

# SYRIA'S SPONTANEOUS RETURNS





**Samuel Hall** is an independent think tank providing research and strategic services, expert analysis, tailored counsel and access to local knowledge for a diverse array of actors operating in the world's most challenging environments. We specialise in socio-economic surveys, private and public sector studies, and impact assessments for a range of humanitarian and development actors. With a rigorous approach and the inclusion of academic experts, field practitioners, and a vast network of national researchers, we access complex settings and gather accurate data. We bring innovative insights and practical solutions to addressing the most pressing social, economic, and political issues of our time.

Samuel Hall has offices in Afghanistan, Kenya and Somalia, and a presence in France, Germany, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. For more information, please visit [www.samuelhall.org](http://www.samuelhall.org)



This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) for Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, which is supported by Czech Republic, Denmark, European Commission (DEVCO), Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and United Kingdom. The contents of this document can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the RDPP.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study seeks to provide an analysis of the current returns to Syria. The ongoing armed conflict in Syria has displaced millions of people inside and outside the country sparking an international humanitarian crisis. Since 2011, over 6 million Syrians have sought asylum outside Syria's borders, and an additional 6.5 million people displaced internally. There is no clear picture of the number or conditions in places of return. This research contributes to filling this gap. Returns to Syria should neither be promoted nor facilitated, as the focus must remain on investing in the preservation, and expansion, of protection space in host countries.

The research team at Samuel Hall would like to thank the hundreds of returnees – refugee and internally displaced persons – in Syria, as well as the host population, who took the time to answer our questions. We would like to thank the team at the Syrian Association for Relief and Development (SARD) who helped collect the data from the field locations in Syria.

## CITATION

This report should be cited using the following referencing style:  
Samuel Hall (2018): Syria's Spontaneous Returns.

## ACRONYMS

HH	Household
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPM	Needs and Population Monitoring
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency

Cover photo: An internally displaced man from Aleppo walking through the streets of Damascus. June 2017.

Photo by: Rafel Al-Yasseri.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Glossary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>6</b>
Introduction	6
Methodology	8
<b>Chapter 2. Understanding Returns</b>	<b>10</b>
Typology of returns: Who are the returnees and why do they return “home”?	10
Preparedness to return and Information from Family and Friends	13
Specific situation of Youth Respondents	15
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>16</b>
Obstacles to Realising their Rights	16
Obstacles to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	17
Obstacles to Civil and Political Rights	20
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>24</b>
Reintegration Challenges	24
Resilience scores: Location and Multiple displacement matter	24
Economic integration	27
Social integration/safety security	29
Durable solutions and Future Intentions	31
Location specific dynamics	33
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>37</b>
Conclusion and Recommendations	37



## GLOSSARY

**Return in safety:** Return which takes place under conditions of legal safety, physical security (including protection from armed attack, and mine-free routes and if not mine-free then at least demarcated settlement sites), and material security (access to land or means of livelihood).<sup>1</sup> There should be well-grounded expectations that safe conditions will persist for the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup>

**Spontaneous return:** Refers to a process of going back to one's country or location of origin without any formal assistance programs.<sup>3</sup> Spontaneous returns thus can be voluntary or coerced.

**Sustainable reintegration:** Reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.<sup>4</sup>

**Durable solutions:** Solutions that enable refugees or IDPs to secure the political, legal and social conditions to maintain life, livelihood and dignity. Three durable solutions are internationally acknowledged: voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement.<sup>5</sup>

**Protection:** All activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the Human Rights law, the International Humanitarian Law and the Refugees Law.<sup>6</sup>

**Refugee:** Any person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.<sup>7</sup>

**Internally Displaced Person (IDP):** Persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border.<sup>8</sup>

**Returnee:** An individual who was previously displaced for at least one month who has returned to their original home or community for at least one month.<sup>9</sup>

**(Refugee-) Returnee IDP:** Persons who have returned to their country of origin (from outside Syria) but not to their original home or community of origin.<sup>10</sup>

**IDP Returnee:** Persons who have returned to their original home or community of origin (from within Syria), but still require reintegration assistance in order to reach a durable solution.<sup>11</sup>

**Host:** People, of the local population in Syria, who have not been displaced since 2011 (i.e. have not been out of the country for longer than one month)<sup>12</sup> and, additionally, define themselves as hosts.

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Handbook: Voluntary Repatriation, International Protection, 1960, 2.4.

2 Ibid

3 UNHCR, Handout on refugee protection, 2005, p.42.

4 IOM, Glossary of Migration, 2017.

5 UNHCR, Handout

6 Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC), Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, 2007, p.7.

7 Article 1 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

8 UNHCR, Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998.

9 Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM), Returnees Overview (January to June 2017), 2017.

10 National IDP policies; and inferences from IASC guidelines and the Brookings-Bern Manual

11 Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Beneficiary Selection

12 NPM, Parameters of displacement and return, 2017

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing armed conflict in Syria has displaced millions of people inside and outside the country sparking an international humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 6 million Syrians fled out of Syria<sup>13</sup> and an additional 6.5 million people, including 2.8 million children, have been displaced internally since 2011. In addition, over 2.4 million displaced Syrians have returned to their community of origin.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, 113,000 of them were again displaced.<sup>15</sup> In 2017, the same pattern continues: more than 20,000 individuals of returnee households from January to June 2017 were displaced again after their return, about 4% fleeing outside Syria while the majority (96%) were displaced internally.<sup>16</sup> Syrian returnee households remain at risk of becoming internally displaced (again), most likely attributed to changes in safety and security. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) noted the risks of further displacement upon return to Syria in *The Invisible Majority* series.<sup>17</sup> In late June 2017, UNHCR brought international attention to the spontaneous returns of displaced persons in/to Syria, highlighting two key return trends:

- **Internal Returns:** more than 440,000 internally displaced people have returned to their homes in Syria from January to June 2017.<sup>18</sup> Internal displacement remains prevalent: according to Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM) 2016 data, the majority of returnee households (93%) had been internally displaced.<sup>19</sup>
- **International Returns:** 31,000 refugees crossed the border back into Syria in the first half of 2017.<sup>20</sup>

**Talking too early about or funding assistance programs that intentionally or incidentally encourage returns to Syria – where fighting still rages, income-generating opportunities are rare, access to services is scarce, and Durable Solutions are lacking – may result in unintended harmful outcomes.**

Previous research highlighted that these spontaneous returns have not been fully informed, safe, voluntary, or sustainable.<sup>21</sup> Although preliminary data exist, there is no clear picture of the number of returns or conditions in places of return and progress towards achieving solutions. This is in great part due to the limited access of humanitarian organisations on the ground. Protocols for working in government and non-government areas also make provision of humanitarian assistance difficult and limit access to vulnerable host communities, IDPs and returnees. Humanitarian organisations continue to stress that there is still a high degree of displacement occurring within Syria.<sup>22</sup> Refugee returns to Syria are neither promoted nor facilitated at this time by UNHCR and other organisations, and the focus remains on further investing resources in host countries in the region and internationally to “preserve protection space.”<sup>23</sup>

13 “Syria Regional Refugee Response – Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal,” UNHCR, last modified June 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

14 “Internally Displaced People,” UNHCR | Syria, <http://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people>

15 NPM, Year in Review 2016, p.5.

16 NPM, Overview 2017, p.1.

17 IDMC, Returnees in Syria - Sustainable reintegration and durable solutions, or a return to displacement? November 2017.

18 UNHCR, “Briefing note – UNHCR seeing significant returns of internally displaced amid Syria’s continuing conflict,” June 30, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/6/595612454/unhcr-seeing-significant-returns-internally-displaced-amid-syrias-continuing.html>

19 NPM, The Road Back: Syrian Returnees (Year in Review 2016), p.5.

20 Ibid

21 DSP, Unsafe But Home: Returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad, 2017; DSP, “Returns: Voluntary, Safe and Sustainable? Case study of returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad, Syria”, briefing paper, July 2017. Rim El Gantri and Karim El Mufti, « Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence » (9 July 2017)

22 KI-1, Sept 15; KI-3, Sept 19; and KI-11, Nov 7, 2017

23 UNHCR, “Flash Update: Syrian Refugee & IDP Returns,” 2017.

**Returns are not safe in a context of continued displacement:** the Syrian civil war is a protracted crisis complicated by foreign interventions (Russian, Turkish and American), stalled peace talks and a delicate Astana agreement.<sup>24</sup> Protocols for working in government and non-government areas make provision of humanitarian assistance difficult and limit access to vulnerable host communities, IDPs and returnees. As a result, UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations continue to stress that there is still a high degree of displacement occurring within Syria.<sup>25</sup> In August 2017 alone, there were 120,000 individuals internally displaced within Syria.<sup>26</sup>

