



REFUGEE
PROTECTION
WATCH

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TRAPPED IN BETWEEN LEBANON AND SYRIA

The Absence of Durable Solutions
for Syria's Refugees

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
DISCLAIMER	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/KEY FINDINGS	5
1. INTRODUCTION	8
2. METHODOLOGY	9
2.1 Qualitative methodology inside Syria	9
2.2 Quantitative methodology in Lebanon	10
2.3 Research methodology limitations	11
3. SETTING THE SCENE	13
3.1. The largest forced displacement crisis in the world	13
3.2. Limited prospects for durable solutions?	14
3.3. UNHCR Protection Thresholds for safe, voluntary and dignified return	16
4. DATA FINDINGS	17
4.1. Safety and Security	17
4.2. Voluntariness of return	19
4.3. Freedom of movement	25
4.4. Physical, legal and material safety	25
4.5. Amnesty agreements	30
4.6. Access to civil documentation	31
4.7. Housing, Land and Property Rights (HLP)	32
4.8. UNHCR access to returnees	34
4.9. Impact of COVID-19	34
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	37
ANNEX 1: UNHCR PROTECTION THRESHOLDS	40
ANNEX 2: BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH AREAS INSIDE SYRIA	42
ENDNOTES	47

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

B&Z	Basmeh & Zeitooneh
CoI	United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
CPSS	Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GHRP	UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan
GoL	Government of Lebanon
GoS	Government of Syria
HDC	Higher Defence Council
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
HNAP	United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KI	Key Informant
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PRS	Palestinian Refugees in Syria
RPW	Refugee Protection Watch
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SACD	Syrian Association For Citizen's Dignity
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHCR Protection Thresholds	UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria
VASyR 2019	2019 UNHCR Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees
WHO	World Health Organization

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) would like to thank all the individuals who took the time to participate in this research, without whose input we would not have been able to complete this report. We look forward to discussing the findings with them.

DISCLAIMER

Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) made all possible efforts to represent only accurate data, crosscheck all the information in this report, and translate all Arabic data obtained during the research phase into English as carefully as possible. This does not rule out the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which the team hereby expresses its regrets.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syria has been the **largest forced displacement crisis** in the world since 2014. The vast majority of Syrian refugees (83%) live in **host countries in the region**, who continue to bear a **vastly unequal responsibility** for hosting Syrian refugees. Lebanon, which hosts at least 910,600 officially registered Syrian refugees (while the unofficial number is estimated at 1.5 million), is a particular case in point. While hosting the eighth largest refugee population worldwide, Lebanon has the second highest refugee population relative to the national population in the world, with 134 registered refugees per 1,000 nationals.

A large majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon **have no viable prospect of a durable solution** (safe, voluntary and dignified return; local integration in host country; or resettlement to a third country) to end their displacement in the near future. They are stuck in limbo while conditions around them are worsening. As shown in more detail below, conditions in Syria are not conducive for a safe and dignified return, while the rapidly deteriorating situation in Lebanon makes a voluntary and informed return decision impossible. Moreover, both the possibility of local integration and (temporary) residency in the host country, or resettlement to a third country have become less and less available for Syrian refugees, while threats of deportation and violations of the non-refoulement principle (including by EU member states such as Cyprus and Greece) have been increasing.

Syria not safe

This report aimed to contribute to an assessment of whether, and to what extent, conditions in Syria and Lebanon are conducive to a safe, voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees. It takes the **UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria**, a list of 22 conditions that were published by the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR in February 2018, as its main analytical framework. These Protection Thresholds – the importance of which was most recently reiterated during the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region that took place on 30 June 2020 – are **the internationally-accepted standard to assess the conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees to their country**.

In order to assess these conditions, RPW has adopted a longitudinal research approach and employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to reach a gradually expanding sam-

ple of respondents across all governorates in Lebanon and in two Government of Syria (GoS)-held areas of Syria (Homs and Rural Damascus Governorates) who share their current living conditions, experiences with/perceptions on return and perspectives on their futures. In doing so, this research has found that:

- **Conditions are not in place for a safe return:**

In line with international experience in return processes – which have shown that a sense of security requires not only the absence of an active conflict but also the absence of explicit or implicit threats from government, militias and other social groups – this report has concluded that conditions for a safe return do not currently exist inside Syria.

All RPW returnee respondents inside Syria, across regions and gender, stated that the safety and security situation is significantly worse than the situation before 2011, largely due to the heavy presence of the security apparatus in the areas of return, and reported to avoid going out after dark because of the security situation in their area of residence. Many refugee returnees – in particular military-aged males – fear detention and reported that men of military age are often harassed on the streets by members of the security apparatus, even after gaining official exemptions from the compulsory military service. The fear of military conscription has also resulted in a relatively large number of families who have undertaken a so-called “split return”.

RPW’s online conversations with Syrian refugees in Lebanon confirmed these findings. Syrians currently residing in Lebanon reported they simply cannot go back to Syria for various reasons related to their safety, stating fears related to military conscription and detention by the Syrian authorities. RPW findings on safety and security are also confirmed in other reports, including reports by the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) and the Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity (SACD).

- **Conditions are not in place for a dignified return:**

Syria’s dire economic situation has resulted in enormous levels of unemployment, poverty and widespread hunger, thereby risking to refuel the root causes of the Syrian conflict. Poverty and unemployment rates reached 86% and 42.3%, respectively, in 2019 (and have further deteriorated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), while

food prices have risen by at least 133% in the past year. Syria's war economy and rampant corruption are among the main reasons for this, while the economic crisis in Lebanon, the impact of COVID-19 and imposed sanctions are adding to Syria's dire socio-economic and humanitarian situation.

This report finds that over three quarters of returnee respondents inside Syria are aid-dependent, while respondents across different regions reported different levels of satisfaction with service-provision in their areas. Among others, access to electricity and water in Rural Damascus is reported to be limited to 2-3 hours a day; 90% of RPW respondents are not receiving the psychological support they need; the performance of the public education sector is consistently rated as "bad"; and 50% of returnee respondents reported to have had to pay outstanding utility bills for services inside Syria they never received (as they were living in Lebanon).

- **Lack of voluntary and informed return decisions:**

Conditions are currently not in place within Syria or Lebanon to make return discussions on an informed and truly voluntary basis: "push factors" from host countries, negative pull factors inside Syria, and most notably the lack of objective and reliable information about the conditions for return to Syria undermine the voluntariness of the vast majority of returns:

- **72.3%** of respondents in RPW's online panel in Lebanon reported an increasing pressure to leave Lebanon and return to Syria. In addition, **69.9%** of these respondents feared how local authorities will address and treat them (such as the implementation of curfews, threat of deportation, misconduct at checkpoints) in Lebanon. As a result, more than half of them (**56.7%**) reported that such concerns were impacting their decision-making process on return.
- **52.7%** and **37.3%** of respondents in RPW's most recent (August 2020) online panel in Lebanon reported an increase in social tensions and discrimination, respectively, in the past 3-6 months.
- Around **two thirds** of returnee respondents in RPW's two data collection rounds inside Syria reported the lack of livelihood opportunities and worsening economic situation in Lebanon as a primary reason for their decision to return.
- Only **32.7%** of respondents in RPW's most recent online conversation with Syrian refugees in Lebanon reported to have reliable information on the situation in their area of origin inside Syria.

- **Lack of implementation amnesty agreements:**

On 9 October 2018, the Government of Syria (GoS) issued Decree 18, granting amnesty for individuals accused of deserting or avoiding military conscription, if they would turn themselves in within four to six months. This report finds that all Key Informants (KIs) who evaded or deserted the military draft reported being at high risk of detention or immediate conscription in Syria, rendering a return to Syria life-threatening and thus impossible. Several KIs reported that – even after paying their exemption fees and fines – many people who returned were arrested for previous actions of political dissent, or have been conscripted again.

- **Violations of Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Rights:**

This research highlights several important HLP issues. 42.5% of respondents in the first data collection round inside Syria did not return to their own house but instead had to move to another house. Syrian respondents in Lebanon stated that the main reasons for their inability to go back to their houses in Syria were because it was seized by the Syrian government or because they were not able to prove ownership; because the property was damaged; and/or because of movement restrictions in their area of origin. In addition to these RPW findings, several other studies, including by the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, have described how property of displaced Syrians has either been damaged and seized, or how property documents have been confiscated or falsified.

- **Absence of UNHCR access and monitoring:**

As also emphasized by the World Bank, UNHCR currently does not have a system in place to monitor whether current returns can be considered safe, voluntary and dignified. This report confirms the lack of UNHCR access and current ability to monitor the situation of refugee returnees. **All returnee respondents reported that there has not been follow up by any actor after return.** Moreover, when asked if they would contact UNHCR if they were ever to face an issue in their place of residence, overwhelmingly respondents reported that they will not do so due to their distrust in UNHCR's capabilities. Respondents also reported a lack of UNHCR presence in their areas, in particular in Rural Damascus.

- **Access to civil documentation:**

When asked whether refugee returnees possessed any official documents (birth, death and marriage certificates, national ID cards, the Syrian family booklet and other relevant personal documents); whether they were able to replace missing documents; and whether civil documentation offices were regularly open and available in their region, almost all respondents answered affirmatively.

- **Freedom of movement:**

All returnee respondents inside Syria indicated they were able to go back to their neighbourhoods of origin. Male respondents of draft age, however, reported that they are being more cautious while moving around, including when passing through checkpoints.¹

Impact of COVID-19

Since March 2020, the **COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded pre-existing socio economic hardships of Syrian refugees in Lebanon**. RPW's online conversation between 30 March and 15 April 2020 demonstrated the limited ability of vulnerable communities in Lebanon to deal with the global pandemic, and the challenges that lay ahead:

- **85%** of respondents reported that they do not have access to or the possibility to buy sufficient sterilization and hygiene materials. Amongst Syrian respondents this figure even rose to 89%.
- **80%** of all respondents, and 85% of Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian respondents, answered that they had lost their main source of income. All areas of Lebanon seemed to be equally affected by job/income loss.
- **42%** of respondents were not aware which COVID-19 hotline to contact if they suspect they have contracted the virus.

During RPW's follow-up conversation in June 2020, it became again clear that the combined impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the economic crisis has proven extremely challenging:

- Only **3.7%** of the respondents reported that their income had remained the same since 18 March 2020; nearly all respondents had experienced either a decrease in income or had lost their income completely.
- A mere **27.9%** of respondents had received food, cash or hygiene assistance between the 18th of March and June 2020; of which 60% only once.

- The children of **73%** of respondents with school-aged children in their household were not able to attend online classes when schools were closed due to COVID-19 in the period 18 March - June 2020.

Need for durable solutions

The international community, as well as local authorities, **need to take urgent action to tackle the rapidly deteriorating situation of Syria's displaced**. In doing so, refugee-hosting countries, international institutions, and donors need to ensure and apply a holistic approach that recognizes that the 3 internationally-recognized durable solutions for displaced Syrians are inherently interlinked and should be actively and simultaneously promoted.

In this light, it is essential that (see also full list of recommendations on p 38-39):

- **States recognize that Syria cannot be considered a safe destination of return.** States need to put an end to violations of the principle of non-refoulement, including on all Mediterranean sea routes, as well as land routes to Europe.
- The Government of Lebanon facilitates **access to legal residency** for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, commits to a **moratorium on summary deportations**, and upholds the right to asylum for Syrian refugees.
- **Donors commit to sufficient, predictable, flexible and multi-annual humanitarian and development aid to refugees and host communities, through dedicated mechanisms** such as the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (Madad Fund). Aid localization efforts and commitments should be accelerated, while access to services should be provided in a non-discriminatory manner.
- UNHCR puts in place a **robust monitoring mechanism – on the basis of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds** and with sufficient resources – that closely monitors the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return of displaced Syrians. Such mechanism should also be used to ensure that Syrian refugees who consider returning have sufficient access to objective and reliable information about current conditions inside Syria (including protection risks and information gaps about such risks).

1. INTRODUCTION



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Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) is a coalition formed in 2019 by ALEF – Act for Human Rights, Basmeh and Zeitooneh, PAX, Upinion and 11.11.11. It brings together the strengths and experiences of Lebanese, Syrian and European organisations working in the human rights, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian fields, as well as a social profit enterprise (Upinion) specialised in digital data collection among (refugee) communities.

Since 2019, RPW has conducted research and advocacy on protection issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as on the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return to Syria. As such, the coalition aims to tackle the information gap that currently exists on protection and return dynamics that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are faced with. By taking a longitudinal approach to its research RPW aims to contribute to a more detailed, long-term and reliable information landscape, complementing the information that is already available. More specifically, RPW aims to provide more clarity on how Syrian refugees and host communities themselves assess their protection situation and living conditions in Lebanon, what their individual decision-making processes look like, and what happens to Syrian refugees once they have returned to Syria.

The RPW research takes the **UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria** (UNHCR Protection Thresholds), which were

published by the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR in February 2018, as its main analytical framework.² These Protection Thresholds – the importance of which was most recently reiterated during the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region that took place on 30 June 2020 – are **the internationally-accepted standard to assess conditions for a safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return of Syrian refugees to their country.**

This report is the first in a series of other monitoring reports that will be published twice a year in the period of 2020-2021 (and possibly beyond 2021). These reports aim to provide answers, as well as targeted policy recommendations, regarding the following research questions:

- What are the current realities of return for Syrian returnees from Lebanon?
- To what extent can current refugee returns from Lebanon be considered safe, voluntary, informed and dignified?
- What are the priority needs and concerns of Syrian refugee returnees from Lebanon?
- To what extent are the UNHCR Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria being met within Syria, and what are the main gaps experienced by refugee returnees?

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to distinguish between one-off events and longer-term patterns, RPW has adopted a **longitudinal research approach** and employs a **combination of qualitative and quantitative research** methodologies to reach a gradually expanding sample of respondents across all governorates in Lebanon and in two Government of Syria (GoS)-held areas of Syria (Homs and Rural Damascus Governorates). These research methods are also partially based on operational access and security considerations within GoS-held areas.

The overall findings contribute to creating a better understanding of the extent to which the UNHCR Protection Thresholds are met in the target areas inside Syria, while also providing additional insights on refugee protection and the impact of recent developments, such as the global COVID-19 outbreak and its particular impact on Syrian refugees and vulnerable communities in Lebanon.

2.1 Qualitative methodology inside Syria

By conducting **face-to-face interviews** with refugee returnees currently residing in Homs and Rural Damascus Governorates, RPW aims to capture refugee returnees' experiences, attitudes, current living conditions and perspectives on their futures. All interviews were held in colloquial Arabic.

The research sample consisted of respondents from the same target areas (Rural Damascus and Homs Governorates). Respondents however live in different (sub)districts, to exclude or detect the influence of highly localized dynamics. A **"refugee returnee"** is defined as a Syrian who spent at least one year in exile in Lebanon and who went back to Syria with the aim to re-settle there and re-establish his or her life.

In the **first data collection round** inside Syria (December 2019 - January 2020), 75 Syrians that returned to their place of origin in Syria in 2018 or 2019 were included. The **second data collection round** inside Syria (July - September 2020) included **37 of these same refugee returnees, in addition to 63 new respondents** who returned from Lebanon to Syria in 2019 and 2020. All refugee returnees were interviewed on an individual level, while **information provided by respondents was cross-checked by a number of Key Informant (KI) interviews and general background research** conducted by RPW staff.

In the **first round of data collection**, 75 refugee returnee respondents who live across Eastern Ghouta, Qalamoun, Homs city, Rural Northern Homs, and Wa'er were interviewed at the individual level. Of the sample of 75 returnees, 61% (46) were male respondents and 39% (29) female. 75% (56) of respondents reported to be the main breadwinner for their family (45% of all female respondents were also the breadwinner for their family). All these respondents were also widows except for one, whose husband had gone missing). The average age of respondents was 43 years. 56% (41) of respondents returned to Syria in 2019, 39% (29) in 2018, and the remaining part between 2015 and 2017. 49% of respondents (38) were displaced in the year 2012, 24% (18) in 2013, and the remaining respondents in 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, or 2017. The educational attainment of respondents differed strongly: 10 out of 75 (13%) did not have any previous education or were illiterate, while 35 (47%) completed secondary education or higher. 55% of returnees (41 individuals) returned to Syria in early 2019, 39% (29) in 2018, 5% (4) in 2017, and 1% (1) in 2015.

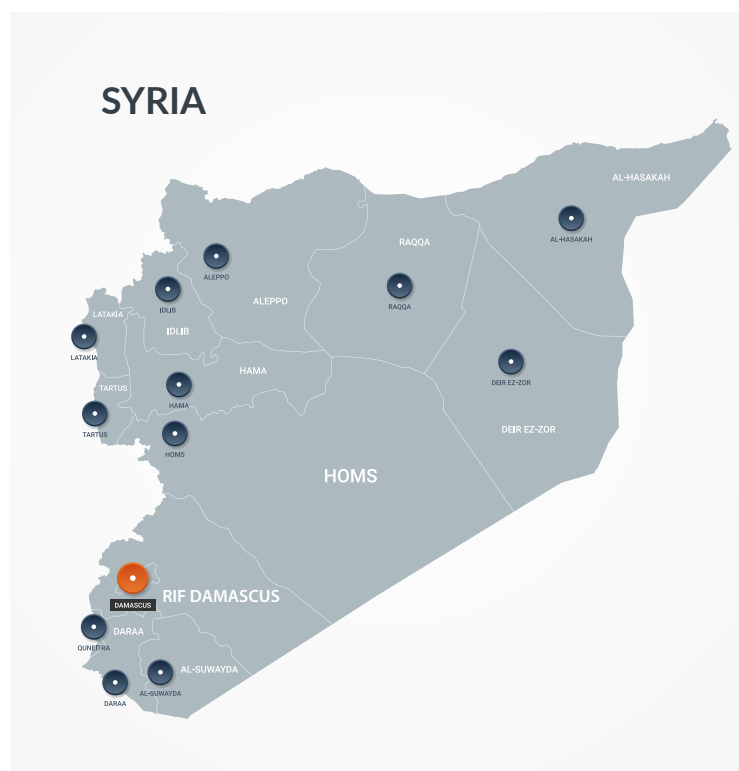


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In the **second round of data collection**, 63 returnee respondents were included from Rural Damascus Governorate (mostly from Eastern Ghouta and Douma) and Homs Governorate (Jouret Chiah and Baba Amr). 60% of these respondents were male and 40% female. 68% of respondents (43) reported that they were the main breadwinners of their families, including 5 female respondents who are the main breadwinner of their families and widowed, except for one whose husband had gone missing. The average age of male respondents was 45 years, and that of female respondents 40 years. 5% of respondents (3) reported to have returned in 2017, 13% of respondents (8) in 2018, 54% of respondents (34) in 2019, and 29% of respondents (18) in 2020. Furthermore, the educational attainment of respondents was quite diverse: 20% of respondents reported to have only completed elementary school; 25% of respondents completed junior high (either at grades 7, 8 or 9); 25% of respondents completed high school and baccalaureate (with the exception of two respondents who reported only having completed the 10th grade); 25% of respondents reported to have completed some part of a post-secondary education; and 5% of respondents stated that they were illiterate. The majority of returnee respondents fled from Syria to Lebanon between 2012-2015 (except for one respondent who left Syria in 2017), citing mainly security reasons (related to war) for their move. **All 63 returnees reached in the second round of data collection returned to Syria in the period 2019-2020, which coincided with the combined financial, economic and COVID-19 crisis that has struck Lebanon.**

2.2 Quantitative methodology in Lebanon

By making use of the two-way, online Upinion methodology,³ RPW has been able to create a digital panel consisting of Syrian refugees, Palestinians (both Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) and Palestinians born in Lebanon) and Lebanese host communities that it can frequently engage with in Lebanon. Through regular online conversations with the panel, RPW aims to capture the main reflections and concerns of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, what they consider the largest obstacles for return, and their level of access to information about conditions of return inside Syria. In addition, the Upinion tool allows for a better understanding of the livelihoods of Lebanese communities and their perceptions towards Syrian refugee communities; the rapidly deteriorating economic and financial crisis in Lebanon; and the impact of COVID-19 and the Beirut explosion of 4 August 2020 on both Lebanese and Syrian communities. Besides gaining useful insights, RPW also shares information, hotlines or statistics with the online panel itself, based on the panellists' responses to questions.



