

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

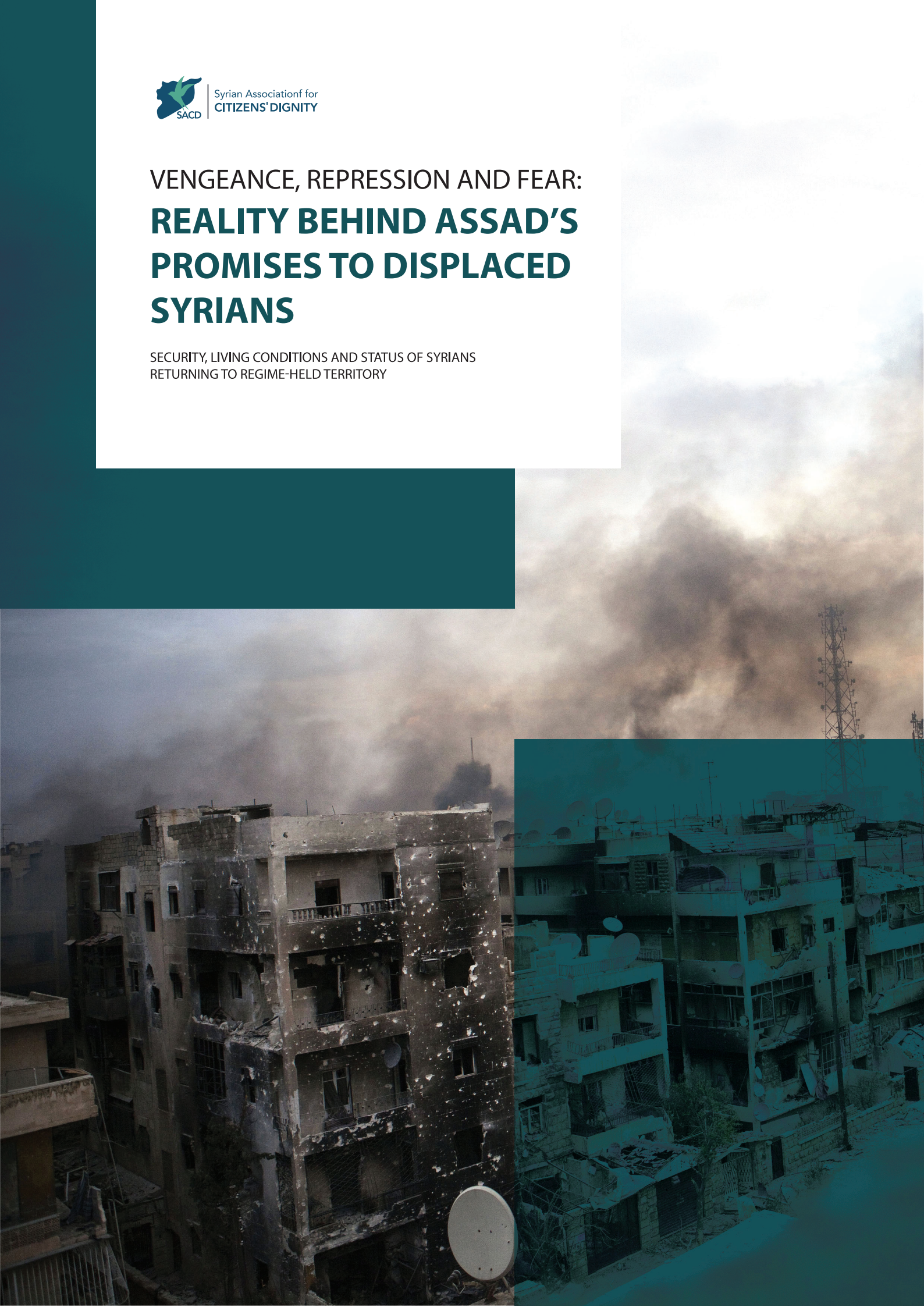
|                                 |                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>               | <b>1164</b>                                                                          |
| Land:                           | Syrien                                                                               |
| Kilde:                          | Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity (SACD)                                        |
| Titel:                          | Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians |
| Udgivet:                        | 18. november 2019                                                                    |
| Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet: | 20. januar 2020                                                                      |



Syrian Association for  
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

# VENGEANCE, REPRESSION AND FEAR: **REALITY BEHIND ASSAD'S PROMISES TO DISPLACED SYRIANS**

SECURITY, LIVING CONDITIONS AND STATUS OF SYRIANS  
RETURNING TO REGIME-HELD TERRITORY







Syrian Association for  
**CITIZENS' DIGNITY**

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

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

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



# INDEX

|                                                        |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>                               | 01 |
| <b>Key Findings</b>                                    | 03 |
| <b>Methodology</b>                                     | 05 |
| Terminology                                            | 05 |
| Sample definition approach                             | 06 |
| <b>Security</b>                                        | 09 |
| Feeling safe                                           | 10 |
| Risk of arbitrary detention and (forced disappearance) | 13 |
| <b>Living Conditions and General Rights</b>            | 15 |
| Housing issues                                         | 16 |
| Payments for non-existent services                     | 18 |
| Housing issues                                         | 20 |
| Evaluation of the public services reality              | 22 |
| Absence of the rule of law and widespread corruption   | 24 |
| Losing previous job                                    | 27 |
| Harassment of residents and returnees                  | 28 |
| Lack of freedom and citizen's rights                   | 29 |
| <b>Intentions and Opinions about Leaving</b>           | 31 |
| The wish to leave regime-held areas                    | 32 |
| Motivations for leaving                                | 33 |
| Advising others to return                              | 33 |
| <b>Recommendations</b>                                 | 35 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                                                                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1. Interviewees' residency status .....                                            | 06 |
| Figure 2. Type of area (degree of regime control) .....                                   | 07 |
| Figure 3. Perceptions of safety, by type of regime-held area .....                        | 10 |
| Figure 4. Perceptions of safety, returnees vs. long-term residents .....                  | 10 |
| Figure 5. Prevalence of arbitrary arrests .....                                           | 13 |
| Figure 6. Detainees by pardon and reconciliation status .....                             | 13 |
| Figure 7. Forced to move within regime-controlled area, by degree of regime control ..... | 16 |
| Figure 8. Forced to move within regime-controlled area, by city .....                     | 16 |
| Figure 9. Type of housing problem .....                                                   | 17 |
| Figure 10. Type of housing problem, by degree of regime control .....                     | 17 |
| Figure 11. Forced payments of non-existent services .....                                 | 18 |
| Figure 12. Forced payments of non-existent services, by city .....                        | 18 |
| Figure 13. Loss of previous job, by residence status .....                                | 27 |
| Figure 14. Causes of a change in work .....                                               | 27 |
| Figure 15. Would you consider leaving if you had the chance .....                         | 32 |
| Figure 16. Desired destination, by current city of residence .....                        | 32 |
| Figure 17. Desired destination, all Interviewees .....                                    | 33 |
| Figure 18. Motivation to leave regime-held areas .....                                    | 33 |
| Figure 19. Citizens advising others to return .....                                       | 34 |

# Executive Summary

**E**ight years into the conflict in Syria, some 13 million people—more than half of the country's population—have been displaced from their homes. Some 6 million are internally displaced, while the rest are refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Europe and elsewhere. This is an unprecedented scale of displacement in modern times. Any political solution to the conflict must include mechanisms to protect displaced Syrians from refoolment (being forced to return to dangerous conditions) until the conditions for their voluntary, safe and dignified return are guaranteed by a political agreement, and a robust international mechanism to guarantee and monitor respect for their rights is put in place.

The vast majority of the displaced live in an increasingly difficult situation. Inside Syria they are suffering in dire living conditions, overpopulation and continued attacks by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and his allies. This indiscriminate killing has displaced more than 400,000 people who have fled from Idlib and northern Hama towards the Turkish border since the beginning of the latest military offensive led by Russia and Assad's regime in February 2019. Despite the harsh living conditions in Idlib caused by the offensive's intentional destruction of vast amounts of civilian infrastructure, **there have been no recorded cases of people fleeing towards regime-held areas.** Likewise, residents of Rukban Camp, on the border with Jordan, are under siege and lack basic food and supplies. A UN delegation that visited in August 2019 was **shocked by the low number<sup>1</sup> of people that wanted to return to regime areas despite the harsh living conditions in the camp.**

At the same time, Syrians living as refugees in Lebanon are facing an increasingly harsh situation characterized by a lack of access to basic services and rising anti-Syrian sentiment. The situation in Turkey is worsening due to domestic issues and external pressure, although Turkey is not pressuring Syrians to go back to regime-held areas, but Turkey is planning to populate a potential future safe zone in north-eastern Syria with "at least one million Syrian refugees"<sup>2-3</sup>.

Syrian refugees in some European countries are also being pressured to return home, with or without a political solution to the conflict or sound international guarantees of the minimum conditions for a safe and dignified return. The Lebanese head of general security recently stated that as many as 200 000<sup>4</sup> Syrian refugees have been returned to Assad-held areas in Syria. International agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have limited or no access to most of these areas; they cannot monitor the fate of returnees or report on the security threats in regime-controlled parts of the country.

Assad's regime is intensively implementing a policy of demographic change aimed at stripping a huge portion of the displaced Syrians of their homes and properties through discriminatory laws, demolitions and false "reconstruction" activities. The regime and its Russian allies are desperate for international funds, especially from the European Union, to finance their

"reconstruction" and create new realities on the ground with a multi-pronged effort to Syria's demographic picture before the

1. "UN 'ready to facilitate' evacuations from Rukban camp in southern Syria," Defense Post, 30 August 2019 <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/08/30/syria-rukban-un-evacuation/>
2. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-to-sort-out-safe-zone-in-syria-soon-erdogan/1575647>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49719284>
4. "200,000 Syrian refugees have returned from Lebanon since 2017," PressTV, 11 May 2019 <https://www.presstv.com/Detail-Fr/2019/05/11/595659/Syrian-refugees-Lebanon->

organized return of the displaced takes place. To achieve this objective, they are actively promoting a false narrative that the displaced are free to return to Assad-held areas, that the returnees will be safe from persecution and harassment, and allowed to reclaim their properties and enjoy a peaceful life. As this report reveals, nothing could be further from the truth.