The present report contributes to building the information base on spontaneous returns of IDPs and refugees. It is critical to present – to the humanitarian community, state and non-state actors – this study's findings in a way that respects and adheres to Do No Harm principles in regional policies and donor programming.<sup>27</sup> In recent years, shifting border policies with Syria's neighbouring, host countries have often been viewed as impeding refugee well-being and safety. In Jordan, the 2016 closure of the border trapped around 75,000 Syrians in a 'no man's land,' pushing them towards loss of basic services and protection risks,<sup>28</sup> including forced return to Syria by Jordanian authorities.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 1: Thematic framework of the household survey in Syria**

<b>Survey Sections</b>	
<b>Profile</b>	Age, sex, location Household composition Brief history of displacement
<b>Integration (Comparison with Host Community)</b>	<b>Economic dimension:</b> Ownership of a home, land, livestock and durable goods; Earners and earner redundancy; Access to credit; Hunger; Debt; Perceptions; Access to employment and skills development; Skills. <b>Social dimension:</b> Access to healthcare; Healthcare received; Dwelling amenities; Access to clean water; School attendance; Literacy; Access to education; Migration intentions; Perceptions and stress. <b>Safety/security dimension:</b> Documentation; Physical security; Shelter; Tenure security; Access to justice and legal assistance; Perceptions of representation; Community interactions and networks; Previous migration experiences.
<b>Return Drivers and Future Intentions</b>	
<b>Decision making process</b>	<b>Level of information:</b> Is return a well-informed process? <b>Drivers:</b> What are the drivers of return? Are returns voluntary? What resources were needed to return and how was their access to them? <b>Level of decision-making:</b> To what extent various actors and institutions intervene in the decision of return and how: individual, household and community levels? <b>Networks:</b> What is the strength of networks (transnational, domestic) as a resource for planning return and for reintegration?
<b>Protection Needs</b>	<b>During return:</b> What protection risks arise during the journey? <b>Upon return:</b> What protection concerns and key networks impact return?
<b>Future intentions</b>	<b>Coping strategies:</b> What are their coping strategies (positive and negative)? <b>Aid:</b> How dependent are they on humanitarian and development aid? <b>Future:</b> Is return permanent or temporary? Do returnees plan on further migration?

24 KI-9, Oct 26, 2017; Al Jazeera, "Final de-escalation zones agreed on in Astana," Al Jazeera, Sept 15, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/final-de-escalation-zones-agreed-astana-170915102811730.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/final-de-escalation-zones-agreed-astana-170915102811730.html); and Crisp, Jeff, "It's Far Too Early to Talk of Return for Syrian Refugees," Chatham House, Aug 10, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/it-s-far-too-early-talk-return-syrian-refugees>

25 KI-1, Sept 15; KI-3, Sept 19; and KI-11, Nov 7, 2017

26 KI-11, Nov 7, 2017

27 KI-11, Nov 7, 2017

28 Su, Alice, "Why Jordan is Deporting Syrian Refugees," The Atlantic, Oct 20, 2017

29 Amnesty International, "Syria-Jordan border: 75,000 refugees trapped in desert no man's land in dire conditions," Sept 15, 2016

## METHODOLOGY

This study focused on a quantitative survey with host communities, IDP and refugee returnee households in three governorates inside Syria. To ensure a variety of profiles in areas controlled by different actors, fieldwork took place in Homs, Idlib and Aleppo (Table 2). These governorates were selected due to the relatively high number of documented returns, also taking into consideration expected movements from border closures (expected pause/decline in movement) and recent liberation of areas from the Islamic State (expected increase in returns).

**Table 2: Locations for field data collection and status of returns**

Location	Control	Profile of returnees	By the numbers
Homs	Syrian Government	Refugees mostly from Lebanon and IDPs from nearby districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15,524 individuals returned in July 2017 alone</li> <li>• July 2017 overall population statistics: 21% IDPs, 1% Returnees, 78% non-displaced/host<sup>30</sup></li> </ul>
Idlib	Opposition / Rebel forces	Refugees mostly from Turkey and IDPs from the border camps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 48,919 individuals returned from Jan-June 2017</li> <li>• July 2017 stats: 21% IDPs, 10% Returnees, 69% non-displaced/host<sup>31</sup></li> </ul>
Azaz	Turkish-backed Rebel forces	Refugees from Turkey and IDPs from nearby camps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 317,810 individuals returned from Jan-June 2017</li> <li>• July 2017 stats: 34% IDPs, 9% Returnees, 57% non-displaced/host<sup>32</sup></li> </ul>
Aleppo City (and parts of Aleppo governorate)	Syrian Government	Refugees from Turkey and elsewhere and IDPs from nearby camps and areas	

**Table 3: Sampling by governorate**

Household Survey Sampling		Aleppo (n=205)		Idlib (n=233)		Homs (n=216)	
		# surveys	% total	# surveys	% total	# surveys	% total
Target Group	Refugee-returnee	62	30%	63	27%	55	25%
	IDP returnee	61	30%	79	34%	78	36%
	Host	61	30%	69	30%	69	32%
	Returnee IDP	21	10%	22	9%	14	6%
Type of location	Rural	108	53%	109	47%	97	45%
	Urban	97	47%	124	53%	119	55%
Sex	Female	66	32%	74	32%	78	36%
	Male	139	68%	159	68%	138	64%
Age	Youth (18-24)	79	39%	105	45%	62	29%
	Adult	126	61%	128	55%	154	71%

30 REACH, Syria Shelter and NFI assessment: Homs Governorate (Household surveys), July 2017.

31 REACH, Syria Shelter and NFI assessment: Idlib Governorate (Household surveys), July 2017.

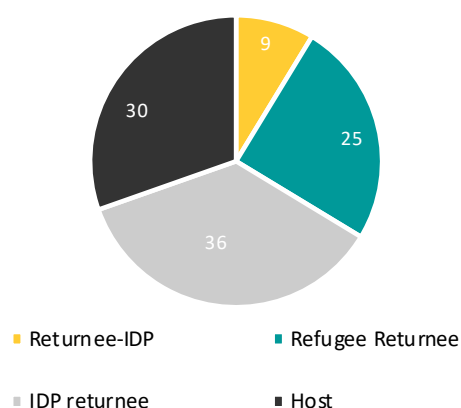
32 REACH, Syria Shelter and NFI assessment: Aleppo Governorate (Household surveys), July 2017.

The final tally is 654 surveys from three governorates in Syria, for a total of 3,359 individuals. In terms of returnee households, this study's findings are based on results of **455 interviews with returnee households (70% of the total sample), defined according to their most recent displacement.**

An individual or household was considered having been a 'returnee' if, according to the Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM) definition used for this study, the individual or HH assessed had been displaced internally (an IDP) or displaced outside Syria (a refugee) since 2011 for more than one month and had come back (a returnee) to Syria and/or their community of origin since at least one month<sup>33</sup>. The survey takes into account the 'host' (non-displaced since 2011) households with 199 host community surveys, with a shorter version of the same survey (30% of data collection).

For further details on the location in each governorate, refer to Annex 1 – Methodological addendum.

**Figure 1: Breakdown of respondents by profile**



## Limitations and challenges

Field teams led by the Syrian Association for Relief and Development (SARD) faced three key challenges during fieldwork, that have implications for future programming in Syria, and an impact on the data collected.

1. **Limited access:** armed groups were fighting in some of the surveyed areas during fieldwork, reflecting the continued volatile state of Syria. This forced enumerators to minimise or suspend data collection on some days until security had improved. Households seemed hesitant in responding to questions relating to the safety and security situation (mostly in Government-controlled areas). This limitation is reflected in the analysis on safety and security.
2. **Limited timeframe of returns:** the survey relies on returnees' self-assessment of their needs and vulnerabilities: as returns are recent (2016-2017) and the situation is evolving fast, respondents provide a short-term assessment of their situation, which could vary with time and with seasonality. The survey was conducted in the summer months, and it is expected that responses on housing conditions would be worse during winter months.
3. **Identifying youth respondents:** Field teams reported that in some cases, it was difficult to find youth (age 15-24), especially male youth and particularly in Homs governorate. Due to the fear of the military draft in Syria, many youth have left their country.
4. **Frustrations voiced:** Households complained about their perceived mismatch between the number of assessment activities in Syria compared to the smaller number of actual humanitarian assistance and projects. Host community households reported feeling excluded from humanitarian programs; in fact, some declined to participate in the survey for this reason. The expectations of respondents should be kept in mind in the next steps of this study; community-level consultation and validation of the results and recommendations could strengthen relations to communities and support in the development of long-term programming in Syria.

<sup>33</sup> By definition, Refugee-returnee, IDP returnee and Host households were in their community of origin when surveyed, that is, their place of origin from before 2011 when the war started in Syria. This analysis and discussion of sustainable reintegration is thus applicable to the majority of respondents (n=597, 91%), while the remaining households surveyed – (Refugee-) Returnee IDP HHs – were not in their community of origin when surveyed; they are currently technically IDPs. Their sample size (9%) serves to provide a glimpse of their unique displacement history, vulnerabilities, needs, and intentions. The full dataset is analysed in this report, although this distinction is necessary to declare.