Four conversations (the first in February 2020, the second in March 2020, the third in June 2020, and the fourth conversation in August 2020) of approximately 15 questions and feedback messages have been held with the online panel to date, the results of which are described in the Data Findings section. At least three more conversations (and likely more), will be held after the publication of the current report. All conversations were held in the Arabic language.

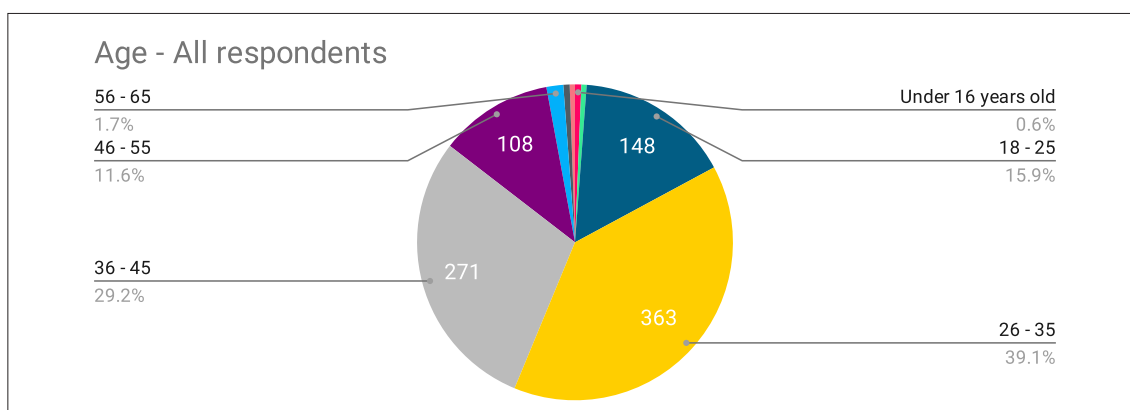
The first conversation has been answered by 825 people, the second conversation by 454 people, the third conversation by 1,211 people, and the fourth conversation by 784 people. The average male-female ratio was 1:1, indicating an even distribution between men and women joining the conversations. The age-range distribution of all respondents is illustrated in the pie-chart below⁴.

The respondents joined these conversations from all over Lebanon, but the highest responses were from the following five governorates: Beirut, North Lebanon, Mount Lebanon, Beqaa and South Lebanon. For each conversation, more than half of the respondents were Syrians (except for the fourth conversation, where only one-third of the respondents were of Syrian origin). The second-highest number were respondents of Lebanese origin, and the rest was equally distributed between Palestinian Syrians and Palestinian Lebanese. The majority of Syrian respondents were from Aleppo, Homs, Rural Damascus and Idlib Governorates.

2.3 Research methodology limitations

The following research limitations should be taken into account with regards to the research data compiled within this report (both inside Lebanon and Syria):

- Reporting on the situation of refugee returnees largely depends on self-reporting. To remedy this, analysis from both open and closed-source reports, in addition to cross-checking through Key Informant (KI) interviews, has been done to ensure the validity of the respondents' answers.
- The security situation, both for refugee returnees and data collectors, renders it challenging to 1) reach returnees who are facing serious security issues (such as detention) or who consider themselves at increased risk; and 2) ask extensive questions on security issues that refugee returnees, or their relatives, face.
- The findings from inside Syria are rather qualitative in nature. As Syria is especially fragmented and dynamics can differ greatly from one community to the other, the selection of target communities impacts the results. To remedy such potential bias, respondents from different districts, sub-districts and towns of the target governorates have been included in the research sample.
- The returnee respondents included in the research sample inside Syria have all been able to return to their neighbourhood or place of origin, and therefore the sample excludes those who were unable to return to their own neighbourhood or place of origin, which adds to the built-in bias of the sample.
- The COVID-19 outbreak, in addition to the poor electricity supply in the target areas, raised additional operational and logistical barriers in conducting surveys and recording answers.



- As Upinion is a digital platform that mostly collects quantifiable data, it does not have the advantages that face-to-face interviews have with regard to probing, or explaining of questions. Hence, the answers should be interpreted carefully.
- Only respondents with internet access and a Facebook account are included in the online panel, which also limits the inclusion of illiterate individuals. Additionally, in the period of data collection internet access throughout Lebanon was compromised due to increased electricity cuts and the high prices of internet subscription.⁵
- Due to lack of engagement, outside of the data collection, with both the online panel and the refugee returnee respondents, certain sensitive themes (such as gender-based violence) had to be avoided as no psychosocial support or mental care could be provided to respondents in case they required it after discussing these themes.



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3. SETTING THE SCENE

3.1. The largest forced displacement crisis in the world

Syria has been the largest forced displacement crisis in the world since 2014. At the end of 2019, 13.2 million Syrians lived in displacement, including 6.6 million refugees and over 6 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The 6.6 million Syrian refugees are the largest refugee population in the world, accounting for **25.4% of the global refugee population in 2019**. Similarly, Syria is the country with the second highest level of internal displacement.⁶

The impact of the Syrian war has been intense on all aspects of life, and will reverberate for the decades to come. This is also stressed by the World Bank, which has stated that the Syrian war has “reversed development gains and compromised prospects for stability, peace and prosperity for future generations in the country and across the region [...] The loss of human capital is staggering. The combined effects of casualties, displacement and forgone investments in human development will create permanent hardship for generations of Syrians.”⁷

Syria's neighbouring countries have been disproportionately affected by the Syrian forced displacement crisis. The vast majority of Syrian refugees (83%) live in host countries in the region, who continue to bear a vastly unequal responsibility for hosting Syrian refugees. **Lebanon**, which hosts at least 910,600 officially registered Syrian refugees (while the unofficial number is estimated at 1.5 million), is a particular case in point. While hosting the eighth largest refugee population worldwide, Lebanon has the second highest refugee population relative to the national population in the world, with 134 registered refugees per 1,000 nationals.⁸

It should also be emphasized that the **forced displacement of Syrian civilians has not been a mere consequence of the conflict, but rather a deliberate strategy by the parties to the conflict**. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Col), the displacement of civilians in the Syrian conflict was perpetrated as part of a “widespread and systematic attack against civilians”.⁹

Moreover, even if Syrian refugees intend to return, they **face active barriers preventing them from doing so**. According to a September 2020 report by

the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Col), the Syrian government continues to “prevent thousands of individuals from returning to their homes in areas that had been retaken in the preceding five years.”¹⁰ In large swathes of GoS-controlled areas, barriers to return are omnipresent with civilians being deliberately prevented from returning to their houses and exercising proprietary and other economic and social rights. **Syrians need to apply for return and receive a security clearance from GoS authorities before being able to return** to their neighbourhood, and a significant number of these return applicants are refused or never receive an answer to their request.¹¹ Moreover, displaced Syrians wishing to return are forced to sign a “reconciliation document”¹² and share extensive personal information with the Syrian security apparatus, which has used such data to blackmail or arrest individuals who are perceived as a “security threat”.



83%

of Syrian refugees
live in host countries
in the region

UNHCR is not formally engaged in this system of return and reconciliation, nor has it been vocal about these harmful practices taking place.¹³ On 8 July 2020 a binding ruling was also issued by the Government of Syria that compelled all refugee returnees to exchange the equivalent of US\$100 (or any other currencies accepted by the Central Bank of Syria) for Syrian pounds, in accordance with the latest exchange rates published by the customs and aviation authorities. As a result, Syrians with access to US\$100 – which are very few – lose about 55 to 60 dollars in these transactions to the GoS, while Syrians without access to this amount of cash – which constitute the vast majority – are unable to enter their own country. Several refugees trying to go back to Syria – often to escape the dire economic circumstances in Lebanon – have found themselves stuck in a no man's land be-

tween Lebanon and Syria, unable to go home but also not allowed back into Lebanon. At least one 17-year old girl has died in this situation.¹⁴

3.2. Limited prospects for durable solutions?

Syrian and international organisations have repeatedly highlighted that Syrian refugees in neighbouring host countries currently do not have access to any of the three “durable solutions” that UNHCR is promoting to address international refugee crises: safe, voluntary and dignified return; local integration in the host country; or resettlement to a third country.¹⁵ The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees consistently indicate their desire to go home if safety prevails and basic conditions for a dignified life are guaranteed, but do not see any signs of such conditions being met in the (near) future.¹⁶ Secondly, Lebanon has clearly demonstrated its unwillingness and inability to permanently settle a Syrian refugee population that could seriously impact the extremely fragile sectarian balance in the country, making citizenship and (temporary) legal residency unattainable for most Syrians.¹⁷ Thirdly, the possibility of resettlement to a third country has also become less and less available for Syrian refugees.

Reports are increasingly emerging about EU countries pushing back refugees at the EU's borders

Since 2016 the number of Syrian refugees returning to Syria, with the aim to stay and rebuild their lives there, has remained limited. UNHCR has officially recorded 250,555 refugee returns between 2016 and July 2020 from the main Syrian refugee-hosting countries in the region, of which 59,877 returned from Lebanon.¹⁸ However, these numbers only include those verified or monitored by UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of returns, which may be significantly higher. In addition to the limited number of refugees who have returned in this period,

it should be noted that only a very small fraction of Syrian refugees currently residing in host countries want to return in the current context. This is also reflected in UNHCR's latest Regional Intention Survey (March 2019): **although 75% of respondents stated they want to return to Syria one day, only 5.9% indicated a willingness in the next 12 months.**

In stark contrast, in recent months **Lebanese politicians have increasingly claimed that large parts of Syria have become safe and that Syrian refugees in Lebanon should thus start returning to Syria.** For example, in his speech to the UN General Assembly (September 2020), Lebanese President Aoun claimed that “most of the Syrian territories have become safe” and stated that “the Lebanese government seeks help to implement the plan it had adopted for the return of the displaced Syrians now that circumstances for their return are more favourable.”¹⁹ This plan was developed by the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs and leaked to the press in July 2020, but its full scope and status remain unclear. The fact that the plan has not yet been officially presented – apart from the versions circulating online – demonstrates a serious lack of transparency on the side of the Lebanese government.

The past year has also seen an increase in forced evictions and even deportations of Syrian refugees from Lebanon. A decision by the Lebanese Higher Defence Council (HDC) on 13 May 2019 required the deportation of anyone arrested and found to have entered Lebanon illegally after 24 April 2019, despite Lebanon's earlier commitment to refrain from conducting deportations. The Directorate General Security reported it had deported 2,731 Syrians under this order between 21 May and 28 August 2019 alone. However, the actual number is expected to be much higher than the number reported. Moreover, during deportation deportees are handed over to Syrian authorities, after which their fate becomes unknown. The Government of Lebanon (GoL)'s deportation policy is considered as creating a high risk of refoulement, as it allows for deportation orders to be issued and executed summarily without verification of the risks upon return to Syria and without granting Syrian nationals the right of defence and the right to resort to the judiciary. Even though deportations from Lebanon have temporarily been halted due to the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no guarantees that they will not resume.

Meanwhile, reports are increasingly emerging about **EU member state Cyprus preventing boats that departed from Lebanon (carrying both Syrian and Lebanese nationals) to disembark, in violation of the international law principle of non-refoulement.** Between early July and 14 September 2020 at least 21 vessels left from Lebanon to Cyprus, compared to 17 vessels in the whole of 2019.²⁰ According to Cy-

priot media, at least 108 people were sent back to Lebanon on three boats between 6 and 8 September 2020. In response, UNHCR Cyprus officials have expressed their concern and have called on the Cypriot government to immediately end such practices. On 9 September, the European Court of Human Rights submitted questions to the Cypriot government related to these events²¹, while on 18 September 2020 UNHCR's representative in Lebanon expressed her concern about this new trend, warning that *"in desperate situations, whether in search of safety, protection, or basic survival, people will move, whatever the danger. Addressing the reasons for these desperate journeys and the swift collective rescue of people distressed at sea are key."*²² In addition to these cases in Cyprus, in recent months several instances of violations of the non-refoulement principle at the **Turkish-Greek border** have been documented by rights groups.²³

Finally, it should be noted that some EU member states are also re-assessing their policies towards Syrian refugees, claiming that parts of Syria have be-

come safe for return. In December 2019, the Danish Asylum Appeal Board confirmed the **Danish Immigration Services'** decision to reject the protection need of three asylum seekers from Syria, based on a perceived general improvement of the security situation in Damascus. In February 2020 the Danish government informed parliament that Danish authorities will not engage in the cooperation needed to ensure forced returns with the Syrian regime, but in June 2020 the government nevertheless announced its intention to fast-track a review of residency permits for approximately 900 Syrian refugees from Damascus, claiming that conditions in the Syrian capital are no longer severe enough to warrant their "Temporary Protected Status".²⁴ In addition, the **German** government has reportedly started to provide financial support to Syrian refugees who choose to return to Syria. At least two of the more than 437 refugees who took up this option have been reported disappeared since they arrived in Syria²⁵.

IMPACT OF BEIRUT EXPLOSION²⁶

The catastrophic explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020 left 203 people (of which at least 43 were Syrian and Palestinian refugees and dozens of foreign migrant workers) dead (with 3 persons still missing), injured thousands more and destroyed countless homes, businesses and key infrastructure in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. At least 300.000 people were rendered homeless. An enormous burden has been placed on Lebanese society, while both the short- and long-term effects will further marginalize already particularly vulnerable communities, among which are refugees and migrants. Livelihoods, safe shelter and a – limited – feeling of safety have been destroyed in a few seconds, compounding the socio-economic, legal and psychosocial hardships of refugee communities that already lacked access to social safety nets or any form of legal protection. Food security and access to medical care have further decreased, and it is unlikely that the growing needs in Lebanon will be matched with sufficient funding and support. A large number of humanitarian and civic initiatives to support citizens and help rebuild houses and businesses in the affected areas sprung up, yet the level of support needed to reconstruct the damaged vital infrastructure and restore people's livelihoods is unlikely to be achieved in reality. Moreover, the Access Center for Human Rights documented 29 cases of discrimination based on nationality during aid distributions, including 27 families and two individual cases.²⁷

The large impact of the explosion on Lebanese and refugee communities was confirmed by findings from the Upinion panel: 35.7% of respondents across Lebanon (227 of 635) in the August 2020 conversation reported they had experienced a psychological impact, followed by a loss of income (14.0%) due to job loss or damages. A few weeks after the explosion, 83.9% (141 out of 164) of respondents residing in Beirut and Mount Lebanon had not received any assistance in response to the blast, and 84.5% of respondents had not had any NGO or government agency assess the damage to his/her home or business.

Moreover, on the day of the explosion, a two-week state of emergency was declared, which was later extended until the end of 2020. Such extension is unconstitutional, as neither the approval of two-thirds of the caretaker government was obtained, nor the necessary decree was issued. The state of emergency allows the army to curb free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press, as well as to enter homes and arrest anyone deemed a security threat. Judicial proceedings are to take place in the country's military courts, which Human Rights Watch and other rights groups have shown do not conform to international standards on due process. Popular protests against the incompetence and negligence of the Lebanese authorities have also been met with excessive force.²⁸

3.3. UNHCR Protection Thresholds for safe, voluntary and dignified return

UNHCR's overall policy on Syrian refugee return is outlined in the February 2018 '**Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy**' (CPSS) for refugee return to Syria. The CPSS outlines four criteria that need to be met inside Syria before UNHCR could move from "phase 1" (the current phase according to UNHCR as of October 2020) to "phase 2", the phase in which UNHCR could start facilitating large-scale voluntary return:

1. Legal frameworks, guaranteeing rights of returnees and unhindered access to them as well as return areas, must be in place;
2. There is clear evidence that a list of 22 protection thresholds are being met in the place of return (see full list in annex 1);
3. There is an improvement in conditions in return areas;
4. Refugees actively request support from UNHCR to return, "in large numbers".

To this end, UNHCR has designed a **list of "protection thresholds"**, which serve as the internationally-accepted standard to assess whether conditions in Syria are conducive for safe, voluntary and dignified return. In addition to a durable cessation of hostilities, UNHCR has also outlined thresholds related to, among others, physical, material and legal safety; guarantees that returnees will not face arbitrary arrest or detention; freedom of movement; assurances that an individual's decision to return is informed and genuinely voluntary; amnesty agreements for forced conscription; the existence of accessible mechanisms to address housing, land and property (HLP) rights violations; and free and unhindered access of UNHCR to all returnees. The **central importance of the Protection Thresholds was also re-confirmed** in the outcome document of the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (co-organised by the EU and the UN on 30 June 2020), which stated that "*participants reiterated the importance of the Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria, issued by the UN in February 2018.*"²⁹

The CPSS states that UNHCR's role in facilitating return movements in phase 1 would be limited to "*planning, monitoring, counselling, advocacy, and ongoing analysis of obstacles to and conditions necessary for return, and identifying the necessary actions to address them.*" UNHCR added, at the same time, that in phase 1 it could "*exceptionally facilitate the return of individuals or small groups (in terms of providing limited assistance), on a case-by-case basis where refugees*

express a strong desire to return, UNHCR is assured of the voluntary character, and refugees are well-informed, even to areas where conditions may not yet be conducive for return."

