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HOME,
BUT NOT WHOLE

The Fragile Return and Reintegration of Syrian Returnees

July
2026





Table of contents

Foreword **3**

Acknowledgements 4

Executive Summary **5**

Methodology **7**

Part One: The Returns Journey **9**

The Scale and Significance of Syria's Return Movements 9

Who Is Returning, and to Where? 9

The Decision to Return 11

Conditions in Displacement as a Driver of Return 11

The Impact of the March 2026 Conflict in Lebanon 13

Decision Making Dynamics 15

Assistance During Return 15

Access to Information 16

Part Two: Reality Post-Return: The Journey towards Reintegration **18**

Expectations and Reality 18

Infrastructure and Housing 18

Protection, Psychosocial Needs and Social Repair 22

Livelihoods 25

Regional (intra-Syria) Differences 29

Part Three: Social Cohesion as a Systems Outcome **30**

The Role of Essential Services 30

The Social Dynamics of Aid Distribution 34

The Case for Area-Based Programming 34

Conclusion **35**

Recommendations **36**

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Cover Photo: Homs, Syria. Adam, 8 years old, with his father, 38-year-old Mohammad Shehada, who returned to Al-Qusayr with his family after 13 years of displacement, determined to rebuild life in his hometown.

A general view during the distribution of winter kits provided by the International Rescue Committee at a camp for displaced people from the Aleppo countryside in the city of Tabqa, Syria.

Foreword

By **Eatizaz Yousif** (IRC Syria Country Director) and **Kinda Alhourani** (WLO Platform Coordinator)

Over one and a half years since Syria entered a new political era, millions of Syrians displaced by conflict have started the journey back to their communities. The prospect of returning home, once unimaginable, has become the lived reality for many. Yet this moment of renewal is shaped by the profound legacy of fourteen years of conflict and destruction which gave rise to one of the world's most protracted displacement crises. Today, Syria's hospitals, water supplies, electricity networks and schools remain severely damaged. The institutions meant to deliver healthcare, education, social protection and justice lack capacity after years of neglect, leaving millions without reliable access to these essential public services. The economy is devastated, with nine in ten Syrians living in poverty and 15.6 million people reliant on humanitarian assistance to survive, while governance systems remain fragmented and unable to meet rising community needs.

Amidst this reality, returns have become a central policy priority both domestically and abroad, shaping the choices, or lack thereof, of millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Since December 2024, over 3.5 million Syrians have returned, and many more hope to do so one day. While some are motivated by the prospect of reuniting with their families, the pull of home and hope in a post-Assad future, others are compelled by difficult conditions in displacement, limited assistance, or insecurity. As a result, not all returns reflect voluntary choice.

Given these pressures, the IRC, with the support of the Syria Women-Led Organization (WLO) Platform, set out to center the voices of returnees and host communities to better understand what "return" truly means in practice. Not only the journey home, but the challenging process of rebuilding everything that 'home' represents: safety in one's community; a dignified livelihood that can support a family; access to food, water, healthcare and an education to nourish both mind and body. And of course, a house that provides shelter and the foundation to rebuild a life that has been profoundly disrupted by conflict.

Our research makes it clear: the pace of return is moving faster than recovery systems can support. Communities are absorbing significant pressure through informal mechanisms (i.e. committees to improve services and exchange assistance), which are thinning under the weight of return. Many are arriving in areas where housing, services, livelihoods and education are not adequately in place, straining social cohesion and raising the probability of tensions driven by competition over scarce resources. This risks an unsustainable process of survival, rebuilding and reintegration, which particularly affects women and children.

If there is one message we ask you to remember, it is this: for Syrian returnees, rebuilding requires more than bricks and mortar, it requires restoring dignity, opportunity, and a sense of belonging – the social and economic foundations for people to connect and thrive once again. Syrians deserve nothing less.



Sahlet al Banat, Syria. Shadi (10) and Nour (8) live as IDPs in the informal settlement of Sahlet al Banat together with their grandparents Faisal and Khadija.

Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to Kinda Alhourani and the Syria Women-Led Organizations (WLO) Platform for organizing validation workshops in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus. The validation workshops brought together over 60 local Syrian women-led organizations whose insights and feedback strengthened the gender-sensitive lens of this research.

Above all, the authors extend their deepest gratitude to the returnees, host community members, key informants, and focus group participants across Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Daraa, Damascus, and Rural Damascus who gave their time, shared their experiences, and trusted this research with their stories. This report belongs to them.

Executive Summary

Syria's return movement is unfolding at a pace surpassing current recovery and service capacity. Since December 2024, more than 1.6 million refugees and 1.9 million IDPs have already returned to their places of origin within the country. At current levels, returnees now constitute approximately 14% of the Syrian population.[i] This figure will continue to grow as recent surveys by UNHCR highlight stable long-term aspirations to return, amongst nearly 80% of refugees in host countries within the region. With 14% intending to do so within the next 12 months.[ii,iii]

These returns reflect a complex reality: Syrians acting on hope, belonging, and the desire to reclaim lives interrupted by more than a decade of conflict. However, the evidence gathered in this research makes clear that hope alone does not make returns sustainable. Many returnees are enduring return journeys shaped by limited information on return conditions, constrained options, and significant uncertainty. Once these barriers are negotiated, they arrive in areas where housing, services, livelihoods, and social cohesion support are often not in place.

The right of displaced people to return to their homes is a fundamental principle, and as this report shows, returns are already taking place across Syria. However, return must be voluntary, safe, and dignified, and displaced Syrians that are not ready to return should not be pushed to do so prematurely. Policy choices which encourage returns must be matched by comprehensive return and reintegration assistance. Failing to do so risks an unsustainable process of survival and rebuilding, with women-headed households, children in displacement, and families without documentation, bearing the brunt should government, donors, and humanitarian actors fail to act.

The research identifies a set of structural barriers that constrain the sustainability of return and complicate reintegration for many households. During our research ninety-one percent of returnees reported that essential services were missing in their community upon arrival. Seventy-one percent are living in damaged housing. The single factor most frequently cited as undermining reintegration was insufficient services for all community members, also identified by 71% of respondents. These findings have direct policy implications: underfunded and inequitably distributed services not only fail to meet humanitarian needs, they risk generating intra-communal competition, eroding trust, and in turn create the conditions for heightened social tensions.

The research also found that not all returns classified as "voluntary" reflect genuine choice. For many returnees – including IDPs displaced by the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance, refugees compelled to move by deteriorating legal and economic conditions in host countries, and families caught in sudden conflict escalations such as Lebanon in early 2026 - return was often the least untenable option available. The design of the response must account for this reality. When people arrive without plans or adequate information, they need immediate support.

Syria has a historic opportunity to support sustainable return and lay the foundations for long-term recovery. Realizing this opportunity will require collaboration between the Syrian government, humanitarian actors and donors, backed by sustained public and donor investment in the conditions for informed, safe and sustainable reintegration. Water, health, electricity, education, shelter, livelihoods, protection, and other social services are not only essential to a dignified life. They are the foundation of recovery, reintegration, and social cohesion. Without them, returns are less likely to be sustainable, communities are more vulnerable to renewed tensions, and the prospects for long-term recovery are diminished. Investing in these interconnected priorities will help build an inclusive, resilient and sustainable future for all Syrians, one that enables refugees and internally displaced people to return and reintegrate voluntarily, safely and with dignity, both now and in the years ahead.

SPOTLIGHT

Domestic, Regional, and European Policy Developments

Inside Syria

In March 2026, the Government of Syria unveiled plans to facilitate the rapid closure of internally displaced camps under the 'National Initiative for Camp Closure and Recovery', in alignment with its National Recovery Priorities.[iv] The initiative, commonly referred to as the 'No Tents, No Camps' vision, falls under Presidential Decree No. 59, which established a committee chaired by the Minister of Emergency and Disaster Management, to oversee the rehabilitation of infrastructure destroyed over the course of the conflict, and support IDPs in accessing safe, dignified and legally protected living conditions by the end of 2027. The vision goes beyond physical camp closure. It encompasses protection, service provision and sustainable livelihoods, with the goal of enabling displaced Syrians to move from emergency survival toward long-term stability. It sits alongside the government's Statement of National Recovery Priorities, which sets out a national direction for recovery and reintegration, and has been recognized by UN partners as a framework for aligning international support with Syria's own recovery-led approach.

Neighboring Countries

Since December 2024, neighboring host countries have increasingly shifted their policy focus toward facilitating or encouraging the return of Syrian refugees, though approaches differ markedly across the region. Lebanon has introduced administrative facilitation measures and now operates dedicated Return Spaces offering counseling, voluntariness assessments, documentation support and modest return grants, with the Government aiming for some 400,000 returns within the first half of 2026. Türkiye maintains that returns should remain self-organized and voluntary, with no promoted large-scale return program, while Jordan has seen UNHCR-registered returns rise sharply. The common thread is a growing alignment of refugee policy with the expectation that conditions in Syria are changing; by the end of 2025, over 1.3 million Syrians had returned from the region. Yet this shift is unfolding alongside deepening economic hardship and more restrictive residency, employment and protection environments, which together have narrowed the options available to many refugees—so that some return decisions are made under constrained circumstances rather than as the result of a fully informed and genuinely voluntary choice.

Against this backdrop, the stated commitments of regional governments and the way those commitments are implemented in practice take on particular weight. Governments have consistently reaffirmed that returns should be voluntary, safe and dignified, and coordinated with the Syrian authorities and international partners - in line with UNHCR's December 2024 position, which recognizes refugees' right to return while cautioning that it is not promoting large-scale repatriation amid continued uncertainty. Intention surveys capture the gap between aspiration and readiness: around 80% of refugees hope to return one day, but only 14% intend to do so within the next year. Whether that gap is respected will depend on the practical detail of return-related policies - changes to legal status, residency requirements, access to services and other protection safeguards. As Syria enters a new phase, upholding non-refoulement and mitigating push factors, while supporting the conditions for safe and dignified return, will be what ultimately distinguishes return as a durable solution from return as a response to diminishing alternatives.

European Union

Recent policy developments also suggest a growing emphasis on return to Syria. The principles of voluntariness, safety, and dignity continue to be formally reaffirmed in political discourse,[v] and there is a growing emphasis on supporting conditions for return. For instance, the January 2026 Jordan-EU Summit committed to contributing to conditions required for the return of internally displaced persons and refugees,[vi] while the February 2026 Foreign Affairs Council highlighted the need to create conditions for safe return through rehabilitation and reintegration support.[vii] This trend was further reinforced in May 2026, when the Council restored the full application of the EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement – a development that forms part of a broader normalization of relations and political re-engagement with Syria, while also being viewed as facilitating future returns of Syrian refugees residing in Europe.[viii]

These developments take place against a broader shift in EU migration policy towards increasing returns, reflected in the political agreement reached on the new Return Regulation in June 2026. As return becomes more prominent both in the Union's external engagement with Syria and in domestic political debates across Member States, questions arise as to how the principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity will be interpreted and upheld in practice in relation to Syrian refugees. The task ahead is immense, with these policy choices shaping the lived experiences of approximately 4.5 million Syrian refugees in host countries,[ix] and more than 5.5 million IDPs nationwide, with approximately 1.2 million spread between both formal and informal camp settings.[x] They will also be consequential in determining whether increased political pressure to facilitate returns translates into returns that are genuinely voluntary and sustainable, or instead heightens the risk of premature, unsafe, or de facto deportations from the European Union.