# Chapter 2

## Understanding Returns

### TYOLOGY OF RETURNS: WHO ARE THE RETURNEES AND WHY DO THEY RETURN "HOME"?

Three types of returnees were identified in the survey, reflecting the diversity of returns to Syria. The research focused on the first two groups – refugee-returnees and IDP-returnees – with insights on the third subgroup.

**Table 4: Returnee groups under review**

Population	Definition
<b>Refugee-Returnee</b>	Refugees as previously displaced for at least one month who have returned to their original home or community for at least one month.
<b>IDP Returnee</b>	Persons who have returned to their original home or community of origin (from within Syria).
<b>Returnee-IDP</b>	Persons who have returned to their country of origin (from outside Syria) but not to their original home or community of origin. <sup>34</sup>

**Returnees stay close to their place of origin returning to the same governorate: the governorate of origin is a strong indicator and predictor of return trends.** The data reveals a preference for intra-governorate movement, and a reliance on local approaches to durable solutions. When asked their place of origin, one third (33.2%) reported Homs, then Idlib (31.4%) and Aleppo (28.8%). These mirror the governorate of current residence.

- 99% of those who were originally from Homs, returned to Homs governorate
- 95% of those who were originally from Idlib, returned to live in Idlib governorate
- 87.5% of those who were originally from Aleppo, returned to live in Aleppo.

The main districts of origin are Idlib, Homs and Al Bab. For example, in Aleppo governorate, the majority of respondents were displaced from Al Bab, moving then to Ar-Raee, Bazagha, Olan and Qabasin, in the periphery of Al Bab, staying close to their original homes.

**Returnees are among the more recently displaced: 35.5% had been displaced in the previous year, and 80.9% within the last three years.** The length of displacement acts as a second predictor of returns: returns are favoured by those who were most recently displaced, not the more protracted caseloads. The more time passes, the less likely that return will be chosen. The numbers are consistent across the types of returnees. When asked of refugee-returnees and returnee-IDPs how long they had lived outside of Syria since 2011, the largest group reported one year or less (39.7%), then between 1-2 years (22.8%), between 2-3 years (14.3%) and above 3 years (23.2%). Once the decision is taken, it is enacted within a year for the most part (63.7%), and within six months for over one third of respondents (39%). This shows that return is most often linked to structural issues and a number of reasons that come together informing this decision. It also indicates a window of opportunity to be able to inform those return decisions.

Over half (55%) of the returnees had moved to the surveyed area in 2017, with the majority of those (52%) going to Aleppo governorate. This is in line with NPM data: Aleppo governorate has one of the highest rates of return in 2017.<sup>35</sup> Returns that occurred in 2016, were mainly split between Homs (45%) and Idlib (48%) governorates.

<sup>34</sup> IDMC 2017 (the invisible majority series); and inferences from IASC guidelines and the Brookings-Bern Manual

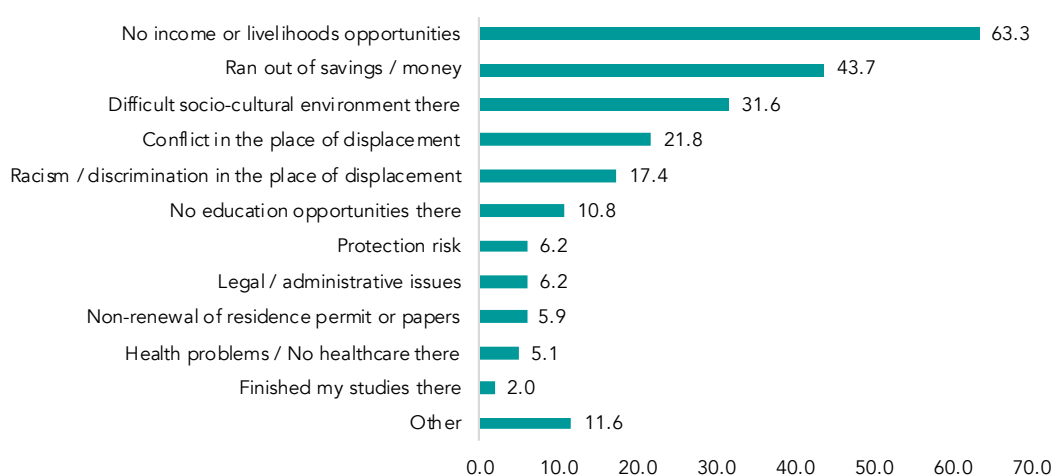
<sup>35</sup> NPM, Year in Review 2016; and NPM, Overview 2017.

## Examining the drivers of return

*Reasons for leaving the place of displacement:* The inability to find an income, secure livelihoods and the difficulties in running out of cash for basic needs are primary reasons leading to return. The economic dimensions of their everyday life are made more difficult by the lack of social ties and the presence of conflict, racism and discrimination.

Of those who reported conflict and protection as a key factor (27.9%), nearly all reported protection risks in the place of displacement related directly to arrest, murder, kidnapping, and attacks. Almost all households were displaced in another part of Syria, with a small number reported this as refugees facing protection risks in Lebanon. As a result, one quarter of the returnees reported protection risks in displacement that led to their return. In other words, IDPs were not able to find a hospitable environment within Syria, and were pushed to return.

**Figure 2: Drivers of return – reasons for leaving the place of displacement (in %)**



The five main reasons for leaving were disaggregated by type of returns. While income and livelihoods were reported by the majority in both groups, the secondary reasons differed statistically. The lack of money and conflict were reported by IDP returnees, while difficult socio-cultural environments in displacement, racism and discrimination were greater concerns for refugee returnees.

**Table 5: Main reasons for leaving the place of displacement by returnee category (% - multiple answers possible)**

	No income/ livelihood	Ran out of savings/ money	Difficult socio- cultural environment	Conflict	Racism, discrimination
<b>IDP returnees</b>	65.6	47.7	18.3	31.2	9.2
<b>Refugee-returnees (+ returnee-IDPs)</b>	61.2	39.2	43.5	12.2	24.9
<b>Total</b>	63.3	43.3	31.4	21.3	17.4

*Reasons for returning to a known location:* This study finds five main factors driving the displaced back “home”. These are an overall feeling of longing for their homes (70.1%), family reunification (37.4%), to find work (33.6%) check on property and assets left behind (33%) and the belief that the security had overall improved (21.3%). In line with previous studies that inform returns through



the lens of family reunification and checking on property and assets left behind in Syria, the main reasons for return are therefore to resume a social and material life that the displaced were not able to secure in displacement.<sup>36</sup> A disaggregation by type of return (Table 6) reveals that family reunification and an improvement in security play a more important part in refugees' decision to return, while checking on property, assets and to find work are reported by IDPs. A real or perceived improvement in an area's safety and security situation, e.g. directly after fighting ends or de-escalates, is also considered to be a key factor influencing some returns.<sup>37</sup>

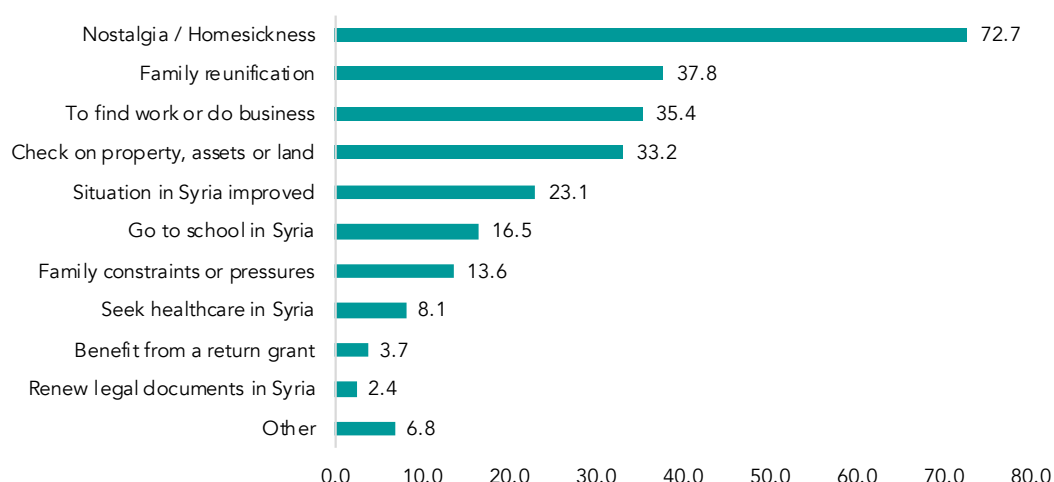
Finally, HHs seeking a lower cost of living in Syria, feeling pressured to leave the host country, no longer able to afford the cost of living in host countries, and a real or perceived improvement in the economic situation in (parts of) Syria are also reasons influencing returns.<sup>38</sup> An improved 'economic situation' likely includes reference to *"an increased access to the market, the availability of employment opportunities, the decrease of rental prices, the availability of money and other positive economic aspects."*<sup>39</sup> Answers marked as 'other' include poor treatment and living conditions, e.g. infrastructure and access to basic services, as well as high rent costs in the place of displacement. In those cases, return is a coping mechanism to the situation in the country of asylum.