UNHCR's current position vis-à-vis returns to Syria remains that there are "*not sufficient guarantees or conditions in place to facilitate large-scale repatriation in safety and dignity*" and that "*significant risks remain for civilians across the country and premature return could have a negative impact on refugees, and, if significant in scale, could further destabilize the region.*"³⁰ In a similar vein, participants in the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region on 30 June 2020 reiterated that "*conditions inside Syria do not lend themselves to the promotion or organisation of large-scale voluntary return, in conditions of safety and dignity in line with international law.*"³¹

The central importance of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds was reiterated during the 'Brussels IV Syria conference' in June 2020

4. DATA FINDINGS

The following section outlines the key findings of four rounds of data collection in Lebanon and two rounds of data collection in areas of return in two Syrian governorates under the full control of the Syrian government, thereby contributing to an **assessment as to whether certain UNHCR protection thresholds are currently met inside Syria**. Under each heading, the relevant Protection Threshold is first cited, followed by RPW data findings and additional information from other sources. The below RPW findings should not be considered conclusive (as outlined in the methodology section above) and only aim to contribute to a better understanding of return dynamics for Syrian refugees.

Given the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of Syrian refugees and conditions for return inside Syria, this chapter will end with a separate section that **highlights specific research findings related to the impact of COVID-19 in Lebanon**. A more in-depth discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on the situation in Lebanon can be found in two separate RPW policy briefs published in April and August 2020.³²

4.1. Safety and Security

UNHCR Protection Threshold 3:

“The government / actors in control of the return area provide genuine guarantees that returnees will not face harassment, discrimination, arbitrary detention, physical threat or prosecution on account of originating from an area previously or currently under de facto control of another party to the conflict; for having left Syria illegally; for having lodged an asylum claim abroad, or; on account of any (individual or family) diversity characteristic.”

Although some actors, such as Lebanese President Aoun, have recently reiterated their claims that large parts of Syria have become safe again, it should be emphasized that a mere decrease in the level of active fighting is not sufficient for a “safe return”. Indeed, the fear of persecution and retribution is an effective deterrent to return, which may not be obvious during a small-scale spontaneous return phase but becomes apparent in episodes of large-scale returns.³³ International experience in return processes has learnt that **a sense of security requires not only the absence of an active conflict but also the absence of explicit or implicit threats from government, militias and other**

social groups. Frequently raised fears, beyond active fighting, include arbitrary arrest by security forces, forced conscription, kidnapping by armed groups and the risk from unexploded ordnance.

This is also emphasized by a **2019 World Bank study** on mobility dynamics among Syria’s displaced:

*“Refugee apprehensions over security conditions are broader than fears of being caught in the crossfire of active conflict. Concerns over military service, conscription, or recruitment and fear of arrest and detention or retaliation upon return are among the frequently reported obstacles to return. Assuming that a cessation of hostilities will assuage refugee concerns over security overlooks these other trenchant aspects of well-being.”*³⁴

The EU and UN, during the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (30 June 2020), have also echoed this point, stating that “returnees also need security from armed conflict, political persecution and arbitrary arrests, access to functioning services, livelihood opportunities as well as other considerations which would enable a voluntary, safe and dignified return.”³⁵

The above dynamic also became very clear throughout RPW’s two rounds of data collection inside Syria.³⁶ **Many refugee returnees, in particular military-aged males, fear that they are at risk of detention**, and that government actors cannot provide genuine guarantees for the physical and emotional safety of returnees. If male refugees of draft age choose to return, they report constantly being cautious within their area of return when leaving the house and crossing checkpoints, even if they have obtained official exemptions prior to return. Members of the security apparatus within Syria have also reportedly arbitrarily arrested men who they deem to be of draft age, or have evaded the draft³⁷. Returnee respondents also reported that men of military draft age are often harassed on the streets by members of the security apparatus.

Overall, the **heavy presence of the security apparatus in the areas of return included in this research was considered threatening** by the majority of respondents (in particular among male respondents), even among those that know they are not ‘wanted’ or at particularly high risk of being detained. Respondents reported that not having personal papers in order, or another seemingly small annoyance, could have large repercussions for one’s personal safety and security. Limiting interactions with authorities and staying out of trouble to the largest extent possible, are considered the safest way of living.

“ I don't feel very safe. The large deployment of the army and security forces in the city is not reassuring”

Rural Damascus, Male, 40

“ I was insulted by a member of the security apparatus while crossing a checkpoint”

Homs, Male, 48

“ I feel safe at home and in my town and living among my family. But I don't feel safe in the presence of the military and the security forces everywhere in our town. And in the presence of people appointed by the regime to track down civilians and inform the officers of the military detachment in our town about them”

Eastern Ghouta, Male, 32

The fear of forced military conscription has also resulted in a relatively large number of families who have undertaken a so-called “split return”³⁸, where only a part of a refugee household returns to Syria and others (mainly male family members) stay behind in Lebanon. **20% of respondents** (28 out of 138) reached in the two first rounds of data collection **reported to have undertaken a split return**, mainly with male family members staying behind in Lebanon. A primary reason cited by respondents is the fear of forced conscription, as many refugees in Lebanon refused to serve in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and were forced to evade the draft, and would thus put their personal security at risk if they choose to return. Other reasons for split returns include family members or respondents getting married in Lebanon and deciding to stay behind, or seeking asylum and settling in a third country.

“ My brother stayed in Lebanon as he is a draft evader and he is afraid of enrolling in the military”

Rural Damascus, Male, 34

“ My young son remained in Lebanon as he didn't want to return because of the security checkpoints and the harassment that young men are subjected to.”

Eastern Ghouta, Male, 50

RPW respondents were also asked whether they “feel safe in their current place of residence”, also in comparison to pre-2011. **Respondents, across regions and gender, unanimously expressed how the safety and security situation – and living conditions – are incomparable to the situation prior to 2011, and**

have deteriorated severely. 20% of returnee respondents stated outright that they do not feel safe, citing mainly a general decrease in security, the heavy presence of the security apparatus, the appearance of sudden checkpoints and an increase in kidnappings, robberies and theft. A large part of the respondents did not directly report that they feel unsafe, yet still brought up similar concerns about the general safety and security situation in their area.

“ The army and security personnel can go whenever and wherever they want without permission. And they can blackmail someone either by submitting a report about them or sending them to jail to get money out of them.” Eastern Ghouta, Male, 50

“ I currently avoid taking the same road to go to work every day because I worry that someone might be watching me as we hear about a lot of kidnappings and robberies in the country.” Homs, Female, 39

“ I don't feel very safe. Because of the security presence and the random detentions due to a report, or someone mentioning my name, or being called for reserve. Being transferred to the frontline makes me always anxious.”

Eastern Ghouta, Male, 30

Respondents were also asked whether they “feel safe moving around by themselves after dark in their own neighbourhood”. **All returnee respondents report avoiding going out at night, unless absolutely necessary, due to the security situation in their areas,** a lack of electricity for street lighting and the perception that they are not safe after sunset. Female respondents also reported needing to go out with a male relative during the night or around sundown.

“ There is no movement in our area after 10pm, so I don't move around unless it's something urgent.”

Rural Damascus, 40

“ There's a big difference in life before and after 2011 as I don't feel now not even a little bit of that safety we had.” Eastern Ghouta, Male, 50

“ We were living in security and stability before the war; work was good and we were happy. But nowadays we are uncomfortable on so many levels. In addition to all the pain caused by the war, from homelessness, to death, to the deterioration of life on all levels.”

Eastern Ghouta, Male, 41

“ No [I do not feel safe], especially with the large number of kidnappings and robberies happening every now and then.” Rural Damascus, Male, 40

Opinion data findings echo the above: despite the challenging situation in Lebanon, many Syrians reported that they simply cannot go back to Syria for various reasons related to their safety. These fears were largely related to forced military conscription (mostly mentioned by Syrian refugees from Ar-Raqqa, As-Suwayda and Hamah) and detention by the Syrian authorities.

“ We will not return, and if we do, we will either be arrested or forced into the regime’s military service.”

“ I cannot enter Syria, because of the compulsory military service.”

“ We cannot go back to Syria, because my wife and I are wanted by the Syrian regime.”

“ Random and sectarian arrests that increased as a result of the war.”

In addition to the above RPW data, other reports have confirmed that a “safe return” goes well beyond the mere absence of active fighting. A September 2020 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (Col) has (once again) documented “ongoing patterns of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture and death in detention” in government-held areas. In this report, the UN Col stated it has reasonable grounds to believe that acts of enforced disappearance, murder, torture, sexual violence and imprisonment are perpetrated “in pursuance of a continued State policy” and amount to crimes against humanity.³⁹ Moreover, in a survey conducted by the Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity (SACD, October 2019), 65% of returnee respondents stated

that they do not feel safe in regime-held areas; citing fears of arbitrary arrests, forced conscription and the presence of regime security forces and various militias. 62% of respondents stated that they or one of their relatives have been subject to arbitrary detention, while 68% said that they or their relatives are wanted for arrest.⁴⁰

In another report published by SACD (July 2020), on the basis of a survey among 1,100 displaced Syrians, 90% of respondents cited feeling unsafe as one of the main reasons for their original displacement and 80% stated that the security situation has to change before they would consider returning. 84% of respondents stated they want to see compulsory military recruitment cancelled or suspended, 73% said they want security sector reform before they would consider returning, and 64% mentioned the fate of detainees as an important factor for return.⁴¹

Other reports show similar findings. A May 2019 Human Rights Watch report documented cases in which Syrian intelligence services arbitrarily detained and harassed people in areas retaken from anti-government groups.⁴² A July 2019 report by the European Institute of Peace also showed how the return process is fully controlled by the Syrian security and intelligence apparatus.⁴³ In a similar vein, a February 2019 report by the UN Col stated that current conditions inside Syria “render safe and sustainable return of displaced Syrians impossible”⁴⁴. A January 2020 UN Col report has also warned that “civilians in areas retaken by the Government suffered from a general absence of the rule of law. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and detentions continued to be commonplace throughout areas such as Dar’a, Duma and eastern Ghutah. During the period under review, large numbers of adult men were also detained purportedly for conscription.”⁴⁵

4.2. Voluntariness of return

UNHCR Protection Threshold 4:

“Every individuals’ decision to return is informed and genuinely voluntary, without any coercion.”

During the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (30 June 2020), the co-chairs declaration by the EU and the UN underscored that “return is a right to be exercised based on an individual’s free and informed decision. Support should be guided by refugees’ needs, views, concerns and decisions, based on accurate and factual information” and that “maintaining assistance levels and access to protection, livelihoods and services in host countries is a key component

*in enabling a voluntary decision by refugees to return, free from push factors.*⁴⁶

However, as demonstrated by the below findings, conditions are not currently in place within Syria or countries of asylum for refugees to make return discussions on an informed and truly voluntary basis: “push factors” from host countries, pull factors inside Syria, and most notably the lack of objective and reliable information about the conditions for return to Syria undermine the voluntariness of the vast majority of returns.

4.2.1. Push factors in Lebanon

Humanitarian conditions for Syrians in Lebanon remain dire. At the end of 2019, 78% of Syrians in Lebanon (above 15 years old) did not have legal residency, which has enormous consequences on all aspects of life including challenges in securing housing, accessing livelihoods and facing risks of arrest and detention. 57% of Syrian refugee families were living in overcrowded shelters, shelters below humanitarian standards and/or shelters in danger of collapse. A mere 63% of Syrian households were marginally food secure at the end of 2019, the unemployment rate stood at 31%, 73% of Syrians were spending less than USD 3.80 a day in 2019, and only 22% of Syrian children aged between 15 and 17 years were in school.⁴⁷ Moreover, it should be emphasized that these numbers have only increased in recent months, due to the combined impact of the COVID-19 virus and the Beirut explosion. **Hunger is also on the rise among Syrian refugees** in Lebanon: according to UNHCR protection monitoring in May 2020, 78% of Syrian refugees reported difficulties buying food due to lack of money, making adults more likely to restrict consumption so children can eat. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already caused a serious global economic downturn with short-term economic impact likely to translate into reductions in long-term growth for low- and middle-income countries, means that many of these needs are further at risk of not being met.⁴⁸

In addition to government policies, **social tensions between refugees and host communities** are also on the rise, in particular due to the rapidly deteriorating economic situation and loss of jobs in Lebanon. In light of this situation, Lebanese host communities have increasingly turned their frustration and anger toward refugees, encouraged by political figures that have blamed the economic crisis in Lebanon on Syrian refugees and have made unsubstantiated claims that Syrian refugees are planning on permanently staying in the country. Data from the 2019 UNHCR Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees (VASyR 2019) illustrates that over half (51%) of Syrian refu-

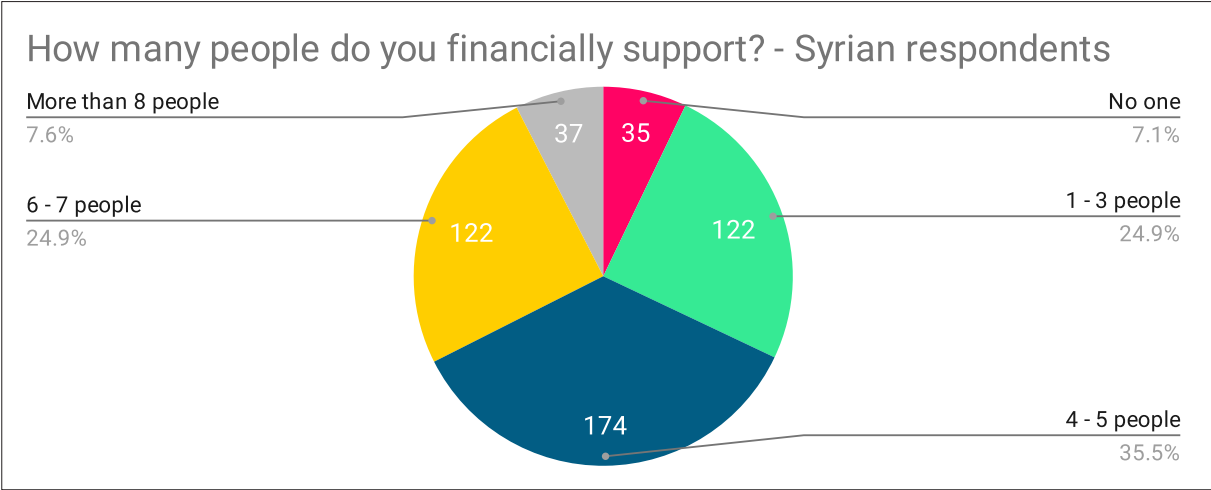
gee households believe that competition for jobs is the main reason for inter-communal tension.⁴⁹ Given that the economic situation has enormously worsened since 2019, and as a long expected crackdown on undocumented foreign labour was instituted in June 2019 by the Ministry of Labour, it is highly likely that competition for jobs (and resources more broadly) will further drive inter-communal tension in the future.

These dire conditions have led prominent human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, to **question the notion of “voluntariness” of returns** in a Lebanon-Syria context. According to Amnesty: *“the dire conditions in Lebanon, in particular the difficulties obtaining valid residence visas and the resulting barriers in accessing essential services, raise doubts about the ability of Syrian refugees to provide truly free consent (...) In many cases, the Lebanese government’s unfair policies represent a fundamental factor in the decision to leave the country. In these cases, the refugee’s consent to repatriation cannot be considered free (...) For the refugee’s consent to be informed, they must have access to sufficient, objective and updated information about the human rights situation in their place of origin”*.⁵⁰

The above dynamics have also been confirmed in the RPW research. In the **first online conversation with Syrian refugees and Palestinian Syrians in Lebanon**, conducted in February 2020, **72.3% of respondents (342 out of 473) reported an increasing pressure to leave Lebanon and return to Syria**. In addition, **69.9% of these respondents feared how local authorities will address and treat them** (such as the implementation of curfews, threat of deportation, misconduct at checkpoints) in Lebanon. As a result, more than half of them (56.7%) reported that these concerns were impacting their decision to return.

Main reasons that were cited by respondents as influencing their decision-making process/thinking around going back to Syria included:

- **The deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon**, which is particularly tough for the 86.7% of respondents in the online panel who reported that they are supporting one or more people financially. For Syrian refugees, the numbers are even higher, as 92.9% of them are supporting others, with an average of 4-5 people. Moreover, in both the first and second round of data collection inside Syria, around **two thirds of returnee respondents** reported the lack of livelihood opportunities and worsening economic situation in Lebanon as a primary reason for their return to Syria, followed by reported discrimination against Syrians by Lebanese citizens and the Lebanese security apparatus.



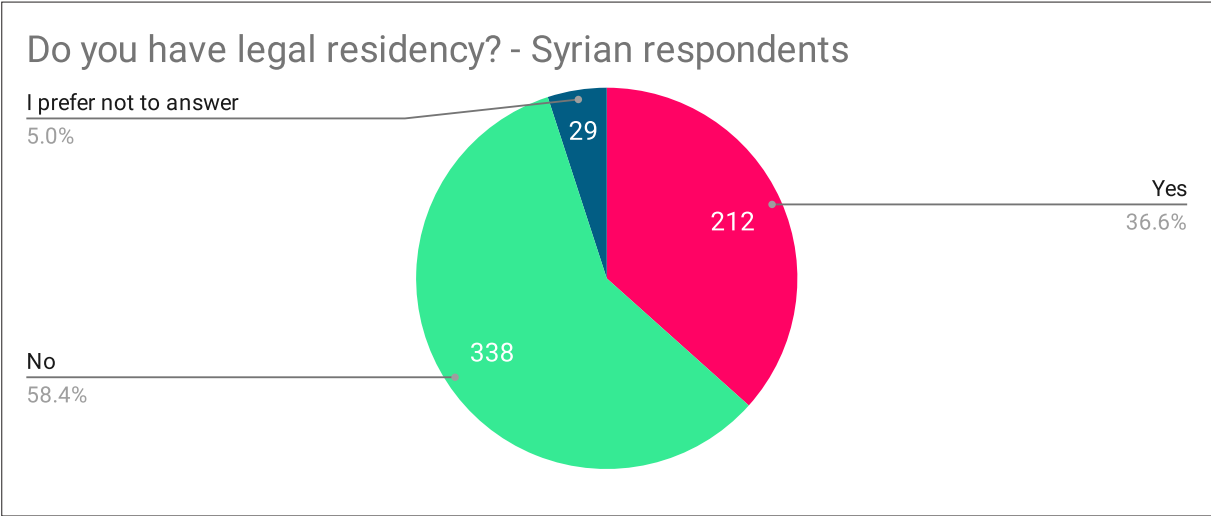
- Increased discrimination and social tensions between the Lebanese host community and Syrian refugee population:**

In RPW's latest online conversation with Syrian refugees in Lebanon (August 2020), 37.3% of Syrian respondents in Lebanon reported an increase in discrimination over the past 3-6 months. In addition, an even higher percentage of Syrian respondents (52.7%) reported an increase in social tensions between refugee and host communities in Lebanon over the past 3-6 months. 52.7% had experienced this tension, which is impacting them or their family (46.7%), making it difficult to find work (10.7%) and in housing (3.3%). With regard to the latter, findings showed that Syrian refugees are being threatened with eviction by their house owners. As explained by one respondent:

“ We were told to forcibly evict the house, at gunpoint, and to change the housing area.”