Developments

National Initiative for Camp Closure and Recovery

"No Tents, No Camps" vision

Presidential Decree No. 59

EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement restored

New EU Return Regulation

Key Numbers

Approximately **4.5 million** Syrian refugees in host countries

More than **5.5 million** IDPs nationwide

Approximately **1.2 million** people in formal and informal camp settings

Methodology

The research draws on evidence and findings obtained through a mixed-methods research, combining qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with a quantitative survey to understand the lived experiences of Syrian returnees. Data collection was conducted in Syria between March - April 2026, across seven governorates with high concentrations of returnees: Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Daraa, Damascus, and Rural Damascus. The study included 425 returnee survey participants, 31 key informant interviews (KIIs), 15 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 7 testimonial case studies, capturing perspectives from former IDPs, refugee returnees, host community members, civil society organizations, local authorities, and humanitarian actors. Out of the 425 survey participants, 229 (54%) identified as IDPs, 186 (44%) identified as refugees and 10 (2%) as refugees and IDPs. There was an even 50% split between men and women, and 75% of participants were under the age of 50.

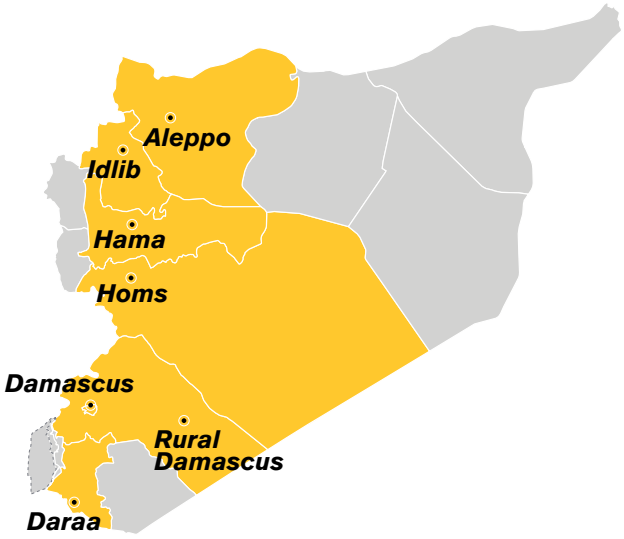


Figure 1 **Data collection in Syria between March - April 2026**

In addition to the 15 FGDs conducted, three further FGDs (Aleppo, Homs, Damascus) were conducted with over 60 members of the Syria WLO Platform, to validate the gender-sensitive lens of the research. Research findings were strengthened through the inclusion of IRC Protection Monitoring Reporting covering the period of January – March 2026 and an IRC Resilience, Peace and Conflict Assessment (RPCA) covering Homs and Aleppo, conducted between December 2025 - May 2026. The methodology emphasized gender sensitivity, inclusion, conflict sensitivity, and ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and a "do no harm" approach.

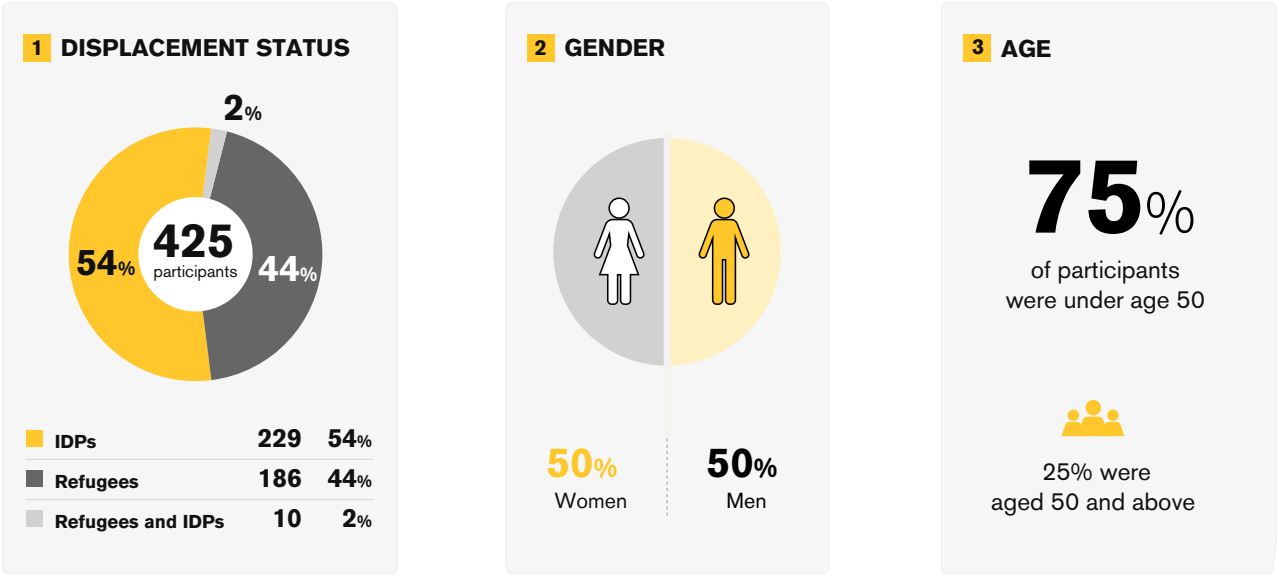


Figure 2 **Survey Sample Overview**

Terminology and Timeframe

Within the category 'returnees,' the research has included both refugee returnees (Syrian refugees who were displaced outside of Syria) and IDP returnees (returnees who had been internally displaced within Syria). The research has also encompassed returnees who have returned to their original community (the community in Syria in which they originally resided before becoming internally displaced or a refugee), and returnees who have relocated to a different community in Syria (either to their original governorate or to a different governorate). The research focused on refugee returnees comprised of refugees who returned in close proximity to the overthrow of the Assad-led government (1 – 2 years: 44%), and those who returned to Syria more recently (6 months – 1 year: 30%) Amongst IDPs, the majority relocated in the past 6 months to one year (48%), preceded by the last 1-2 years (27%). Finally, amongst recent returnees, refugees who relocated within the past 1-3 months comprised 11% of participants, while IDPs constituted 5%. 8% of refugees and IDPs returned within the past 3-6 months.

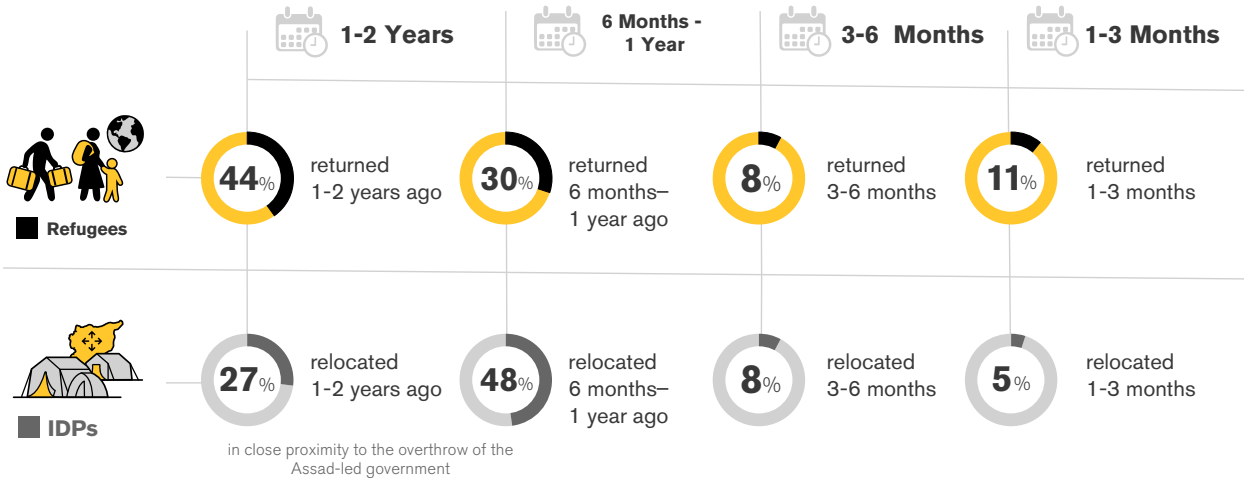


Figure 3 **Refugees and IDPs Return Timing Overview**
Comparison of return/relocation timing among refugee and IDPs.

Limitations

Interviews took place between March – April 2026, amidst ongoing conflict in Lebanon which led to a surge in forced displacement amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with over 400,000 crossing into Syria since then.[iv] Data findings are not representative of the experiences of this group due to continuous population mobility and a rapidly changing displacement and return journey. The study's ability to capture the experiences of vulnerable groups was limited by the underrepresentation of people with disabilities within the sample. The research also faced difficulty in reaching participants who have returned to communities other than their origin, and the short timeframe during which key informant interviews could be conducted.

While the research distinguished between refugee and IDP returnees throughout, the data did not reveal large or consistent differences between the two groups beyond a small number of specific areas - notably expectations before return, documentation barriers, and likelihood of remaining. Whether this reflects a genuine convergence in returnee experiences or the constraints of the sample is difficult to determine on the present evidence, and the relationship between displacement type and reintegration outcomes would benefit from more targeted investigation.

A further limitation concerns the relationship between the study's scope and its findings on social cohesion. The research was conducted in seven governorates with high concentrations of returnees and did not include areas such as coastal Syria or Suwayda, where some of the most severe incidents of identity-based violence since December 2024 have taken place. The sample is also composed of people who have already returned, the overwhelming majority to their community of origin. Those for whom safety or sectarian concerns were decisive are more likely to remain in displacement or to have relocated to communities other than their own - a group this research also found difficult to reach. Accordingly, the finding that tensions in communities of return are primarily resource-based rather than identity-based should be read as specific to the populations and locations studied, not as a general assessment of sectarian dynamics in return across Syria. The protection risks facing returnees from minority communities, and the role of sectarian violence as a deterrent to return, were beyond the scope of this research and remain important questions for further study.

1. The Returns Journey

The Scale and Significance of Syria's Return Movements

Syria is now home to one of the largest return movements this century, and one that is unfolding faster than the support systems around it can be built. Since the fall of the Assad-led Government in December 2024, over 3.5 million Syrians have returned. Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama have received the highest number of IDP returnees while Damascus received the most refugee returnees, followed by Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, and Rural Damascus.[xi]

The humanitarian response faces significant resource constraints. In 2025, the United Nations and its partners received less than half of the $3.2 billion needed to respond to Syria's humanitarian needs.[xii] The 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan estimates similar funding requirements to support a population of 15.6 million people in need, but only 20% of the plan is funded to date.[xiii]

Who is Returning, and to Where?

The returnee population in Syria is not uniform. It includes people who have spent years displaced in camps inside Syria, families who built lives across multiple countries, widows returning alone with children, young people who grew up entirely in displacement, and farmers returning to land they have not cultivated in over a decade. It also includes returnees with capital, skills, or social leverage whose presence shapes market dynamics, local power structures, and service systems in ways that affect the wider community, a dimension relevant to understanding the social tensions that can emerge when groups with unequal resources renegotiate belonging in the same space. While this research focuses on those who experienced displacement and are returning from it, acknowledging this broader picture is important context for the findings that follow. Each of these experiences shapes what durable return requires.

According to IRC's survey, 97% of respondents returned to their community of origin rather than relocating elsewhere in Syria, a finding that held consistently across IDP and refugee returnees and governorates. Community and family ties, alongside the desire to reclaim property and land, were the primary reasons given for this choice.

For many internally displaced people, home remained physically close but inaccessible for years. Mahmoud, a farmer from Kafar Khacher in rural Aleppo, spent over a decade in Azaz, a town from which his original village was still visible from a rooftop, but unreachable due to the active front line. He was displaced twice, returning briefly in 2013 before renewed hostilities forced him out again. When the situation changed in December 2024, he returned the same day. He described:

> *"I could see my village, yet I couldn't go there. I couldn't even go to check on my house. This was such a heavy feeling.*

For refugees, separation from home was shaped not only by time but by crossing international borders. Among female participants in the Homs focus groups, women had returned from Jordan, Türkiye, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and Germany, after between 8 and 12 years abroad. For many, the return was also a first introduction to a Syria they had only ever known as children, and in some cases a first meeting with relatives their children had only known through video calls.

