international community in order to stop and prevent it.

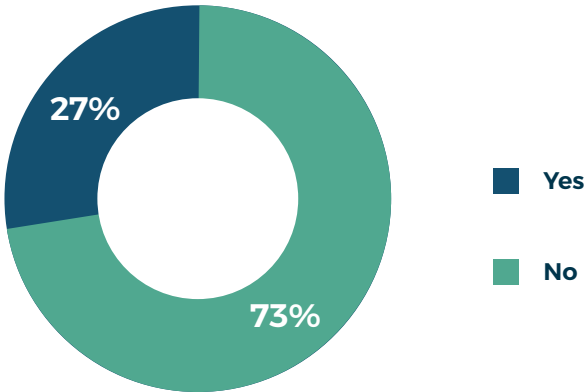
What demands do you have from the international community?



The survey also addressed the issue of the “Step for Step” initiative since it has become a central issue within the special envoy’s narrative.

The vast majority (73%) of surveyed Syrians did not know what the initiative meant. Almost 96% of those how claimed that they knew what the “Step for Step” initiative is got their information from the different political entities that they follow or have contact with, none got the information from what the office of the special envoy is communicating.

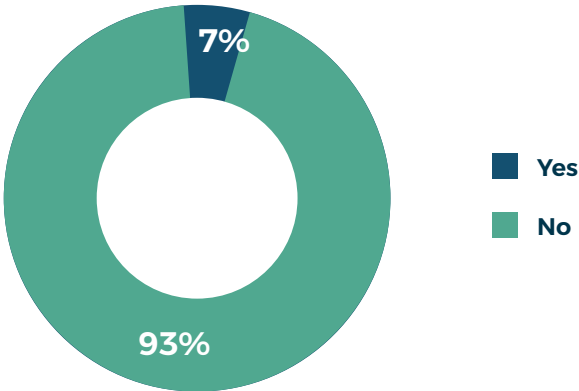
Do you know what “Step for Step” means?



When those who answered positively regarding their knowledge of the “Step for Step” initiative were consulted about the impact of such initiative, 66% believed that it was not the appropriate solution for the current situation in Syria, while 26% believed that it is not enough.

Finally, when participants where directly asked whether they believed that normalization is good for Syria, 93% said no. This percentage is very indicative of the level of despair and lack of hope within these communities, and most importantly the lack of trust in the state actors and UN agencies working on the implementation of a political solution that would address the needs and fears of displaced Syrians.

Is normalization good for the future of Syria?



Conclusions and recommendations

The Syrian conflict, now spanning over a decade, has seen countless tragedies, shifts in regional politics, and attempts at normalization of the Syrian regime. The devastating earthquake that struck north-west Syria and south Turkey in February 2023 further compounded the humanitarian crisis and precipitated discussions around the normalization of the Syrian regime. This briefing by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) sought to explore the perspectives of displaced Syrians on the prospects of normalization and its potential impact on their lives and the political process.

The core focus of the SACD survey was to gauge the opinions and sentiments of displaced Syrians regarding normalization and its potential impact on their return to Syria. The survey results paint a clear picture: the overwhelming majority of surveyed Syrians don't feel settled in their current locations, citing inadequate living conditions, and don't consider returning under the rule of the Syrian regime.

The establishment of a safe environment in Syria is deemed essential by the majority of the surveyed displaced Syrians for their return, while 61% emphasize the importance of addressing the issue of detainees. The survey indicates a worrying trend as the majority of Syrians seem to be losing faith in a political solution, underscoring the urgent need for accountability and the fate of detainees.

Worryingly, the briefing highlights the highest degree of overall lack of stability among displaced Syrians since SACD started polling displaced Syrians more than four years ago, with 85% expressing a sense of instability in their current locations. Discrimination and harassment are major concerns for refugees in Turkey and Lebanon, while a lack of job opportunities, inadequate services, and security issues dominate the concerns of displaced Syrians in north-west and north-east Syria.