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

**The report has unique value as no international organization, including the UNHCR, has real, uncensored access to all areas under Assad's control.** Gathering information on the security situation, threats facing returnees and the general living conditions in these areas in a systematized way is virtually impossible. The Data Collection and Analysis Unit of the Syrian Association for Citizen

Dignity (SACD), a movement fighting for the rights of displaced Syrians, worked in extremely challenging conditions to interview 165 people in Homs, Damascus countryside, Dara'a and Aleppo to obtain a valid, reliable and comprehensive picture of the situation facing returnees in Assad-held areas of Syria.

-----



# Key Findings

**T**he main conclusion of this research is that **it is not safe for displaced Syrians to return to Assad-held areas**. Returnees and most people living in regime-held areas live in fear and feel extremely vulnerable and unsafe. Widespread and systematic human rights violations continue to be committed against Syrians in these areas by the regime, its security apparatus, militias and foreign forces. Arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment, extortion and the absence of basic services<sup>5</sup> are the main factors driving this fear and the returnees' desire to leave their homes again, this time permanently. Nearly 60 per cent of the interviewees (and 73 per cent of those living in areas the regime seized by force) reported that they would seriously consider leaving if an opportunity presented itself. Returnees overwhelmingly asserted that they regret their decision to return, regardless of the hardship they faced in displacement; 63 per cent are actively seeking a way to flee again. Several factors are driving another wave of displacement, this time among those who have returned or decided to stay under "reconciliation agreements".

- **The most destructive pattern of abuse is the indiscriminate arrests and detention by the security services without a charge.** More than a quarter of those interviewed had been detained themselves or had a family member arbitrarily arrested by the security services. Of those respondents, 75 per cent had been arrested within the last 18 months. More than 70 per cent of those arrested had to pay a bribe to be released. Beatings and torture are common practices in detention. Several interviewees' relatives were taken to unknown locations, after which they were never heard from again.
- **Some 68 per cent of those interviewed are themselves or have a relative who is wanted for arrest by either the security services or Assad's military.** Forced conscription<sup>6</sup> into Assad's forces is rampant, especially in areas integrated under "reconciliation agreements", where up to 75 per cent of those interviewed or their family members were wanted for recruitment. Conscripted fighters are almost inevitably sent to the most dangerous frontlines; many, especially young men, have been killed either in battle or in murky circumstances. Many of those wanted by the security branches for being perceived as "anti-Assad" are forced into the military and sent to the frontlines straight from detention and are never seen again.
- **Two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they live in constant fear of arrest or harassment from the security services and various militias that run a maze of checkpoints—particularly those in or from areas under "reconciliation agreements".** People are arbitrarily stopped, harassed, threatened and arrested by these groups to extort money on the spot or from their families. Militias rely on a network of informants to identify returnees and those who accepted "reconciliation agreements" for targeting.

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

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

- **Corruption and extortion by the regime and militias permeate every aspect of life for returnees.** Interviewees reported having to pay bribes to carry out the most menial of activities, such as obtaining documents or transporting produce to the market. Almost all industrial and other economic activity in these areas has ceased, so farming is often the sole source of income. The regime is exploiting this situation by enforcing a ban on the transfer of goods and products beyond local areas under “reconciliation agreements”, which forces returnees to sell their produce to the pro-regime monopolists. Two-thirds of the returnees have lost their former source of income and are now unemployed or engaged in manual, temporary work that cannot provide a basic standard of living for their families.
- **Most interviewees from areas covered by the regime’s “urban development laws” consider themselves to be affected by the discriminatory laws and decrees governing the destroyed areas.** They are systematically denied the right to their property in an openly retaliatory manner, especially in areas where the regime has seized control by force. Returnees to these areas are particularly affected, as regime officials know that one of the key reasons they returned was to officially document their property to ensure it is not lost.

The data collected in this research provide empirical evidence in support of a long-held position of SADC: the return of displaced Syrians is impossible without a comprehensive political solution that guarantees the rights of returnees, including their rights to be free of persecution, discrimination and harassment, their right to safety and dignity, their rights to their property and protection under the law, and freedoms guaranteed to them as citizens and human beings. This research gives international and regional decision makers working to help displaced Syrians a unique insight into the real consequences of ill-conceived policies, especially those that accommodate the Syrian regime and Russia’s policy of forced return. The report’s findings reinforce the need to protect the rights and dignity of Syrian refugees and to provide adequate living conditions in their places of displacement to protect them from forced return, and to ensure their wellbeing and dignity as a prerequisite for a lasting political solution and any hope of genuine stability in Syria and the region.

# Methodology

This quantitative research study is based on structured interviews conducted using identical questionnaires to collect the opinions of Syrian citizens residing in regime-controlled areas. The study addresses three themes in these areas:

- **Security conditions**
- **Living conditions and basic rights**
- **Residents' intention to leave/stay**

Due to clear security threats and censorship challenges from Assad's regime, all interviews were held secretly through private remote communication, or in person when possible in order to protect respondents and interviewees from threats originating from the regime's security forces. All names have been changed in this report. This hazardous situation was fully explained to both respondents and researchers, and the respondents' informed consent<sup>7</sup> was obtained before commencing the study in accordance with the policies of SACD's Data Collection and Analysis Unit. The SACD-affiliated researchers all had at least 5 years' experience conducting similar research, and were rigorously screened to ensure they could perform such challenging research.

## Terminology

Throughout the report the following terminology is used to identify categories of interviewed citizens and their areas of origin.

**Returnees:** Syrian refugees or internally displaced persons (IDP) who returned to regime-controlled areas for any reasonable period during the conflict

**Residents:** Syrian citizens who live in regime-controlled areas, and did not become a refugee or IDP at any time during the conflict

**Areas A** = regime-controlled areas: areas that have remained under the control of the Syrian regime since 2011

**Areas B** = areas retaken by the regime after a surrender of opposition forces followed by reconciliation agreements: namely Dara and Homs Northern suburb

**Areas C** = areas retaken by the regime by force without reconciliation agreements: namely Damascus suburb (Eastern and western Ghouta), parts of Homs city (ancient city and Al-Wa'er neighbourhood, east Aleppo)

**Reconciliation agreements<sup>8</sup>:** Local truces in the Syrian conflict that the regime calls reconciliation (Muslaha) agreements. These agreements have different modalities. In some cases opposition forces remained in the area under the agreement and theoretically were involved in the area's security, although in practice the opposition was gradually eliminated. In other cases, the opposition forces had to completely leave the area. In all cases, civilians were given the chance to leave on the infamous green buses, or take their chances by staying. In most cases, these agreements led to the complete or partial evacuation of civilians from these areas.

7. Informed Consent is a voluntary agreement to participate in research after the participant has had the risks of taking part explained and he or she indicates their willingness to proceed.

8. "The Details of 'Reconciliation Deals' Expose How They Are Anything But," Haid Haid, Chatham House, August 2018 <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-details-of-reconciliation-deals-expose-how-they-are-anything-but-a-closer-look-at-the-regimes-process-reveals-its-real-goal-retribution-and-control>

## I Sample definition approach

The study employed a systematic approach to guarantee the fair representation of the different segments of Syrian society affected by the forced displacement. The following categories of people were interviewed in order to capture the diversity of the targeted areas:

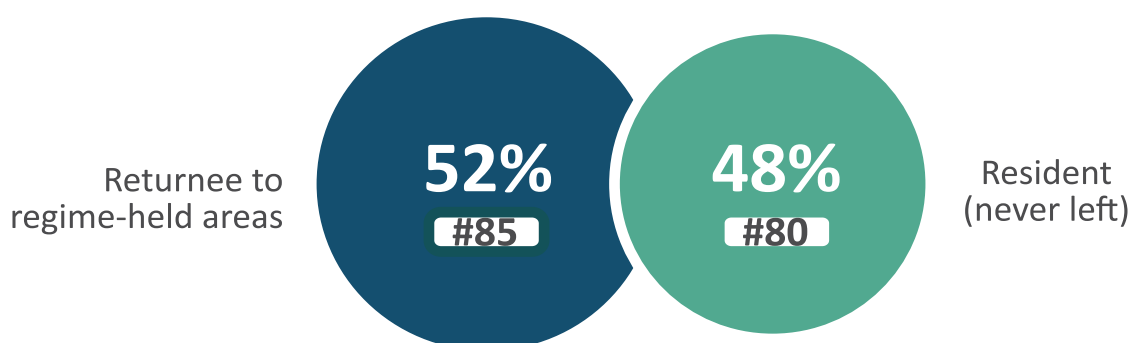
- Citizens who are not involved in any political, military or humanitarian activities.
- Citizens who were formerly engaged in military activities in opposition forces (who conceded to Personal Legal Status Settlements)
- Citizens involved in civil and humanitarian activities in opposition-held areas, such as humanitarian workers, human rights activists and clerks working with organizations established by members of the opposition (who conceded to Personal Legal Status Settlements)
- Humanitarian workers active in documenting legal issues and human rights violations

The sample was designed to be representative of the target communities in terms of gender balance, age groups and educational levels to ensure that the findings apply to the entire society. It was designed to reflect the experiences of both males and females. Interviewees were classified into four categories; special focus was given to citizens aged 26–60 which oversampled by design, the focus on this group was due to their vulnerability to be affected by the security context of the current and post conflict status. While the sample covers all educational levels of the target communities, the percentage of participants with a university or post-graduate degree is low. This is mainly because most academically qualified people have left regime-held areas as they were forced to take refuge elsewhere in Syria or seek asylum outside the country, in addition to the fact that they have the resources to leave/stay away.

**The respondents were nearly equally divided into two categories of resident status (see Figure 1):**

1. Returnees who had been refugees or IDPs (52 per cent).
2. Residents who have not experienced displacement and stayed in regime-controlled areas; some have moved between regime-controlled areas (48 per cent).