These two experiences — the IDP and the refugee — often differ in important ways, and this report distinguishes between them where the evidence warrants it. The challenges of reintegration, documentation, language, and economic recovery are shaped differently depending on how long someone was displaced, where, and at what stage of life the displacement began.

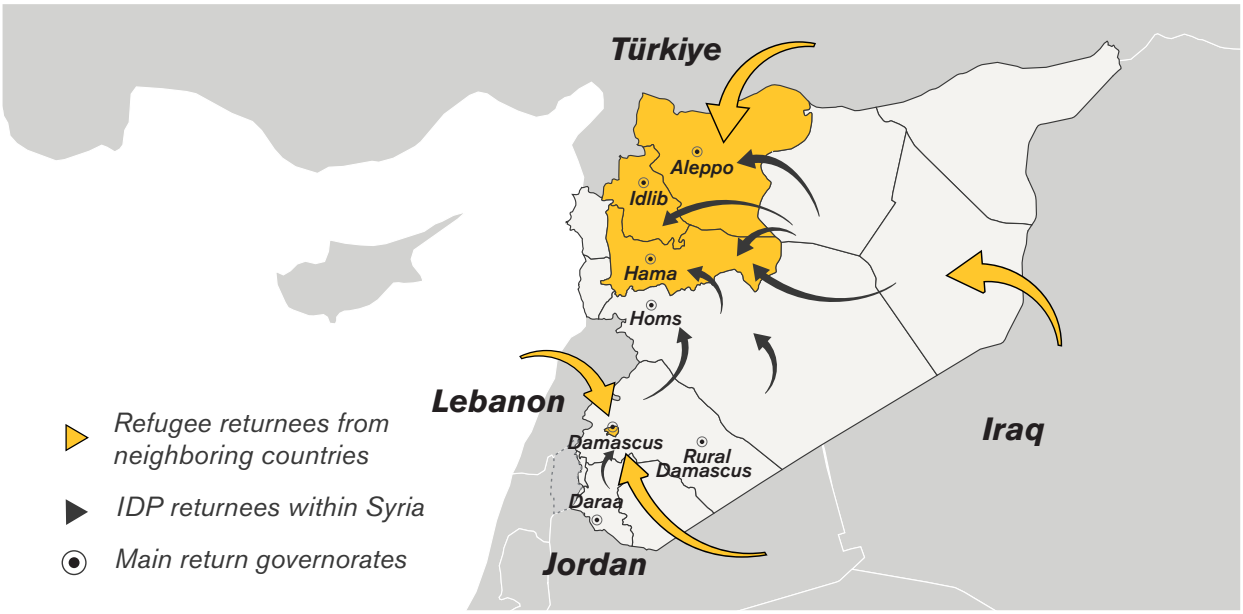


Figure 4 **Return Movements:** Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama have received the highest number of IDP returnees while Damascus received the most refugee returnees.

Note: *Arrows are illustrative and indicate general movement patterns only. They do not represent exact routes, directions, or volumes.*

	IDP Returnees	Refugee Returnees
Share of survey participants	**54%**	**44%**
Decision to return	More commonly described as immediate and resolute, many had been waiting for the political context to change and acted quickly	More commonly described as a longer deliberation, shaped by conditions in host countries, legal status, and the difficulty of uprooting lives built abroad
Expectations before return	More grounded, geographic proximity during displacement meant many had more recent and direct knowledge of conditions in their communities	More likely to be based on second-hand accounts from relatives and social media, with less opportunity for go-and-see visits
Reality upon arrival	Challenges were significant but broadly anticipated; the scale of destruction and service absence was the most unexpected element	More likely to encounter conditions worse than expected; the severity of damage, absence of services, and social changes after years abroad were frequently described as a shock
Reintegration experience	Smoother on average, with closer community ties retained during displacement	More challenging, language barriers, cultural differences, absence of social networks, and reported frustration at over-curiosity from community members
Likelihood of remaining	**63%** say they are very likely to remain in their community	**45%** say they are very likely to remain, an 18-percentage point gap pointing to a more conditional sense of settlement
Documentation access barriers	**16%** reported documentation access barriers, likely reflecting multiple displacements within Syria, compounding loss of civil records	**9%** reported documentation access barriers, partially mitigated by UNHCR documentation support at border crossings for those who crossed through formal channels
Primary reintegration challenges	Length of absence and adapting to changes in the community	Language barriers, cultural differences after years abroad, and weaker social networks

The Decision to Return

The decision to return is shaped by multiple, simultaneous factors: conditions in communities of origin, conditions in displacement, family circumstances, and financial resources. Understanding what drove these decisions requires going beyond top-line survey results to what returnees themselves said.

According to the IRC survey, the most frequently cited motivation across all governorates was attachment to the community of origin, selected by 63% of respondents. Reunion with family members followed at 58%, and the desire to rebuild life in post-Assad Syria at 50%. The political change of December 2024 genuinely altered the calculus for many Syrians who had not felt safe returning under the previous government.

Beyond the survey results, when participants were asked to explain the decision in their own words, a more layered picture emerged. For a significant proportion of returnees, the decision was shaped as much, and in some cases primarily, by deteriorating conditions in displacement as it was by genuine improvements at home. The pull toward origin and the push out of displacement were entangled in ways that resist a clean separation.

Conditions in Displacement as a Driver of Return

In Lebanon, Syrian families were navigating converging pressures: worsening economic conditions, precarious legal status, and restricted access to livelihoods. In Türkiye, host to over 3.2 million registered Syrians, social marginalization was reported as a daily experience for many. Hama focus group participants described working in exploitative livelihoods, moving houses every two to three months when employers asked them to leave or stopped paying their salaries, and facing dismissal in front of their children.[xiv]

Yasmeen, a 32-year-old mother of two who fled Idlib to Türkiye in 2019 while six months pregnant, described an isolation so acute that her daughters showed signs of social withdrawal. Her eldest, born in Türkiye, had almost no peer interaction for the first years of her life. When Yasmeen returned to Syria, her daughter's development improved, but the conditions she faced in Türkiye, not improvements in Syria, had been the deciding factor in the timing of her return.

For IDPs, the push was often the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance in their area of displacement and the rising cost of rent. Several Idlib focus group participants described returns from camps driven directly by the end of food distributions, not by confidence that their communities in areas of origin had recovered. A government official from Daraa who had been displaced for 12 years, described his decision:

> ***"After all this tiredness and alienation in people's homes, I decided to return to Daraa because I am tired of instability, and because I want my children to grow up in the family house and among their relatives, away from the humiliation of rents and the displacement that took from me 12 years.***

A male returnee from Lebanon, now in Damascus, described the same dynamic more directly:

> ***"I had no choice but to return to my original community, as I did not have the ability to continue paying rents or move to another area. Returning was the only option available, even though I knew the situation was difficult.***

A senior representative of a Syrian civil society organization working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, interviewed as a key informant, further explained this dynamic:

> ***Even though there are returns that are technically considered 'voluntary,' I would push back and say that for many the decisions to return are not truly voluntary because they are driven by a lot of volatility and insecurity. At the same time, these refugees don't really have access to other durable solutions. Resettlement to a third country has become practically impossible. And integration in countries of displacement is often not viable. So oftentimes their only choice is to return to their country if they have the capacity to.***

This convergence of push and pull factors matters for the design of the response. When return movements include a large share driven by the untenability of staying away, families arrive with acute immediate needs and limited financial buffers. Understanding this, and designing support accordingly, is essential for making returns as sustainable as possible.

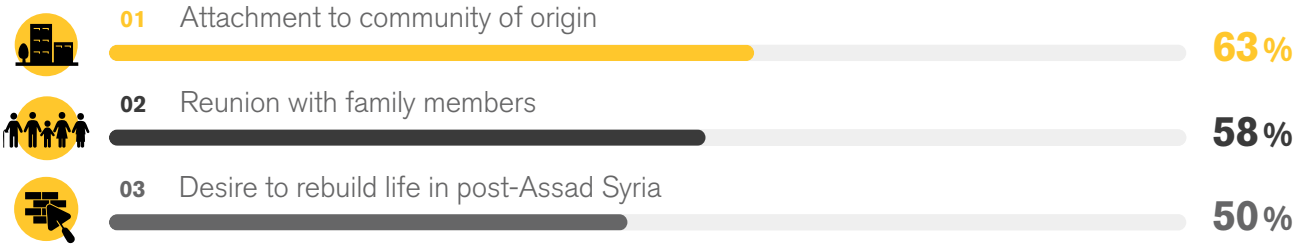


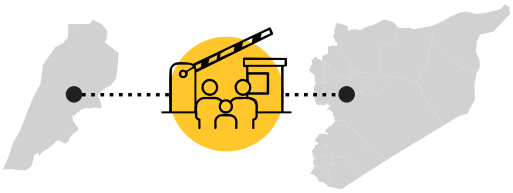
Figure 5 **Top Motivations for Return**
Most frequently cited across all governorates



Al Kamouneh Camp, Idleb, Syria — 27 year old Yasmeen al Hameed (left), sits with her 7 year old daughter Kafa (right), at their shelter in the camp, where the family has lived since returning to Syria after six years of displacement in Türkiye.

Impact of the March 2026 Conflict in Lebanon

The scale and nature of crossings from Lebanon in March 2026 illustrate this dynamic at its most acute. Over 400,000 people are reported to have crossed from Lebanon into Syria through official border crossings since then, driven primarily by renewed conflict in Lebanon rather than improved conditions in Syria. Among those crossing, only 27% indicated an intention to remain in Syria permanently.[xv] The IRC's Homs Protection Officer described the humanitarian consequences: "sudden and unplanned, in large numbers that exceeded the availability of services." These were families that had planned nothing, prepared nothing, and arrived at communities that had nothing waiting for them.

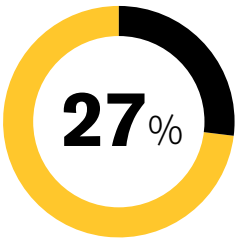


400,000+

Since March 2026



Driven primarily by renewed conflict in Lebanon rather than improved conditions in Syria



Indicated an intention to remain in Syria permanently

Figure 6 **Crossings from Lebanon to Syria**



Homs, Syria. All of Fatima Yehya Jobran's grandchildren gathered inside the family home in Al-Qusayr.

CASE STUDY: One Family's Return

Amna El Ahmad, 30, returned to Homs with her husband Saleh and their three daughters in July 2025 after 11 years in Lebanon.

Amna is originally from Houla, a rural area in Homs governorate that came under complete siege by Syrian government forces in 2012. She was in Grade 9 when the siege began. Schools closed. Electricity and water were cut. Food had to be smuggled in, and people risked their lives crossing checkpoints to reach nearby villages. Amna spent nearly three years under siege with her parents, her brother and her two younger sisters.

She left in 2014, at age 18 to meet her future in-laws, who had recently fled from Homs to Lebanon. The journey from Houla to their house in Saoufar, Lebanon, took a day and a half. There she met Saleh, her husband, who worked as an IT technician. Amna and her family settled in Beirut where her three daughters, Elena (now 11), Mariam (7), and Seleen (3) were all born.