- Challenges with legal stay.**

More than half of Syrian respondents in the online panel (58.4%) do not have legal residency.



At the same time, all 138 refugee returnee respondents in the RPW research sample stated that they had **voluntarily returned** to Syria and **did not report coercion**. What is remarkable about the answers provided though is that while respondents do not consider their choice to return forced, they would often express that their options were highly limited and that the option of return may have been “*better than staying in Lebanon, however still far from ideal and full of uncertainties*”.

“*We returned to Syria] because of severe living conditions and inability to afford the costs of renting a house.*” Homs, Female, 27

“*I could no longer find a job to provide for myself and my family; our situation deteriorated once they started scrutinizing Syrian workers in Lebanon. Then the demonstrations started and the dollar rose. So I could no longer stay, pay the house rent and secure our house necessities.*” Eastern Ghouta, Male, 41

“*The high cost of living and the lack of job opportunities, in addition to some harassment have pushed me to go back to Syria.*” Rural Damascus, Male, 56

“*We returned because of the poor economic and living conditions in Lebanon. The harassment I was subjected to at work. The bad looks I got from Lebanese for being Syrian.*” Homs, Male, 44

“*Back in Syria I can go wherever I want without anyone taking my ID and telling me my residency is illegal here and that I will be sent to my country (like what was happening in Lebanon).*” Eastern Ghouta, Male, 41

In contrast, however, in the third online panel conversation in Lebanon (June 2020), 10 Syrian respondents indicated that they knew someone who got deported from Lebanon, and 9 out of 10 of them reported that that the deportee(s) did not have a chance to defend him/herself and fight the deportation order in a competent court. When asked whether they were aware of the safety and security and living conditions of the deportees, the majority of answers indicated that the respondents had not been able to get in touch with the deportees.

Banned from Lebanon

90% of refugee returnee respondents reported being banned from re-entering Lebanon when returning to Syria, because their residence permits had expired or were close to expiring. A number of respondents reported that they “did not know” whether they had been banned or not as well, which in itself is remarkable and points to the lack of clarity around exit and entry regulations implemented by the Lebanese General Security. This was also echoed in a previous study done by Basmeh & Zeitooneh, in which respondents expressed confusion about exemptions with regard to paying the fees for expired residency permits, and were unsure what would apply to themselves.⁵¹

The above finding also means that a very limited number of Syrian refugees have the chance to conduct “go-and-see visits”. Such visits are normally encouraged – and sometimes even facilitated – by UNHCR in protracted displacement situations, as a good way for displaced persons to assess the security situation, infrastructure and livelihood possibilities in their neighbourhoods of origin. People who conduct such visits can subsequently share their experiences with other displaced people, thereby contributing to displaced communities’ ability to make an informed decision about potential return. Additionally, some Syrian refugees would travel to Syria to undergo medical treatment which they cannot afford in Lebanon. However, such go-and-see visits are strongly criticized by certain parties in Lebanon that consider Syria safe for return and often portray Syrian refugees as ‘economic migrants’, even though a brief visit (potentially to a completely different area) cannot be compared to a sustainable return and re-establishment in the country.

4.2.2. Access to reliable information on return conditions

Findings from respondents in Lebanon

In the first online conversation held with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, **37.8%** of respondents reported to not have reliable information on the situation in their areas in Syria. Respondents who stated that they had reliable information (**56%**)⁵², reported to have received this from their relatives and friends. However, there still remained an urgent need for more information about the economic situation, security, education and medical care inside Syria.⁵³

Six months later, only **32.7%** of respondents in the online conversation reported to have reliable information. More than half of the respondents either did not know if they had sufficient information (**37.4%**) or simply did not feel they were aware enough about the situation in Syria (**16.7%**).⁵⁴

The respective 7 respondents (four are currently residing in Beirut, 2 in Beqaa and 1 in Mount Lebanon) that indicated they were actually planning on returning in the coming six months in the online conversation in June 2020, all indicated that they lacked sufficient information to prepare for their return. Also, **60%** of them indicated that they lacked sufficient information about the conditions (safety and security, livelihoods, state of services) in their areas of return in Syria.

Findings from returnee respondents in Syria

When asked how they prepared for their return and whether they considered they had access to all necessary information to take an informed decision to return, **the majority of returnee respondents interviewed in the second round of data collection reported that they were able to obtain all the necessary information** about the situation in Syria, mainly from friends and family there who had gone back before them or had remained in Syria. However, 11 out of 63 (16%) returnee respondents interviewed in this second round indicated that **the situation in reality turned out worse than they had anticipated**, and a number of others reported that they did not receive, or even **did not make a significant effort gathering information, as their only option was to return anyway**. These findings reflect the need for reliable, systematic, and verifiable information about conditions in areas of return before Syrians can make informed decisions about return.

“ My husband didn’t ask much, we just made sure that our house was still standing and wasn’t destroyed.” Rural Damascus, Female, 47

“ Honestly, no; but the level of despair that I had reached in Lebanon was my main motive in deciding to return without having received any information.” Rural Damascus, Male, 40

“ Yes, we asked but the reality is more difficult than what we were told”
Rural Damascus (Douma), Male, 31

Moreover, a recent report by the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity (SACD), based on interviews with 1,100 displaced Syrians across Syria, neighbouring countries and Europe, has suggested that **self-reported access to information does not necessarily mean access to comprehensive information**. In SACD’s survey, the overwhelming majority (80%) of respondents were not aware of the existence of the aforementioned “reconciliation documents” that Syrians are supposed to fill in before returning, while 46% of respondents who were aware of these forms did not know that they could be prosecuted on the basis of information provided in such documents.⁵⁵

32,7%
of respondents
reported access to
reliable information
on return conditions

What constitutes an informed and voluntary return?

The principle of “voluntariness” is clarified in UNHCR’s Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation (emphasis added):

“The principle of voluntariness must be viewed in relation to both conditions in the country of origin (calling for an informed decision) and the situation in the country of asylum (permitting a free choice) (...) The issue of voluntariness as implying an absence of any physical, psychological, or material pressure is, however, often clouded by the fact that for many refugees a decision to return is dictated by a combination of pressures due to political factors, security problems or material needs (...) One of the most important elements in the verification of voluntariness is the legal status of the refugees in the country of asylum. If refugees are legally recognized as such, their rights are protected and if they are allowed to settle, their choice to repatriate is likely to be truly free and voluntary. If, however, their rights are not recognized, if they are subjected to pressures and restrictions and confined to closed camps, they may choose to return, but this is not an act of free will (...) As a general rule, UNHCR should be convinced that the positive pull factors in the country of origin are an overriding element in the refugees’ decision to return rather than possible push factors in the host country or negative pull factors, such as threats to property, in the home country (...) Conditions of asylum may be so severe as to border on coercion, or refugees may be faced with unjustifiable restrictions on access to other durable solutions. In such situations UNHCR should intervene to ameliorate such conditions and eliminate coercive factors” (emphasis added).⁵⁶

However, questions remain regarding the voluntariness of return decisions in the Syrian context, given the many “push factors” at play in Syria’s neighbouring countries. A careful individual analysis of push factors and negative pull factors is thus of key importance to determine the voluntariness of an individual return decision. In addition, a robust voluntariness assessment must be undertaken to ensure that any decision to return by individual refugees is based on reliable and comprehensive information about conditions in the country of origin. This is also reflected in UNHCR’s Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, which stipulates that “only an informed decision can be a voluntary decision. It is therefore important to provide bridges which refugees can use to gather information from sources they can trust (...) The provision of accurate and objective information on the situation in the country of origin by UNHCR will be an important activity” (emphasis added).⁵⁷

UNHCR has thus historically recognized the significance of collecting, fact-checking, and disseminating information about conditions inside a country of origin, including the implementation of any government guarantees of safety. Yet governments in countries of asylum have actively blocked UNHCR efforts to assess the voluntariness of return decisions. Given these constraints, UNHCR has acknowledged that its current pre-return interviews do not meet the standards of a comprehensive “Voluntary Return Assessment”. If UNHCR is not presently in a position to conduct this information gathering, fact-checking, and dissemination of information with regard to conditions within Syria, it has a responsibility to explicitly communicate that position to the Syrian refugee population.

The information regarding returns that is currently available to refugees – whether from UNHCR or from other reliable sources – is not sufficient for refugees to make fully-informed return decisions. At present, UNHCR provides public information (in Arabic and English) through dedicated websites in Lebanon and Turkey. Only the Lebanon website includes information on refugee return, through a Q&A and an “important information” section. The latter section includes information on civil documentation, education documentation and health related information, as well as contact details of UNHCR offices that can provide “individual counselling, advice and support”. Yet this policy does not facilitate refugees’ access to important information and assessments that UNHCR has made regarding conditions inside Syria. For example, the “important information” section does not include any specific reference to UNHCR’s assessment of current conditions inside Syria (or to access restrictions that hamper its assessment of those conditions), does not refer to UNHCR’s protection thresholds, and does not clearly state that UNHCR’s position is that currently conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return have not been met.⁵⁸ This in contrast to UNHCR’s Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, which states that “where UNHCR considers that conditions remain objectively too uncertain to permit the fulfilment of guarantees of safety or amnesties (...) it is UNHCR’s responsibility to provide guidance and make its position known.”⁵⁹

4.3. Freedom of movement

UNHCR Protection Threshold 5:

“Acceptance by the government / entity in control of the return area of returnees’ free choice of destination and place of residence and right to freedom of movement.”

When asked whether they had been able to go back to their neighbourhoods of origin, all refugee returnee respondents answered affirmatively. Furthermore, when asked about their ability to move between neighbourhoods and areas, all respondents also reported being able to move around freely within their regions, with no trouble at checkpoints. Male respondents of draft age, however, reported that they are being more cautious while moving around, including when passing through checkpoints.

When interpreting these findings, it is however necessary to remain cautious. As indicated in the section on research limitations, the sample excludes those who were not allowed by the Syrian government to return to Syria, which adds to the built-in bias of the sample. Moreover, other research does suggest that limitations related to freedom of movement exist and should in no way be underestimated. A September 2020 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, for example, has documented how civilians living in government areas that were previously under the control of armed groups face particular challenges due to the continued denial of freedom of movement of people and goods. In these areas, Syrian security forces (such as the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army) use checkpoints to restrict the entry and exit of people and goods into the area, confiscate items and extort money from the civilian population. Many civilians try to avoid such checkpoints, due to their fear of arbitrary arrest, detention or conscription.⁶⁰ According to the UN Col, the Syrian government continues to “prevent thousands of individuals from returning to their homes in areas that had been retaken in the preceding five years.”⁶¹

“ Sometimes I’m subjected to certain situations because I am from the area of Al Moadamyeh and because I’m a young man and have an academic deferral, when at my age I’m supposed to be doing my military service; but things go well and I continue my life normally.”

Rural Damascus, Male, 31

“ Young men are more closely scrutinized, especially those of specific ages, but the treatment differs and is easier and faster for women and children”

Rural Damascus, Male, 34

“ I think that being a woman of my age makes my movement easier” Eastern Ghouta, Female, 43

“ Sometimes I am more scrutinized than others to make sure I’m not wanted for reserve service”

Homs, Male, 42

4.4. Physical, legal and material safety of refugees and returnees

UNHCR Protection Threshold 6:

“The physical, legal and material safety of refugees and returnees is ensured.”

4.4.1. General socioeconomic situation inside Syria

Syria’s dire economic situation has resulted in enormous levels of unemployment, poverty and widespread hunger inside Syria. This risks refuelling the root causes of the Syrian conflict, which included deepening poverty and inequalities.⁶² Between 2011 and 2019, the unemployment rate in Syria increased from 14.9% to 42.3%. This enormous loss of job opportunities has led to an increase in the economic dependency rate, from 4.13 persons per employee in 2010 to 6.4 persons in 2019.⁶³

The overall poverty rate reached 86% in 2019 (and even up to 90% in 2020), while it is estimated that 71% of the population was living in extreme poverty by the end of 2019. As noted by the EU and the UN during the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (30 June 2020), in the past year food prices have risen by 133% in Syria.

The Syrian conflict has also inflicted enormous damage to the country’s Human Development Index (HDI), which dropped from 0.631 (2010) to 0.445 (2019). Syria’s HDI is estimated to have lost 29.2% of its value compared to 2010, and fell back from 124th place in 2010 to the 180th place in 2019 (out of 189 countries). Syria’s HDI Health Index fell from place 116 (2010) to place 168 (2019), its HDI Education Index fell from 111th in 2010 to 185th in 2019, and the country’s HDI Income Index decreased by 28.6%

between 2010 and 2019, from 132nd to 171st position.⁶⁴

About **2.4 million school-age (5-17 years) Syrian children remain out of school** in Syria and in the neighbouring host countries. According to the World Bank, the average school enrolment ratio in Syria dropped from 82% before the crisis to 61% currently. Figures provided by UNOCHA also show that 81% of assessed communities in the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) reported the occurrence of child labour as a barrier to school attendance, while 45% reported child recruitment to armed groups as a concern and 45% reported early marriage for girls, sometimes as young as 10. Experts have warned of a **“lost generation” of Syrian children**, which will have far-reaching consequences for the country’s future⁶⁵

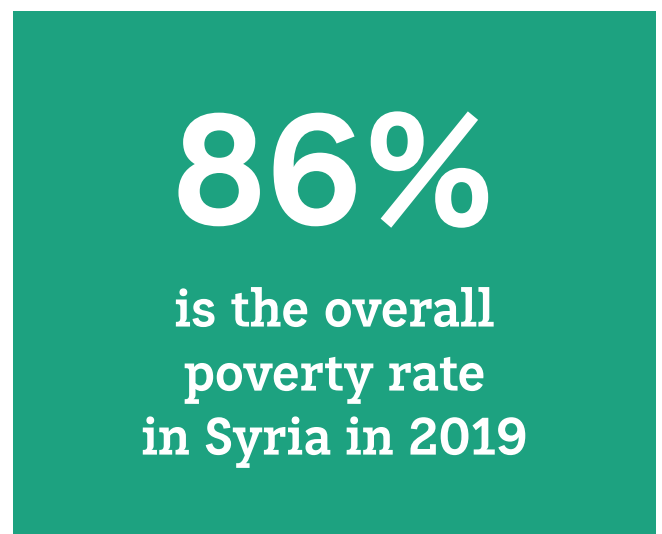
The Syrian conflict has seriously damaged the **mental health** of many Syrians. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that one in five Syrians have moderate mental health issues, and 1 in 30 Syrians are at risk of developing severe or acute mental health issues. A survey conducted by the United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) concluded that 12.1% of the population inside Syria suffers from difficulties in at least one of the six main functional domains (seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care and communication).⁶⁶

Moreover, in recent months the **Syrian economy has been facing an unprecedented “meltdown”**, with the Syrian currency witnessing a wave of massive depreciation and a sharp increase in food prices. Key reasons for the massive depreciation of the Syrian currency include the dominance of conflict-centred institutions, the rampant corruption and the overall dynamics of the Syrian conflict economy. These have damaged the foundations of the economy and caused weak performance of public institutions, including a reduction of external support. The war economy is further marginalising the poor and enriching regime “cronies”, while the Syrian government is manipulating humanitarian aid to reassert its control, reward loyalist communities and punish communities perceived as being “hostile” to its rule. The economic crisis in Lebanon adds to the dire situation. Lebanon has always been the main informal channel and financial hub for Syrian public and private economic and financial transactions. The crisis has negatively impacted the Syrian balance of payments and the ability of Syrians to withdraw money from Lebanese accounts. This was exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19-imposed lockdowns.

Meanwhile, experts and practitioners have expressed concerns about the potential **negative impact of sanctions** on Syria’s economy. Although sanctions are not the main reason for the rapid socioeconomic deterioration in Syria, they have contributed to the coun-

try’s socio economic ills and could lead to a deepening impoverishment of some sections of the civilian population⁶⁷. In particular, the US Caesar Act⁶⁸ that entered into force on 17 June 2020 has increased the threat for any investors to invest in or trade with Syrian entities in the future, resulting in “over-compliance” of sanction regimes by financial institutions. In the words of researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov, *“as Syria descends into extreme destitution, sanctions aiming to achieve accountability and to protect civilians may end up merely compounding their misery.”*⁶⁹ A similar argument is being made by the International Crisis Group, which has recently stated that *“the new U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Civilian Protection Act that kicked in on 17 June will probably push the economy deeper still into the pit, magnifying the misery of ordinary Syrians.”*⁷⁰

In addition, concerns have been expressed by experts about the potential negative impact of sanctions on the delivery of humanitarian aid inside Syria. The UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, Idriss Jazairy, stated in a 2018 report that, despite efforts to implement humanitarian exemptions, current sanction regimes *“have contributed to the suffering of the Syrian people”* and to a *“worsening of the humanitarian situation”*.⁷¹ Reports by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and IMPACT- Civil Society Research and Development have cited widespread confusion among humanitarian actors on how to navigate different sanction regimes; difficulties to obtain exemption licences (in particular for smaller actors with limited resources); the overly broad definition of what constitutes “dual-use goods”; and a “chilling effect” in which overlapping sanction regimes have created so much doubt and uncertainty on how to comply with all possible measures that banks, exporters, transportation companies and insurance companies have voluntarily refused to conduct business in Syria.⁷²



4.4.2. RPW findings on livelihoods

Returnees in Rural Damascus and Homs governorate were asked about 1) whether they currently have a job; 2) if they worked, in what capacity (permanent or casual contracts, day labour, etc); and 3) what constitutes the main sources of their income - work, aid, remittances, or other. They were also asked whether their sources of income were sufficient to meet their needs.

The findings show a **discrepancy in access to livelihood opportunities and basic services in different geographical areas (Rural Damascus and Homs)**. To start with, respondents in Homs reported to have higher access to job opportunities (whether permanent or temporary) and to be able to make a small living to sustain themselves. This contrasts with findings from Rural Damascus, where only around half of the respondents that work are able to make ends meet. The other half of respondents in Rural Damascus rely on food baskets⁷³ and remittances, which is barely enough to cover basic needs and which, according to respondents, is also dwindling month to month.

In the first round of data collection, **over three quarters of returnee respondents in both Homs and Rural Damascus Governorates reported to be aid-dependent. 64% (40 of 63) of respondents in the second round of data collection reported to receive food baskets**, even if they also reported to have work as a source of income. Across the board, respondents interviewed in the first round of data collection reported their income (whether it be from work, aid, remittances, or a combination of any of those) to barely cover their basic needs (food and rent), with the overwhelming majority reporting that their income is not sufficient.