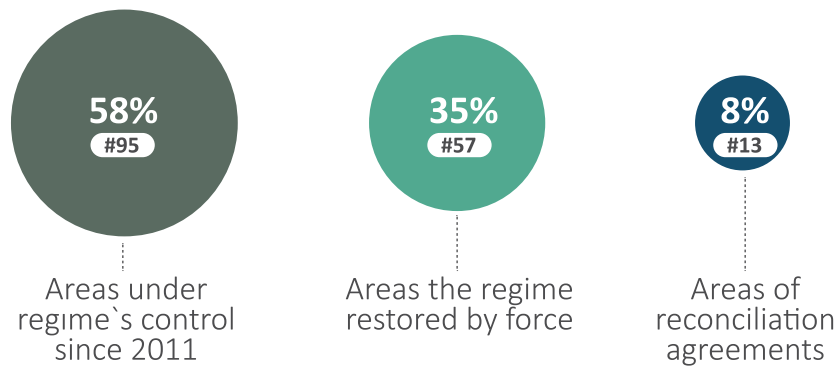
**Figure 1.** Interviewees' residency status



Respondents' areas of residence are also categorized into three types based on the degree of former control by opposition forces and the Syrian regime's restored control (see Figure 2).

1. Respondents from A areas that were never opposition held (8 per cent of total respondents).
2. Respondents from B areas retaken by the regime from opposition after "reconciliation agreements" (35 per cent).
3. Respondents from C areas taken by the regime through military intervention without "reconciliation agreements" (58 per cent).

**Figure 2.** Type of area (degree of regime control)



Interviews were conducted in four governorates (Damascus countryside, Dara'a, Homs, and Aleppo) which illustrate the regime's conduct towards returnees or those who accepted "reconciliation agreements." These areas provide an insight into the fate that awaits most of the displaced/refugees if they return to regime-held areas without international guarantees.



Rural damascus 2019





Rural Damascus- 2019



Rural Damascus-doma- 2019



# Security

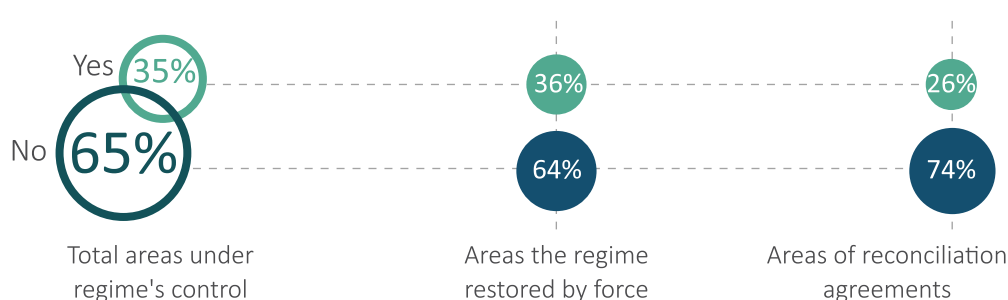




## I Feeling safe

Safety is a key prerequisite for the return of refugees in accordance with international standards. Their return must be also be voluntary and dignified. However, 65 per cent of the respondents in this study (68 per cent of men and 59 per cent of the women interviewed) acknowledged that they do not feel safe in the regime-held areas. Older residents reported feeling less safe than their younger counterparts: 82 per cent of those over 60 feel unsafe, compared to 58 per cent of those aged 18 to 25. Reconciliation agreements appear to make residents feel less safe: 74 per cent of respondents in areas the regime restored through reconciliation agreements feel unsafe, compared to 64 per cent in areas without such agreements (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Perceptions of safety, by type of regime-held area



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Do you feel safe to be in regime-held area?'

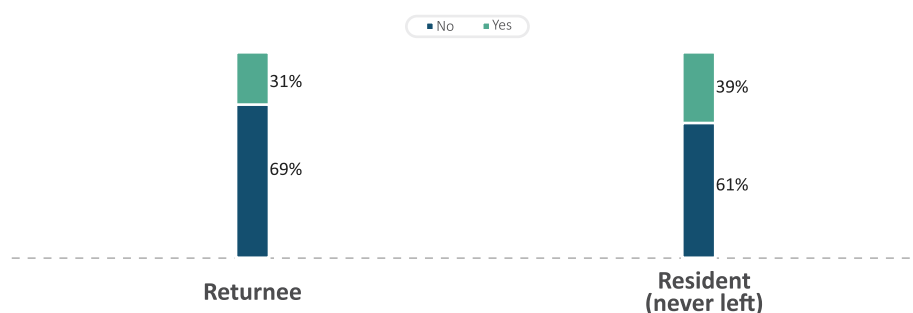
The participants expressed their disappointment regarding the regime's promises not to abuse them. They were also angered by what they described as "the regime's repudiation of reconciliation agreements and the inability of the Russian guarantor to win the trust of citizens."

### The main three sources of respondents' fear are:

- Arbitrary arrests
- Forced conscription into regime forces
- Chaotic security situation caused by the presence of regime forces and various militias

The high level of insecurity felt by people in regime-held areas is evident. Figure 4 illustrates that it is somewhat higher among returnees (69 per cent) compared to residents who never left their homes (61 per cent)

**Figure 4.** Perceptions of safety, returnees vs. long-term residents



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Do you feel safe to be in regime-held area?'

This data directly contradicts the regime's propaganda about ensuring the security of returnees and its promises that none will be subject to abuse<sup>9</sup>. The study showed that 94 per cent of the participants who feel insecure are those who conceded to so-called Personal Legal Status Settlements<sup>10</sup> as part of their overall "reconciliation agreement". For instance, Saeed, a 25-year-old former opposition fighter conceded to a "Personal Legal Status Settlement" under pressure from his parents because he was severely injured in the last clashes before the regime took the area. He now lives in constant expectation of being arrested.

Some 70 per cent of interviewees expressed fear due to the fact that they or a family member is wanted for compulsory or reserve military service (fear of being recruited). Half of the respondents attributed their feelings of insecurity to the fact that they or a family member are in danger of being arrested because they were against the regime (fear of being arrested).

The participants' testimonies reflect a mixture of fears and serious concerns that have become part of their daily life. These fears developed from direct personal or family experiences, or those of their friends and acquaintances.

“

***There is always the fear of extortion or detention because my children are away and because of the malice of the security forces.***

*Sameh Ali, 62-year-old man from Homs*

***There is a sense of insecurity and fear of revenge, arrest, or financial extortion by the security forces. There is no law and jurisdiction.***

*Monzer Rajab, 46-year-old man from Homs*

***I have been arrested and blackmailed several times, and there have been several robberies in the neighbourhood. Everyone knows the thieves but cannot do anything.***

*Abu Sobhi, 60-year-old man from Homs*

***Many people have been arrested for not accepting reconciliations, and I fear I will be one of the arrested.***

*Ramez, 60-year-old man from Homs*

- 
9. "Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation." Washington Post, Louisa Loveluck, 2 June 2019 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef\\_story.html?noredirect=on](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html?noredirect=on)
10. Regime authorities offered these agreements as a guarantee not to persecute ex-fighters who surrender. They are usually sponsored by Russian or local community leaders.

### 01 Persecution by the security apparatus:

48 per cent of the participants stated that they or their family members were wanted by the regime security branches for reasons related to anti-regime civilian activities, even including anti-regime sentiments.

### 02 Persecution by forced military recruitment:

68 per cent of total respondents were wanted for recruitment in compulsory military service, and in the areas the regime retook by force this percentage was a bit higher (i.e. 75 per cent in those areas).

### 03 Other forms of persecution:

The conflict has left the regime military and security branches in disarray, as testimonies described considerable confusion and lack of coordination between the various wings of relevant regime military and security branches, which has resulted in a seemingly contradictory call to recruit military persons who already wanted or persecuted for security reason, and in this issue the study shows that 63 from the respondents who came from the area the regime retook by force are wanted for both reasons.

Testimonies from this study and open source reports make it clear that individuals whose loyalty the regime suspects are being forcibly recruited into the army and immediately thrown into the fiercest battles on the most difficult frontlines<sup>11</sup>. In effect, the regime is executing “anti-regime elements” and former opposition fighters who “reconciled” in a way that shields it from international investigation. Thus, forced conscription is being used as a substitute for the widespread use of torture and death in the regime’s prisons, which have been extensively documented by human rights groups<sup>12</sup>.

For instance, the son of Umm Zuhair, from Eastern Ghouta, signed a so-called Personal Settlement with the regime after it took control of the city. His safety and rights were guaranteed by Russian forces as guarantors of the “reconciliation agreement”. Upon his visit to the Military Drafting Division in 7/2018, he was taken to a front-line combat zone. He disappeared shortly thereafter during a night shift. His fate remains unknown.

***If only I hadn't allowed him to stay, at least I could have known he was alive or dead, I would rather die and I regret it ....***

*Umm Zuhair, 60-year-old woman from Eastern Ghouta*

11. “Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear,” Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, July 24 2019 <https://medium.com/@SACD/reconciling-with-death-disappearance-and-fear-6e17fe2456aa>

12. Human Rights Watch reported on the release of more than 28,000 shocking photos of deaths of detainees. Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Stories Behind Photos of Killed Detainees’, 16 December 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees>

## I Risk of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance

Over half (62 per cent) of the respondents or one of their relatives have been subject to arbitrary detention by the regime's security services.