During their stay in Lebanon, Saleh fell ill and the cost of medical care was exorbitant. The costs of living in Beirut accumulated, "we had to pay for school, for rent, and for services, in addition to our daily expenses," she said. The financial pressure, combined with the political opening in Syria after December 2024, made the decision to return a practical one.

They returned on 20 July 2025. The crossing was smooth, no difficulties on either side of the border. She went directly to Houla. She had not seen her parents in eleven years.

The reunion was real and joyful. However, the return to daily life was harder. The family could not immediately move back to the family home in Houla because it was damaged and instead moved into Amna's sister's house in Homs's Al-Waar neighborhood. Saleh struggled to find stable work. The predictable monthly salary he had earned in Beirut did not exist in the same form here.

Additionally, the education situation immediately became a challenge. Elena, her eldest daughter, had studied in French and English in Beirut. She arrived in Homs to find a school system taught entirely in Arabic, with a different curriculum and different teaching methods. She has not adapted easily. She tells her mother she wants to go back to Lebanon, to her friends, to the system she understood, and to the life she had built there. "She was born in Lebanon and her friends live there," Amna said. "She feels more comfortable over there." The two younger girls are adjusting, though they too found the destruction they saw on the streets of Homs difficult to process.

For Amna herself, return has meant confronting the education she was denied. She left school in grade nine when Houla came under siege. She has been attending English classes and psychosocial support sessions at the IRC's Al-Shams Center in Homs, one of the few structured activities available to her since returning. When she applied for work at a non-governmental organization (NGO), she was told she needed a university degree. "Youth born in the 1990s weren't able to continue their education from 2011 to 2019," she said. She wants to complete her studies eventually. She also thinks about opening a small business if they stay.

Amna has not closed the door on leaving again, although she considers it a last resort. If the right opportunity came, she would go primarily for her daughters' futures. Elena has already told her she wants to move to Europe once she finishes school. Mariam, just seven years old, says the same thing. Amna is still glad to finally be home, but the conditions that would encourage her to stay, a stable income, adequate education for her daughters, a house of her own are not yet in place.

"Syria needs more than a couple of years to recover. It needs time to rebuild itself economically, commercially… in all aspects."



Homs, Syria – Amna El Ahmad (center) sits with her daughters Elena, 11 (left), and Mariam, 7 (right), at their home in the Al-Waer neighborhood of Homs.

Decision-Making Dynamics

Gendered Motivations for Return

Women and men described different primary motivations for return, with practical implications for reintegration.
Men more commonly cited economic factors, including property management, the inability to sustain livelihoods in displacement, and the opportunity to reclaim land. Women more commonly emphasized family reunification, children's stability, and access to education and health services as central to their decision-making.

A government official in Damascus who is also a returnee from Türkiye noted an important demographic pattern: in some neighborhoods that were centers of anti-government mobilization during the conflict and experienced heavy fighting—such as Al-Tadamon—the majority of returnee households were headed by women, most of them widows returning with their children and grandchildren. This reflects how the conflict has reshaped household composition in many parts of Syria.

Household and Generational Decision-Making

Within households, return decisions were often made jointly, but not always equally.
Adolescents and young adults who had built lives in displacement—through education, friendships, and emerging professional identities—frequently reported limited influence over the decision.

A 19-year-old from Baba Amr who grew up in Jordan described her father's decision as sudden:

> ***"I was crying for fear of the unknown and of losing the life that I built there, and my opinion was completely different from my father's.***

A woman returning from Germany described fractures within her family when adult children strongly opposed their parents' decision to return. Where return is decided for family members rather than with them, the costs of adaptation are not equally shared across the household.

Constraints and Concerns Shaping Return Decisions

Despite very real concerns about what awaited them at home, return decisions were often shaped by constrained choice within households and by the wider pressures of prolonged displacement. Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported concerns about returning, most commonly around the unavailability of essential services (68%), insufficient funds to manage the journey and resettlement (52%), and disruption to children's education (48%).

That many nevertheless returned reflects how decision-making was shaped less by confidence in conditions upon arrival than by necessity and the narrowing of viable options in displacement.

Assistance During Return

The return journey requires practical resources: money for transport, documentation, and information about conditions at the destination. Yet, for the majority of returnees in this research, it was a process they managed without organized support.

Only 18% of respondents reported having adequate support during the return process. Among those who lacked support, 75% identified cash assistance as the primary unmet need, followed by food assistance (45%) and transport (33%). The most received forms of support were access to legal documents and border facilitation.

Institutional interviewees confirmed the limited landscape of available support. A government official from Daraa described what was available at the crossing: a Red Crescent shelter basket, border facilitation, and a UNHCR cash grant of $400 for refugees with active UNHCR registration. While IDPs returning only received food baskets.

In Jordan, the vast majority of those who have returned have done so without any formal support for the journey. With a cash assistance program for voluntary return, launched by UNHCR in September 2025, reaching over 3,200 individuals by the end of that year,[xvi] against a backdrop of 170,000 Syrians who had returned from Jordan since December 2024.[xvii]

Transport was the most consistently cited practical gap. There is no public transportation serving most return areas outside major cities. Families moved by rented truck or private car, at their own expense. An IDP returnee and government official from Daraa, borrowed money from relatives to rent a truck for the 10-hour journey home, traveling with a family of five. A 35-year-old man returning to Houla with a mobility disability relied on a relative to transport him by car from northern Syria, the only form of support he received. A sewing worker returning from Lebanon to Homs sold part of her professional equipment to fund the journey, arriving without the equipment she needed to restart her livelihood.

A government official in Damascus raised a specific risk: families unable to afford official transport options were resorting to irregular crossings to avoid paying border fees and official transportation costs, potentially exposing themselves and their children to safety risks. In Rural Damascus, the Al-Sarraj Charitable Society organized return convoys for IDPs from northern Syria to eastern Ghouta, covering transport coordination through a community fundraising model. This locally funded initiative reached families who would otherwise have been unable to return. It also illustrates the gap, where a function that requires organized, funded support was being carried out by a local civil society organization operating on charitable donations.

Access to Information

Families making one of the most consequential decisions of their lives often did so without access to reliable, organized information. There is currently no centralized platform providing returnees with up to date, accurate information on road conditions, housing status, available services, documentation requirements, or registration procedures, for any governorate.

In this gap, personal networks have become the primary intelligence source. Relatives and friends already in communities of return were called, messaged, and trusted above any institutional communication. This finding held universally across all seven governorates and all types of interviewees.

A government official in Damascus described it:

> ***"What encouraged many people to return is their communication with their families, relatives or friends inside Syria in general and in their communities of origin in particular — they are the source of information closest to the reality to which they will return."***

A representative of a local coordination body in Houla described the trust hierarchy plainly: community sources and recent returnees' direct accounts were most reliable, followed by local leaders and organizations on the ground, with social media and media the least reliable unless cross-referenced.

Women in the research described a specific information channel: closed WhatsApp and Telegram groups through which information about documentation requirements, aid registration deadlines, water delivery schedules, and available services circulated among women with no other access to institutional communications. In Homs, these networks were the primary way women learned when and where to go for gas allocations, which organizations were registering, and which



Figure 7 **Essential Information Families Need During Return**
Informal women's messaging groups became trusted channels for practical return information.

documents different services required. The IRC's Resilience, Peace and Conflict Assessment (RPCA) for Aleppo and Homs found these women's networks performing a significant coordination function, but invisible to formal actors and absent from official mapping.

The absence of pre-departure information on documentation has had compounding consequences. Families crossing from Lebanon, Türkiye, or Jordan had, in most cases, limited to no guidance on which documents to bring. A government official in Damascus identified civil documentation, registration of marriages, births, and deaths; extraction of personal identification papers, as one of the areas of greatest need.

The IRC's Homs Protection Officer noted that women often arrived without documentation needed to prove divorce, claim inheritance, or establish legal identity in their own names, with direct consequences for their access to services and legal rights.

In Al-Tadamon neighborhood in Damascus, some returnees found that their properties had been sold during their displacement, creating legal disputes that will be difficult to resolve without proper documentation on both sides. Housing, land and property (HLP) rights are essential for a safe and dignified return, but most returnees arrived without guidance on how to assert them.



Northwest Syria. The National Hospital in central Idlib city, which the IRC had been renovating for two months, sustained some damage following an airstrike on a neighboring facility.

2. Reality Post-Return: The Journey towards Reintegration

Expectations and Reality

While half of all survey respondents expected to encounter challenges upon arrival, for 44%, the challenges they encountered were worse than anticipated. Although many had received detailed reports from relatives who returned before them, the scale of destruction, service absence, and economic pressure in communities of return is difficult to convey from a distance. Additionally, conditions across many areas have continued to deteriorate even as return numbers climb.

An official from a national civil society organization in Daraa described the pattern:

> ***"Returnees from outside Syria may expect the country to be on the path to recovery and for basic services to be restored quickly. Reality shocks them with poor medical and educational services, the destruction of infrastructure, and very slow recovery processes.***

Although nearly half of the participants expected to encounter some challenges upon return, 91% of returnees reported that essential services were missing in their community upon arrival. The three most commonly absent: water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services; primary health care; and community infrastructure such as electricity and roads. The absence of these services makes every other aspect of recovery – economic, educational, and psychological – that much harder.

Infrastructure and Housing

Infrastructure

The physical conditions facing returnees across the seven governorates covered by this research are, in many areas, more severe than pre-return communications conveyed. In Homs Old City, the water and sanitation network has, based on an interview with the local mukhtar,[xviii] effectively collapsed. In Saraqeb, Idlib, a town of roughly 70,000 people, there is no electricity, schools have been destroyed and not rehabilitated, and private hospitals are the only healthcare option at prices most families cannot meet. In Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, Rural Damascus, the mayor described water networks as "still absent or inefficient," electricity and communications as "weak or interrupted in most neighborhoods," and sewage and road infrastructure destroyed, in a community receiving thousands of returning families.

The World Bank's 2025 assessment estimates total infrastructure damage in Syria at $52 billion, with reconstruction costs projected at $82 billion.[xix] Electricity shortages mean that many regions have only two to four hours of public supply per day. In Homs, the Chamber of Commerce documented businesses paying up to 40% more in production costs due to dependence on private generators. More than 12 million people in Syria have limited access to basic WASH services. In communities of return, water often now arrives intermittently, for example once every four days in parts of Al-Bab or once a week in Maskana. Many communities are forced to purchase water from private tankers at rising costs, a burden that falls hardest on households with the least income, including the significant proportion of women-headed households returning to areas where they have not yet established income-generating opportunities.[xx]

The absence of public street lighting has also had a specific effect on women and girls' safety and freedom of movement. A 19-year-old in Baba Amr described it:

> ***"There are no services or public transportation entering Baba Amr after 5 pm, which means I'm confined to the house.***

Beyond protection, the absence of reliable electricity constrains every dimension of recovery. Businesses cannot operate competitively, agricultural irrigation systems cannot function, health facilities cannot run equipment reliably, and children and youth find it more difficult to study after dark. In communities where the working day is effectively truncated by the absence of power, economic recovery is structurally impeded.

CASE STUDY: Coming Home to Stay — Mahmoud's Story

Mahmoud Al Sweidan, 43, was born in the house he lives in today. It is an old house in Kafar Khacher, a small village in rural Aleppo, where his family has farmed the land for generations. He grew up there, married there, and was raising five children there when the uprising began. In 2012, after airstrikes killed twelve people in the village in a single day, including two of his nephews, Mahmoud and his family fled to Azaz. He could see his village from the rooftop of the house he rented in Azaz. It was a 45-minute walk away, but he could not go there for more than a decade.

In Azaz, Mahmoud did what he had always done: he farmed. Without his own land, he rented plots each year and cultivated them. He tried to return to Kafar Khacher once, in 2013, and stayed for six months before renewed bombing forced him out again. He went back to Azaz and stayed until 8 December 2024.