**So that my children can live in my country Syria and attend its schools and be raised with the same values and ethics that we were raised on.**

Refugee-returnee in Homs, Female, 33

**Figure 3: Motivations for return - Pull factors (in %)**



**Table 6: Main reasons for returning to a particular location (% - multiple answers possible)**

	Homesickness/ Nostalgia	Family reunification	To find work	Check property/ assets	Situation has improved
<b>IDP returnees</b>	68.3	34.9	36.2	41.7	12.8
<b>Refugee-returnees (+ returnee-IDPs)</b>	71.7	39.7	31.2	24.9	29.1
<b>Total</b>	70.1	37.4	33.6	33	21.3

36 KI-1, Sept 15, 2017; and Durable Solutions Platform (DSP), "DSP Returns Phase 1 Research Findings; Unsafe But Home: Returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad," (PowerPoint presentation), 2017. Durable Solutions Platform, "Returns: Voluntary, Safe and Sustainable? Case study of returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad, Syria", briefing paper, July 2017

37 UNHCR, Briefing note

38 DSP, "Returns"

39 NPM, Year in Review 2016, p.18.

## PREPAREDNESS TO RETURN AND INFORMATION FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Preparedness and resource mobilisation are necessary conditions for sustainable return (Cassarino 2004). Resource mobilisation pertains to tangible (i.e. financial capital) and intangible (i.e. information, contacts, relationships, skills, acquaintances) resources that have been mobilised during the migration experience. Resource mobilisation also includes resources that the displaced had brought with them prior to leaving their origin country (i.e. social capital). In the context of Syria, returnees turn to their relatives and friends, or social media.

**Further qualitative research should explore the content of the information shared and the alignment between expectations and reality of return.**

**Only 4% said that they had no information before returning.** The gaps in information after return were about i) assistance available and ii) the cost of return; but overall the resources needed were secured for the majority of respondents.

**When asked what resources they needed the most to enact their return, information ranked first (76.3%), before material considerations related to money (72.7%) and transportation (51%).** While their networks allowed them to secure enough information, they were fewer to report having been able to secure enough money to plan their return and reintegration.

**Table 7: Resources needed to return and ability to secure the said resource (% - multiple answers possible)**

	<b>What resource did you need to return</b>	<b>Were you able to secure enough of this resource? Yes</b>
Information	76.3	87.0
Money	72.7	59.5
Transportation	51.0	85.3
Papers	16.3	75.7
Clothes, shoes	11.4	69.2
Food and water	7.5	61.8
Institutional support	7.5	44.1
Other	7.0	53.1
Protection support	3.3	93.3

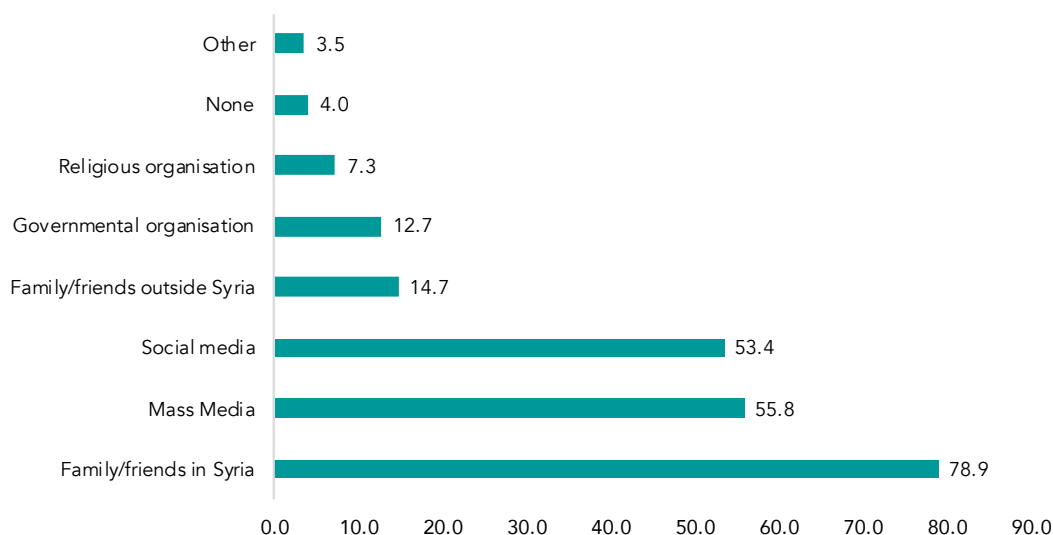
**Source of information:** A key informant reports the availability of some information (to refugees in host countries; to IDPs within Syria) at UNHCR Community Centres, discussing return implications, legal issues, safety/security in Syria, and other available resources inside Syria. Most of the information is transmitted through social networks, word-of-mouth, mass and social media sources.

By far, the main source of information reported by 96% of households is family and friends: for 79% family/friends in Syria, and 14.7% outside of Syria.<sup>40</sup> In addition, mass media (news, internet) and social media (like Facebook) are also major sources of information. Figure 4 details the use of all sources of information.

<sup>40</sup> KI-1, Sept 15, 2017

On the same note, some HHs who reported 'other' mentioned that residents in the place of return in Syria also informed them, and a few respondents went back and forth to the place of return, getting information and checking on the safety/security situation prior to commencing return with their families.

**Figure 4: Main sources of information reported (% - multiple answers possible)**



In terms of the content of this information, updates on security, safety (78.9%) and controlling factions (58.5%) were the most sought after, followed by infrastructure in the area (36.3%), how to reach the area (33%), cost of return (27.3%) and how to cross into Syria (25.7%).

There were differences between the content of information accessed by IDP-returnees and refugee-returnee (including returnee-IDPs). IDPs who chose to return inquired about safety and security, then infrastructure and the logistics of getting home (including how to reach the area). On the other hand, refugee returnees were mainly focused on security and updates on controlling bodies, as well as the cost of return and the crossing of the international border back to Syria. As a result, the assistance they inquired the most was focused on the logistics of return – of getting from point A to B and choosing where to return to – while for IDPs the key considerations were about physical and material safety.

The majority relied on daily conversations (61%) with family members and friends before returning, others on weekly updates (12%) and several times a month (10%). Less than 1% reported having had no discussion about their intention to return with family and friends. They remain relied upon by all Syrian displaced as the main trusted source of information.

## SPECIFIC SITUATION OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS



**We want from you as humanitarian actors to facilitate livelihood and job opportunities to the youth in order to minimize migration and displacement, this issue is causing a break-up between family members for years**

Head of Family, Idlib

Out of the sample of 654 respondents, 37.6% are youth between the ages of 15 and 24, equally represented between all target groups, from host to refugee returnees alike. Disaggregating the data by age shows protection needs affecting those who will gradually be taking on more responsibilities within their households. What are the factors that will impact their transition to adulthood? These can be used to develop youth-specific programs of sensitization, awareness raising and assistance to ensure this transition is supported.

Youth are less likely to:

- Be able to borrow money if they need to (54% against a 60% sample average)
- Currently work (43% against a 55% sample average)
- Have legal, unexpired identification documents (74% against 85% sample average)

In addition, youth are more likely to:

- Be separated from family members (60% among youth against a 55% sample average)
- Have moved to this location to reunite with family and friends (48% against a 43% sample average)
- Seek information on the status of the war (64%) and on the cost of return (33%) (10 and 5% points above average)
- Rely on social media and mass media (59%) against a 53% and 56% sample average
- Look for work in their current location (54% against a sample average of 41%)

Other indicators do not show statistically significant differences but confirm findings for all age groups. For instance,

- Youth – like other age categories – leave their previous location primarily because of the lack of money (44% vs. an average of 43%) and due to racism and discrimination (19% vs. an average of 17%).
- Youth – like other age categories – need information (79%) and money (76%) to facilitate a decent return home (3% points above average in both cases).

# Chapter 3

## OBSTACLES TO REALISING THEIR RIGHTS

This section presents the protection priorities voiced by returnees, within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework<sup>41</sup> and a rights-based approach to understanding protection upon return.

### Main household needs to be targeted

Households were asked to rank their top three needs:

1. Livelihoods, income and cash;
2. Health (healthcare, medicine, hospitals, psychosocial support, etc.);
3. Safety of family. Safety was more so reported in Idlib.

Two other household needs ranked closely:

4. Basic infrastructure (water, electricity, roads, etc.). Highlighting again the poor conditions of Idlib governorate, 59% of HHs mentioning basic infrastructure are in Idlib, while 33% in Aleppo and 8% in Homs.
5. Schools and education.