**Figure 5. Prevalence of arbitrary arrests**

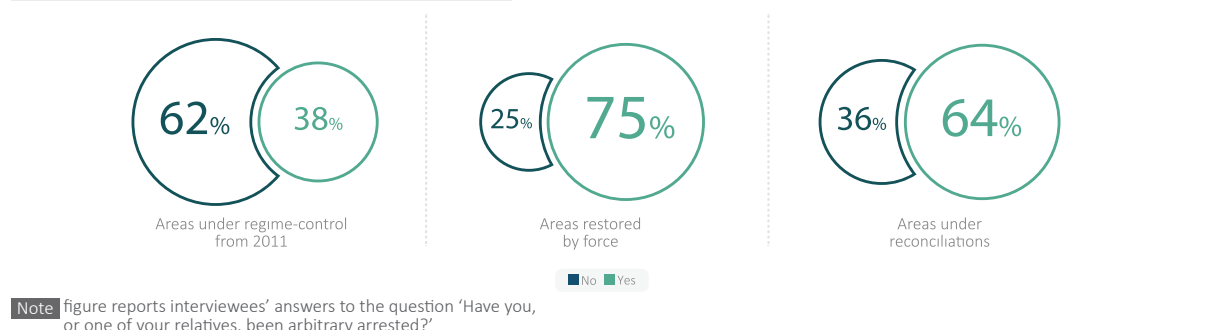
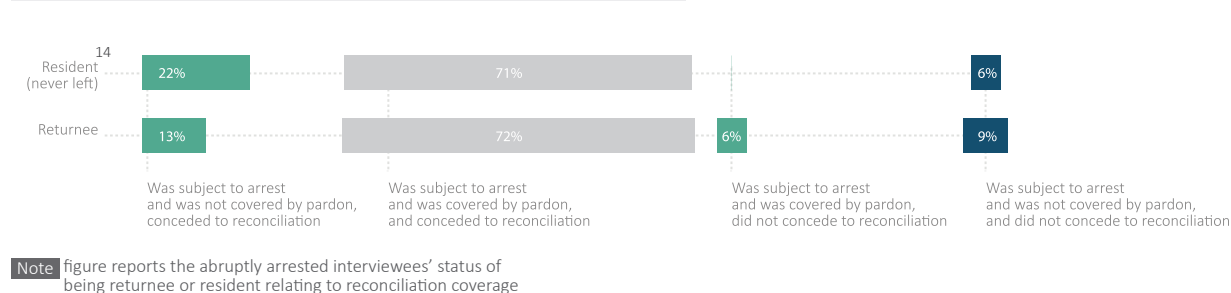


Figure 6 illustrates that 72 per cent of the returnees who were arrested were covered by the regime's alleged pardon<sup>13</sup> decrees and/or entered into Personal Settlements after staying in these areas after reconciliation agreements.

**Figure 6. Detainees by pardon and reconciliation status**



This testimony demonstrates that the regime is not effectively enforcing its decrees. It also highlights the fragility of the reconciliation agreements, which have made it possible for the regime to impose control by systematically violating the rights of the local population.

The testimonies of those interviewed for this study illustrate the widespread sense of insecurity among local residents.

“

***My husband was arrested more than once after our return.***

*Rama Alahamad, 50-year-old woman from Homs*

***I am an old man living with my wife. When the regime restored our area, my young son did not leave and stayed in the neighbourhood. After a while, he was arrested. Security forces harass us because of our imprisoned son and because of our other children who stayed with the rebels.***

*Abu Fayez, 65-year-old man from Homs*

***I was imprisoned after a (reconciliation agreement), but they imprisoned me for financial extortion and demanded a very large sum for my release.***

*Marwan, 44-year-old man from Homs*

13. Assad issued a decree that declared a general pardon/amnesty for particular crimes; some crimes are pardoned fully, partly, or even excluded from amnesty, which is changed according to the will of the legislator. This decree covers only the public liability; it does not pardon individuals for the personal liability. In previous years, several amnesty decrees were issued, most of which did not include the alleged perpetrators of so-called 'political crimes'. Moreover, the amnesty includes terms such as setting a time limit for extraditing a wanted person. In some cases, pardoned persons are still prosecuted via personal legal claims from individuals affiliated with the regime as a deceptive way to bypass the amnesty.
14. "never left residents" refers to people who never left their homes regardless of who was in control of the area



Mrs. Hanan, a 35-year-old woman from northern Homs countryside, was arrested at the border crossing (Naseeb) with Jordan upon her return from Saudi Arabia in November 2018. She believed the regime's propaganda about strong security guarantees, general pardons<sup>15</sup>, and guarantees to all returnees that they would not be persecuted. However, she was detained and charged with supporting "terrorists". She was blackmailed and forced to bribe a number of regime security officers to transfer her to a civilian prison<sup>16</sup>. She was later released after a staged mock trial.

***If I did not pay them, you would not have seen me this day to tell my story.***

*Mrs. Hanan, 35-year-old woman, Homs countryside*

Abu Mahmoud, a 53-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta, said that his only son had never been interested in joining either side of the conflict. He consequently believed the regime's alleged assurances through general pardon<sup>17</sup> that they would not harm anyone who was not involved in hostile military activities. An unknown security force arrested his son in January 2019. His fate is unknown.

***The boy has gone. I wish they had taken me and left him to his mother.***

*Abu Mahmoud, 53-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta*

The testimony of Um Mohammed, a 45-year-old widow from eastern Aleppo, further illustrates the broader feeling of insecurity. She was forced to leave the regime-held areas in 2011 and cross over to the opposition-held areas in eastern Aleppo countryside. However, the difficult economic situation in the displacement, and her desire to return to her extended family, made her decide to return to the regime-held areas controlled by one of the regime's militias, the so-called National Defence Forces, better known as "Shabiha". She was arrested while trying to obtain her identity card. She spent 50 days in prison and was forced to transfer her house and parts of her property to Shabiha. Ultimately, she was forced to pay a large sum of money as a bribe to one of the regime's officers to be released.

15. BBC, 'Syria: Bashar al-Assad "grants general amnesty"', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13607770>.

16. In this case the bribe amount was about \$3,500, but in general the amount ranges from \$2,000 to \$20,000 depending on the alleged accusations, security branch, area, the family and social position of detainee.

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

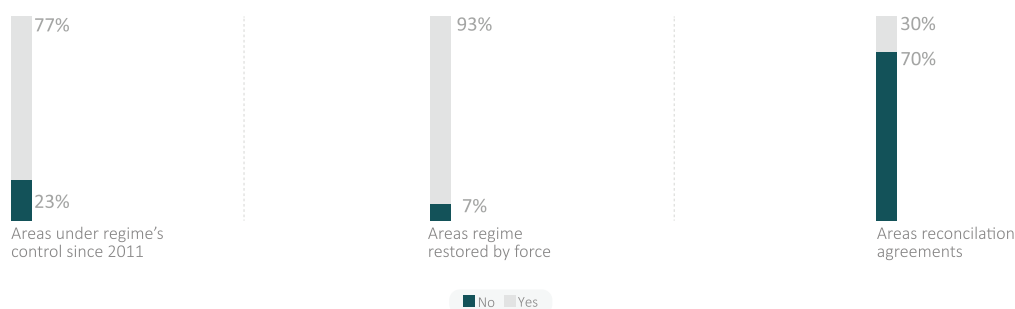
# Living Conditions and General Rights



## I Housing issues

This section explores housing issues including problems of people who were forced to move to another house/neighbourhood/city within the current regime-controlled area due to the ongoing conflict. Such changes entailed other problems that adversely affected their social and economic conditions, such as living in temporary/inadequate accommodation, overcrowding, living in other people's homes, sharing a house with multiple families, etc. More than two-thirds (70 per cent) of the respondents reported that their residence was interrupted for various reasons related to the conflict (see Figure 7). This percentage was higher (93 per cent) among respondents in the areas restored through the regime's military campaign and without reconciliation agreements.

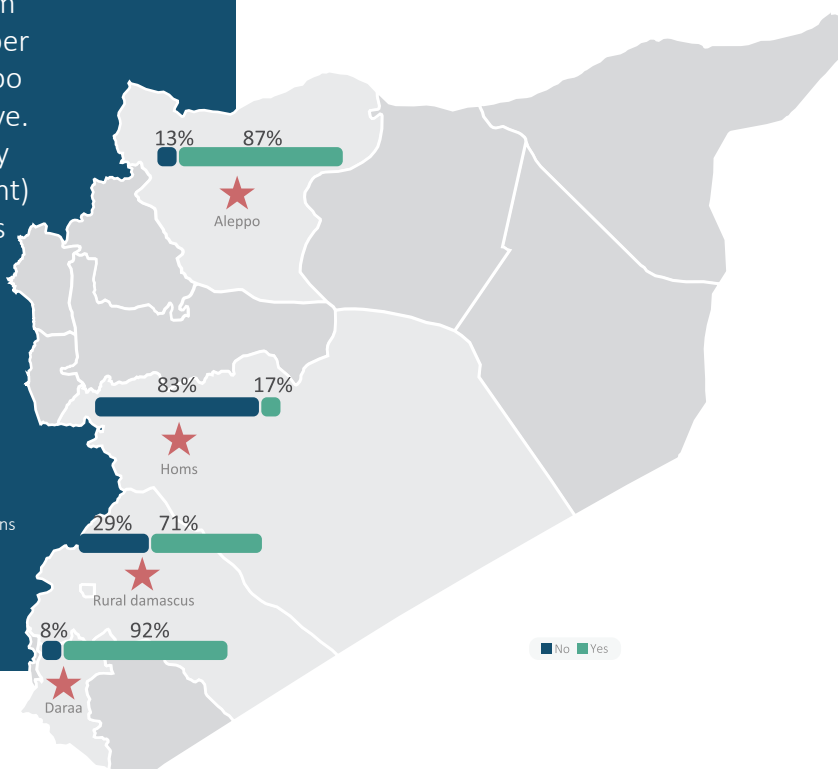
**Figure 7.** Forced to move within regime-controlled area, by degree of regime control



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Have you experienced any interruptions in your residence in currently regime-held areas, according to the previous degree of regime control?'

Figure 8 shows that 92 per cent of interviewees from rural Damascus and 87 per cent of those from Aleppo have been forced to move. The percentage is slightly lower in Dara (71 per cent) and much lower in Homs (17 per cent).