"When I first returned and entered my house, I can't describe the feeling. We started crying and we fell to the floor to thank Allah. To return home after such a long time and after all this suffering, it's the house I grew up in, it's the family house. It's a very nice feeling."

The house had been partially destroyed by bombing. In the village there was no electricity, no piped water, no functioning school. Mahmoud began cleaning and repairing, driving out from Azaz each morning and returning each evening until the house was livable. He installed solar panels for electricity. Neighbors with wells share their water with those who do not have one; others buy it from tankers. The school in the village remains closed.

None of this has slowed him down. Mahmoud has planted barley, wheat, potatoes, lentils, and nigella seeds across his land. At the entrance to his house he has planted parsley, arugula, garden cress, onions, and garlic. "It gives some greenery," he said, "and you can eat directly from your land." In the courtyard he keeps sheep, pigeons, canary and karawan birds, some of which survived the entire displacement in Azaz and made the journey back with him. This year, he says, the rains have been good. The crops are better than last year, and he can feel the land reviving.

In 2025, Shafak, an IRC partner organization, reached Mahmoud and the other farmers of Kafar Khacher through an agricultural support program. They provided barley seeds and $300 in cash, which Mahmoud used to buy fertilizers and herbicides. An agricultural engineer from Shafak came to the village to provide training: when to irrigate, when to apply fertilizers and pesticides, and how to manage the crop cycle. The support came at a critical moment, their first proper planting season back on their own land after more than a decade away.

However, many people from Kafar Khacher have not returned. The closed school, the absence of water and electricity, and the cost of repairs are all real barriers. Mahmoud hopes the government will expand support to farmers by improving access to seeds and fertilizers at affordable prices. He is clear-eyed about what is missing. But he is also, unmistakably, home. "I hope to rebuild the house the way it was before," he said. "I hope to cultivate our land once again and to enable my children to pursue their education." He has already started on all three.



Kafr Khasher, northern Aleppo, Syria – Mahmoud Al Sweidan and his children relax in their backyard with tea. L-R: Mohammad (17 years old), Baraa (11), Mustafa (3), Mahmoud (43), and Alwan (12).

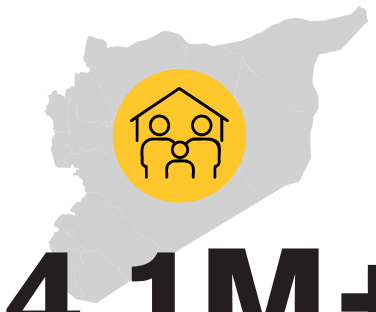
Housing

In the research, 71% of returnees reported residing in damaged housing, severely constraining their ability to achieve safe and dignified living conditions, and increasing the risk of secondary displacement. Many families are living in a single habitable room of a partially damaged building, or in temporary accommodation with relatives. Home restoration is severely constrained by the high cost of building materials and the near absence of organized support for residential rehabilitation.

Across Syria, more than 4.1 million people require support on housing, land and property issues, according to the HLP Technical Working Group. In Aleppo alone, an estimated 51,500 properties require HLP-related intervention.[xxi,xxii] In parts of South Damascus, returnees have found their properties subject to fraudulent transfers that took place during their absence. Research by Daraj Media documents how the Assad-led government issued 35 laws during the conflict enabling the confiscation and expropriation of property, primarily affecting displaced persons and political opponents. In some cases, properties were subsequently sold through formalized contracts processed during years of conflict and administrative disruption, leaving returnees with limited or no legal avenues to reclaim their homes.[xxiii] As a result, families have arrived to find strangers occupying their homes, with documentation to support legal ownership. This challenge was also discussed by a member of the local authority in Rural Damascus:

> ***"Tensions related to ownership and housing between the original homeowners (returnees) and the occupants or beneficiaries of these houses during the war due to informal seizure, long-term use of houses, difficulty in proving ownership or loss of documents are rising. These tensions may develop into acute conflicts, especially in the most affected neighborhoods.***

The new Syrian Ministry of Justice announced in late 2025 the establishment of a specialized court to investigate forgery cases and restore properties to their original owners, a step that is welcomed, though the process will take considerable time.[xxiv]



4.1M+

People across Syria require support on housing, land and property issues



51,500

Properties in Aleppo require HLP-related intervention

Figure 8 **HLP Needs**



A general view during the distribution of winter kits provided by the International Rescue Committee at a camp for displaced people from the Aleppo countryside in the city of Tabqa, Syria

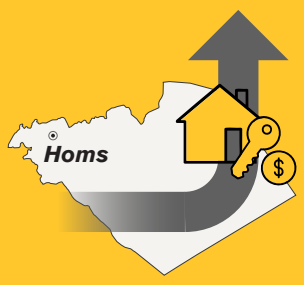
SPOTLIGHT

Conflict Risks Due to Unresolved HLP Issues

An owner returning to an occupied home is often the moment housing competition becomes a direct legal and social dispute. As focus group and key interviewees recounted, these cases have no quick resolution pathway: community mediation can defer them, and courts take months to years. In the Old City of Homs, managing property boundary disputes, where physical destruction erased the landmarks on which informal ownership knowledge depended, are described as the mukhtar's largest daily workload.

Agricultural land disputes arise when returning families find their land has been used by others during their absence - combined with damaged boundary markers and competing claims over water access. An interview with a civil society organization identifies this as an increasing and under-addressed source of friction, where agricultural livelihoods are already under severe pressure from input costs and market timing failures.

Rental increases triggered by return signal economic pressure attributable specifically to the return process. This was mentioned solely by respondent in Homs, though is likely occurring in other governorates, given the well-documented and significant rise in the cost of living. The Homs Chamber of Commerce described residential rents in stabilized areas of Homs rising 50–100% within months of return movements accelerating. This harms both returnees without property and existing low-income resident households.



50-100%
increase in residential rents
within months of return movements

Figure 9 **Rising Residential Rents**

Unresolved HLP Issues

- Occupied homes: Legal and Social disputes
- Agricultural land disputes
- Rental increases triggered by return
- Courts take months to years
- Community mediation can defer disputes
- Damaged boundary markers
- Competing claims over water access
- Significant rise in the cost of living

Protection, Psychosocial Needs and Social Repair

Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)

Contamination from ERW was identified as one of the most severe and life-threatening protection risks affecting people, particularly in areas of return in northwestern Syria.[xxv] IRC Protection Monitoring from January – March 2026, indicates that this threat is persistent and deeply entrenched, directly restricting safe freedom of movement, access to livelihoods, and the ability of households to safely remain in or return to their areas of origin. Overall, 300,000 explosive ordnances contaminate the country.[xxvi]

Interview findings indicate that 62% of assessed locations in northwestern Syria reported the presence of unexploded ordnance or explosive remnants of war (UXO/ERW) within a 10-kilometer radius of residential areas, reflecting widespread contamination of civilian environments.[xxvii] Agricultural lands were identified as the most heavily affected areas, making up approximately 90% of contaminated sites, followed by abandoned or partially damaged buildings, secondary roads, and areas close to former frontlines. This contamination prevents households from safely accessing agricultural land, restricts livelihood opportunities, and increases reliance on unsafe or unstable income sources.

In Idlib, a community leader described children being killed or injured by war remnants in areas that families had assumed safe. Private clearance teams charge between $100 and $500 per residential property, and significantly more for agricultural land, costs that most returning families cannot meet.[xxviii]

Mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS)

MHPSS services were identified as another severe gap affecting returnees. Psychological support at this critical juncture is a clear mechanism through which increased stress and adjustments to new social, economic, and living conditions can be positively impacted. Returnees and host community members also noted how psychological pressures facing host community members impact upon returnees' ability to reintegrate, with pressures from the lack of job opportunities and high rents affecting both groups.[xxix]

During focus groups with the WLO Platform, the importance of providing MHPSS support for ex-detainees released following the fall of the Assad-led government was a particularly strong finding. Mental health impacts on male ex-detainees who face struggles in adjusting to family and community life require a high degree of personalized support. Such support will have positive knock-on effects on spouses too, who are reporting higher levels of gender-based violence as a result of the psychological distress experienced by their husbands.[xxx] MHPSS can be understood as a key step in rebuilding the social fabric of families and communities and therefore establishing sustainable social change. The IRC's Protection Officer in Homs documented the downstream effects of economic stress on family health: as household income collapses, the risk of domestic violence increases, with women absorbing many of the consequences. Maternal health and psychosocial support remain critically under-addressed for returnee populations across all areas of return.

In a focus group in rural Homs, a young woman shared:

> ***"We have lost safe spaces for psychological gathering or unloading, and phones have become our only world to escape reality."***

Lacking tailored programmatic interventions, household-level stress will increase, gender-based violence will likely rise, and community tensions will remain unresolved. Reintegration is far more than material recovery, it is also about rebuilding social and psychological stability. The provision of psychological support should therefore be understood to be a key need for returnees, host community members and IDPs, with direct impacts on the effectiveness of reintegration.

Documentation

Relatedly, documentation barriers form a key obstacle, not only in reclaiming property, but to accessing services in general. The WLO Platform focus groups noted how, for many returnees, title deeds for their property, national records and identity papers have been lost after

years of displacement and conflict. Without identity documents, families cannot register for assistance, enroll children in school, access health services, or legally reclaim their homes. This issue acutely impacts women-headed households, particularly in conflict-affected neighborhoods where widowhood is widespread. Women cannot establish legal identity in their own names through most available channels, leaving them unable to assert inheritance and property rights or access the services they are entitled to. As one focus group participant described: "Without a 'man' defending their right, or a 'paper' proving their identity, a woman's voice remains completely absent from the lists of support." A mukhtar in Maskana, Aleppo, described significant numbers of families unable to access documents due to years of conflict, leaving them in legal limbo. While a mukhtar in the Old City of Homs described people in "legal paralysis"; present in their community but unable to assert any rights within it. Focus groups and interviewees described organizations and authorities mostly directing assistance toward those with complete paperwork, as they are easiest to support, which systematically channels resources away from those without documentation.

For returnees in rural areas, documentation challenges are intensified by limited access to civil registration services, often requiring lengthy and expensive travel to larger towns or cities:

> "
>
> ***People are often forced to travel to other cities such as Aleppo or Manbij to obtain a simple document. This means a long journey, fatigue, risks and additional expenses, especially for the elderly, women and the sick.***
>
> IDP returnee from Al-Khafsa, Aleppo

Over a third of returnees felt a lack of effort from authorities, community leaders and organizations to address their documentation challenges and believed this undermined their reintegration. Focus groups and interviewees also noted that due to a lack of funding, those with homes destroyed are put on wait lists for rehabilitation grants, which often prioritize minor or medium repairs. This leads to a situation where those who suffered the most damage are also the group least able to access support. WLO Platform participants shared how this can lead to situations where returnees are forced to rent at exorbitant rates, further challenging their ability to save the money required to rebuild their homes. Addressing these barriers requires improving access to civil registration services, simplifying procedures, and ensuring that women can establish legal identity independently, steps that would mark a significant move toward sustainable return.



Naji* (2) is helping his mom Amal* (25) with gardening at their home at Sere Kaniye Camp, Syria

SPOTLIGHT

Children Returning from Abroad

Educational access in Syria is constrained for all children, regardless of whether they are host community members, internally displaced, or returning from abroad. More than 2.5 million children are out of school, and nearly 8,000 schools require urgent rehabilitation. Qualified teachers have left the system in large numbers, with gaps increasingly filled by volunteers and recent graduates without formal training. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and shortages of learning materials continue to hinder learning across the country.