“

**I can't understand this, how come this happened, seeing my home completely destroyed in front of me every day, I cannot rebuild it.**

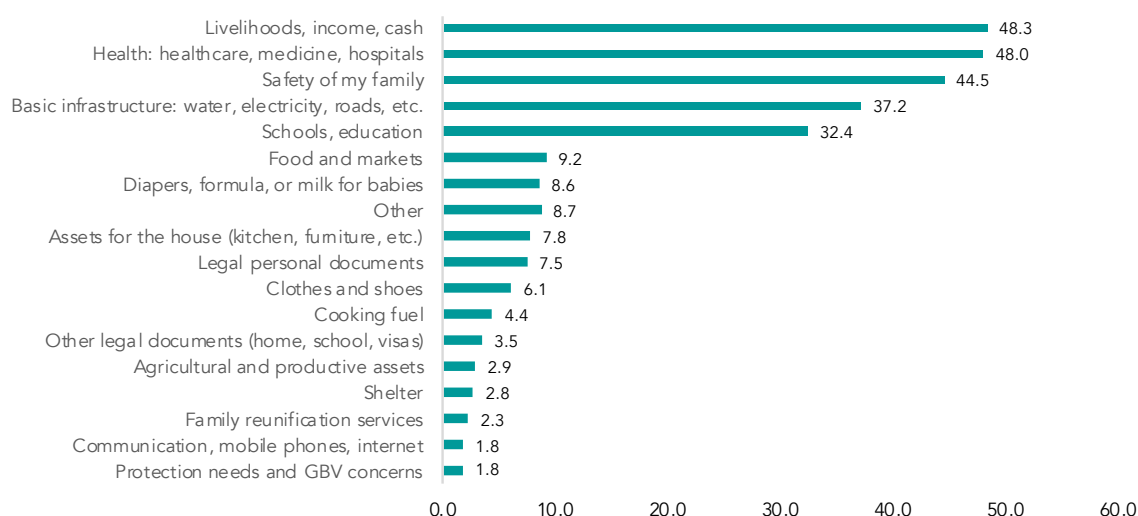
Female Head of Family (Homs)

“

**We passed through a mine land, we had to let the sheep pass before us, they died because of the mines, those sheep were all what we had.**

Household, Aleppo

**Figure 5: Top 3 reported needs for all households (in %)**



<sup>41</sup> IASC (2010), IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons, published by the Brookings Institution.

Certain needs were more so reported among HHs living Aleppo governorate, such as diapers, formula or milk for babies; assets for the house (kitchen supplies and furniture); clothes and shoes; other legal documents; and agricultural and productive assets (more so among adults age 41-60). **Host communities remain vulnerable and share similar needs with returnee HHs** as illustrated in Table 8.

Highlighted cells show the groups that report more needs in a given category. While IDP returnees stand out in terms of their limited access to livelihoods, their concerns over safety and their need for education, hosts report needing health care at par with IDP returnees. Refugee-returnees report having issues with basic infrastructure, food and water, and access to shelter. These can be understood through the fact that their expectations and threshold are higher: having had access to better infrastructure, food, and housing as refugees, their expectations are often higher than those of people who never crossed a border, or never left at all.

**Table 8: Household needs (%)**

Household needs	Sample Average	Host	IDP returnee	Refugee-returnee
Livelihoods, income	47.9	42.2	52.8	46.7
Health care	48	49.7	48.6	43.9
Safety	44.5	43.7	50	40
Basic infrastructure	36.7	39.2	33.9	43.9
Education	32.4	27.6	37.6	31.1
Food	9.2	9.5	6.4	11.1
Shelter	2.8	2	1.4	2.8

## OBSTACLES TO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

### Accessing jobs and livelihood opportunities

Half of HHs replied that their current access to employment opportunities did not meet their needs – with up to 79% in Idlib governorate and 66% in Aleppo. Just more than half (55%) of respondents are currently employed – but less than 30 percent of women. Respondents are actively searching for work in a variety of means:

- About 41% of respondents reported that they and/or someone in their HH are currently looking for a job. Fewer in Aleppo governorate are seeking work. Youth constitute 49% who responded seeking work.
- Households are primarily looking for jobs through **friends, relatives or other people** (76% of job-seeking respondents, of which half are youth).
- Half of all HHs **checking websites/worksites** are currently living in Idlib governorate (total is 37% of job-seeking respondents), and more so in urban areas. 69% of these respondents are youth.
- As well, 13% of HHs looking mentioned the presence of education or **training institutions** (more so in Idlib governorate (66%) and more so in urban areas (74%).
- Another 13% are applying through **direct applications** to businesses, more than half in Homs governorate.
- Of HHs looking for a job, few of them (6%), mostly in rural areas, cited looking through **job fairs**.
- Public (7%) and private (7%) **employment offices** were reportedly accessed mostly in Homs but also Idlib.
- Few (5%) are resorting to **newspaper advertisements**, the majority of whom are male youth respondents.

Analysis of other survey variables show that returnee and host families remain **vulnerable to shocks with a high dependency ratio**: the majority of HHs reported one person with an income (61%) and another 23% reported two people from the HH having a source of income. There is no significant

difference between HHs reporting a source of income and 'returnee' or 'host' status or respondent profile; however, people living in Homs governorate have more HHs with three or more sources of income (20%) compared to Aleppo and Idlib governorates (6% and 3%).

## Access to Services and Housing

Access to services is dependent on the location more so than on household or displacement profile.

**Housing:** Upon return, Syrians find their homes partially damaged. Refugee-returnee HHs (excluding returnee-IDPs) are able to resettle in their original homes, which may be damaged, requiring the need for shelter programming (after the crisis ends)<sup>42</sup>. Destroyed property and assets and missing livelihoods are just some of the main challenges facing returnee and host HHs. Damaged schools and hospitals as well as broken basic infrastructure, resulting in "dangerously low" access to water and electricity, make life – and returns – hard.<sup>43</sup>

Access to housing was reportedly better in Aleppo governorate, and worse or non-existent in Homs and Idlib governorates. Housing access was also better ranked in rural areas. Housing was highlighted by field teams as extremely poor – despite the availability of shelter materials and skills necessary to construct and repair homes, most returnees and host communities cannot afford to access those resources.



### When will you fix our sanitation pump? Our situation is so bad!

A head of household living in a collective shelter in Homs

Households were asked to rate their standard of housing on a five-point scale from 'very poor' to 'very good.' Most households in Aleppo governorate (97%) answered 'good' or 'very good.' While there was no clear difference between rural and urban housing, more than half (53%) of returnee and host HHs tended to lean towards rating their standard of housing as 'good.' One third of households responded that their housing standards were sub-standard: 'average' (25%), 'poor' (6%), and 'very poor' (2%). The following shelter needs were given:

**Table 9: Housing conditions**

Negative household condition	% HHs	Household profile
Missing essential furniture	42%	More so in Idlib and in rural areas; predominantly among returnee HHs (81%)
Part of the house was destroyed in the war	39%	Less so in Aleppo, shared between urban/rural areas and displacement profile
Leaky roof	33%	Not reported in Aleppo; mostly in Idlib governorate
Not enough room or privacy within the shelter / overcrowded	27%	More so in Idlib and in rural areas
No doors / no privacy and protection from outside	27%	Not reported in Aleppo; shared among urban/rural areas and displacement profile
Too expensive for what I'm getting	16%	Less so in Aleppo; predominantly returnee HHs (91%)
Broken windows	12%	
No toilet or WASH facilities	10%	Not reported in Aleppo; shared among urban/rural areas and displacement profile
Other	15%	Missing basic services; unsafe; other issues
Living in a makeshift shelter or tent	1%	IDP returnees and (Refugee-) Returnee IDPs

42 KI-9, Oct 26, 2017

43 IOM, "Press release – Over 600,000 Displaced Syrians Returned Home in First 7 Months of 2017," Aug 11, 2017, <https://www.iom.int/news/over-600000-displaced-syrians-returned-home-first-7-months-2017>



In terms of housing security, most households (88%) said they felt they could remain in their current housing for as long as they wanted. Nearly all HHs reporting insecurity are currently living in Homs and Idlib governorates. Household security is mixed between rural and urban areas and among both returnee and host households, with nearly 24% of housing-insecure HHs representing the non-displaced community and another 33% coming from (Refugee-) Returnee IDP households, who are currently displaced in Syria.

Main reasons for reporting housing insecurity among the different household profiles (n=68) are:

- The HH is renting the housing (52%), more so in Idlib governorate, among Returnee IDPs, in urban areas.
- About 28% of households said that because of the security situation (fighting, the war, insecurities), they do not feel secure in their current housing. These houses are mostly in Idlib (both urban and rural parts) and also in rural parts of Homs (Wa'er).
- Although missing legal home ownership papers have been reported as an issue in Syria, just three households (in Idlib rural, including one host HH) claimed this as their reason for housing insecurity.
- In addition, 13% of HHs feeling insecure said they were squatting illegally (in Homs and Idlib rural areas); they are mostly Returnee IDP households.