In the second round of data collection, **around 80% of respondents reported their income to be “acceptable” to meet their basic needs (while still living month to month), and around 20% reported their income to be entirely insufficient**. However, respondents who reported that their income is “acceptable” also expressed fears that this may change in the coming months, in particular during winter.

“*My income is currently enough in summer to cover food, electricity and phone bills, but not in winter as we have to buy heating supplies at very expensive prices.*”

Rural Damascus, 32

“*Work is still limited and the cost of living is very high.*”

Eastern Ghouta, 30

Furthermore, it is worth noting the **relationship between “split returns” and livelihood**. Split returns make up 20% of all respondents in the RPW research

sample. Such split returns often take on a **gendered aspect**, as it is mainly women returning to Syria (usually together with dependents) while their husbands (who often are the main breadwinner) remain in Lebanon. Unable to find a job, women who undertake split returns often have to rely on aid and remittances to cover family costs, which is often insufficient to make ends meet every month. A report by SAWA for Development and Aid, taking an in-depth look at the conditions for return, has similarly found that “*women are more likely to return than men, with women and children returning first in a split-return format, to settle property and civil documentation claims, and to assess conditions and available services in the intended area of return.*”⁷⁴ An overwhelming majority of female respondents who had undertaken split returns also relied mainly on aid and remittances from relatives as their main sources of income, making them dependent on these channels.

“*The living conditions are very difficult and we sometimes borrow money to buy medicine for my children.*” Homs, Female, 24

“*Many times our income is only enough to buy food and water.*” Homs, Female, 44

4.4.3. RPW findings on access to services

Electricity and water

Respondents in Homs and Rural Damascus were asked “*how many hours of electricity and water they receive per day*”, and “*(to what extent) they are dependent on private electricity generators and water tanks to fulfil their needs, and if so what the main challenges in accessing these are*”.⁷⁵

Data findings vary per region. **In Rural Damascus, access to electricity and water is limited to around 2-3 hours a day**. Therefore, almost all respondents from this area have reported poor quality of services, and have to rely on flashlights due to the lack of generators in Douma and Eastern Ghouta. There is also a dis-incentive to buy generators, because most respondents reported no longer being able to pay for fuel. In the absence of electricity and water, respondents reported that they have to fall back on rechargeable LED lights and water wells, while also having to buy drinking water to cover cooking and drinking needs (as the available water is often not potable).

“ We don’t have a generator. When the power is out for days in a row, we buy fuel and give it to the neighbours to turn on their generator and provide us with electricity”

Rural Damascus, Eastern Ghouta, 40

“ Yes, I sometimes need generators for work. The high cost of fuel and the difficulty securing it sometimes.”

Eastern Ghouta, 50

Meanwhile, respondents in Homs reported being satisfied, to a large extent, with their level of access to electricity and water. Homs respondents in the RPW research sample reported, during the second round of data collection, that their basic needs are currently covered, even though electricity is reported to be only available between 3-12 hours a day. These results stand in stark contrast to the first round of data collection, when the vast majority of respondents reported electricity provision to be a major concern, with 18 out of 37 returnees rating the electricity service either as “poor” or “very poor” and a further 15 respondents stating that it was “average”. The short service hours (which in some research areas don’t exceed four hours a day) and the high cost of private electricity services were cited as the main reasons for these ratings. Respondents in Homs also reported to not have access to generators, stating that generators are either too expensive to buy or are considered unnecessary to have. **When it comes to access to water, respondents in Homs reported that they are satisfied with the water provided by the state, and that it suits their needs to a large extent.**

“ I don’t rely on private generators because they are very expensive; I have a small battery with its charger for lighting” Homs, 44

“ The State’s electricity is enough to cover most of our needs and we have a battery for lighting” Homs, 46

“ Sometimes power cuts last for a long time because of the constant malfunctions.” Homs, male, 39

Another important research finding related to access to basic services, is that it was common among respondents to have had to pay outstanding utility bills to the GoS, even though they had been displaced in Lebanon for years and had thus not used any services in Syria. **Around 50% of respondents interviewed in the first data collection round and around**

50% of respondents in the second data collection round, reported having to pay electricity, water and phone bills from the years that they spent in exile in Lebanon, in some cases even if their houses were damaged and they are not able to return to them. It should be stressed though that this is not a recent phenomenon, but has also been highlighted in reports by Basmeh & Zeitooneh and 11.11.11 (March 2019) and the Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity (SACD, October 2019).⁷⁶

“ We were asked to pay the electricity and water bills in addition to the landline bill when it is still out of service” Rural Damascus, Male, 40

Access to medical care

In the first round of data collection, when asked about the quality of and access to medical services, a large portion of interviewed returnee respondents in Homs reported that the high cost of private health facilities constituted a concern; however the majority of them asserted that health services offered to them through public, private, and non-profit facilities and their access to medicine were good, with only **five out of 37 interviewees (13.5%) expressing their concerns with the quality of the health services in Homs Governorate.** However, Key Informants (KIs) interviewed noted that while the overall quality of health services in Homs improved since the end of active fighting, **the situation still remains bad when compared to the situation prior to 2011.**

During the first round of data collection in Rural Damascus, health services were generally considered good by respondents, with the vast majority of them (especially respondents in Eastern Ghouta) expressing their approval of the functionality of the public health sector. However, respondents did mention that costs of private healthcare services are high and unaffordable to most of them. Moreover, **in specific areas of Rural Damascus returnees expressed their concerns over the sector, with 40% of those interviewed describing it as “poor” due to the lack of public health facilities and high cost of private health facilities.** Half of the KIs interviewed indicated that the quality of health services should be considered “poor”, with the other half rating it as “good” or “average”. KIs also indicated that while there are public health facilities available in several areas, shortages of personnel and lack of medical supplies worsen the quality of the services offered.

These attitudes remained largely the same in the second round of data collection, when respondents were asked whether they had received medical care (including female specific health care, such as maternal/pregnancy/childbirth healthcare, and repro-

ductive rights care). All respondents reported going to dispensaries (“*mostawsaf*”) for medical needs, and only go to doctors or hospitals (if available) when absolutely necessary due to the high costs associated with these services. Similar to the first data collection round, many respondents also reported the **rising prices of medicine as a result of the deteriorating economic situation**.

Access to psychosocial support

Traditionally, the importance of mental well-being and psychosocial care is not recognized in Syrian society. Therefore, proper access to such services is particularly challenging, in a context of acute challenges related to multi-layered traumas of war, displacement, and structural violence.

In the second data collection round, respondents from both target areas were asked whether they had received the psychological support they needed in the last 12 months. **Only around 10% of respondents reported this was the case**, through local organisations offering such services for free. Without being explicitly asked about their access to such services, respondents in the first round of data collection indicated that being able to access psychosocial services and receiving assistance to reintegrate in their communities would help guarantee the safety and well-being of returnees as well.

“*I am now considering going to one of the [psychological support] centres in Damascus because of the difficult situation we are living in and the daily pressures we are subjected to*” Eastern Ghouta, Female, 43

4.4.4. RPW findings on access to education

Although there have been efforts to restore education services in several communities of **Rural Homs** (including through the rehabilitation of schools), many students still lack access to education in the area. For example, in the ar-Rastan community (where an estimated 45 schools were affected by the war, including 30 that were completely destroyed), reports have suggested that at least 14,000 students still lack education provision.⁷⁷ Additionally, schools in different communities in Homs governorate still lack the logistical and operational capacity needed to serve their students, especially in areas situated far from Homs city such as the Khirbet Tin community. High transportation costs also act as an impediment to the education of students, as many families cannot afford to cover such costs.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, in **Rural Damascus** the education situation in most communities in Eastern Ghouta is considered dire. In public schools, classroom sizes reached an average of 150 students per teacher in September 2018⁷⁹, and 746,322 individuals remain in need of better education services (as of March 2019)⁸⁰. In Eastern Ghouta, many schools were destroyed during the conflict, and areas such as Jobar Zamalka, Arbin, and Ein Tarma experienced extensive destruction during the conflict.⁸¹

“*Education is not good and the teaching personnel is weak; in addition to the lack of discipline as students and teachers arrive sometimes late. The COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on the quality of education*” Homs, Female, 24

In areas where destruction was less extensive, schools that survived the war resumed classes at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. However, reports have shown that these schools are vastly understaffed. The main reason for such shortages of teachers are financial, with salaries of public school teachers averaging at 40,000 SYP, an extremely low salary in comparison to the cost of living in the area amid the economic sanctions, rise of war economy actors, and Syrian currency devaluation.⁸² Additionally, the infrastructure of schools in Eastern Ghouta does not allow for welcoming the number of people in need of education, in an area that hosts nearly 500,000 people but where the school system can only host up to 40,000 students.⁸³

In the two rounds of RPW data collection, **when asked to rate the quality of the educational system, the performance of the public education sector was consequently rated as “bad”**, with one of the main concerns being that public schools are understaffed and that teachers lack the necessary skills.

Moreover, the **outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has resulted in the temporary closing of schools and universities across Syria**, leading to restrained access to education for the respondents in the RPW research sample. However, the 2020-2021 school year has not been deferred but has started off as planned, with experts warning against a pending health catastrophe. Finally, another significant challenge that respondents noted are the **high prices of school supplies and uniforms** that children need to purchase, amid uncontrolled inflation and a rise of up to 400% of the prices of stationery in GoS-areas.⁸⁴

4.4.5. Lack of material, physical and legal safety leading to re-displacement

The lack of sustainable material, physical and legal safety has increasingly given rise to a phenomenon of “re-displacement”, in which refugee returnees decided to again leave Syria and attempt to cross the border with Lebanon, where they however don’t have access to legal residency.

Nearly half of all respondents in the RPW research sample, in both the first and second rounds of data collection, reported to know relatives or friends who had re-returned to Lebanon, or are considering doing so, and would therefore have to rely on smuggler networks. The reasons for such re-returns vary: the main reason reported is the **lack of employment opportunities in Syria**. The second most frequently cited reason is the **constant fear among young men that they will be forcibly conscripted into the military or arbitrarily arrested by members of the security apparatus**, even if they have obtained an official exemption or service deferral.

“ I came back to Damascus, then Homs once again, the situation was really bad and my second son had to enter the hospital in Lebanon, I tried all possible ways to come back to Lebanon till I found someone who was able to get me out from Homs to Lebanon by smuggling. I had to walk in the orchards, mountains and between rocks until I finally got to Al Nour square in Tripoli at 3 am, my entrance to Lebanon was stealthily, therefore, I was considered illegal, after 15 days, the UN called me in order to renew my file in April.”

Syrian woman in Tripoli who had re-returned to Lebanon

“ I have some friends and acquaintances who couldn’t stay in Syria because of the difficult situation and who have preferred to go back to Lebanon than to stay there; they have of course gone back illegally.”

Rural Damascus, 31, Male

In the June 2020 online conversation with the Upinion panel, 181 out of 486 (37.2%) Syrian and PRS respondents in Lebanon indicated that they personally knew other Syrians who had returned to Syria. The most often cited reasons for which these people had not been able to return to their destination of choice included damage to their houses, forcing them to go to other areas (26.7%), security and personal protection issues (24.8%), and a lack of livelihood opportunities (17.8%) and basic services and medical care (16.8%) in the preferred area of return. While this

data is secondary, it does contribute to demonstrating how physical, legal and material safety cannot be ensured in many areas of Syria.

Therefore it is important **not to conflate the physical movements themselves with the successful realisation of a durable solution**. For displacement to end inside Syria and for refugees to return to the country, conditions need to be made conducive for the *sustainable* reintegration of displaced people in areas of origin. **Pushing people into premature return would only compound their suffering and create new waves of “re-displacement”**, and only further reduce Syrians’ chances of sustainable return.

4.5. Amnesty agreements

UNHCR Protection Threshold 12:

“Returnees fully benefit from an amnesty in Syria, except for those that are charged with a serious violation of international humanitarian law, or a crime against humanity, or a crime constituting a serious violation of human rights, or a serious common crime involving death or serious bodily harm, committed prior to or during exile. The amnesty includes those who evaded compulsory military service or reservist service, have deserted from the armed forces, have joined a non-state armed group, and who left Syria illegally and/or lodged an asylum claim abroad.”

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity⁸⁵, has structurally infringed on human rights during the conflict, and has used chemical and prohibited weapons against civilians and civilian infrastructure and humanitarian personnel and facilities.⁸⁶ A large number of Syrian men who therefore refuse to serve in the military, fear immediate arrest or conscription upon return on grounds of evading the draft. According to the 1960 Military Criminal Code (revised in 1973), evaders face up to five years in prison during war time. Deserters from the SAA face even greater punishment, including instances of torture, physical assault and disappearances.⁸⁷

All 16 KIs interviewed for a separate study by Basmeah & Zeitooneh⁸⁸ - who either evaded, deserted or defected the compulsory military draft - reported being at high risk of detention or immediate conscription in Syria. Therefore, returning to Syria is life-threatening for them. It also became evident from conversations with both KIs that served and those that did not serve, that having the legal exemptions or deferrals exempting you (temporarily) from the compulsory draft is not a guarantee for not

being drafted; nor is having valid reasons for deferral or exemption a guarantee that you will in fact be (temporarily) exempted and are not at risk of being conscripted.

Additionally, several KIs indicated knowledge of instances in which people were **re-enlisted for the reserves ranks, despite having already finished their compulsory military conscription previously**. Since the start of the war, Syrian men remain in the reserve ranks after they finish their official 1.5 year service, meaning they can be serving for an unknown period of time.

Finally, KIs confirmed that once conscripted, draft evaders are often **sent to training for only a short while** – if at all – before being sent to battle, **putting them in more danger due to the lack of preparedness**. Training in the SAA in general was considered inadequate by the majority of respondents, and is not considered to provide conscripts with the necessary skills and preparation to deal with the situation on the frontline.

“*Currently, the training phase for conscripts isn't adequate, [it is] shorter in time [than it was before 2011], and lacks a specialization phase of training.*”

Rural Damascus, Male that served in the SAA, 34

On 9 October 2018, the GoS issued Decree 18, thereby granting amnesty for individuals accused of deserting or avoiding military conscription if they would turn themselves in within four (for those residing inside Syria) or six months (for those present outside of Syria). **All Key Informants questioned the credibility of this declared amnesty agreement** (as well as other amnesty agreements that were previously announced by the GoS) and would still not feel safe after returning to Syria. One Key Informant has stated, for instance:

“*In Dar'a the amnesty was often not respected, with many draft deserters still being arrested. Moreover, the conscription amnesty that was issued in July 2018 did not stop the Government from arresting military age males with valid settlement agreements, often because these people were suspected of political activities.*”

Another KI stated what many respondents had expressed:

“*Amnesties don't have any impact, and there is no trust in this regime.*”

Only one month after the above mentioned amnesty was issued, the GoS published a list of 400,000 males that could still be called for military conscription, thereby effectively nullifying the October 2018 amnesty.⁸⁹

“*With regards to the topic of conscription of reconciled fighters, it's notable that GoS forces often arrested reconciled fighters of opposition groups that had reconciled their cases and sent them to front lines, that is while decreasing the training time prior to joining the Army from 6 to just 2 months.*” KI

Lastly, in December 2019, an amendment to the legislation concerning military service, Law 97, was announced by the GoS. This amendment entailed that **assets and properties of individuals accused of avoiding or deserting their military duties can be seized unless they are able to pay the hefty service pardoning fee of \$8,000⁹⁰**. Such an amendment thus increases, rather than removes, barriers for people who refused to serve in the SAA, by putting them at risk of property/asset loss and increased economic burdens.

4.6. Access to civil documentation

UNHCR Protection Threshold 13:

“GoS commits to recognizing changes in returnees' personal/civil status occurred, during the conflict, including in displacement and abroad (e.g. births, deaths, marriages, adoptions, divorces, custody – including the extension of Syrian nationality to returnee children born abroad and residence status with the possibility of it leading to naturalization for non-Syrian spouses). All returnees have access to affordable civil registration and documentation and validation of education certificates obtained abroad. Documentation issued by a competent authority indicating such changes is validated or re-issued.”

UNHCR Protection Threshold 15:

“Legislative measures allow for issuance of documents necessary to establish identity, family composition and nationality. To prevent statelessness, legislative measures are undertaken to ensure refugees born to a Syrian parent – female or male – are considered citizens of Syria, and birth certificates are issued to refugee children who are not in possession of such documents.”

When asked in the second data collection round whether any of the respondents possessed any official documents (birth, death and marriage certificates, national ID cards, the Syrian family booklet and other relevant personal documents), whether respondents were able to replace missing documents, and whether civil documentation offices were regularly open and available in their region, almost all respondents answered affirmatively. Only one respondent from Homs reported to have an issue with an educational certificate obtained in Lebanon.

New respondents reached in the second data collection round also reported that they did not expect any trouble in accessing such services in case they would need it, while an overwhelming majority of respondents already possessed all the documents they needed. Therefore, **civil documentation remained the most highly rated service, with civil documentation offices reported as being operational and efficient** in meeting the needs of locals in terms of providing them with new documentation for cases such as births and deaths, as well as replacing any documents that respondents might have lost.

The importance of such access cannot be underestimated (in particular being in possession of a “family booklet”), and was also highlighted in KI interviews during the first round of data collection. It is also worth pointing out that while the respondents in the RPW research sample inside Syria showcased a relatively high level of awareness about the importance of preparing civil documentation before starting the return journey, this awareness cannot be assumed to be similarly high among all Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In the online conversation held with respondents in Lebanon in June 2020, only 5% of respondents indicated that they have legal concerns with regard to returning. This can either mean that they are well prepared in terms of civil documentation, or that there is low awareness around this issue. Awareness raising and legal support programs therefore remain important⁹¹.