For children returning from abroad, these systemic challenges are compounded by additional barriers linked to displacement history. Many have never lived in Syria or have been educated in different languages, including Turkish, French, English, or other curricula. Upon return, those lucky enough to attend school, enter school systems operating in Standard Arabic, often without structured mechanisms to recognize prior learning or bridge language gaps. As one interviewee described it: "We call this a form of re-displacement."

Many returnee families are also unfamiliar with school registration procedures, which can delay enrollment. These children therefore face a set of barriers that build on, rather than replace, broader systemic constraints in the education sector, and which are not yet systematically addressed in post-return programming.

Research participants also described children being bullied in schools because of their accents and habits and facing academic difficulty because the curriculum assumed a level of Arabic literacy they did not have. Children living in displacement in IDP and refugee camps frequently had their education disrupted by service cuts and movements requiring re-registration, compounding the gap upon return. In a discussion with local NGOs in Homs, participants described children as "completely lost" in classrooms where their Arabic language skills were not at the level required for the Syrian curriculum and they did not share the cultural references of their peers. Amna's eldest daughter, Elena, schooled in French and English in Beirut, is among them. Amna explains: "She arrived in Homs to find a school system taught entirely in Arabic, with a different curriculum and different teaching methods. She has not adapted easily."

Education is not only about learning. It is one of the primary pathways through which children reintegrate into communities, develop a sense of belonging, and build the social networks that support stability. Some adult returnees noted that their children's school attendance supported their own reintegration: attending parent meetings, joining parent associations, and forming new social networks through other parents. A female refugee returnee from Iraq living in Homs described it directly:

"I feel a sense of belonging because my children have integrated into school and have companions. The most important factor for my reintegration was school and children. When I started attending parent meetings and getting to know the mothers of my children's companions, I formed a new social network. My children's success in making friends was the prerequisite for my integration as well."

Meanwhile, during an interview, a local authority member in Homs identified schools as "the last neutral space", bringing Syrians together across different ethnic and social (host/refugee/IDP) groupings. These testimonies reveal the importance of education as an entry point to forging social cohesion in communities. A lack of educational reintegration also has profound longer-term consequences, reducing children's future access to the labor market and to full participation in Syria's social and economic life.

The IRC's RPCA for Aleppo and Homs identified the withdrawal of girls from school, particularly in rural Homs, as a pattern driven by family economic pressure and distance to secondary schools, with early marriage occurring as a coping strategy in some areas. These are multi-generational consequences of displacement that require targeted educational support: language bridging, recognition of prior learning, and social integration programming.[xxxi]

Challenges



2.5 M+

children are out of school in Syria



Nearly 8,000

Schools require urgent rehabilitation



Qualified teachers have left Syria in large numbers



Language and curriculum gaps



Social adaptation and acceptance



Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities and shortage of learning materials

Livelihoods

Today, one in four Syrians is unemployed, and nine out of ten live in poverty.[xxxii] At current growth rates, Syria's economy will not regain its pre-conflict GDP level before 2080. Against this backdrop, the expectation that returning families will achieve economic stability through individual effort and limited assistance alone is not realistic.[xxxiii]

Across all seven governorates covered by this research, unemployment was described as a universal issue in areas of return. Agriculture, the primary livelihood for rural populations in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Daraa, is operating under conditions that make recovery extremely difficult: recurring droughts, damaged irrigation infrastructure, sharply higher input costs, market structures that disadvantage smallholder farmers, and agricultural land contaminated by explosive remnants of war. The IRC RPCA found Aleppo farmers often borrow upfront to cover seed and input costs. But by the time they harvest, market prices are at their lowest, and because everyone is selling at the same time, they are left with less than they spent and no choice but to borrow again the following season. Formal credit that might cushion this cycle is often inaccessible to most returnees, as it requires collateral property that is destroyed or legally unclear.

In urban Homs, the Chamber of Commerce estimated that 60–70% of youth and returnee economic activity is now informal. Commerce and services are mostly advertised through Facebook and WhatsApp marketplaces, with very few businesses formally registered with the relevant government entities.

The weight of economic pressure falls hardest on specific groups. Women-headed households, disproportionately represented in the returnee population, face the combination of sole financial responsibility and restricted access to formal labor markets. They face a labor market that is largely informal, physically concentrated in areas they cannot safely reach, and governed by social norms that restrict independent participation in some communities. The economic assets many women relied on before displacement, including sewing machines, workshop equipment, and small business stock, were lost during years away and cannot be replaced without capital. Where assistance exists, it typically takes the form of food distributions. What women need is productive support: training, equipment, and small loans. The sewing worker who returned to Homs from Lebanon described the experience: "If I had the help to buy the fabric and repair my machine, I would have supported myself and my family without needing anyone." The preference for productive support over consumable aid was a consistent finding across female focus groups in all seven governorates.

Women returning to rural and peripheral areas face mobility restrictions that women in urban centers do not. Fewer services are available locally, transport is limited, social conservatism is deeper, and the informal support systems including women's WhatsApp networks and community groups are less developed. Rural women are the furthest from the systems designed to support them, and the least able to reach them independently. Widows, identified in every focus group as the most economically vulnerable group, carry full domestic and financial responsibility without any formal support structure. Young men without capital, property, or established networks are categorized by some assistance frameworks as "capable" and therefore excluded from support, even when they are unable to start economically. The RPCA identified this exclusion as a source of accumulating frustration.

People with disabilities face an additional dimension of exclusion. A 35-year-old man from Houla in Homs governorate, who returned to Syria with a mobility disability after displacement in northern Syria, described systematic rejection when seeking employment:

> ***"I did not expect that there would be a clear rejection of a person who has a disability even by simple actions. This made me feel more helpless than the injury itself.***

The IRC's RPCA confirmed that service centers are not equipped to receive people with disabilities, and that assistance does not routinely reach their homes, making them often invisible to systems that are meant to target them.

Economic reintegration

The research also found livelihoods to be one of the strongest drivers of successful reintegration. When returnees are able to work, open businesses, and engage in daily economic life, they report faster integration, stronger social connection, and a greater sense of belonging. One IDP returnee interviewed in Hama noted,

> ***"I returned to work and opened my shop. This left me in contact with people on a daily basis. The feeling of stability played an important role in my reintegration."***

Another refugee returnee from Lebanon shared how she felt employment helped her reintegrate in Aleppo:

> ***"What helped me with my reintegration was my work and profession. As soon as I started receiving customers in my workshop, I got into people's conversations and stories. These daily interactions quickly broke the ice and made me feel like I was an effective and productive member of the neighborhood."***

However, as mentioned earlier, the sheer number of new arrivals has also increased pressure on limited jobs in communities, in turn undermining reintegration efforts in some locations. A representative from an international NGO noted how Hama and Homs governorates have seen the highest level of returnees and that the lack of job opportunities in these areas has created competition, resulting in frustration amongst both returnees and host communities.



Kafr Khasher, northern Aleppo, Syria – Mahmoud Al Sweidan tends to his tomato seedlings

SPOTLIGHT

The Syria Women-Led Organizations (WLO) Platform

The Syria Women-Led Organizations (WLO) Platform was established in 2023 by ten Syrian women's organizations working across the humanitarian response. Originally operating from outside Syria, the platform relocated its operations to Damascus following the political transition of December 2024 and now brings together over 100 women-led civil society organizations working inside the country. Its founding mandate is to strengthen women's role in humanitarian and community work while expanding their presence in planning, coordination, and decision-making, a shift from representation toward structural participation in the mechanisms shaping Syria's recovery.

The WLO Platform played a central role in this research. The platform organized and facilitated a validation workshop that brought together over 60 local Syrian women-led non-governmental organizations to review and comment on the research findings, ensuring that the gender-sensitive lens of the study was tested against the knowledge of practitioners working directly with women and girls across Syria's communities of return. Three additional focus group in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus were conducted with WLO Platform members as part of the research process.

The platform's network provided insights that would not have been accessible through standard research channels: on the mental health impacts of detainee release on household dynamics, on the regression of rural service provision as donor funding centralizes in urban areas, and on the absence of peacebuilding programming at the community level despite this being recognized as a critical need. Women-led organizations operating inside Syria are among the most effective mechanisms available for reaching women and girls in communities where formal institutions are absent, where mobility is restricted, and where trust in external actors is limited. They have sustained a presence through the conflict period that international organizations could not maintain, and they hold knowledge of community dynamics, informal networks, and protection risks that no external assessment can replicate. The Syria WLO Platform can be followed and supported at: www.facebook.com/syriawlo.

Key Facts



Established in 2023



Founded by 10 Syrian women's organizations



Brings together 100+ women-led civil society organizations



Relocated operations to Damascus after the political transition of December 2024

Research Role



Validation workshops held with 60+ local Syrian women-led NGOs



Focus groups held in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus

Table 1. The following table provides a summary of effective practices which support and strengthen area-based reintegration in communities. These practices have been discussed by returnee refugees as well as IDPs:

Best Practices which Support Reintegration

Damascus and Idlib

The establishment of 'Civil Peace Committees' which focused on addressing identity -level divisions which exist between community members. In addressing these divisions, community members from different backgrounds developed a shared understanding of challenges they face in addressing their needs.[xxxiv]

Damascus and Rural Damascus

'Solidarity' efforts between different community members (including host community members, returnees, and existing IDPs) to address common challenges in the community e.g. service availability, clearing rubble, "informal exchange of assistance."[xxxv]

Idlib

National charity organizations fill a notable gap in service support from authorities. Support from charity organizations also enables different community members to provide support as well as receive support.

Hama

Refugee returnees in Hama noted how "there were local initiatives (e.g. volunteer assistance teams, community maps with service points and meetings held with community leaders) which helped improve my relations with the local community. These initiatives were part of the reintegration process and encouraged me to contribute positively to the community."

Cross-Governorate:

Returnees consistently noted how 'warm attitudes', cooperation, moral support, guidance, and practical assistance received from host community members strongly supported their feeling of inclusion and reintegration.

Regional (intra-Syria) Differences

Table 2. The table below captures key governorate-level differences. It is notable that despite minor differences, across all governorates reintegration is less constrained by social acceptance and more by structural deficits, particularly services, livelihoods, and housing, with severity varying significantly by location.