**Education:** Households in Idlib governorate reported poorer access to education. The crisis in Syria has been going on since 2011, and most estimates cite that half or more than half of those affected are children; without education, Syrian children, especially refugees, are at risk of becoming a 'lost generation'.<sup>44</sup> There is a need for schools and teachers to bridge this education gap and rebuild the future of Syria,<sup>45</sup> though in Syria today, perhaps not all sub-districts are lacking schools<sup>46</sup> or they might have one functional, accessible school remaining.<sup>47</sup> Households in Idlib governorate reported poorer access to education. Just one HH answered 'non-existent or nearly no access' and another 96 HHs did not know or declined to answer (30% of which are youth). Considering enrolment of school-aged children in schools, 15% of all HHs said they had children out of school; 53% have all school-aged children in school, while the question did not apply to about one-third of HHs. Both returnee and host households reported children out of school, though more so in Idlib (73%) than Aleppo and Homs governorates. On the other hand, more households in Aleppo (43% reporting full enrolment) reported all school-aged children being enrolled.



**Imagine my daughter's class has 60 students, how will she understand the lessons?**

Mother from Homs

**Healthcare:** Health needs are high among all households (48%) with higher rates among the internally displaced (53%), followed by refugee returnees (47%) and host residents surveyed (42%). Access to healthcare was roughly the same in all three governorates, in rural/urban areas and among returnee and host HHs. Overall, 58% rate a good access to healthcare, 23% average, and 19% poor or none existent. When asked if they could access psychological care if needed, 64% stated that psychological care was inaccessible. Syrians are in need for psychological support, having endured years of displacement and trauma,<sup>48</sup> especially children. Host communities who endured conflict are also considered in need. Yet healthcare centres may not be intact and functional. Data from late 2016 show that access to health services in Aleppo governorate, for instance, is very scarce.<sup>49</sup>

**Support services:** Even if they are not receiving support or assistance from them, households were asked to identify all organisations present in their community where they believe they can get support. This question was left open to the interpretation of how the respondent needs support, such as emotional, financial, medical, protection support, health or psychosocial support, etc. The primary response – local councils or village associations – was reported by 62% of households,

44 Shaheen, Kareem, «Syria's lost generation: report counts cost of collapse in education system,» The Guardian, March 30, 2015,

45 ICTJ, Not Without Dignity

46 KI-8, Oct 26, 2017

47 KI-11, Nov 7, 2017

48 ICTJ, Not Without Dignity

49 NPM, Year in Review 2016, p.21.

very few of which live in Homs governorate; mostly they are in Aleppo (46%) and Idlib (53%) and represent mixed HH profiles and both urban and rural locations. Some organisations reported were only in Homs governorate, such as faith-based and youth groups.

**Table 10: Organisations in the community**

<b>Organisations present in the community that can offer support</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Household profile</b>
Local council / village association	402	Very few in Homs, mostly in Aleppo (46%) and Idlib (53%); mixed HH profiles and urban/rural locations
Humanitarian/development organisation (NGOs and other types)	338	More so in urban areas; including host HHs; more so in Idlib
Charity	137	Mostly in Homs governorate
Faith-based organisation	79	Only in Homs
Youth group	45	Reported among all age groups, but only in Homs
Farmers' association / cooperative	41	73% in rural areas; 98% in Idlib
Club (sports, social etc.)	29	More so among youth and in urban areas; equal returnee/host status split
Private voluntary organisation	28	
Human rights group (international and local)	15	More so among youth, male, IDP returnees, in urban areas, and in Homs
Academia	11	
Self-help groups	9	
Labour union	5	
Other	6	
None	19	

## OBSTACLES TO CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

### Split families and family separation

When asked if they returned alone or with their household, close to one in four returnee households reported split families. While 73.8% returned with their entire household, 11.6% returned with only some members of their household and 14.5% returned on their own. Refugee returnees were more likely to have returned on their own indicating instances of “go and see” efforts, of single individuals in a household traveling home to check on property, security and economic conditions, and the viability of return. Given the uncertainty of conditions upon return, refugee returnees were more likely to rely on splitting their family, a common practice in situations of spontaneous returns as documented in similar research in Kenya and Somalia.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Hall (2014), Towards Durable solutions: Expectations vs. reality – Perceptions of unassisted returns to Somalia

**Table 11: Split families upon return**

	Alone	With some members of my HH	With all members of my HH
IDP returnees	15.8	8.3	84.9
Refugee-returnees	21.5	14.8	63.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.5</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>73.8</b>

Men were more likely to have returned on their own, in advance of bringing their family: 20% of male respondents reported returning on their own, as compared to 3% of women. Men are taking the responsibility of checking on areas of return, indicating a possible temporary return in their case.

Confirming the split returns trend, when asked “do you have immediate family members you are currently separated from?”, refugee returnees were most likely to respond positively: 62.4% of refugee returnees are currently separated from a family member, against 52.8% of IDP returnees and close to half of host families (49.7%). This means that family separation is a common fixture in a country marked by conflict, when even half of host families have experienced family separation. It also confirms that mobility remains a key livelihood strategy and that the term “host” cannot be equated with no mobility: instead some immediate members of host families are also part of the IDP and refugee caseloads. Categories are flexible, and coping strategies are multiple.

While no trends on separation were found in the datasets for Homs and Aleppo governorates; separation trends are prevalent in Idlib – known as a key area for defected fighters and their families:<sup>51</sup>

- 54% of HHs reporting that an immediate family member is outside Syria were in Idlib governorate
- Most HHs with an immediate family member fighting in the war are also from Idlib governorate.

**Youth are particularly vulnerable to family separation:** about 22% of returnee youth surveyed reported that they returned alone; and about half of them are still separated from someone in their household. This means that families are often relying on their younger members to “go and see” the situation in various parts of Syria, which is a coping mechanism that can come with specific sets of protection challenges for the youth.

## Access to Documentation

Access to civil documentation (including legal documents such as birth, death, marriage and divorce certificates) is lacking in all locations and across groups. The fighting between government and non-government groups has made acquiring civil documentation a challenge for all.

When asked if they had legal, unexpired identification documents, about 15% of respondents said no, with a higher prevalence among refugee-returnees: one in five refugee returnee does not have legal documentation (20%). In terms of location, 72% of those without civil documentation are in Aleppo governorate (across both urban and rural areas). In addition, a quarter of youth do not have current legal documents. Documentation and basic services appear to be positively correlated with time since arrival: the more recently a household returned / arrived, the lower its score in the documentation dimension.

Over half (51.2%) do not have access to documentation and as a result do not know where to go for requests related to documentation in their current location of residence. Refugee returnees are the most likely to respond negatively to access to documentation (55%) as compared to IDP returnees (45%), yet the differences remain minimal with host community members (53%).

<sup>51</sup> KI-9, Oct 26, 2017; and Al Jazeera, “Syrian fighters, refugees arrive in rebel-held Idlib,” Al Jazeera, Aug 4, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/syrian-fighters-refugees-arrive-rebel-held-idlib-170804034636552.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/syrian-fighters-refugees-arrive-rebel-held-idlib-170804034636552.html)

This can be explained by the lack of systems in place in areas controlled by government and non-government groups,<sup>52</sup> making renewals and new documents hard to access. Reports of identification cards being confiscated at check-points in Syria indicate a hardening of travel and proof of identity, hindering Syrians' rights to access services or their freedom to move.<sup>53</sup> Access to documentation services in rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo and Idlib governorates are 'non-existent' or there is nearly no access; this response accounts for about 34% of all HHs.

In addition, housing, land and property (HLP) rights are also challenging. Often times, households no longer have their proof of ownership<sup>54</sup> or they cannot bring issues to judicial entities because of the different streams of power and operational systems, which may not be fully functioning.<sup>55</sup> This situation may result in a chain of complications, such as instances where squatters cannot be moved from homes and landlords cannot claim their land or property.



A displaced family from Idlib towards Aleppo who are also beneficiaries of the shelter programme of the Danish Refugee Council in Syria. July 2017. Photo by: Ahmad Allowas.

52 KI-9, Oct 26, 2017

53 KI-6, Sept 26; and KI-7, Sept 27, 2017

54 REACH and UNHCR, "UNHCR Shelter NFIs Assessment – Preliminary Findings Presentation," (PowerPoint presentation), Sept 2017.

55 KI-2, Sept 18, 2017

## ON THE SAFETY OF RETURNS – THE JOURNEY BACK TO SYRIA



**We passed through a mine land, we had to let the sheep pass before us, we almost lost most of them because they died because of the mines so that we pass safely through this area, those sheep were all what we had.**

A family telling their story of displacement in Aleppo

### On the way back to Syria

Around 3% of the displaced reported that they needed protection support during their return. Although this value is statistically low, the reasons are of concern: all 15 households required protection from either arbitrary arrest/detention by the Syrian regime, smugglers or the presence of mines.

Half (51%) of non-host HHs cited that transportation was needed to help in their return. Youth more so than other age groups surveyed said that they needed transportation to return. All but one of these non-host HHs secured some, 'enough or all' transportation needed. This requires further qualitative studies to identify entry points for protection.

A total of 8% of non-host HHs mentioned that institutional support, e.g. from INGOs, the UN, Red Cross, or government, was needed to facilitate their return.

### Upon return

About 9% of HHs said that their home was affected by the presence of mines or other explosive remnants of war, although enumerators reported that respondents may have not been able to answer this question, indicating that the actual rate is higher. These households are both returnees and hosts, in rural and urban areas and within the three governorates.