The survey findings underscore the crucial role of a political solution in the minds of displaced Syrians. Importantly, normalization efforts are seen as a threat to the hopes of displaced Syrians for a political solution and accountability for human rights violations. A staggering 90% of respondents affirm that their decision to return will not be affected by normalization, whether regional or international. The majority believes that normalization will hinder the prospects of real change in Syria, the fate of detainees, and the creation of a safe environment. Security concerns, mistrust in the promises of the Syrian regime, and fear of reprisals loom large in the minds of displaced Syrians when it comes to normalization.

While a political solution remains a priority for displaced Syrians, their faith in its realization is waning. Nearly three-quarters of respondents doubt that a political solution will ever be implemented. The normalization of relations is seen as a potential death knell for the already stalled political process, further exacerbating feelings of hopelessness.

In conclusion, the briefing by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity reveals the resilience and determination of displaced Syrians to seek justice, security, and a political solution. Normalization efforts have failed to sway their stance on returning to a Syria ruled by the current regime. Instead, they emphasize the need for a safe environment, accountability for past atrocities, and a comprehensive political solution as prerequisites for their return.

The briefing serves as a powerful reminder that the voices and concerns of more than 13 million displaced Syrians must be central to any discussions on the future of Syria. The international community, regional actors, and Syrian stakeholders must heed these calls for justice and security as they navigate the complex path toward resolution and the return of displaced Syrians to their homeland.

Recommendations for international actors

Publicly and categorically reject the idea of normalization with the Assad regime as a potential solution for the Syrian crisis specially the issue of refugees. Such approach will only result in more instability and displacement. This point is very relevant for the image of the main western and regional states stakeholders in the Syrian public opinion.

Firmly and publicly insist on the implementation of UNSC resolution 2254 (and other resolutions and mandates related to Syria, such as the “Geneva Communiqué” and UNSC resolution 2118) as the only path towards peace and political transition in Syria, not only to enforce international legitimacy, but also to reassure the Syrian people and regain their trust in the main international guarantors of the political track.

Avoid the launch or engagement in ad-hoc political initiatives that would inadvertently or purposely lead towards a partial or full gradual normalization of the Syrian regime which could undermine accountability for human rights violations and would further persuade displaced Syrians away from the idea of return and the political solution.

Support political initiatives in line with UNSC resolutions, emphasizing the need for the voice of displaced Syrians to be actively included in such initiatives and the political process as a whole.

Prioritize the de-politicization of humanitarian aid, focusing on the delivery of direct support to displaced Syrians both within and outside Syria. Prevent the use of humanitarian aid or early recovery programs for indirect normalization of the Syrian regime.

Shift the humanitarian aid paradigm in Northwest and Northeast Syria from its current reactive nature to more sustainability-centered programs that would achieve long lasting improvements in living conditions and would prevent future waves of displacement of Syrian IDPs towards neighboring countries and Europe.

Support projects and programs that would provide an impulse for good governance in Northwest Syria through cooperation with non-designated, nor sanctioned de-facto authorities that would lead to improved living and security conditions for Syrians in the area.

Maintain targeted sanctions on the Syrian regime . These targeted sanctions should persist and be enforced until significant progress is made in accountability for human rights abuses, and the establishment of safe environment for all Syrians through the effective engagement of all parties in the political process.

Enhance protection and support for Syrian refugees in the regional countries and Europe, ensuring their rights and addressing their needs to avoid further displacements.

Uphold international legal principles regarding Syrian refugees, particularly regarding the prevention of forced returns in neighboring countries, especially Lebanon, as well as in some European countries that have taken effective steps towards considering parts of Syria safe for the return of refugees.

Promote inclusive Syrian dialogue in the political process involving displaced Syrians and Syrian civil society.



Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

“Death of Dignified Return and Political Process”

Displaced Syrians' Views on
Normalization of the Syrian
Regime