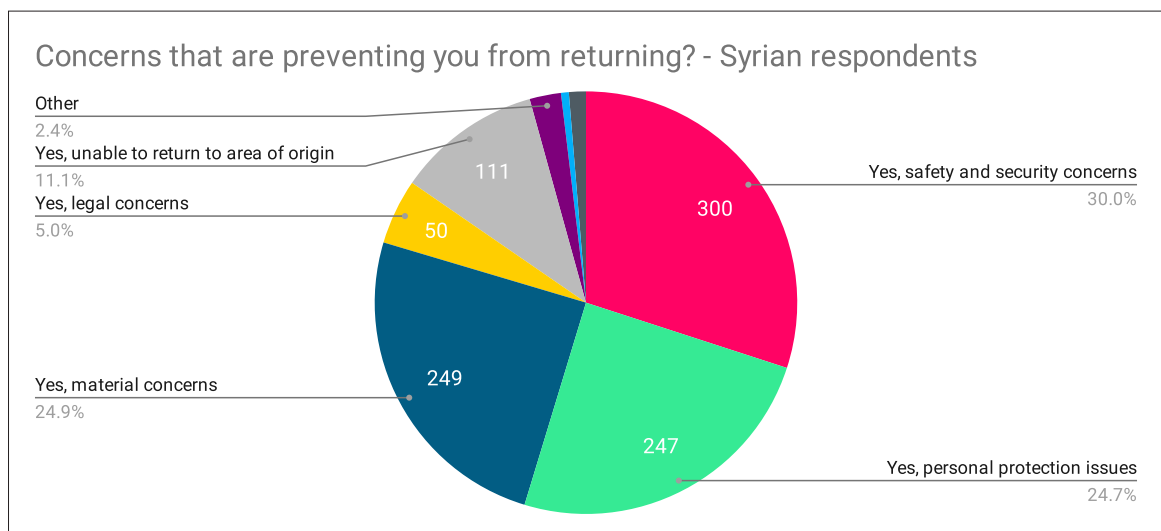
4.7. Housing, Land and Property Rights (HLP)

UNHCR Protection Threshold 17:

“The Government sets up efficient, accessible, and affordable mechanisms to address housing, land and property (HLP) issues and to provide for property restitution and compensation in line with international law. Particular attention needs to be paid to the rights of returnee women heads of households and the rights of secondary occupants of refugees’ property.”

Unaddressed challenges to HLP rights act as a central impediment to the return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced Syrians. As noted by the EU and the UN during the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (30 June 2020), HLP rights and their restitution are a “core factor for the rebuilding of Syrian society” and a “cornerstone for ensuring society’s stability and enabling Syrians to plan for a future life together in peace and dignity.”⁹² The latter point was also highlighted by the chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, who on 22 September 2020 stated that “no factor will be more important for healing internal divisions and rebuilding trust at the local level than how the government deals with issues of housing, land and property rights.”⁹³

Throughout the first round of RPW data collection inside Syria, several HLP-related issues were also highlighted. **49%** (37 out of 75) of returnee respondents reported having somewhat or severely damaged houses, while **42.5%** (32 out of 75 respondents) did not return to their own house but instead had to move to another house in the neighbourhood (such as the house of relatives). **12%** (9 out of 75) of respondents reported that they were missing property documents for their house or other property. When asked in the second round of data collection whether



they had been able to return to their homes (if they had repaired the damage), around **30%** of these same respondents reported that they still do not reside in their original homes. Additionally, respondents to Upinion's online conversation in Lebanon stated that the **main reasons for their inability to go back to their houses in Syria** were because it was seized by the Syrian government or they were not able to prove ownership; because the property was damaged; and/or because of movement restrictions in their area of origin.

In addition to these RPW findings, several other studies have also described how **property of displaced Syrians has either been damaged and seized, or how property documents have been confiscated, falsified, incomplete and inaccurate.** In a survey from 2017 by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) among Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Northern Iraq, nearly a third of Syrian refugees who stated that they had property documents reported that these documents were lost or destroyed. Moreover, at least half of those who had left their documents said that they are at risk of not finding them again if or when they return. In the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), 47% of assessed communities also reported HLP issues.⁹⁴

Moreover, a September 2020 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Col) has highlighted how access to HLP rights continues to be a significant challenge for many civilians, particularly in formerly besieged areas. Many civilians have reported to the UN Col how they are **still being prevented from returning to their often-habitable houses** in Qaboun, Jobar, Yarmouk camp and parts of Daraya, and how large reconstruction projects result in civilians being denied their property rights. The UN Col has also received several reports that people who have received so-called "security marks" had their **assets seized under counter-terrorism pretexts.** According to the UN Col, "*thousands of properties belonging to private persons have been seized and their assets frozen, including under the State's counter-terrorism legislation.*"⁹⁵

Such threats to land tenure security are further increased through changes to the legislative and regulatory framework, as roughly one-third of Syrian legislation and regulations have been adopted during the conflict.⁹⁶ These laws have increased fears of unjust land grabs and the deprivation of displaced people's property rights.⁹⁷ A March 2020 report by Impunity Watch and PAX, co-signed by 11 Syrian CSOs and individual experts, highlights how HLP violations and policies of demographic change are intrinsically linked:

“ The Assad regime has built up an intricate legal framework that allows it to expropriate anyone it considers a threat or an inconvenience: those accused of ‘terrorism’, a catch-all term used for any political opposition or civic action; political detainees and their family members; and the internally displaced and refugees. This legal framework underpins an apparent plan for demographic change in Syria whereby individuals or communities perceived as government opponents are systematically dispossessed, cementing displacement as a permanent reality for those forced from their homes. Meanwhile Assad loyalists profit from expropriated land and property, and investments benefit only the country's economic elite.”⁹⁸

Some of the most worrisome legislative developments include:

- **Law No. 10** (April 2018), which sets out the procedure to designate certain areas as a redevelopment zone. Under the law, such zones will be designated by a decree, after which local authorities are required to provide a list of property owners for that area. People who used to live in the area but are not on the list need to issue an ownership claim. If they cannot prove ownership, local authorities are allowed to confiscate their property. Needless to say, this is impossible for many Syrians who are living abroad or are internally displaced. Law No. 10 does permit for a relative or a local agent to claim the property on behalf of another person, but for this the local agent requires clearance by the security services. The latter requirement poses a major barrier for many to make a claim, as they would risk arrest, detention or forced conscription. In practice, Law 10 means that informally housed areas are transformed into luxury real estate projects benefiting government loyalists at the expense of the original inhabitants, who could never afford to live in the new developments.⁹⁹
- Law 10 is also fundamentally linked to **Decree 19 (2015)** on the formation of holding companies that supervise and manage regulatory zones.¹⁰⁰ Previously, the Syrian government has used **Decree 66 (2012)** to dispossess and forcibly relocate inhabitants of certain redevelopment zones and to transfer assets to private companies and regime cronies.

- In addition, under **Decree 63 (2012)** the Syrian Finance Ministry is allowed to confiscate the property of Syrians accused of a crime under the Counterterrorism Law of 2012 (Law No. 19). Law 19 created a Counterterrorism Court, which is considered contrary to all international and constitutional standards for providing a fair trial.¹⁰¹
- **Law No. 35 (2017)** allows for the confiscation of properties of people failing to perform military service.
- **Law No. 11 (2016), Law No. 12 (2016) and Law No. 33 (2017)** create a series of obstacles for recovering or transferring property records.¹⁰²
- **Law No. 11 (2011) and Decree No. 43 (2011)** establish that people need security clearance for various property transactions.¹⁰³

4.8. UNHCR access to returnees

UNHCR Protection Threshold 19:

“UNHCR’s supervisory responsibility, which includes but is not limited to monitoring the voluntariness of the repatriation, the reintegration of returnees, and all interventions aimed at ensuring repatriation in safety and dignity, is respected.”

UNHCR Protection Threshold 22:

“UNHCR is granted free and unhindered access to all refugees and returnees to monitor the conditions of reception and reintegration. Similarly all refugees and returnees, wherever located, including in detention centres and prisons (in liaison with ICRC), have access to UNHCR.”

UNHCR currently does **not have any system in place to monitor whether current returns can be considered safe, voluntary and dignified**, in line with the international standards outlined in UNHCR’s protection thresholds. This is also confirmed by the World Bank, which has stated that:

“*Although UNHCR keeps a record of registered refugees who returned to Syria, access constraints and the spontaneous nature of returns make it impossible to systematically trace these returnees; it is not known if they returned to their original place or whether they were arrested, killed, or became displaced again.*”¹⁰⁴

Information gathered through the two data collection rounds inside Syria paint a similar picture. When asked whether anyone had followed up on their situation after return, **all respondents reported that there has not been any follow-up by any actor**. Respondents only mentioned that they had received aid in the form of food baskets distributed by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

Moreover, when asked if they would contact UNHCR if they were ever to face an issue in their place of residence, overwhelmingly **respondents reported that they will not contact UNHCR, due to their distrust in the capabilities of the agency**. Respondents also reported a lack of UNHCR presence in their areas, in particular in Rural Damascus.

4.9. Impact of COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic has **compounded pre-existing socio-economic hardships** and further hollowed out and laid bare the shortcomings of the medical systems in Syria¹⁰⁵ and Lebanon.

RPW’s online conversation between 30 March and 15 April 2020 with 429 respondents demonstrated the limited ability of vulnerable communities in Lebanon to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenges that lay ahead¹⁰⁶:

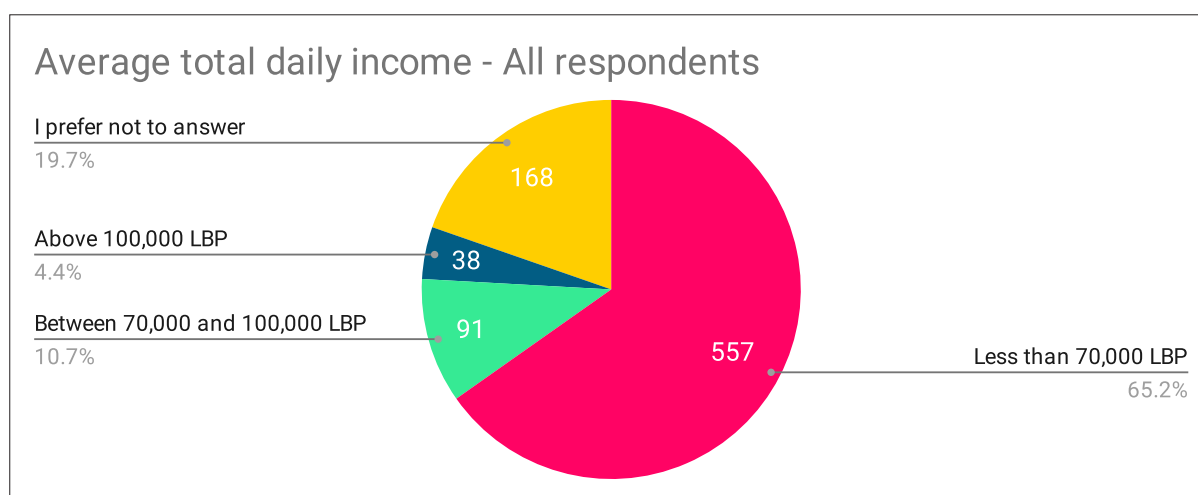
- **85%** of respondents (305 out of 360 individuals) reported that they do **not have access to or the possibility to buy sufficient sterilization and hygiene materials**. Amongst Syrian respondents this figure was 89% (169 out of 190 individuals).
- **80%** of all respondents, and **85% of Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian respondents** (200 out of 234 respondents) answered that they had **lost their main source of income**. All areas of Lebanon seemed to be equally affected by job/income loss.
- **42%** of respondents were **not aware which COVID-19 hotline to contact** if they suspect they have contracted the virus.
- **Discriminatory implementation of lockdowns and/or movement restrictions**, targeting Syrian refugees disproportionately, and **stigmatization among and threatening of refugees** and migrants in case of contracting the virus, especially those that lack legal residency.

During RPW's online conversation with 1,080 respondents in June 2020, it became clear that the combined impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the economic crisis has proven challenging for everyone¹⁰⁷:

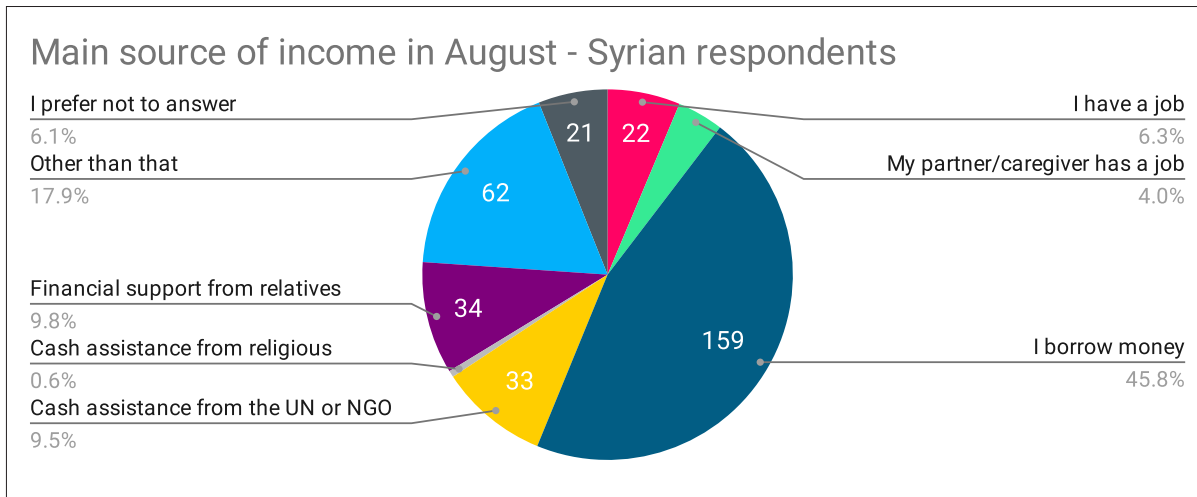
- Only **3.7%** of the respondents reported that their **income had remained the same** since 18 March 2020; nearly everyone had experienced either a decrease in income or they lost their livelihood completely.
- A mere **27.9%** of respondents had **received food, cash or hygiene assistance** between the 18th of March and June 2020; of which **60% only once**.
- The **children of 73% of respondents** with school-aged children in their household were **not able to attend online classes** when schools were closed due to COVID-19 in the period 18 March-June.
- Moreover, the **inability of many to maintain social distance** increases the risks of COVID-19 even more. About half of Syrian respondents reported that they are not able to respect social distance rules, because they live in an overcrowded area (16.5%); their work does not enable them to do so (6.5%); their community is not committed to safeguarding measures (19.9%); or other reasons (5.2%).¹⁰⁸

The fourth online Upinion conversation, held in August 2020, showed concerning trends that further exacerbate the above findings:

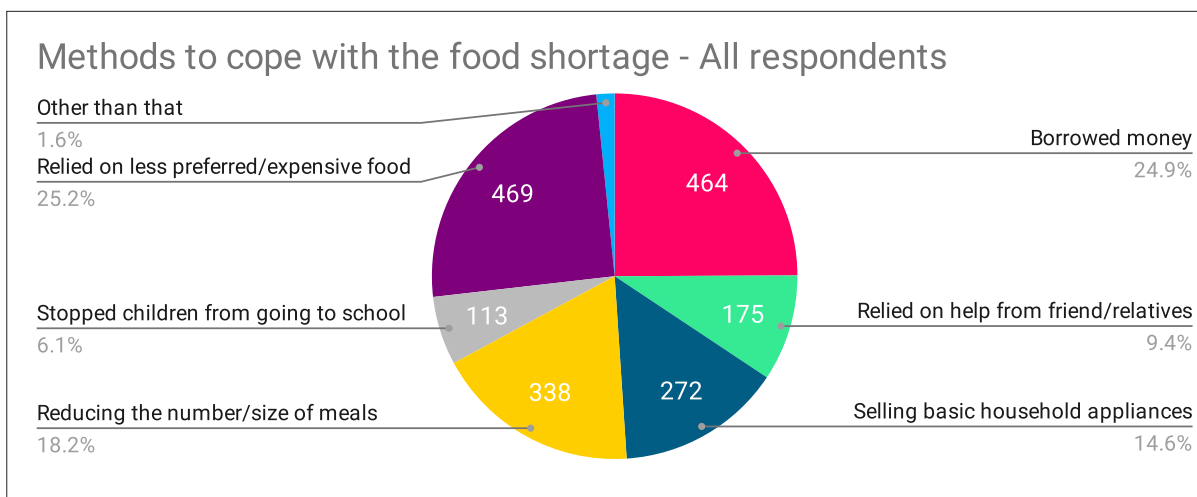
- The inability to practice social distancing among Syrian refugees deteriorated even further: **58.3% of all Syrian respondents (including PRS) indicated they were unable to or did not want to practice social distancing**.
- **65.2% of all respondents reported an average daily income of less than 70,000 LBP**, with 68.2% of the Syrian refugees falling under this category versus 59.5% of the Lebanese population.



- The sharp increase of income and job loss resulted in more people seeking other ways to make a living. In the online conversation in August 2020, **45.8% of the Syrian respondents in Lebanon indicated that they are borrowing money to make ends meet**. Only 10.5% of Syrian respondents reported having a job and/or a partner who provides an income through work (see below). Furthermore, 26.5% of all respondents who work or have someone in the household who works, reported their employers still owe them money and have thus not received the salary they were entitled to.



- Similarly, **24.9% of all respondents reported borrowing money to cope with a lack of food**, or money to buy food, in the month preceding the survey in August. **25.2% of all respondents also reported relying on less preferable and less expensive food as a negative coping mechanism** to deal with the rising prices of food stuffs in Lebanon.



5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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Syria has been the **largest forced displacement crisis in the world since 2014**. At the end of 2019, 13.2 million Syrians lived in displacement, including 6.6 million refugees and over 6 million IDPs. The 6.6 million Syrian refugees are the largest refugee population in the world, accounting for 25.4% of the global refugee population in 2019.

Syria's neighbouring countries have been disproportionately affected by the Syrian forced displacement crisis. The vast majority of Syrian refugees (83%) live in host countries in the region, who continue to bear a **vastly unequal responsibility** for hosting Syrian refugees.

Lebanon, which hosts at least 910,600 officially registered Syrian refugees (while the unofficial number is estimated at 1.5 million), is a particular case in point. While hosting the eighth largest refugee population worldwide, Lebanon has the second highest refugee population relative to the national population in the world, with 134 registered refugees per 1,000 nationals. In addition to this disproportionate responsibility to host Syrian refugees, in the past year the overall situation in Lebanon has rapidly deteriorated as the country has to deal with COVID-19, a deep economic crisis and social unrest and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020.

Against this backdrop, this report aimed to analyse several protection issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return inside Syria (as outlined in the UNHCR Protection Thresholds for Refugee Return to Syria). It has found that the **clear majority of Syr-**

ia's displaced have no viable prospect of a durable solution (safe, voluntary and dignified return; local integration in host country; or resettlement to a third country) to end their displacement in the near future. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees consistently indicate their desire to go home if safety prevails and basic conditions for a dignified life are guaranteed, but do not see any signs of such conditions being met in the (near) future, while the deteriorating situation in Lebanon makes a voluntary and informed return decision impossible. Both the possibility of local integration in the host country (Lebanon) and resettlement to a third country have also become less and less available for Syrian refugees, while threats of deportation and violations of the non-refoulement principle (including by EU member states such as Cyprus and Greece) are increasing.

Consequently Syrian refugees in Lebanon are **stuck in limbo** while conditions around them are worsening. They are **living** between a country that does not want them now and for the longer term, and a country they cannot return to in any safe and sustainable way, as the **conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return are currently not met inside Syria**.