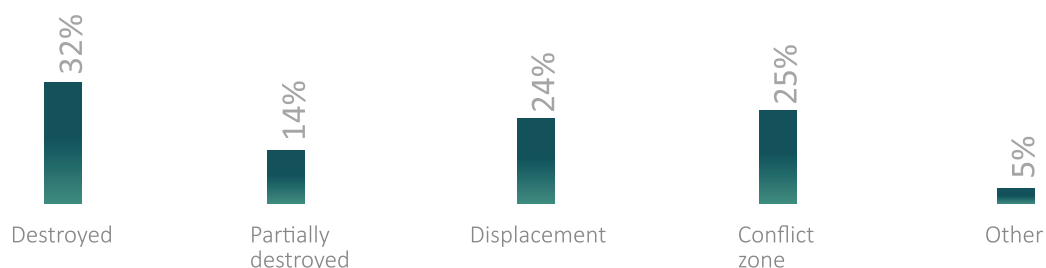
**Figure 8.** Forced to move within regime-controlled area, by city



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Have you experienced any interruptions in your residence in currently regime-held areas, according to their original provinces?'

The analysed data show that 55 per cent of returnees were forced to move, compared with 45 per cent of residents who never left. Figure 9 describes the reasons for this interruption.

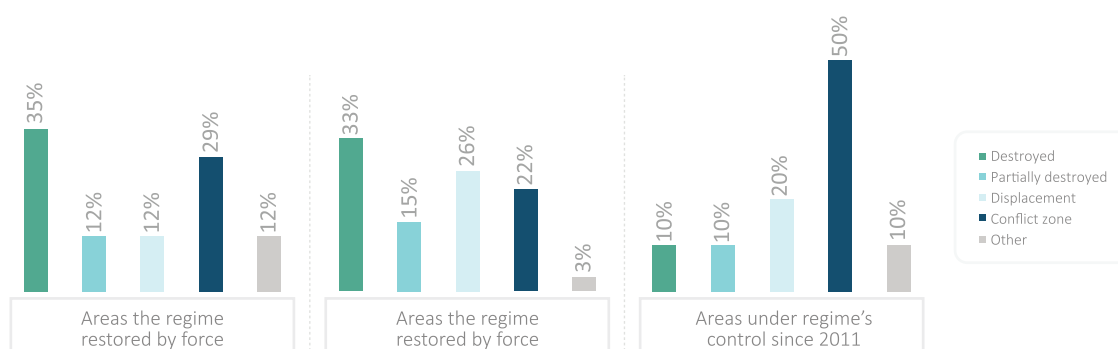
**Figure 9.** Type of housing problem



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'What housing problem forced you to move from your home?'

Housing issues varied in every area according to the categories described in the Methodology section. The main reason for the housing issues in the areas the regime retook by force was due to destruction, whereas the main reason in regime-held areas that were never under opposition control was that the houses are located in dangerous zones.

**Figure 10.** Type of housing problem, by degree of regime control



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'What housing problem forced you to move from your home?'



## Payments for non-existent services

The regime authorities forced 64 per cent of all those who were forced to leave their home, or left in areas that were later retaken by the regime, to pay for non-existent services for all periods when these areas were out of its control, or when the returnees were out of the area (Figure 11). The government has done this across the board: people must pay for water, electric, telephone, municipal fees, real estate taxes and other services that they did not use (because they did not live in the home) before cut services are restored or before they can proceed with formal paperwork. In some cases, these fees may exceed the average monthly or annual salary of the returnee.

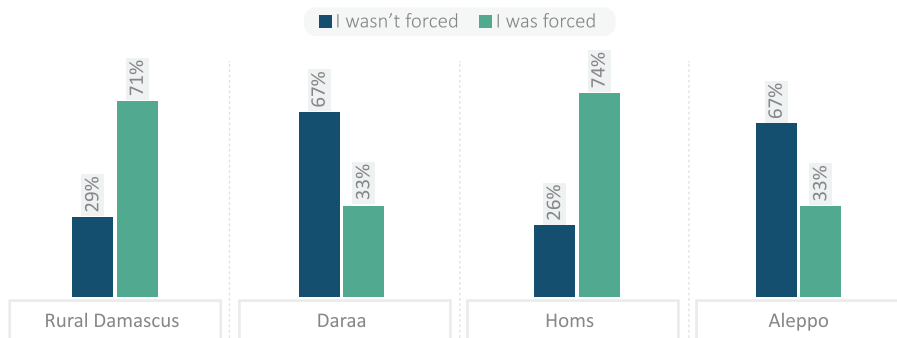
**Figure 11.** Forced payments of non-existent services



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Have you been forced to pay for non-existent services relevant to your residence in regime held area?'

Nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of returnees to Homs were required to make such payments, as were 17 per cent in rural Damascus and 33 per cent in both Aleppo and Daraa (Figure 12).

**Figure 12.** Forced payments of non-existent services, by city



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Have you been forced to pay for non-existent services relevant to your residence in regime held area?'

This percentage was 70 per cent among those living in areas restored by the regime without reconciliation agreements and 67 per cent for those who had to return to regime-held areas from countries of refuge or internal displacement. Some respondents said they felt the regime was charging them systematically as a method of collective punishment against anti-regime individuals.

“

***When we returned, we were obliged to pay bills from 2011 until 2019 for services that did not exist, such as water, electricity and telephone.***

*Hassan, 45-year-old man from East Ghouta*

***No official document can be taken from the government offices without paying accumulated bills, such as water, electricity, telephone, and real estate taxes for the duration of absence from home.***

*Salma, 36-year-old woman from Homs*

***One has to pay water and electricity bills that did not exist when they get any official documents from the state offices.***

*Ziad, 52-year-old man from East Ghouta*

***I was forced to pay water and electricity bills which were not available for years as a common procedure for returnees.***

*Ahmed, 44-year-old man from East Ghouta*

***The regime refuses to bring back the electricity to our area until we pay for the non-existent electricity in all previous years.***

*Talal, 53-year-old man from Dara*

## Housing issues

In September 2012, the government adopted Legislative Decree no. 66, which allowed the authorities to demolish random settlement areas in Damascus and Damascus Countryside governorates to convert them into urban development zones<sup>18</sup>.

When Assad announced the decree, his minister of local administration, Omar Ibrahim al-Ghalawanji, hailed it as a “first step in the reconstruction of illegal housing areas, especially those targeted by armed terrorist groups”. State media promotional material for the Basateen al-Razi development makes a similar argument. With the “terrorists” gone, it says, the serious work of rebuilding Syria can begin<sup>19</sup>.

In April 2018 the government passed Law no. 10,<sup>20</sup> which gives property owners or their relatives one month to present the necessary paperwork and claim their property once a zone has been designated. The law initially gave people only 30 days after an area was officially slated for redevelopment

to prove they owned property there and to apply for compensation – a deadline that aid groups said would be impossible for almost all refugees to meet. For refugees abroad, getting power of attorney under Syrian law for a friend or relation back in Syria to apply on their behalf takes a minimum of three months, even if they both have all the right documents. It also requires a security clearance, which is a potential problem for people who fled districts that were rebel controlled before being retaken by government forces. Countries hosting refugees voiced concern over Law 10, saying it may prevent refugees from returning if they lose their property in Syria.

In November 2018 Assad issued Law 42, which extended this period to a year and added other amendments including giving claimants more time to appeal verdicts and letting them do so through the normal courts instead of through a dedicated judicial committee<sup>21</sup>.

Many study respondents (in the areas where urban development laws have been issued) consider themselves to be vulnerable to be affected by this law, mainly saying that it falls far short of protecting the rights of people who had been living in random settlements and whose residence is most likely not recorded in the land registry. The fears were particularly heightened in areas where the regime had restored control of areas through military action without reconciliation agreements.

***I built my house brick by brick. I built it with my bare hands, tended to every corner and to every inch.***

*Abu Kasem, 57-year-old man, returnee to Ghouta*

- 
18. “Decree 66: The blueprint for al-Assad’s reconstruction of Syria,” IRIN, 20 April 2017 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/591313c04.html>
  19. “Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law,” Human Rights Watch, 29 May 2018 [https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law#\\_What\\_is\\_Law](https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law#_What_is_Law)
  20. “Syria extends time for post-war property claims under disputed law,” Reuters, 12 Nov 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-property/syria-extends-time-for-post-war-property-claims-under-disputed-law-idUSKCN1NH1OD>

The study shows that people are risking their safety by returning to regime-controlled areas to officially claim their properties and ensure that they do not lose them. Several interviewees in Ghouta noted that citizens who are at risk of arrest may send older relatives to visit government offices on their behalf, which increases the vulnerability of these relatives.

Residents who have attempted to return home or simply check on their properties have found little evidence of the supposedly rich legal framework backing the government's reconstruction efforts. Blocked from returning to rehabilitate, let alone visit, their former homes, displaced Syrians now living in other areas of the country are uncertain about what the future holds.

Two respondents who returned to Maliha in Eastern Ghouta said they were seriously affected by (local and area-limited) security-related government orders that may not be related to the known laws (i.e. Decree no. 66, Law 10, and Law 42). These cases, which involve prohibiting individuals from accessing their residential or commercial properties, support reports from other organizations on such violations.

“

***So far, we do not know anything about the current status of the city of al-Maliha. Our property may be owned by others and we know nothing about the real estate regulatory will-be procedure there.***

*Suad, 35-year-old woman from Maliha*

***We are prohibited from returning there, not knowing the actual status of Maliha, except the information provided by the state TV channel. They said that they will permit the people to return but for now the movement there is restricted.***

*Fayez, 52-year-old man from Maliha*



## Evaluation of the public services reality

The results of the questionnaire indicated a general deterioration in the condition of public services in regime-held areas. For instance, only 6 per cent of the participants rated the health services as good quality; 66 per cent found them below average or unacceptable. This percentage rose to about 70 per cent among participants returning to regime-held areas, likely because they enjoyed better services in their countries of refuge or areas of displacement. Similarly, 71 per cent found the health services unacceptable in areas that the regime controlled militarily after rejecting reconciliation agreements, such as Eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus.

***The days of the siege were better, we used to rely on ourselves to secure water and electricity from generators and wells, now we pay bills on virtual services that exist only on the state TV channels.....***

*Abu Obaida, 44-year-old man from Aleppo*

According to participants' testimonies, the regime's negligence of the health sector in these areas is a collective punishment against the local population.