58% of households answered that they felt they could go to the police or courts (legal and justice system) for help, while 16% either didn't know or refused to answer. While both returnee and host households answered that they could go to the police/courts, the distribution among governorate shows that few of these respondents are living in Idlib (16%), while the rest are found in Aleppo (45%) and Homs (39%) governorates.

About 14% of HHs report not feeling secure for themselves and their family members when outside their home (i.e. when engaging in daily activities in their current community). 88% of them live in Idlib, and another 11% in Homs governorate. Upon further inquiry, 91% of these HHs report insecurity because they feel unsafe due to the Syrian conflict (fighting, shelling, insecurities) – nearly all (93%) of these HHs are in Idlib governorate, reflecting the safety situation there. Just five returnee HHs mentioned discrimination from community members, and another four HHs in Idlib cited discrimination from the local authorities.



**I went back to the collective centre because, I couldn't live with my brother, no enough resources or financial capacity for all of us.**

A family telling their story of displacement in Aleppo



# Chapter 4

## REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES

This section draws from the multi-dimensional resilience index developed for this study to provide insights to highlight economic, social, psychosocial and safety gaps in the achievement of durable solutions.

Successful reintegration depends on various factors, including returnees' time spent displaced in or outside Syria, their personal abilities and resources, e.g. financial, and acceptance by family, peers and the community. It considers the level of accurate information available before and after return, feelings of safety, and ability to renew or acquire necessary documentation. Reintegration also depends on environmental and structural capacities as well as development and economic opportunities available in Syria.

Looking at the different locations separately to assess resilience for the different displacement profiles reveals that in Aleppo, host households tend to fare better when it comes to livelihoods and access to basic services. **This is not the case in Idlib and Homs, where there are no significant differences with returnees and former IDPs.** In no location are the displaced at a disadvantage compared to hosts in the safety dimension.

Residents of Aleppo score poorly on documentation and basic services, while residents of Idlib score poorest on safety and livelihoods. Residents of Homs appear to be doing better overall. When comparing overall resilience scores (irrespective of governorate and migration history) in rural vs urban environments, it emerges that residents of rural areas fare slightly worse in terms of documentation and livelihoods, considerably worse in terms of access to basic services, but markedly better in terms of safety.

By contrast, overall scores in all locations according to displacement profile reveal that only the livelihood (and to a lesser degree, the safety) dimension is globally dependent on displacement profile, with returnee-IDPs scoring markedly lower. It follows then that the relationship between displacement profile and the resilience is likely to be context-dependent and to vary from one location to another.

This highlights the need for area-based, integrated, interventions.

Furthermore, the research targeted displaced having arrived in the locations of study in 2016 and 2017. Results reflect that improvement of living conditions post-displacement takes time but **scores do appear to improve relatively quickly**: those who arrived in 2016 score markedly higher in terms of livelihoods, documentation and basic services than their peers who arrived in 2017.

## RESILIENCE SCORES: LOCATION AND MULTIPLE DISPLACEMENT MATTER

The resilience index developed by Samuel Hall (detailed in Annex 3) provides a scoring and visualisation of the protection needs of returnees. As Figures 6 and 7 show, variations are determined more strongly by location than by displacement profile, except for the livelihoods dimension. This index can inform programming and coordination by highlighting the gaps and encouraging area-based programming to address these gaps.

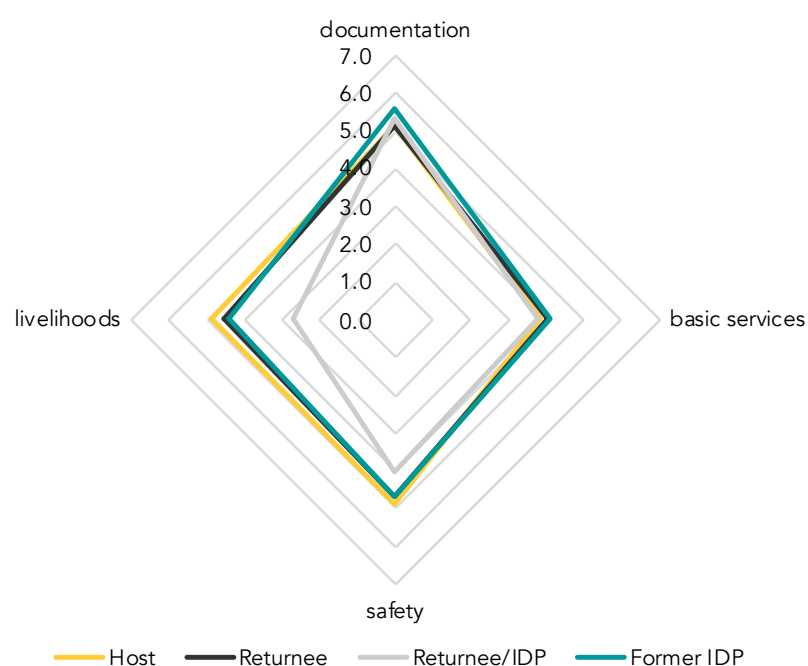
Four dimensions were chosen – documentation, basic services, livelihoods and safety scores – targeting some of the key gaps and needs identified in the data and presented in this study.

Table 12: Four dimensions of the resilience index

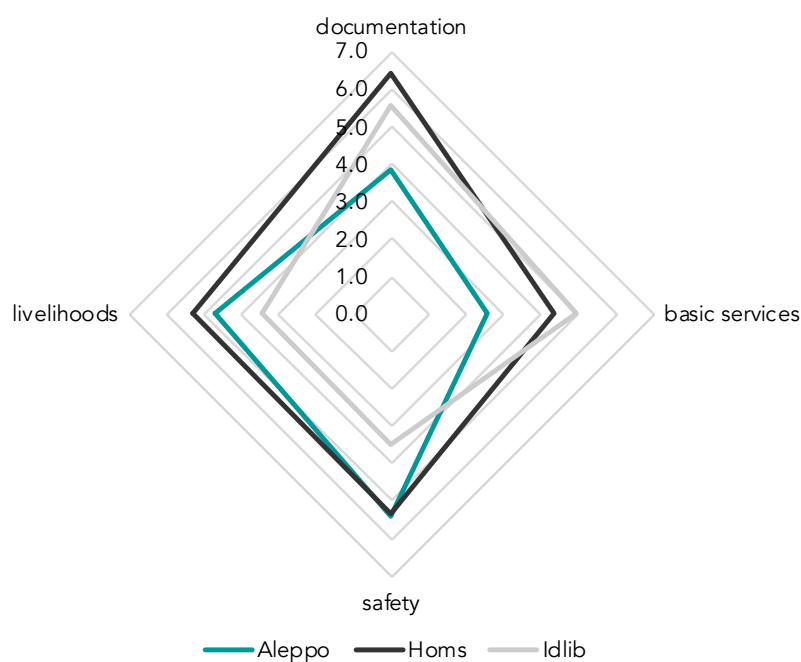
Documentation	Livelihoods	Basic Services	Safety
Personal ID	Durable asset index	Healthcare	Physical safety
Legal recourse/justice system	Household asset index	Psychosocial support	Police or the courts
Access to documentation	Productive assets	Education	Re-integration
	Earner ratio	Drinking water	Migration intentions
	Job prospects	Electricity	Housing security
	Access to credit	Housing access	Assistance
	Skills by sector	Law enforcement	Discrimination
	Debt	Food and markets	Feelings and Moods

Overall scores in all locations according to displacement profile reveal that only the livelihoods (and to a lesser degree, the safety) dimension are dependent on displacement profile, with returnee-IDPs scoring markedly lower. **It follows that the relationship between displacement profile and resilience is likely to be context-dependent and to vary from one location to another.**

Figure 6: Resilience score by displacement profile





**Figure 7: Resilience score by location**

**Returnee-IDPs - those who returned from abroad but were unable or unwilling to return to their place of origin – score much worse in the livelihoods dimension no matter their location.**

The resilience score shows that the situation of returnee-IDPs compared to their peers appears to be particularly dire in Homs.

**Figure 8: Resilience scores by displacement profile - HOMS**

## ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Key economic challenges faced by returnees and host communities relate to:

- Access to food
- Non-productive debt

This section also looks at opportunities for future programming:

- Skills' profiling
- Assets and productive assets

**Access to food and loans:** 77% of households reported having reduced the quantity or quality of food consumed due to lack of means (Table 13). IDP returnees (80.7%) were more likely to reduce their intake of food as a coping mechanism than refugee-returnees (74.3%) and host community members (75.9%). This is the case even if the majority is able to borrow money when needed (60%). Money is borrowed to pay for daily expenses but given competing needs – such as healthcare – and the lack of income, this money is not sufficient to cover basic food needs. Host community members are more likely than refugee-returnees to be able to borrow money, a confirmation that their local networks are stronger; and less likely to fall into debt. More than half (59%) of HHs with debt are in Idlib, scattered throughout the governorate and representing both returnee and host households.