The international community, as well as local authorities, need to **take urgent action to tackle the rapidly deteriorating situation of Syria's displaced**. Now is the time for swift and ambitious action. In doing so, refugee-hosting countries, international institutions, and donors need to ensure and apply a holistic approach that recognizes that the 3 internationally-recognized durable solutions for displaced Syrians are inherently interlinked and should be actively and simultaneously promoted.

More specifically, the Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) coalition makes the following recommendations:

To the European Union and EU member states

- **Maintain the line that Syria is not a safe destination of return**, and that any return should be safe, voluntary, dignified and informed.
- In line with the EU's position that Syria is not safe, **refrain from shifting national policies** towards depriving certain categories of refugees from Syria from their protected status, or reverse this where they have already done so.
- **Request UNHCR to put in place a robust monitoring mechanism** – on the basis of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds, and with sufficient resources – that closely monitors the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians; and request UNHCR to provide regular and public reporting on these thresholds, including on backsliding or information gaps.
- **Increase the number of resettlement places** and other safe and legal routes for Syrian refugees to Europe; commit to improved responsibility-sharing between member states; and uphold the right to apply for asylum. To this end, immediately restart any asylum and resettlement procedures that have been halted due to COVID-19.
- **Immediately put an end to violations of the principle of non-refoulement**, including on all Mediterranean sea routes, as well as land routes to Europe; increase search and rescue capacity in the Eastern Mediterranean and provide predictable ports of safety to allow swift disembarkation of people rescued at sea.
- Support the **creation of an independent mechanism to monitor effective access to EU asylum procedures, respect for fundamental rights and respect for the principle of non-refoulement at the EU's borders**; and ensure that any such mechanism is truly independent from national authorities, and well-resourced. In case of violations, the European Commission must be able to take effective measures to ensure accountability for rights violations.
- **Request UNHCR to structurally include a diverse set of Syrian civil society in the UN-led Durable Solutions Working Groups** at regional and national level.

- Member States which are donors to the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis (Madad Fund), and DG NEAR, should **extend the mandate of the Trust Fund beyond the current expiration date of 14 December 2020, and pledge a new financial contribution** to the Trust Fund.
- Member states which are donors to the Madad fund, and DG NEAR, when deciding on new project proposals submitted to the Operational Board of the Trust Fund, should **increase the availability of funds for projects proposed by local CSOs**.

To the Government of Lebanon

- Uphold the **right to asylum** for Syrian refugees, and **respect the principle of non-refoulement**.
- Provide full clarity and transparency about the **modalities of the so-called "return plan"** issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and ensure that any such plan is based on humanitarian standards and takes into account the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return outlined in the UNHCR Protection Thresholds. Halt any further steps towards implementation of the plan before a clear dialogue with relevant stakeholders – including with UNHCR, humanitarian INGOs and local CSOs – is conducted.
- Commit to a **moratorium on summary deportations** of Syrian refugees. In the event of any deportations, ensure full, independent judicial oversight of deportation decisions and proceedings.
- Facilitate **access to legal residency** for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- Ensure **needs-based humanitarian responses** throughout all communities residing in Lebanon, and ensure that access to services (particularly health services) is provided in a non-discriminatory manner.
- Ensure that any **COVID-19 restrictions** are applied equally, and **without discrimination** between refugees and host communities.

To donors (including the EU and its member states)

- Commit to **sufficient, predictable, flexible and multi-annual humanitarian and development aid to refugees and host communities, through dedicated funding mechanisms** (such as the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis), as well as to human rights and peacebuilding funding which addresses issues facing refugees and host communities.
- Ensure sufficient **additional funding in response to COVID-19** and urgently commit resources to support emergency response plans for COVID-19 testing and treatment, food assistance, hygiene promotion, healthcare, rent support and emergency cash and/or in-kind assistance, as well as awareness-raising activities. This can be done, in part, through additional contributions to the **UN's COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP)**. In the GHRP, UN agencies and donors should also increase the availability of un-earmarked funds for NGOs, and ensure that any such funding does not come at the expense of pre-COVID-19 humanitarian and development funding.
- **Abstain from shifting significant resources to voluntary return assistance programming**, and ensure that any such assistance does not come at the expense of support to refugees in host countries or incentivizes premature return.
- Accelerate and concretize **aid localization efforts and commitments**, by providing longer-term and flexible funding that includes adequate support for overhead costs to cover safety, health insurance, severance pay and other risk management priorities.
- Make more **resources available for Syrian-led and Syrian-owned research efforts** that document protection concerns in areas of return and in host countries.
- Encourage **needs-based humanitarian responses** throughout all communities residing in Lebanon, and ensure that access to services (particularly health services) is provided in a non-discriminatory manner.
- Encourage an **enabling operational environment for civil society organisations**; including – but not limited to – taking the necessary steps to **ensure that sanctions and related regulatory environments do not inhibit the work of humanitarian NGOs** operating across Syria.

To UNHCR

- Put in place a **robust monitoring mechanism** – on the basis of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds and with sufficient resources – that closely monitors the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians; and provide regular and publicly available reporting on the situation in Syria with regards to the thresholds, including on any backsliding or information gaps.
- In order to promote the voluntary and informed character of any individual return decision, increase efforts to **ensure that Syrian refugees who consider returning have sufficient access to objective and reliable information about current conditions inside Syria**, including protection risks and information gaps about such risks. Such information could be offered during voluntary return assessment interviews or on a dedicated website that contains detailed information regarding the conditions for return.
- Ensure that a **diverse set of Syrian CSOs is structurally included in Durable Solutions Working Groups** at regional and national level.

ANNEX 1:

UNHCR PROTECTION THRESHOLDS

1. Significant and durable **reduction of hostilities**.
2. Conclusion of a **formal agreement** with the government, host countries, and other actors as required, to receive returnees.
3. **The government/actors in control of the return area provide genuine guarantees** that returnees will not face harassment, discrimination, arbitrary detention, physical threat or prosecution on account of originating from an area previously or currently under de facto control of another party to the conflict; for having left Syria illegally; for having lodged an asylum claim abroad, or; on account of any (individual or family) diversity characteristic.
4. Every individual's decision to return is **informed and genuinely voluntary, without any coercion**.
5. Acceptance by the government/entity in control of the return area of **returnees' free choice of destination and place of residence and right to freedom of movement**.
6. The **physical, legal and material safety** of refugees and returnees is ensured.
7. Measures are in place so that **the specific needs of women, girls, men and boys are met**, that SGBV is prevented and responded to, that access to assistance is safe and dignified and that protection, care and assistance is provided throughout all phases of the return and reintegration process. Refugees and returnees with specific needs (including, but not limited to older persons and persons with disabilities) receive protection and support, through age and gender-sensitive approaches.
8. Identified **unaccompanied or separated children** are not returned prior to tracing of family members and formal best interests of the child determinations have been undertaken.
9. The principle of **family unity** is upheld, including a right to enter and remain for dependents who are not Syrian citizens.
10. Refugees and returnees can **effectively participate** in the planning and implementation of the return and reintegration process.
11. **Activities by any entity that impede the informed, voluntary, safe and dignified return** of refugees and displaced persons to their places of origin or of choice are prevented and addressed.
12. Returnees **fully benefit from an amnesty** in Syria, except for those that are charged with a serious violation of international humanitarian law, or a crime against humanity, or a crime constituting a serious violation of human rights, or a serious common crime involving death or serious bodily harm, committed prior to or during exile. The amnesty includes **those who evaded compulsory military service or reservist service**, have deserted from the armed forces, have joined a non-state armed group, and who left Syria illegally and/or lodged an asylum claim abroad.
13. GoS **commits to recognizing changes in returnees' personal/civil status** which occurred during the conflict, including in displacement and abroad (e.g. births, deaths, marriages, adoptions, divorces, custody – including the extension of Syrian nationality to returnee children born abroad and residence status with the possibility of it leading to naturalization for non-Syrian spouses). All returnees have access to affordable civil registration and documentation and validation of education certificates obtained abroad. Documentation issued by a competent authority indicating such changes is validated or re-issued.
14. **Appropriate evidentiary value is given to civil documentation issued by non-state entities** and documentation issued in non-government controlled areas by local actors (e.g. birth attestation); and legitimate documentation issued by the competent Syrian authorities is recognized. **For those not holding identity documentation**, alternative forms of evidence is accepted. **Documentation from UNHCR** or other internationally-mandated organisations is recognized.
15. **Legislative measures allow for issuance of documents** necessary to establish identity, family composition and nationality. To prevent statelessness, legislative measures are undertaken to ensure refugees born to a Syrian parent – female or male – are considered citizens of Syria, and birth certificates are issued to refugee children who are not in possession of such documents.
16. **The equivalency of academic/professional/vocational diplomas/certificates/degrees** during displacement is recognized by GoS, as appropriate.

17. The Government sets up **efficient, accessible, and affordable mechanisms to address housing, land and property (HLP) issues** and to provide for property restitution and compensation in line with international law. Particular attention needs to be paid to the rights of returnee women heads of households and the rights of secondary occupants of refugees' property.
18. **Returnees enjoy free access to law enforcement bodies**, courts of law, competent administrative authorities and other relevant entities.
19. **UNHCR's supervisory responsibility**, which includes but is not limited to monitoring the voluntariness of the repatriation, the reintegration of returnees, and all interventions aimed at ensuring repatriation in safety and dignity, **is respected**.
20. Both Syria and host countries take all appropriate steps to ensure the **security and safety of UNHCR staff and all other personnel** engaged in the repatriation process.
21. **Removal of/markings of areas contaminated** by landmines and other unexploded ordnance on main routes of return and in return areas is ensured. Mine awareness programmes are established in affected areas.
22. **UNHCR is granted free and unhindered access to all refugees and returnees** to monitor the conditions of reception and reintegration. Similarly all refugees and returnees, wherever located, including in detention centres and prisons (in liaison with ICRC), have access to UNHCR.

ANNEX 2: BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH AREAS INSIDE SYRIA

Overview

Homs Governorate

Homs Governorate consists of the following districts: Homs, al-Qusayr, Tadmor, al-Makhrim, ar-Rastan, and Tall Kalakh, which for its part consists of 23 sub-districts. Homs Governorate is the largest governorate in Syria with a total surface area of 40,900 square kilometers, making up 22% of Syria's overall territory.¹⁰⁹ Homs is home to approximately 1,458,898 people, of whom 312,307 are IDPs (December 2019). The Governorate is situated in Central Syria and lies in vicinity to the Lebanese, Iraqi and Jordanian borders. Homs Governorate is also home to the Rukban IDP camp which lies in the Tadmor district on the Jordanian border.

Homs witnessed several major battles and sieges since the outbreak of conflict in 2011, most notably the Qusayr Battle (2012) which saw the first involvement of Hezbollah in Syria and the besiegement of the al-Wa'er neighborhood of the Homs district. Furthermore, northern rural Homs was subject to a six-year siege that spanned from May 2012 to April 2018.

Rural Damascus Governorate

The Governorate consists of the following districts: Az-Zabadani, Qatana, Duma, Darayya, An-Nabk, Yabroud, At-Tall, al-Qutayfah, Rural Damascus. Damascus Governorate is home to approximately three million people (2018 figure) and its economy is largely dependent on the agricultural and industrial sectors. The Governorate is situated in Central Syria, it surrounds the capital city of Damascus and has a surface area of 18,000 square kilometers.

During the conflict, Rural Damascus witnessed extensive clashes with several of its neighborhoods falling victim to besiegement and large segments of their populations becoming displaced. Since 2018, Rural Damascus has been completely under Government of Syria (GoS) control with the last opposition stronghold, Eastern Ghouta, retaken by the GoS after a five-year siege. The GoS and opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta reached a series of 'reconciliation agreements' that resulted in some neighborhoods becoming completely uninhabited as opposition fighters and their families were forced to leave to northern Syria (mainly Idlib Governorate and some to opposition-held areas in Aleppo Governorate).

Population Division by Gender 2010¹¹⁰ and 2019 (%)¹¹¹:

Governorate	Male	Female
2010		
Homs	51.1%	48.9%
Rural Damascus	51.5%	48.5%
2019		
Homs	48.3%	51.7%
Rural Damascus	49%	51%

Main sources of income/ industries (pre-conflict)

Homs Governorate

The Governorate, which is known for agricultural activities and farming, houses around 59,379 people working in the agricultural sector, making up around 13% of the total workforce in Homs Governorate. The remainder of the workforce mainly operated in industries relating to textile, foods, chemicals and electrical appliances production. Prior to the conflict, the main industrial area of Homs Governorate was situated in the Hisyah Industrial City, providing employment to 66,000 workers.¹¹² Out of a total workforce of 465,702 people, 34,407 were unemployed, a number that is consistent with the nationwide unemployment rate at the time.¹¹³ Furthermore, prior to the conflict, the Governorate's total workforce made up approximately 9.2% of Syria's total workforce.¹¹⁴

Rural Damascus Governorate

Rural Damascus Governorate is largely agricultural and industrial, with traditional farming being the most widespread type of agriculture in the area. Local industries such as wood carpentry and production, soap-making, textiles, and other artifacts production were also prominent. The Governorate's proximity to the capital Damascus also made it a significant trade station with the presence of several wholesale markets and industrial areas within it.¹¹⁵

Conflict History

Homs Governorate

In mid-2011, peaceful protests engulfed Homs Governorate with the GoS immediately starting a violent crackdown on the protests. As early as October 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established and formed an opposition military council consisting of Syrian Arab Army defectors. The military council included several brigades such as the Khalid bin al-Walid, Homs, Ahrar Talbisa, Omar bin al-Khattab, Ali bin abi Talib, and Abi thu-al-Ghafari brigades.¹¹⁶ The UN brokered a ceasefire in May 2012 in an effort to reconcile between the quarreling groups in Homs, however Hezbollah soon entered the conflict in May 2013, aiding the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in their fight against opposition groups in Homs Governorate, mainly within Qusayr city, and turning the tide to the advantage of the latter.

Al-Wa'er

Al-Wa'er neighborhood is one of the largest and most populated neighborhoods of Homs city and remained the last opposition stronghold for opposition groups in Homs Governorate, alongside the Northern Rural Homs areas. Protests first erupted in the neighborhood in April 2011 with the FSA first entering the city in February 2012 under the name al-Barraa' bin Malek Brigade. As a result of the clashes between the GoS and Opposition forces across Homs Governorate, al-Wa'er became home to many displaced families who sought refuge in the neighborhood. The increase in the neighborhood's population prompted the GoS to intensify its security operations in al-Wa'er, erecting an increasing number of ad-hoc checkpoints, and increasing the number of arbitrary detentions and arrests of known political dissenters. In 2013, the FSA escalated its military operation in the neighborhood by attacking GoS checkpoints in and around the neighborhood, prompting the GoS to start a military campaign that resulted in the besiegement of al-Wa'er in 2013.¹¹⁷ The besiegement of al-Wa'er and its estimated 15,000 families commenced on 10 October 2013 after intense fighting between the FSA and the GoS and a series of aerial bombardments by the GoS.¹¹⁸ Al-Wa'er remained besieged until March 2017 when representatives of al-Wa'er neighborhood and a Russian committee signed a reconciliation agreement that saw the eviction of opposition fighters and their families from the neighborhood to areas in northern Rural Homs, Aleppo Governorate, and Idlib Governorate. Not all fighters from the Free Syrian Army left the area however, as it is reported that a total of 300 fighters were allowed to stay in the neighborhood after settling their cases with the Russian committee.¹¹⁹

The area of Northern Rural Homs was besieged by the GoS between May 2012 and April 2018 with extensive clashes, aerial and ground bombardment targeting the area. The besiegement started after opposition forces took control of the Al-Rastan area and was ultimately ended by an agreement between the Free Syrian Army fighters in the area and the Russian reconciliation committees, after which opposition fighters and their families left the area in April 2018, with the GoS taking full control of the area again, allowing trade routes to re-open and become functional again.

Rural Damascus Governorate

Protests erupted in Rural Damascus as early as March 2011 with the FSA entering the area and taking over several of its sub-districts during the year of 2012. Conversely, the SAA started its military campaign on the Governorate and by October 2012, GoS forces assumed control of several towns while the FSA retained control of several areas, most notably Eastern Ghouta. Eastern Ghouta is the name of the eastern countryside of Damascus and it includes neighborhoods and sub-districts such as Douma, Western and Eastern Jobar neighborhood, Harasta, Zamalka, Saqba, Jisrein, Ein Tarma, Hammura, Misraba, Hosh al-Ashary Irbin, Kafr Batna, Al-Nashabiyah, al-Bahariyah, Tell Kurdi, Maydaa, and more.

The FSA continued to gain control of other areas in the Governorate while the GoS upheld a siege on the opposition's biggest stronghold in the Governorate, Eastern Ghouta, which lasted five years. Eastern Ghouta was besieged from May 2013 until April 2018 and during those years, residents of the area suffered from dire humanitarian conditions, and displacement and death as a result of continuous targeting of the area and infighting. The siege of Eastern Ghouta ended in April 2018 upon the evacuation of armed fighters and their families, as well as many civilians from the area to northern Syria.

Qalamoun

In Qalamoun, a town on the northern side of the Rural Damascus Governorate that lies close to the Lebanese border, the FSA was mainly in control of several parts of Qalamoun from 2012, prompting the area to be attacked by the GoS and Hezbollah in November 2013. While the offensive of November 2013 was not decisive, Hezbollah and the GoS were able to make strategic gains in the area, further expanding their scope of control in the area to include the opposition stronghold Yabroud, and a number of its surrounding villages, as part of an offensive that spanned from February to April 2014. With the GoS and Hezbollah largely in control of Qalamoun, several attempts by opposition groups to regain control of the area were made, most notably in the summer of 2014, spring of 2015, and summer of 2017; however the GoS and its allies were able to maintain their control over the area.

Impact of Conflict

Homs Governorate

During the besiegement of al-Wa'er an estimated 150,000 civilians lived in the neighborhood in dire humanitarian conditions with a lack of access to basic services as GoS forces denied the entry of medical items, personnel, and equipment, even through inter-agency humanitarian convoys into the area.¹²⁰ The only access route for such items was through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, but the provision of such aid was often inconsistent and insufficient, the lack of medical services in the city resulted in many patients losing their lives as even emergency medical equipment and supply vehicles that were once allowed to enter the neighborhood once a month started getting denied entry in 2016.¹²¹ Due to the lack of access to sufficient humanitarian aid or sustainable income, residents of Homs had to rely on negative economic coping mechanisms such as begging and engagement in illegal activities. In general in the Homs sub-district, where al-Wa'er is located, aid provision was often delivered in an exploitative, insufficient, and discriminatory manner. Additionally, the lack of freedom of movement, especially for residents of al-Wa'er, where only students and civil servants were allowed to move in and out of the neighborhood, was facilitated by the presence of checkpoints throughout and around the area as well as curfews, and further exacerbated by the presence of explosive hazards, and the residents' lack of identification documents.¹²² Upon the end of the siege in 2017, armed opposition fighters and their families were forced to settle their cases with the GoS or leave the area, mainly to Idlib Governorate and Rural Aleppo.