“

***The situation is very bad, services are not good, hospitals are unclean and unsafe, corruption is pervasive, and we do not get our rights.***

*Abu Ragheb, 52-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta*

***The services are poor, hospitals are not ready, and the TB rehabilitation process is slow.***

*Um Ahmed, 47-year-old woman from Eastern Ghouta*

***The city has been occupied by Russia, which has spread its forces in our city in an abnormal manner in addition to the militias and the Shabiha and others who control the city as they want.***

*Um Nader, 45-year-old woman from Duma*

***I am not safe because of repeated harassment, discrimination and malicious actions by agents of the regime in this region and I am constantly afraid of arbitrary detention and malicious reporting. I was previously arrested and deprived of a job.***

*Abu Jasem, 54-year-old man from Daraa*

***There have been several cases of burglary in our neighbourhood, although the perpetrators are known, but they are not deterred. Moreover, corruption is widespread, and no one is advised to return because of the lack of security and the security branches overlook the illegal actions of regime security men.***

*Sahar, 35-year-old woman from Eastern Ghouta*

The participants evaluated the educational services as similarly poor: 65 per cent rated them as below average or unacceptable. The lowest levels were reported in areas that were militarily reoccupied by regime forces after rejecting reconciliation agreements with the regime as a pattern of collective punishment. Many parents and students expressed their discontent with the deterioration of the educational situation in schools and universities.

***Schools educate children on cheering and applauding the regime, while the core subjects of science and mathematics are neglected.***

*Saeed, 37-year-old man from Dara'a*

Most of the respondents expressed their absolute dissatisfaction with other essential living services such as water, electricity and municipal services. Alarming, 94 per cent found them to be lacking, and noted that the services have not yet returned to pre-2011 levels.

Levels of discontent were higher in regime-held areas, where people deplore the lack of basic services. They observed that some services were far better during the regime forces' siege on their areas when they were under opposition control.



The current destruction in Homs 2019



Homs, Al-Waer, September 2019

## Absence of the rule of law and widespread corruption

The study found that there are high levels of discontent and dismay regarding the absence of the rule of law and widespread corruption in regime-held areas: 79 per cent of the respondents expressed their resentment at the absence of the rule of law and the extreme deterioration of the security services.

***There is no security, there are arrests for financial extortion and for reserve or compulsory military service, there are no jobs, there is no freedom of movement ... but there is humiliation and oppression.***

*Saeed, 41-year-old man from Dara'a*

Para-military or pro-regime militias play a provocative role in regime-held areas. Their behaviour has turned into a source of horror for the locals; people's biggest concern is now avoiding potential abuse triggered by an informant providing a negative tip to the security services about them (in return for payment).

According to respondents, these militias occupy homes and prevent their owners from returning to them, steal their contents, and steal machines from local workshops. They also extort money from citizens who are rebuilding their destroyed homes by threatening to prevent them from building. In addition, respondents mentioned that pro-regime militants press real estate owners for selling their properties for less than 20 per cent of their market value; they exploit owners returning from opposition areas and the relatives of opposition fighters.

Militias also reportedly set up barriers to obtain royalties from cars loaded with goods and restrict citizens' freedom of movement;

they harass women and insult men as they pass these checkpoints. Furthermore, they extort former members of the opposition by threatening to report them if they do not provide financial or in-kind benefits.

In addition, 97 per cent of participants expressed their disappointment with the spread of corruption at different levels in all aspects of civilian life. The regime's security forces, and the military checkpoints have become more like official fee collection centres that share citizens' limited resources and impose the payment of bribes under false pretenses, such as security procedure requirements.

Furthermore, in areas that were retaken militarily, the regime refuses to recognize any contracts or documents issued when the area was out of its control. Numerous testimonies collected in this study describe the legal and economic problems and social rifts this has caused.

“

***The security barriers of the regime are making people flee and prevent the entry of goods, in addition to the harassment of women without any deterrent.***

*Betoul, 30-year-woman from Eastern Ghouta*

***I was subjected to a lot of harassment when they asked me to check the security forces representative because my older children and my husband did not return, and they threatened me in public.***

*Zayneb, 42-year-old woman from Homs*

***Because we did not leave our country during the war and stayed in the region for nearly six years with opposition forces, they are now loathing us, stealing our homes and shops and forcing us to pay them to preserve our lives after the regime regained control.***

*Ammar, 25-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta*

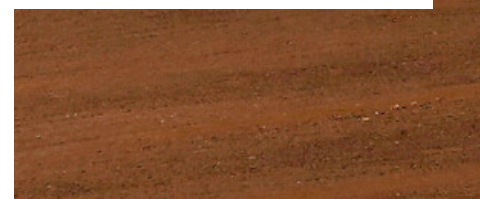
Participants, especially those in areas where the regime had taken control militarily from the opposition forces, reported abusive practices such as bribes and illegal taxes (mafia pizzo) imposed on citizens and farmers transporting their products and crops. The researchers interviewed Abu Mahmoud, a farmer who refused to leave his land after the regime gained control over Ghouta. The excessive abuse he has received at the security checkpoints, where fixed amounts of his crops are regularly confiscated, had made him reluctant to ship products to the city. The bitter experience has made him seriously reconsider his decision to stay.

Other testimonies echo Abu Mahmoud's experience. Farming, which has become their only source of living as most professions in the areas studied have come to a standstill, is suffering under the regime's ban on transferring goods and products beyond the local area. The regime is forcing them to sell their products to the pro-regime monopolists. This amounts to a collective punishment against those who remained in Eastern Ghouta. It cannot be justified at this point by any legitimate security or military necessity.

Umm Muhammad, a widow with four daughters from Aleppo, experienced a different problem when trying to return from the Aleppo countryside to the city of Aleppo. She could not return to her original home because Shabiha occupied it and offered to buy it (and her late husband's shop and land) at 20 per cent of their value because her husband had been killed while fighting with the opposition. While waiting to receive her official papers, she was arrested as a result of an informant's tip related to her returning from opposition areas. She was interrogated for 50 days and was released after paying a large bribe to one of the officers.

***Where shall I go? If I leave my village, I will die out [of sadness], and if I stay, I will die of starving...***

*Abu Mahmoud, 60-year-old farmer from Eastern Ghouta*





**Haysem, a 29-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta, was also robbed by the security services. He recounted his experiences as follows:**

*I own a carpentry workshop in my hometown village. The relevant assets of the workshop were stolen and looted when the regime forces stormed our village in 5/2018. I was obligated to sell a piece of land to start again and get new assets.*

*But after the workshop reopened a month ago, a group of people stole the machines and I become broke again. Several complaints were lodged with the security authorities in the area, but they did not care. A few days later I discovered that the robbers were elements of the regime security branch in the area who did so because I did not pay bribes to them. They stole our livelihood with us.*

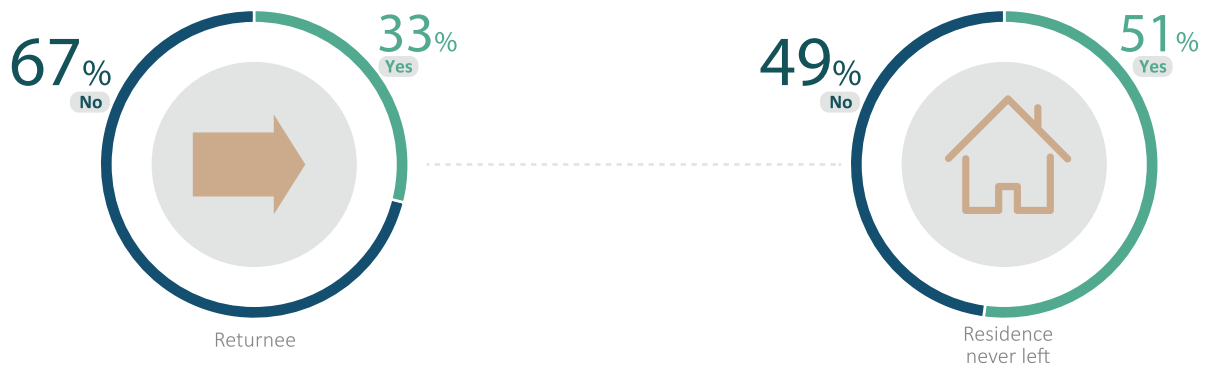




## Losing previous job

The collected data indicates that 58 per cent of the respondents are no longer in the same job as before 2011. This percentage rose to 67 per cent among those who returned to regime-held areas. In other words, two-thirds of the returnees have lost their former source of income and have become unemployed or are engaged in marginal, non-permanent work that cannot guarantee a decent life for them.

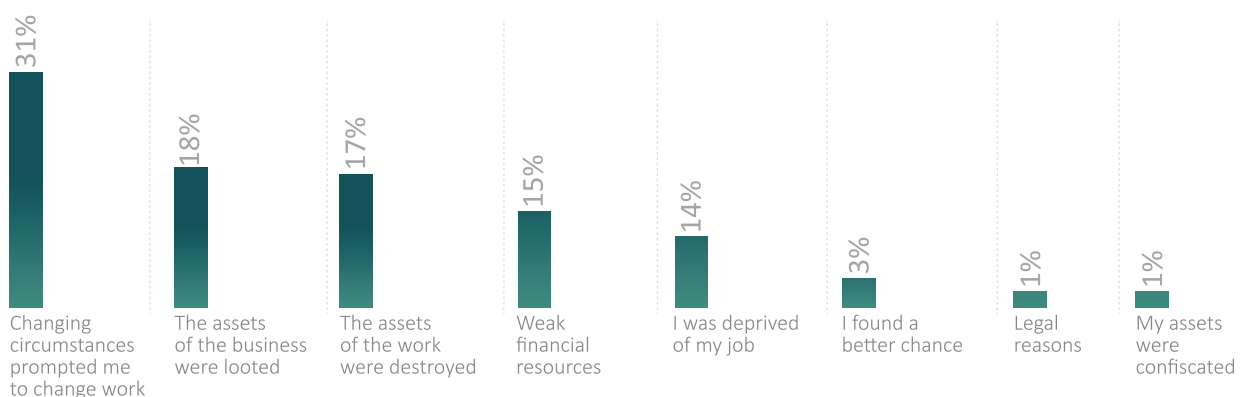
**Figure 13.** Loss of previous job, by resident status



**Note:** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Are you keeping currently the same job you had before 2011?'