Governorates	Integration Profile	Key Reintegration Challenges	Social cohesion/ attitudes	Overall Assessment
 **Homs**	Weak integration	▪ Extreme service shortages ▪ Housing destruction ▪ Limited livelihoods/ income ▪ High psychosocial needs	Lowest positive attitudes; reports of mistrust & exclusion	Most severe challenges overall (services + social tensions + economy)
 **Hama**	Moderate integration	▪ Lack of services (WASH, health, education) ▪ Severe documentation/ HLP issues ▪ Limited livelihoods	Very positive host attitudes; gradual integration observed over time	Socially supportive context, but structural service & legal barriers persist
 **Daraa**	Moderate-to-good integration	▪ Healthcare shortages ▪ Water access/high costs ▪ Housing destruction ▪ Limited livelihoods	Generally positive attitudes; quicker reintegration	Socially cohesive, but health and service gaps critical
 **Aleppo**	Good integration	▪ Gaps in essential services ▪ Damaged housing/ infrastructure ▪ Limited livelihoods ▪ Documentation barriers	Very positive attitudes; strong family/social networks	Best-performing socially, but economic & service gaps limit sustainability
 **Damascus**	Moderate integration	▪ Overstretched urban services (electricity, water, schools) ▪ Infrastructure damage (waste, rubble) ▪ Livelihood competition	Moderate attitudes; some tension due to congestion	Moderate attitudes; some tension due to service pressure
 **Rural Damascus**	Moderate-to-weak integration	▪ Severe infrastructure collapse (roads, water, electricity) ▪ Poverty and limited services ▪ Weak institutional support	Moderate solidarity; reliance on community networks	Moderate integration; weak institutional support
 **Idlib**	Moderate-to-weak integration	▪ Major service gaps ▪ Housing destruction ▪ Explosive hazards ▪ Very high unemployment	Mixed but generally positive attitudes; reliance on NGOs	Economically constrained, with infrastructure damage compounding issues

3. Social Cohesion as a Systems Outcome

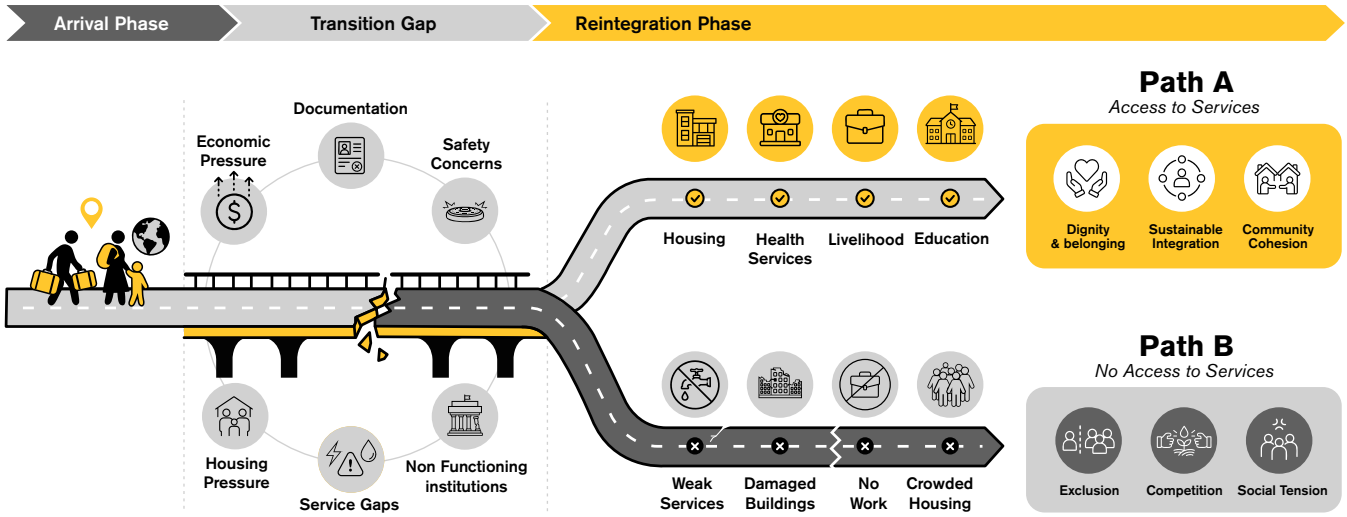


Figure 10 **Role of Essential Services**

Questions and experiences of reintegration are invariably connected with questions and experiences of return. As one interviewee explained,

> ***"The return of refugees and IDPs after years of displacement and destruction was not just a demographic process; it completely reshaped the social structure of our community."*** [xxxvi,xxxvii]

Successful reintegration is shaped not only by social acceptance, but by the capacity of communities to absorb returning populations, including the resources and systems available to them. The research found little variation over time in perceived inclusion: around half of returnees felt included upon arrival, and a similar proportion reported feeling included at the time of the research. Positive treatment from host community members and other returnees were reported to have supported inclusion, but at the same time insufficient services, scarce livelihoods, and conflict-affected social cohesion undermined it. The top factor undermining reintegration was insufficient services for all community members (71%). This finding clearly highlights a key risk in accelerating rates of return: underfunded services can turn return into competition and strain cohesion. Interviews highlighted language barriers for some refugee returnees, political and sectarian tensions, the effects of war on social fabric, and a major gap in peacebuilding and psychosocial support as other key risks. Reintegration outcomes are therefore much broader than 'community acceptance'. They encompass structural factors such as ensuring equitable access to basic services, livelihoods, shelter, access to documentation, HLP support, protection, education, and psychosocial support. Collectively, these services form the basis of a sustainable reintegration assistance package.

The Role of Essential Services

As previously outlined, access to water, electricity, healthcare, education, livelihoods and basic infrastructure is severely constrained across all locations. Within the reintegration process, these service gaps function as drivers of exclusion, sources of competition, and catalysts for social tension, undermining the sustainability of return. Strengthening equitable access to services for all community members is therefore a core need for successful reintegration.

SPOTLIGHT

Social Cohesion Under Strain

In Tal Kalakh, rural Homs, an area that the RPCA identified as showing the most significant signs of social strain in the entire assessment area, economic pressure has visibly contracted community social life. Women in the Tal Kalakh focus group described no longer visiting neighbors, sharing food, or gathering in the ways that sustained mutual support through years of hardship. One woman explained: "the high prices made people lock themselves in. The neighbor became afraid that his neighbor would knock on his door for help, and this is the worst social change we have gone through."

The RPCA found that Tal Kalakh sits at the intersection of multiple conflict risk factors: resource competition between returnees and long-term residents, opaque aid selection criteria generating perceptions of favoritism, and a returnee-only program dynamic that residents experienced as institutional confirmation that their endurance during the conflict counted for less. Women in the community described being effectively invisible to formal systems without a male household head or identity documentation to support their claims.

The informal mechanisms currently supporting community functioning - including the mukhtar system, informal mediation, and collective resource purchasing - remain important, but they are increasingly stretched and rely heavily on individual actors rather than stable institutions.

The reduction in everyday social interaction is therefore not only a social observation but an indicator of weakening community-level coping capacity. As economic pressures intensify and trust erodes, the informal systems that help manage hardship become less able to perform their stabilizing role. This highlights the importance of linking economic recovery and equitable, area-based service delivery with explicit support for social cohesion, particularly in communities experiencing high levels of return and resource pressure.

Main Conflict risk factors



Women being effectively invisible to formal systems without a male household head or identity documentation



Thinning of the informal solidarity bonds



Resource competition between returnees and long-term residents



Opaque aid selection criteria



Perceptions of favoritism



Dependence on informal actors rather than functioning institutions



Raqqa, Syria. Farah* (34) and her children Marwan* (12), Inas* (10), Rana* (8), and Fadi* (5) visit the IRC Integrated Protection Center in Raqqa

Drivers of exclusion

When services cannot meet demand, returnees struggle to access essential systems needed for daily life. When water, electricity, healthcare, and education services operate below demand, returnees, particularly those without income, documentation, or social networks, are disproportionately unable to secure access. This restricts their ability to participate in economic, social, and institutional life, effectively placing them at the margins of their own communities. In contexts of scarcity, access barriers can lead to competition, reinforcing inequalities between returnees, host populations, and other vulnerable groups. As a result, exclusion is structurally produced through uneven and insufficient service provision.

Sources of competition

Limited services can create direct competition between returnees and host communities, as scarce resources are shared among a growing population. When water, electricity, healthcare, and education services cannot meet demand, access becomes rationed, either formally or informally, forcing community members to compete for basic needs. This competition is most visible in access to jobs, school places, housing, and aid, where perceived or real inequalities in distribution can quickly generate tension. In such contexts, scarcity transforms everyday services into contested resources, shifting community dynamics from cooperation toward rivalry.

Catalysts for social tension

When access is unequal or perceived as unfair, service gaps can erode trust, generate perceptions of favoritism and strain community relations, turning basic needs into points of friction between groups. These perceived inequities undermine trust, weaken social cohesion, and can escalate into open conflict, especially in contexts already shaped by economic hardship and prolonged displacement. Evidence from across IRC surveyed locations demonstrates that tensions are primarily resource-based, rather than identity-based, within the locations surveyed (see Limitations).

Positive Impacts

Amongst these complexities and interconnected pressures, it can be easy to overlook the positive impacts and relations which exist between host community members and returnees, with the majority of returnees, both refugees (77%) and IDPs (84%) reported positive or neutral attitudes from host community members. As noted during a focus group discussion in Hama, "[Both host and returnee] participation in daily activities has made the community more vibrant, the neighborhoods have a more social atmosphere, and people are helping each other more."

These results make evident that if resourced and tackled appropriately social cohesion can be fostered through program design and strategic interventions which reinforce peaceful relations. An interview with a civil society network articulated the importance of developing peacebuilding projects in parallel with humanitarian efforts:

> ***"It is crucial that we solve these tensions in order to rebuild Syria. However, currently there are no peacebuilding programs inside communities despite this being understood to be a critical need for many years. Communities are struggling to be reintegrated and to resolve issues. Meanwhile neither humanitarian organizations nor the authorities have developed the necessary programs to support them.***

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond siloed approaches to humanitarian assistance, recovery and peacebuilding, in favor of coordinated, long-term investments that rebuild essential systems, support community dialogue and are guided by the needs of affected peoples. Without this shift, the response risks reinforcing dependency and instability instead of supporting a sustainable transition for Syrian returnees and host community members alike.

SPOTLIGHT

IRC Syria RISE-BMZ Project on Social Cohesion

In 2025-26, the IRC piloted an innovative integrated approach to strengthening social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and resilience among IDPs, and host communities across Deir ez-Zor. Recognizing the social pressures associated with displacement and return movements, the project combined community consultations, field assessments, focus groups, and meetings with local stakeholders and community committees, identifying key sources of tension, including competition over resources, limited access to services, stigma, livelihood challenges, and broader economic pressures.

The identified issues were then discussed through established community-based committees, which worked closely with community members to prioritize challenges, identify root causes, and develop practical mitigation initiatives.

Following validation with local stakeholders, selected initiatives are implemented by communities themselves with technical and financial support from IRC and its local partner.

In Deir ez-Zor, two key issues were identified: (1) Lack of public electricity to run water pumps on farms and (2) Lack of employment opportunities for IDPs. By developing a shared understanding of the problem, the IRC (funded by BMZ) supported the community to connect agricultural water pumps to the electricity grid, eliminating the need for costly diesel. Savings were utilized by host community farmers to employ IDPs who brought specialized knowledge on farming techniques from other governorates such as Aleppo, therefore supporting the livelihood of both host and IDP communities.

This approach ensures that social cohesion interventions are locally driven and responsive to community-identified concerns, while creating opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, trust-building, and sustainable community engagement beyond the project closure.

Through these efforts, the RISE-BMZ project has contributed to strengthening trust, improving access to services and livelihoods, and fostering more cohesive and resilient communities in areas experiencing significant displacement and return dynamics.

Approach


Community Consultations


Field assessments


Focus groups


Meetings with local stakeholders


Community Committees

Identifying key sources of tension


Competition over Resources


Limited access to services


Stigma


Livelihood challenges


Broader economic pressures

The Social Dynamics of Aid Distribution

Humanitarian assistance is reaching some returnees and community members across the research area, with UN agencies, international NGOs, and national and local organizations providing protection services, cash assistance, shelter support, and access to documentation. This work is meaningful and valued by those who receive it. At the same time, coverage falls well short of the scale of need, and the distribution of support is generating social frictions that deserve attention.