GoS forces first besieged the northern part of Rural Homs in May 2012 and the area remained besieged until April 2018. During the besiegement, access to basic services in the area was highly affected with limited water utility provision from the early stages of the besiegement.¹²³ Per an October 2016 assessment of besieged areas in the northern part of Rural Homs, such as Taldu, Ein Elniser, Ar-Rastan, and Talbiseh, over 329,000 civilians lived in besieged areas (this figure includes al-Wa'er).¹²⁴

Rural Damascus

Eastern Ghouta

With the start of the GoS' besiegement of the area in May 2013, living conditions worsened and cases of severe malnutrition, medical shortages, and poor living conditions were observed. The blockade of nutritional and medical necessities, as well as commodities, from entering the area, combined with the heavy bombardment by GoS forces resulted in tens of thousands of civilians lacking access to their basic needs.¹²⁵ At the height of the GoS' military operations in the area and the resulting intense clashes in winter and spring 2018, an estimated 400,000 civilians were trapped in the area, with over 275,000 in dire need of humanitarian assistance.¹²⁶ While over 150,000 people were displaced by April 2018 as a result of these intensified clashes, the humanitarian situation for those who remained significantly worsened as the UN remained mostly unable to reach the besieged areas, including Douma, which hosted the majority of Eastern Ghouta's remaining population at the time. Inter-agency assistance into Eastern Ghouta had been denied frequently by the GoS in prior years, including to Saqba, Kfar Batna, and Hammouriya.¹²⁷ Humanitarian aid provision in the area however was insufficient due to lack of adequate funding, IDP sites being overcrowded and many areas remaining unreachable as a result of the besiegement.¹²⁸ During the besiegement of Eastern Ghouta, instances of exploitation, discrimination, requests for sexual favours in return for aid, sexual harassment, and requests for money in exchange for aid packages were recorded in the delivery of aid to the area.¹²⁹

Qalamoun

As fighting engulfed Qalamoun between 2012 and 2018, access to basic services, goods, and commodities started diminishing. From 2012, different areas in Qalamoun were sporadically besieged by the GoS. In Rankus for example, thousands of GoS soldiers besieged over 25,000 civilians residing there in January 2012¹³⁰, an-Nabek was put under siege in January 2013¹³¹, Yabroud was besieged in March 2014¹³², and at-Tall was besieged in July 2015, causing shortages of basic items and commodities in the city.¹³³ Communities such as Jairoud, Dumayr, and al-Nasiriah in the Eastern part of Qalamoun remained under opposition control until April 2018, when opposition groups operating there surrendered after a Government offensive that started in February 2018 and effectively ended opposition presence in Qalamoun.¹³⁴ The opposition fighters agreed to move to Jarablus district in Aleppo Governorate with their families after having been denied essential food during the blockade, which was used as a pressuring tool against civilians and armed opposition forces operating in the area. The blockade over the area resulted in the worsening of services available to the residents of Qalamoun and made them dependent on aid provision by international organizations and local implementing partners. A 2017 assessment showed that in the majority of areas in Qalamoun, aid provision was carried out in a discriminatory manner, while in some areas instances of exploitation of people in need were also observed.¹³⁵

Waves of displacement

Homs Governorate

Al-Wa'er neighborhood became a destination for many IDPs escaping the violence in Homs city at the start of the conflict, but when a siege was imposed upon the area in year 2013, movement in and out of the area became restricted for the 70-100 thousand residents. In December 2015, a short-term ceasefire allowed residents of al-Wa'er to depart from the area¹³⁶. Upon the reconciliation agreement in the neighborhood between the quarreling opposition forces and the GoS, and on 19 March 2017, the first group of evacuees from al-Wa'er reached the Jarablus sub-district of Afrin district in Aleppo where they resided in a camp set-up by the Turkish Red Crescent.¹³⁷ In April 2017, a further 1,700 residents of al-Wa'er neighborhood reached Idlib Governorate, in parallel to 5,300 departing other areas of Homs city to Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.¹³⁸

During the conflict, thousands of families departed the Rural Homs area, with activists claiming that over 50,000 civilians had departed the northeastern part of Rural Homs by 2015.¹³⁹ In 2018, evacuees left Rural Homs to Idlib Governorate and several communities in rural Aleppo as part of the reconciliation agreement signed between the opposition forces, the GoS, and Russia. Within two weeks of the agreement, over 67 buses reportedly left the area heading to the aforementioned areas situated in northern Syria.¹⁴⁰

Eastern Ghouta

By April 2018, over 150,000 people were displaced from Eastern Ghouta since the outbreak of conflict in 2011, 67,000 of which had evacuated to Aleppo and Idlib Governorates; and by October 2018, an estimated further 158,000 individuals were displaced from the area.¹⁴¹ Of those displaced, a total of 92,000 were displaced internally in Rural Damascus Governorate while over 66,000 individuals were deported to northern Syria, mainly Idlib as well as Hama and Aleppo Governorates, per the reconciliation agreements with the Government of Syria.¹⁴²

Qalamoun

As a result of the November 2013 offensive on Qalamoun, the UN estimated that over 20,000 people left the violence engulfing Qalamoun and sought refuge in Lebanon, mainly Ersal.¹⁴³ Additionally, during the second Qalamoun campaign between February and April 2014, in which GoS forces indiscriminately attacked opposition-held areas with heavy weaponry and aerial bombardment, thousands of civilians fled the area both internally and towards the Lebanese-Syrian border,¹⁴⁴ with reports estimating that up to 50,000 civilians fled Qalamoun during that offensive, mainly towards Lebanon.¹⁴⁵ In April 2018, a convoy carried hundreds of fighters and their families, affiliated to Jaysh al-Islam and forces of Ahmad al-Abad, from the towns of Jayrud, al-Atnah, Nasiryia, and al-Rahiba situated in the eastern part of Qalamoun to northern Syria as part of a reconciliation agreement between the aforementioned opposition groups and the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁶

ENDNOTES

- 1 When interpreting these findings, it is however necessary to remain cautious. As indicated in the section on research limitations, the research sample inside Syria excludes those who were not allowed by the Syrian government to return to Syria, which adds to the built-in bias of the sample. Moreover, other research does suggest that limitations related to freedom of movement do exist and should in no way be underestimated. A September 2020 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, for example, has documented how civilians living in government areas that were previously under the control of armed groups face particular challenges due to the continued denial of freedom of movement of people and goods.
- 2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018): "Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria".
- 3 See <https://upinion.com> for more information.
- 4 In Upinion's multiple choice (MC) options, there is always the possibility to select 'I prefer not to answer'. This option is not always mentioned, but explains why percentages are not always adding up to 100%.
- 5 Refugee Protection Watch (2020): "Double impact of economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon".
- 6 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020): "Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2019", p 20, p 30.
- 7 World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", p 23.
- 8 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020): "Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2019", p 20.
- 9 United Nations Human Rights Council (2013): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/23/58; Syria Legal Development Programme (2020): "HLP rights, migration and business activity in Syria", p 2.
- 10 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 4.
- 11 "Q&A- Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature?", 12 June 2019, Amnesty International.
- 12 Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (2020): "We are Syria. Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the Reasons for Displacement and Minimum Conditions for Return", p 24.
- 13 European Institute of Peace (2019): "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity".
- 14 "Syrian girl dies on border while stranded due to \$100 entry fee", 7 September 2020, Middle East Monitor; "Syria's 100 Dollar Barrier to Return", 23 September 2020, Human Rights Watch.
- 15 See for example Joint Agency NGO Report (2020): "Into the unknown: Listening to Syria's displaced in the search for durable solutions."
- 16 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019): "Fifth regional survey on Syrian refugees' perceptions and intentions on return to Syria";
- 17 Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (2019): "No Longer Just a Humanitarian Crisis. The Politicization of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", p. 20.
- 18 See https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions.
- 19 "At UN Assembly, Lebanese leader appeals for help to rebuild after Beirut explosion", 23 September 2020, UN News.
- 20 "Overlapping crises in Lebanon fuel a new migration to Cyprus", 21 September 2020, The New Humanitarian.
- 21 "Refugee pushbacks by Cyprus draw attention from EU, UN", 16 September 2020, Deutsche Welle; See also https://kisa.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RLet-EDAD-CY-Pushbacks-09092020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2R7o7PZj4S0ZYcdo1ajPrXNZXgx81zTqj0sJ_g_3uSrCG1IH2s-4dUwde4.
- 22 "UNHCR and UNICEF: Urgent need to address the root causes of life-risking journeys from Lebanon and ensure swift rescue of people distressed at sea", 18 September 2020, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- 23 See for example "Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border", 17 March 2020, Human Rights Watch.
- 24 "Denmark: No Forced Return to Syria", 21 February 2020, European Council on Refugees and Exiles; "Denmark's dangerous plan to deport Syrian refugees to Assad-controlled Damascus", 30 June 2020, The New Arab.
- 25 "Germany Supported the Return of 437 People to Syria – Reports on Disappearance of Returnees Raise Concern", 1 March 2019, European Council on Refugees and Exiles.
- 26 See also a statement on the Beirut explosion by Alef-Act for Human Rights, Basmeh & Zeitooneh, PAX and 11.11.11: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1urp2OSpjG53huF4xUiSz80Ejt5t84t7j/view>.
- 27 Access Center for Human Rights (2020): "Discrimination in the Distribution of Aid to the Syrian Refugee Victims of the Beirut Explosion".
- 28 "Lebanon parliament approves sweeping powers for the army", 13 August 2020, Al Jazeera.
- 29 "Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration", 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.
- 30 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019): "Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2018", p 29.
- 31 "Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration", 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.
- 32 Refugee Protection Watch (2020a): "Briefing on COVID-19 and Lebanon"; Refugee Protection Watch (2020b): "RPW Brief: the Double Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crisis in Lebanon".
- 33 World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", p 48.

- 34 World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", p 67.
- 35 "Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration", 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.
- 36 It should be emphasized that the sample of returnees RPW spoke with, were **a)** people from the small percentage of refugees who had already – to some degree – felt safe enough to return to Syria, **b)** people who felt safe enough to participate in the research, and **c)** people who were speaking in a highly-securitised environment which significantly limited their ability to voice protection and safety concerns. Therefore, the fact that the returnee respondents interviewed for this report did not report the occurrence of security incidents, does not necessarily mean that they, and returnees in general, are not facing significant security risks. The latter also becomes clear from the fact that many Syrians can not even consider returning due to security and/or protection issues, and by research from other organisations.
- 37 Landinfo (2018): "Syria: reactions against deserters and draft evaders".
- 38 See in this regard also Sawa for Dev & Aid (2019): "Unpacking Return. Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns".
- 39 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 6, p 9.
- 40 Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (2019): "Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians".
- 41 Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (2020): "We are Syria. Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the Reasons for Displacement and Minimum Conditions for Return".
- 42 "Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas", 21 May 2019, Human Rights Watch.
- 43 European Institute of Peace (2019): "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity".
- 44 "UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible", 28 February 2019, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- 45 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/43/57.
- 46 "Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration", 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.
- 47 United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and World Food Program (2019): "VASYR 2019 - Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon".
- 48 Evans, D. and Over, M. (2020): 'The Economic Impact of COVID-19 in Low- and Middle-Income Countries', Center for Global Development.
- 49 United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and World Food Program (2019): "VASYR 2019 - Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon".
- 50 "Q&A- Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature?", 12 June 2019, Amnesty International.
- 51 Basmeih & Zeitooneh (2019): "Drivers of Premature Return, Syrians' Reflections on Displacement in Lebanon", p 31.
- 52 6.2% of respondents preferred not to answer this question.
- 53 Upcoming rounds of data collection will also further probe the character and quality of information that Syrian refugees have access to.
- 54 The remaining respondents "preferred not to answer" this question.
- 55 Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (2020): "We are Syria. Survey of 1,100 Displaced Syrians on the Reasons for Displacement and Minimum Conditions for Return", p 26.
- 56 UNHCR (1996): 'Handbook. Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection'.
- 57 UNHCR (1996): 'Handbook. Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection'.
- 58 https://www.refugees-lebanon.org/uploads/poster/poster_155237661210.pdf.
- 59 UNHCR (1996): 'Handbook. Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection'.
- 60 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 7-8.
- 61 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 4.
- 62 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 7.
- 63 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 9.
- 64 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 79-81.
- 65 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 81-87.
- 66 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 90.
- 67 "The Wages of Destruction", 24 June 2020, Carnegie Middle East Center.
- 68 See <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-116s52is/pdf/BILLS-116s52is.pdf>.
- 69 Center for Global Policy (2020): "Syria's Economic Meltdown".
- 70 "U.S. Sanctions on Syria: What Comes Next?", 13 July 2020, International Crisis Group.
- 71 United Nations Human Rights Council (2018): "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights on his mission to the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/39/54/Add.2, p 7.

- 72 IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development (2020): "Invisible Sanctions. How over-compliance limits humanitarian work on Syria-Challenges of Fund Transfer for Non-Profit Organizations Working on Syria"; Walker, J. (2016): "Study on Humanitarian Impact of Syria-Related Unilateral Restrictive Measures"; United Nations Human Rights Council (2018): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/39/65.
- 73 It is important to highlight that many returnees in the RPW research sample are present in areas that are relatively accessible and that receive food baskets from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), in stark contrast to the large number of Syrians who reside in areas with a high security risk and suffer from lack of humanitarian access. With regards to aid to Syria in general, lack of funding to the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan has depleted the level of aid that can be provided. Furthermore, aid flowing through Damascus is highly controlled by the GoS and violates the principle of impartiality, resulting in Syrians considered hostile to the GoS not receiving the assistance they need.
- 74 Sawa for Dev & Aid (2019): "Unpacking Return. Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns", p 31.
- 75 It is important to note that access to electricity and water go hand in hand (when there's electricity, there is also water), as well as whether they rely on private generators and water tanks to fulfill their needs.
- 76 Basmeh & Zeitooneh (2019): "Drivers of Premature Return, Syrians' Reflections on Displacement in Lebanon", p 17; Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (2019): "Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians".
- 77 See yomyatsy.net/2019/01/29/145; <http://almashhadonline.net/article/5d95c4e8336dc>; www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2018/1/4/14-نيسر-ال-ي-ف-مهم-يل-عت-فان-ي-تس-ان-ور-ظنتن-ي-س-يل-اطفل-ا
- 78 See <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/102713>.
- 79 See <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/syria.pdf>.
- 80 "2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview", https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Syr_HNO_Full.pdf.
- 81 "Eastern Ghouta Syria: The neighbourhoods below the bombs", 29 March 2018, BBC.
- 82 See <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/270194>.
- 83 See <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/326369>.
- 84 "Syrians cannot afford their children's back to school supplies", 28 August 2020, Enab Baladi.
- 85 "A/HRC/28/69.CRP.4" *Human Rights Council*. 5 February 2017
- 86 "A/HRC/34/CRP.3" *Human Rights Council*. 10 March 2017. For a timeline of significant events related to Syria's chemical weapons program from July 2012 to the present, also see <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>
- 87 Landinfo (2018): "Syria: reactions against deserters and draft evaders".
- 88 B&Z conducted a separate study, specifically on the risk posed by mandatory military conscription and the consequences of draft avoidance, with the support of Trocaire. A total of 40 KIs and respondents were interviewed.
- 89 See <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/11/23/400-ة-طاي-ت-حال-ا-تم-د-خل-ل-ل-دي-د-ح-ب-ول-طم-فل-أ>.
- 90 "Syria Update: Military service law amended: Serve, pay up, or forfeit assets", 6 January 2020, Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR).
- 91 The two slices on the top part of pie chart 'Concerns that are preventing you from return - Syrians' are not displayed, but should be 1.3% 'I prefer not to answer' and 0.6% 'No, I have no concerns'.
- 92 "Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration", 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.
- 93 <https://twitter.com/UNCoISyria/status/1308425041319731203>; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and University of St Andrews (2020): "Syria at War: Eight Years on", p 74.
- 94 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Syr_HNO_Full.pdf.
- 95 United Nations Human Rights Council (2020): "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", A/HRC/45/31, p 8-9.
- 96 World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", p 117.
- 97 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and University of St Andrews (2020): "Syria at War: Eight Years on", p 74.
- 98 Impunity Watch and PAX (2020): "Violations of Housing, Land and Property Rights: An Obstacle to Peace in Syria. What can International Policymakers do?", p 2.
- 99 Impunity Watch and PAX (2020): "Violations of Housing, Land and Property Rights: An Obstacle to Peace in Syria. What can International Policymakers do?", p 2.
- 100 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 114.
- 101 Syrian Center for Policy Research (2020): "Justice to Transcend Conflict. Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", p 114.
- 102 Impunity Watch and PAX (2020): "Violations of Housing, Land and Property Rights: An Obstacle to Peace in Syria. What can International Policymakers do?", p 3.
- 103 "Explained: Security Approvals and Infringements on Property Rights", 23 September 2020, The Syria Report.
- 104 World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis", p 32.

- 105 According to H NAP's fourth COVID-19 vulnerability mapping, nearly the entire population of Rural Damascus Governorate is at high risk of contracting COVID-19 and there are insufficient medical facilities in all sub-districts to deal with the influx of COVID-19 patients. Besides one sub-district in Homs Governorate, which is considered "less sufficient", all sub-districts have insufficient COVID-19 related medical facilities too, and the majority of the population across all sub-districts is at moderate risk of contracting the virus. The vulnerability is determined by assessing key indicators affiliated with exposure to, and are conducive to, the spread of COVID-19. The components include: burden of displacement, access to essential COVID-19 hygiene items, community awareness of the disease, priority WASH and health needs, COVID-19 migration efforts and access to health services. See "Regional COVID-19 Vulnerability Map Government of Syria Controlled Areas", 14 September 2020.
- 106 For more details, see Refugee Protection Watch (2020a): "Briefing on COVID-19 and Lebanon".
- 107 For more details, see Refugee Protection Watch (2020b): "RPW Brief: the Double Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crisis in Lebanon".
- 108 Respondents could select more than one answer option.
- 109 <http://alwehda.gov.sy/index.php/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B5>
- 110 <http://cbssyr.sy/other%20statistics-EN.htm>
- 111 H NAP, November 2019.
- 112 <http://homschamber.com/%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%ad%d9%85%d8%b5/>.
- 113 <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/syria/unemployment-rate> .
- 114 alwehda.gov.sy/index.php/صحة/أىروس
- 115 <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/citiesandregions/2014/5/22/%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82>
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- 118 www.shaam.org/reports/humanitarian-reports/تارشلللتقيو-قرصاحمظلائاعفلأ-15-ةاناعمديزي-رغولايحفصرق
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The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition is comprised of Basmeh and Zeitooneh, ALEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11 and Upinion.