Only about 10 per cent of those who returned to their previous jobs were government employees. One respondent explained, "I am a retired employee. If the law was being followed, I would have kept receiving my salary; but because I was affiliated with the revolutionary people, the regime stopped my salary." Meanwhile, about 70 per cent of those who lost their previous jobs were from the government sector. Some businesses owners had their assets looted, and most other participants were adversely affected by the regime's practices, and hence forced to abandon their previous work (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14.** Causes of a change in work



**Note:** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question "How did the conflict cause the change in your employment?"

## I Harassment of residents and returnees

The study revealed frequent, systematic and varied practices of harassment carried out by the regime security forces and its affiliated militias in regime-held areas. 61 per cent respondents reported suffering at least one form of harassment as like (threatening to be detained, accusation of treason and destroying the country, in addition to verbal and sexual harassment for women in regime check points). These adverse practices seem to target residents and returnees differently.

“

*Because we did not leave the village during the war and because we stayed in the area for nearly six years with the opposition fighters, they took revenge on us when the regime forces entered the village. They became envious of us and robbed our homes and shops and forced us to pay them to keep our lives and I am constantly afraid because of repeated harassment and discrimination as well as the fear of recruitment. I actually think about leaving.*

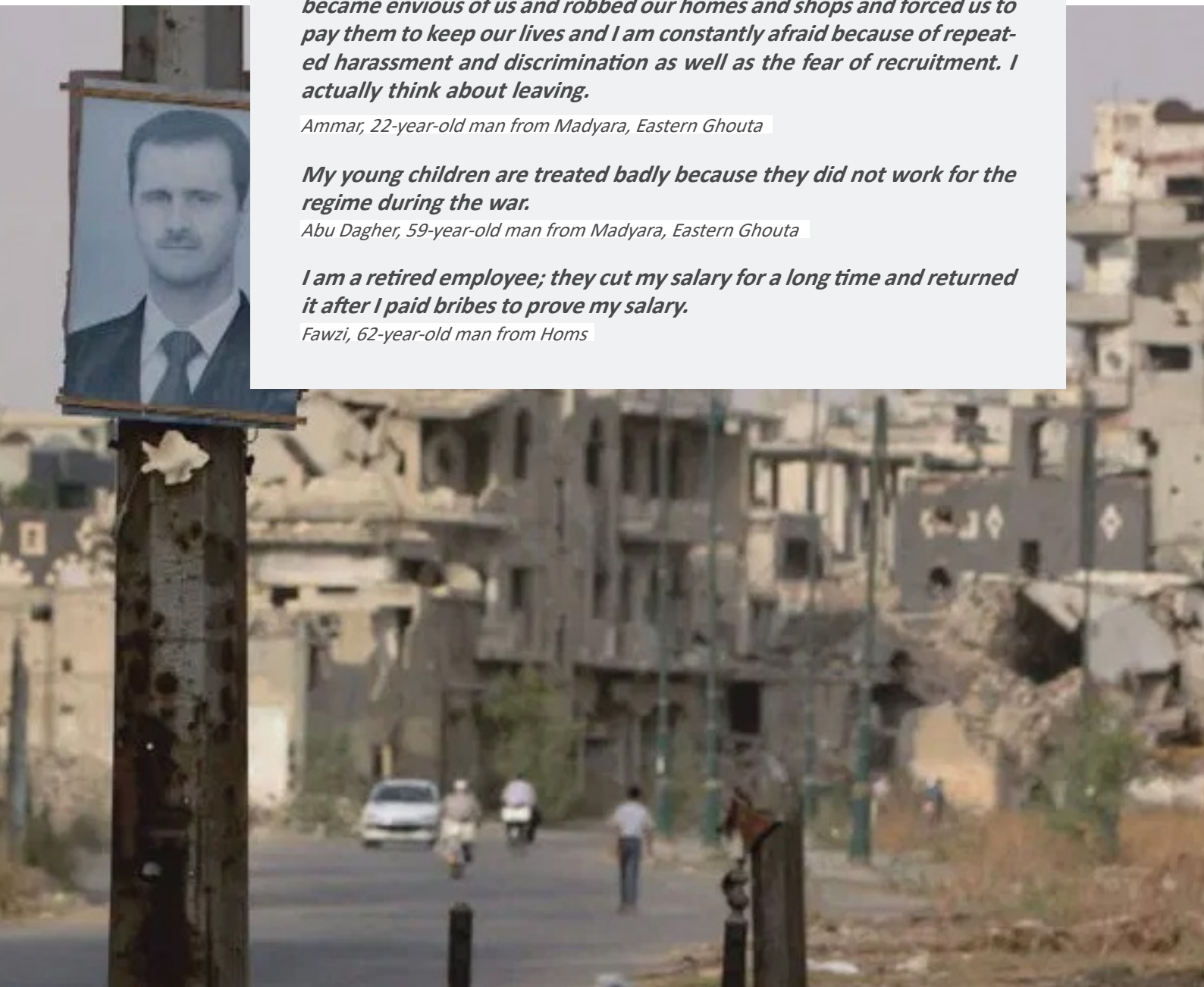
*Ammar, 22-year-old man from Madyara, Eastern Ghouta*

*My young children are treated badly because they did not work for the regime during the war.*

*Abu Dagher, 59-year-old man from Madyara, Eastern Ghouta*

*I am a retired employee; they cut my salary for a long time and returned it after I paid bribes to prove my salary.*

*Fawzi, 62-year-old man from Homs*



## I Lack of freedom and citizens' rights

Syrian citizens living in regime-held areas have an unfulfilled desire to live in a rational state that respects the right of its citizens to the basics of a decent life and living conditions: 71 per cent reported that their civic rights had been violated. Returnees to regime-held areas have been particularly let down by the regime's failure to honour laws that it claimed were designed to protect Syrian citizens.

Many testimonies described feeling that rejected by regime officials, especially if they had spent time in opposition-held areas. These individuals have been subject to humiliating searches at checkpoints and have become easy prey for extortion from security and military officers.

“

***They turned into having a grudge against us, robbing us of our homes and shops, and forcing us to pay dirty money to stay alive.***

*Hassan, 40-year-old man from Aleppo*

***When we returned, they treated us like traitors, and we were summoned immediately for investigation.***

*Yakub, 30-year-old man from Ghouta*

***[People's] talk has become: you are Sunni and we are Shiites. This does not make me feel safe.***

*Tamer, 29-year-old man from Dara'a*

***There are personal, spiteful, and false allegations against former humanitarian actors by regime militias, and they are still accusing us of terrorism.***

*Sami, 40-year-old man from Homs countryside*

***The security checkpoints blackmail the people, and they prevent the entry of goods without making payment of mandatory dirty money; not to mention the harassment of women without any deterrent.***

*Hatun, 50-year-old woman from Ghouta*









# Intentions and Opinions about Leaving



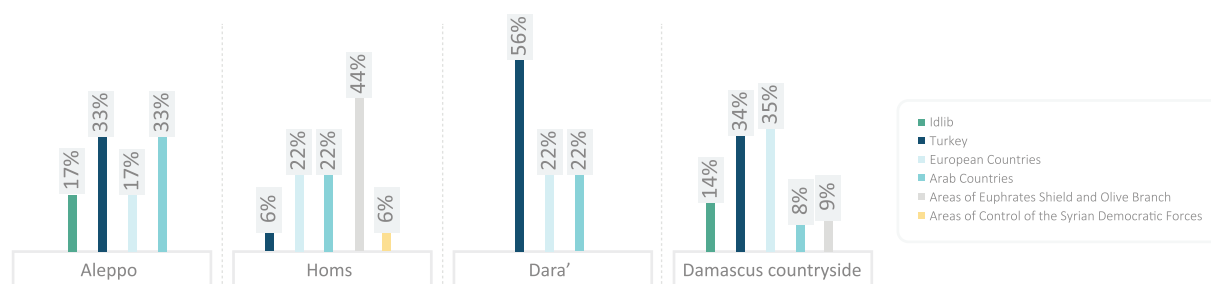
## I The wish to leave regime-held areas

The majority of study participants (59 per cent) are seriously considering leaving the regime-held areas as they are currently in if they have the opportunity (Figure 15). This percentage increased to 62 per cent for those who returned to regime-held areas, as many of them expressed their disappointment after their return. Some of them described their return as a “stupid decision” and felt deluded for having believed the regime’s propaganda about the situation’s stability. Furthermore, 73 per cent of interviewees in areas the regime took by force would like to leave. This desire to leave reflects the state of resentment towards the abuses and violations to which citizens are frequently subjected in those areas.

The study also revealed that 77 per cent of those who wish to leave stated that they felt insecure. In addition, 61 per cent of those included in the “local pardon decrees issued by the regime” are seriously considering leaving regime-held areas. Those aged 18–25 are most likely to want to leave (65 per cent); people over 60 are least likely to want to leave (35 per cent).

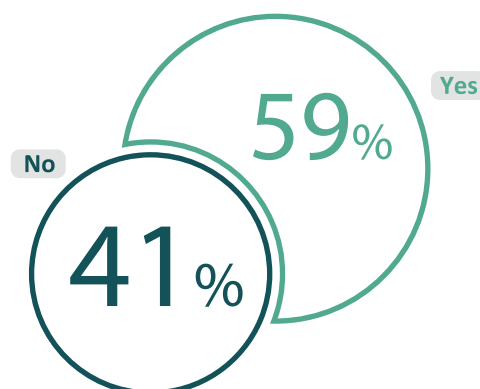
Figure 16 illustrates the variety of destinations people wished to take refuge in by their current city of residence. Figure 17 displays the aggregated response. The most notable figure is the desire to reach Europe (31 per cent), which may anticipate another wave of migration if there are not serious efforts to solve the underlying causes of such intentions. An additional 31 per cent expressed an intention to reach Turkey, but this may change after restrictions regarding Syrian refugees were reportedly introduced in July 2019.