The IRC's RPCA for Aleppo and Homs found that the single most consistently documented conflict trigger across all assessment locations was visible disparity in aid distribution. When one household receives support and a comparable neighbor does not, without transparent explanation, the default interpretation is favoritism. This damages trust among neighbors and erodes the informal solidarity mechanisms on which communities currently depend. A Tal Kalakh resident described the impact:

> ***"We see returnees as our competitors even for our children's seats in schools. Relationships have become more physical than emotional, in the past, return meant joys and blessings. Today, return means asking: 'What did they bring with them? Will they compete with us for the diesel ration?***

As donor funding has shifted since December 2024, organizations have concentrated in more accessible and higher-profile locations, leaving some formerly opposition-held areas, peripheral neighborhoods, and rural communities with less support than urban centers, despite greater conflict impact and fewer existing services. This shift is compounded by broader funding cuts, most acutely the suspension of USAID programs in early 2025, which has contracted the overall humanitarian envelope at the same moment that organizations are relocating away from the areas most dependent on external support. Validation workshop participants in Aleppo described this directly:

> ***"The centralization of organizations and services have all moved to Damascus, which means areas that used to receive services are no longer getting services.***

The research documents a consistent pattern of reduced coverage in areas of highest need, pointing to a significant gap between where needs are concentrated and where resources are currently directed.

The Case for Area-Based Programming

Area-based programming - designing interventions around the needs of an entire community rather than the displacement status of specific sub-groups within it, is the model the evidence consistently points toward. The RPCA finding is direct: infrastructure investments that serve everyone, water networks, shared roads, public schools, street lighting, carry significantly lower conflict risk than individual household or category-based distributions.

Every key informant interviewed in this research, from Idlib to Aleppo to Damascus, identified equitable service access as the foundation of stable communities. A local government representative in Homs framed the stakes plainly:

> ***"Help that does not sow justice, sows the seeds of a new conflict.***

Conclusion

The evidence from this research is clear. Returns are happening at a pace that currently outstrips the systems designed to support them, and the consequences are being absorbed by communities and individuals who have already carried the weight of more than a decade of conflict. Ninety-one percent of returnees arrived to find essential services missing. Seventy-one percent are living in damaged housing. The single greatest barrier to reintegration is not social division but insufficient services for all in the communities studied, a finding that points directly to the gap between the scale of return and the scale of investment. This gap falls hardest on women-headed households, children raised in displacement, people with disabilities, and families without documentation. It is also a gap with consequences for social cohesion. Where resources are scarce and distribution is opaque, competition risks replacing solidarity.

While the recommendations that follow are addressed to different actors and span the full range of return and reintegration needs, three stand out as the foundation on which the others depend. **First, area-based service delivery** - investment in water, electricity, schools, and roads that reaches entire communities rather than households selected by displacement status - is the single most effective way to meet need while reducing the competition that erodes trust. **Second, the closure of camps and the facilitation of large-scale return** must be sequenced behind the restoration of minimum services in areas of return, and tied to verified conditions rather than fixed deadlines. **Third, none of this is achievable without sustained, multi-year, flexible funding scaled to the return movement;** reintegration unfolds over years, and short-term or project-bound financing cannot build the systems that make return durable. Prioritizing these three would do most to ensure that return becomes a genuine durable solution rather than a transfer of hardship from displacement to home.



Al Kamouneh Camp, Idleb, Syria — 7 year old Kafa (center, pink jacket) in class with other children at Al Kamouneh Camp.

Recommendations

Syrian Government

National and Policy Level

- **Adopt area-based service delivery as the foundation of return planning:** Invest in infrastructure - water, electricity, schools, roads - that benefits all community members. This reduces conflict risk and minimizes competition over basic services which erodes trust among communities.
- **Sequence infrastructure restoration ahead of the implementation of national policies on camp closures:** Assess and address minimum service standards in communities of high anticipated return before facilitating large-scale arrivals.
- **Resource and operationalize the Ministry of Justice's specialized property court:** With 4.1 million people requiring HLP support, fast-track legal mechanisms for property disputes are essential. Procedures must be accessible to families without full documentation.
- **Publish a national civil documentation recovery framework:** Establish simplified procedures and decentralized registration points for document replacement, with specific provisions for women establishing independent legal identity. Communicate requirements to potential refugee returnees before departure through Syrian embassies and consulates in host countries.
- **Ensure the National Initiative for Camp Closure is conditions-based, not deadline-driven:** The 2027 target should be tied to verified conditions at the destination, habitable housing, available services, accessible documentation, and not treated as a closure date that results in forced movement.
- **Mainstream MHPSS in the national reintegration framework:** Psychosocial support is a critical gap across all seven governorates, compounded by the GBV consequences of former detainee reintegration.

Governorate, Municipal, and Community Level

- **Establish mobile and decentralized civil registration points:** People are currently traveling to other cities at prohibitive cost in order to access basic documents. Local registration capacity — including mobile units for rural areas — removes a major barrier to services and rights.
- **Fund and strengthen existing community-level peacebuilding mechanisms:** Local authorities should support community dialogue models, such as Civil Peace Committees (e.g. Damascus and Idlib), and integrate social cohesion objectives into local return planning. Committees should be composed of returnees, civil society, youth and women. They should function independently of political factions and be guided by nationally established standards and criteria to ensure fairness and consistency.

Refugee and Asylum Hosting States

- **Preserve space for genuinely voluntary returns:** Do not allow the erosion of legal status, services, or assistance to substitute for genuine choice. Refugees must retain viable alternatives for as long as conditions inside Syria do not meet the standard of safe, voluntary, and dignified return.
- **Return facilitation must be based on verified conditions at the destination:** Before accelerating return programs, engage directly with humanitarian actors in Syria to verify that services, housing, and documentation are in place. Communicate honestly where they are not. In partnership with UNHCR, facilitate go-and-see visits for refugees to visit areas of origin to make informed decisions.
- **Scale up documentation support in countries of displacement:** Prioritize civil registration, HLP documents, and legal identity for women, including evidence of divorce and inheritance rights, as a standard component of return preparation.

- **Maintain durable solutions for those who cannot safely return:** The near-collapse of resettlement pathways is contributing to returns that are not voluntary. Host and resettlement states must maintain and expand alternatives.

Humanitarian, Development, and Peacebuilding Donors

- **Fund integrated humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus programming:** Underfunded and weak services create competition which in turn undermines trust and social cohesion. These three tracks must be funded simultaneously, not sequentially.
- **Increase and sustain multi-year, flexible funding:** Reintegration takes years. Funding for Syria should be scaled to match the return movement and committed across multi-year cycles.
- **Shift funding toward area-based, community-level interventions:** Prioritize programming that serves entire communities rather than individual households by displacement status.
- **Reassess the geographic concentration toward Damascus and major urban centers:**

  Conduct geographic equity analyses and deliberately ensure support to Syria's northwest, northeast and rural communities where conflict damage is often greatest and current coverage is lowest.
- **Provide flexible, multi-year core funding for local civil society and women-led organizations:** These organizations are at the forefront of supporting returning families and rebuilding communities, but they cannot sustain or scale their work without predictable, long-term funding.
- **Create dedicated funding lines for MHPSS, social cohesion, and peacebuilding:** These are absent from most portfolios despite being identified as critical across all seven governorates.
- **Require gender-responsive programming across all Syria portfolios:** Fund livelihoods support specifically designed for women-headed households and widows and protect funding for women-led organizations as essential response partners.
- **Support private sector recovery and job creation:** Expanding access to finance, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and investing in local markets can help generate sustainable employment opportunities, reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance, and enable returnees and host communities to rebuild their livelihoods and contribute to local economic recovery.

National Syrian NGOs

- **Leverage existing community networks to systematically gather, verify, and disseminate pre-return information, and advocate with international partners and donors to formally recognize and resource this function:** Community-based information systems are already the most trusted source of pre-return guidance for returnees. Strengthening their capacity to collect and share accurate, up-to-date information and ensuring international actors coordinate through rather than around these networks, would significantly improve the quality and reach of pre-return information.
- **Design and deliver conflict-sensitive, area-based programming:** Serve returnees, host community members, and long-term IDPs as part of a single community system. Support and scale community dialogue mechanisms that the research identified as effective practice.
- **Expand documentation and HLP support at community level:** Prioritize civil registration for communities far from government services, with specific attention to women seeking independent legal identity and IDPs facing documentation barriers at higher rates than refugees.

- **Prioritize psychosocial support and women's safe space programming:** Expand community-based MHPSS, particularly for former detainees and women experiencing GBV, through informal networks that reach women in communities where formal institutions cannot.

UN Agencies and International NGOs

- **Establish a centralized pre-return information platform and pre-departure support package:** Coordinate through the Humanitarian Country Team to provide current, governorate-level information on road conditions, available services, documentation requirements, and housing, accessible in multiple formats, including for those without internet access. Pre-departure packages for returnees should combine this information with guidance on which Syrian documents to bring, and cash assistance to cover transport and immediate settlement costs.

- **Shift to area-based targeting that serves refugees, host community members, and IDPs equitably:** Move away from displacement-status targeting toward needs-based community assessments. Design shared infrastructure that reaches the full population in need.

- **Integrate documentation and HLP support into all return programming:** Civil registration assistance and legal identity support for women should be standard components, not separate activities. Referral pathways to legal aid organizations should be scaled up.

- **Reassess programming to better understand gaps in reaching rural and peripheral communities:** Conduct geographic equity assessments, partner with local organizations in underserved areas, and fund the higher cost of rural reach rather than defaulting to urban concentration.

- **Formally map and support women's information networks:** The WhatsApp and Telegram networks documented in this research perform significant coordination functions often invisible to formal actors. Route verified information through them and resource their role.

- **Expand MHPSS and address detainee reintegration as a protection priority:** Scale community-level psychosocial services, prioritize outreach delivery, and specifically address the GBV implications of former detainee reintegration.

- **Redesign economic recovery programming to ensure the inclusion of all vulnerable groups:** Support social cohesion through cash-for-work and livelihood opportunities which benefit the entire community. Criteria must reach women-headed households needing productive assets; young men without property or capital; people with disabilities who cannot access centers; and informal economy workers excluded by commercial license requirements.

- **Invest in governorate-specific and rural-urban disaggregated research on returnee and host community needs:** The findings of this research point consistently to significant variation in conditions, service availability, and social cohesion dynamics across governorates and between urban centers and peripheral communities. Follow-on research that maps these differences at a more granular level, with particular attention to social cohesion dynamics in rural and peri-urban areas where tensions are most acute and formal monitoring presence is weakest is needed. This should extend to areas and populations beyond the scope of the present study, including governorates affected by identity-based violence and the protection environment for returnees from minority communities. Understanding the extent to which sectarian and communal dynamics shape both the decision to return and the experience of reintegration, including for those who remain unable or unwilling to return, is a priority gap that resource-focused assessments in high-return areas are not designed to capture.

Endnotes

i Based on calculations which estimate Syria's population at approximately 26 million people.

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iv Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation, Government of Syria, March 2026.

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xv UNHCR Lebanon Protection Monitoring Report, March 2026. Of those crossing from Lebanon to Syria in March 2026, 27% indicated an intention to remain permanently.

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xvii UNHCR Year-End Analysis on Returns to Syria from Jordan, December 2025. At least 170,000 Syrians have returned from Jordan to Syria since 8 December 2024.

xviii https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/121098

xix Mukhtar is an Arabic term used to denote a community leader. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/10/21/syria-s-post-conflict-reconstruction-costs-estimated-at-216-billion

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xxxiv Discussed in KII, Local Authority member, Damascus.

xxxv Discussed in KII, Local Authority member, Damascus; KII, Local Authority member, Rural Damascus.

xxxvi KII, Local authority member, Rural Damascus

xxxvii In referencing 'reintegration' this research refers to returnees who have returned to their original community and are therefore integrating into a community which they are familiar with and belonged to before displacement. It also refers to returnees who have to integrate into a new community with its particular dynamics and challenges.



New York

122 East 42nd Street

New York, NY 10168-1289

USA

Amman

6 Khalil Al-Dabbas Street

Al-Rabieh, Amman

P. O. Box 850689

Amman 11185

Jordan