**Figure 16.** Desired destination, by current city of residence



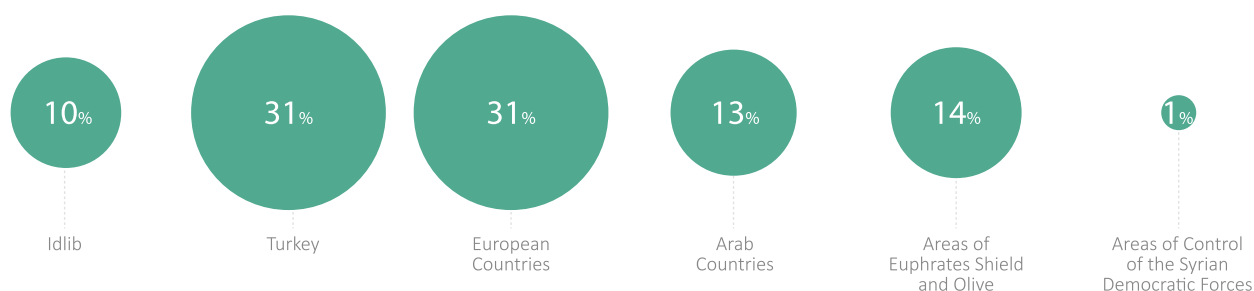
**Note** figure reports interviewees’ answers to the question ‘If you had the chance to leave regime held area, where will be your possible destination?’

**Figure 15.** Would you consider leaving if you had the chance



**Note** figure reports interviewees’ answers to the question ‘Would you consider leaving regime held area if you had the chance?’

**Figure 17.** Desired destination, all Interviewees

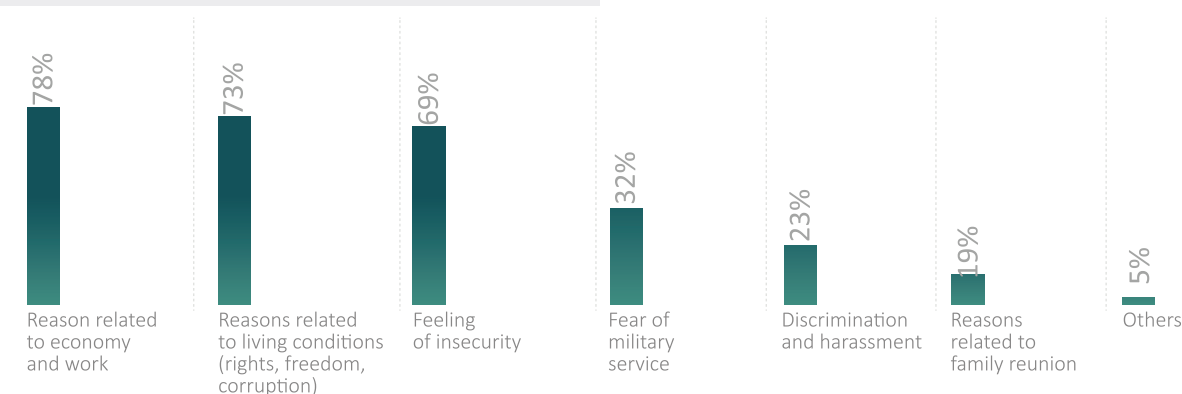


## I Motivations for leaving

The study also showed that people who did not consider themselves entitled to their rights as citizens and are subject to permanent discrimination and harassment were among those most eager to leave (83 per cent).

Most questionnaire respondents attributed their desire to leave to their current livelihood conditions, which they believe do not meet the minimum requirements of a decent life. Feelings of insecurity and the fear of being arrested, or drafted into the military, compounded by the security forces' behaviour towards them in regime-held areas, increase the wish to leave.

**Figure 18.** Motivation to leave regime-held areas



**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'What are the main reasons drive you to think leaving regime held area?'

## I Advising others to return

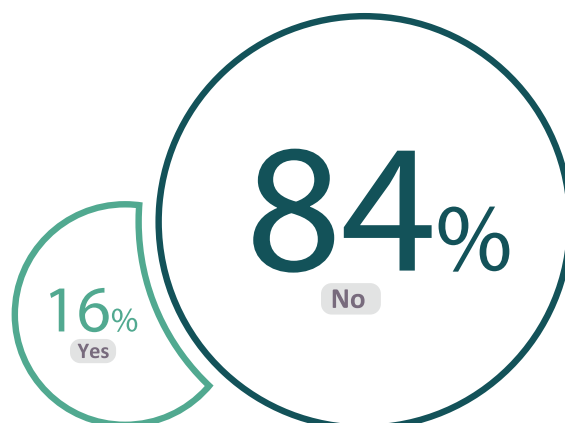
Based on the disappointment of most of the residents and returnees in regime-held areas regarding the prevailing adverse security and economic conditions, the majority (84 per cent) do not advise others to return to regime-held areas. Residents of these areas describe a vicious circle of fear of arrest, enforced disappearance, inadequate basic living requirements, monopolies enforced by regime-backed traders, pervasive corruption, and the absence of the rule of law.

This percentage is likely higher in areas formerly under opposition control. These areas, according to participants' testimonies, have been subject to a series of collective punishment measures designed to extinguish any sign of defiance, which the regime considers incompatible with

its pro-government social fabric. Other people believe the government's invitation to return was limited to the elderly and those who suffer from difficult living conditions in their countries of migration and refuge.

**Figure 19.** Citizens advising others to return

**Note** figure reports interviewees' answers to the question 'Would you advise other people from your area to return to regime held area?'



The citizens' simple, heartfelt testimonies at home best describe the current situation on the ground.

“

***Personally, I am not convinced enough by the situation to encourage others to return.***

*Abu Saeed, 45-year-old man from Aleppo*

***I would not recommend anyone to come back.***

*Sameh, 45-year-old man from Eastern Ghouta*

***I am an elderly person and my wife is old. If we were young, we would not have returned.***

*Monzer, 64-year-old man from Homs*

***Return? Where to?! To the injustice, to detention, to be drafted in [military] reserve or [else] in compulsory service, or into the security***

*Majd, 27-year-old man from Dara*

***[This is] because the city is not fit for living [in] at all as the sectarianism is rampant, which led to the fear of being killed and not feeling safe.***

*Ahmed, 65-year-old man from Homs*

***At present, the city is dominated by ignorance, corruption and sectarianism, which will destroy the [coming] generations.***

*- Wael, 49-year-old man from Aleppo*

***There are no good services, and there are repeated provocations against those who concede to the reconciliation process.***

*- Anwar, 33-year-old woman from rural Damascus*

***The town has become occupied by Russia, the forces [soldiers] which have spread widely across our town. The Assad militias, Shabiha and others, are also controlling the town the way they want.***

*- Shakir, 63-year-old man from rural Damascus*

# Recommendations

This report clearly demonstrates the need for decision makers in host countries and at the international level to re-examine their positions and policies regarding Syrian refugees, who are increasingly being forced to return into a situation of sheer insecurity and uncertainty. Sending the displaced people to Assad-held areas is almost certain to expose them to further persecution and harassment. The following steps should be considered:

- Any political solution to end the conflict, and to achieve a lasting and stable peace in Syria and the region, must include mechanisms to protect the rights of displaced Syrians. The voices of displaced Syrians should be included in constitution drafting and all work-streams within the UN-led Geneva process.
- The international community (including European states, neighbouring countries, and humanitarian agencies) must increase and adapt their efforts to protect Syria's displaced from refoulement or increased pressure to return until the conditions for their voluntary, safe and dignified return are guaranteed.
- The international community must address the crisis caused by the Syrian regime's refusal to allow UNHCR unfettered access to monitor the return conditions. A strong international mechanism should also be considered to ensure and monitor conditions of return inside Syria that protect the rights of displaced persons and refugees - including those who had to return to areas under regime control before the conditions of safe, voluntary and dignified return were in place and a secure environment is achieved - and prioritizes protection concerns.
- The resolving of the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared people must be adopted as a pre-condition for the creation of minimum conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return. This includes unrestricted and immediate access to all detainees by international agencies lead by the ICRC, handing over of the bodies of those who died under torture in detention to their relatives, and the abolishment of sentences and criminal charges, as well as full rehabilitation for all those arrested for opposing the regime
- Given the high reported levels of arrest, detention, harassment, discrimination, conscription and violations of housing, land and property rights, the international community must halt discussion of return or preparation for return until an effective monitoring mechanism is in place. It must also provide reassurance that facilitated or supported return will not take place until the conditions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return have been met and independently verified via the international mechanism.
- Timely and granular information about the security conditions and conditions for return in each of Syria's towns and cities must be urgently made available to Syria's displaced. Until this information is available, no returns can be considered safe or voluntary.



- Numerous HLP violations are occurring, including the prevention of access to properties and the potential implementation of discriminatory planning laws. HLP concerns and mechanisms for solving Syria's HLP crisis must be included in the political process. Humanitarian and development agencies working inside Syria with international funding must not undertake work that perpetuates or consolidates these concerns and must actively prioritize work to protect the property rights of displaced people. Timely information on HLP issues must be provided to Syria's displaced.
- The UNHCR and other UN agencies representing the international community in Syria must be given mandate to ensure that forced conscription of returnees ends immediately. Equally, the reform of the security and the intelligence services of the regime must be made a key element of the political solution guaranteed by the international community, currently pursued through the Geneva process and other relevant international initiatives



Syrian Association for  
**CITIZENS' DIGNITY**

VENGEANCE, REPRESSION AND FEAR:  
**REALITY BEHIND ASSAD'S  
PROMISES TO DISPLACED  
SYRIANS**

SECURITY, LIVING CONDITIONS AND STATUS OF SYRIANS  
RETURNING TO REGIME-HELD TERRITORY





VENGEANCE, REPRESSION AND FEAR:

## **REALITY BEHIND ASSAD'S PROMISES TO DISPLACED SYRIANS**

SECURITY, LIVING CONDITIONS AND STATUS OF SYRIANS  
RETURNING TO REGIME-HELD TERRITORY