- The vast majority of households with debt (93%) said they could borrow from family/friends.
- Just 6% mentioned a possible bank loan in Syria. All of these HHs were assessed in Homs governorate.
- Another 7% of HHs could get a salary advance. None of them were in Idlib governorate.
- Finally, 2% of HHs said they could borrow money from shops or vegetable markets. Mostly, these HHs are in Idlib governorate.

**Table 13: Access to food / Ability to borrow money / Debt by category (in %)**

	Refugee- returnee	IDP- returnee	Host	Total Average
<b>Have you had to reduce the quantity and/or quality of food?</b>				
Yes	74.3	80.7	75.9	76.9
<b>Are you able to borrow money if you need to?</b>				
Yes	58.2	59.6	62.3	59.9
<b>Do you currently have debt?</b>				
Yes	45.1	45.9	40.4	41.6

**Skills:** Respondents were also asked to share the skillsets, by sector, of income generators in their household (listed in Table 14). While differences in sectors were noted by governorate in Syria, there is no significant difference between skillsets and HH 'returnee' or 'host' status. Income generators with skills in education and public administration are more likely to be found in Homs, though. Homs governorate is Government-controlled; this data may suggest that households in Homs have access to more income-generating services in the public sector.

Overall 54.6% of respondents are engaged in an income generating activity and 41.4% are actively looking for work. Among these, IDP returnees are more likely to look for work (43.1%).

Table 14: Skills by sector

Skills (by sector) of income generators	% HHs
Wholesale	20%
Construction	20%
Agriculture	16%
Education	15%
Manufacturing	10%
Other	9%
Other community	9%
Public Administration	5%
Health and social work	5%
Hotels	4%
Private HH service	2%
Engineering	1%

**Assets:** When considering access to durable assets (listed in Table 15), the same trend about Homs governorate appears, suggesting that households in Homs might have better economic integration than in Aleppo and Idlib governorates. The majority of HHs assessed have access to a mobile phone, television and refrigerator. Certain assets like stoves and computers are more likely to be found in an urban setting, although overall computer and radio access are quite low in the surveyed areas. Few significant differences were noted in access to assets between returnees and hosts, and no significance was found between access and number of income-generating household members. Overall, access to assets seems to be location-specific; relevant comparisons are shared in Table 10.

Table 15: Access to assets

Access to assets	% HHs	Household profile
Mobile phone	84%	The large prevalence of mobile phones shows the potential of phone-based approaches to aid and protection
Television	83%	
Refrigerator	78%	
Stove	58%	More so in urban areas; half of HHs with access are in Homs; 50% of Refugee-returnees report access compared to 67% of IDP returnees and 63% of host HHs
Motorcycle	34%	Equal urban/rural access; very few in Homs (8% of HHs with access)
Car / vehicle	26%	Slightly more prevalent in urban areas; half of HHs with access are in Aleppo
Bicycle	8%	More so in urban areas; more so in Homs
Iron	28%	Less prevalent in rural areas and in Aleppo; half of HHs with access are in Homs; more common among host HHs
Computer	23%	More so in urban areas and in Homs (56% of HHs with access)
Sewing machine	15%	
Radio	10%	More so in urban areas; mostly in Homs
Tractor	6%	Mostly in rural areas and in Aleppo
Video Cassette Recorder	6%	Mostly in urban areas and in Homs

Additionally, the survey inquired about ownership of productive assets. Productive assets can be used to generate income and to support in livelihoods and economic reintegration. **Notably, half of all households reported not owning any productive assets.** The most common productive assets are ownership of buildings or structures (which can be used for shops, restaurants, businesses, and to rent), trees, and animals/livestock. As with durable assets, differences in ownership HH profiles are based mostly on geographic location.

**Table 16: Ownership of productive assets**

Ownership of productive assets	% HHs	Household profile
None	50%	
Buildings or structures (can be used for shops, business, to rent)	19%	No (Refugee)-Returnee IDP HHs; more so in Homs; equal urban/rural ownership
Trees (fruit, olive, nut)	19%	More so in rural areas; nearly half of HHs with trees found in Idlib
Animals and livestock	14%	More so in Aleppo and in rural areas
Car / vehicle	9%	Mostly in Aleppo; more so in urban areas
Agricultural equipment and tools	6%	More than half (55%) owning found in rural areas; 69% of HHs owning are in Aleppo
Other	0.3%	Woodworking equipment; other tools

## SOCIAL INTEGRATION/SAFETY SECURITY

Key social challenges faced by returnees and host communities relate to social engagement and psychosocial well-being; while key opportunities relate to feelings of belonging.

**Discrimination:** Overall, one third of respondents have felt discriminated against in their current location. This is the most pronounced among IDP returnees (33.9%), while refugee returnees are less likely to report discrimination (25.7%). Host community members rank in the middle of this range with 30.7% reporting instances of discrimination. In conclusion, discrimination is not related to displacement itself, but to differences in other factors. Households reporting discrimination are located in Idlib (40%), Homs (35%) and Aleppo (25%) governorates; about 40% of them are youth. Common themes of discrimination include:

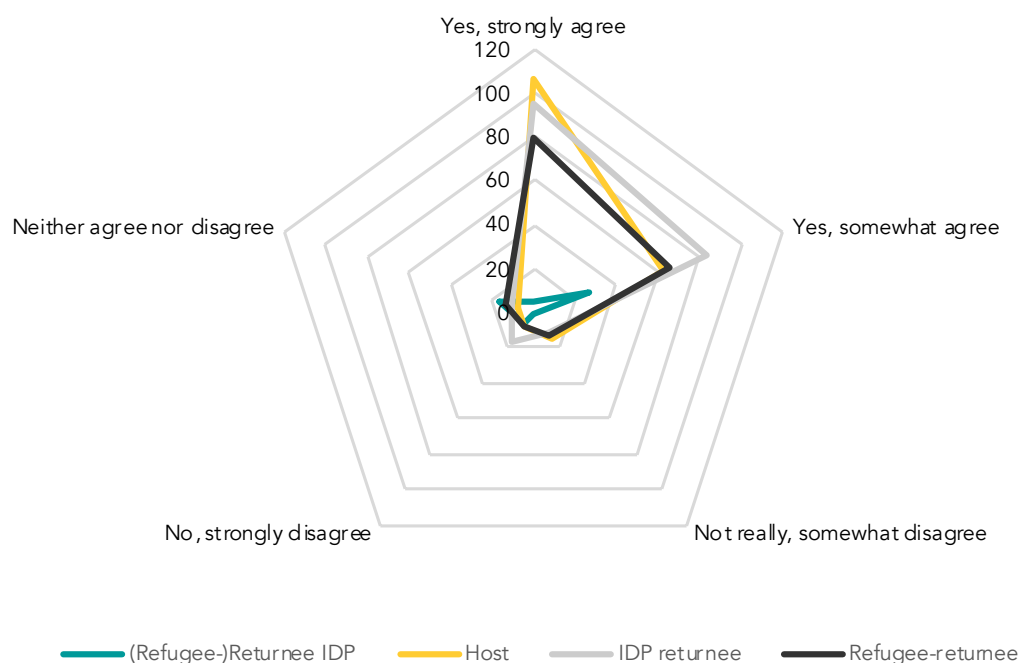
- **Religion:** About 11% of HHs reported discrimination against their religion<sup>56</sup>, three quarters of which are in Homs governorate, primarily in Sadad (rural) and Homs City/Old City (urban).
- **Language:** Roughly 5% of HHs reported that discrimination was against their language, including two Kurdish-speaking hosts; the remaining HHs are returnees speaking Kurdish, Turkish and even Arabic from another region in Syria. Most of these HHs currently live in Aleppo governorate, predominately in rural areas.
- **Favouritism:** Discrimination against favouritism (perhaps through a political party, other organisation/aid group, or even provider of basic services) was reported by 9% of HHs, all in Homs and Idlib governorates.
- **Other:** Discrimination against political opinion was reported by less than 1% of HHs. Discrimination because of ethnicity was reported among some Kurdish and Turkish-speaking returnee HHs. Finally, other types of discrimination included financial and social status.

Social cohesion during reintegration is a sensitive topic in Syria: changing regional demographics and perspectives due to displacement and resettlement<sup>56</sup> and competition for aid between returnee and host HHs may arise and turn problematic during the recovery period. Considering this tension as well as household needs regardless of displacement status, it is recommended that agencies implementing long-term programming in Syria include host households in their approach.

<sup>56</sup> This survey did not ask about the type of religion.

**Belonging to the community:** About one-third (36%) of households reported that they never engage in social activities within their community. 80% feel that they belong to their current community. This is more common among host households (85%) although IDP returnees confirm such sentiments (82%), followed last by refugee returnees (75%). This feeling of belonging contributes to positive community interactions and no reported tensions within or between groups.

**Figure 9: Feeling of belonging to the current community**



**Psychosocial well-being:** Although the majority (68%) of respondents reported no stress, tension or conflict between them and members of their HH in the past three months (and 5% declined to answer), about 27% of households are dealing with domestic tensions. Both returnee and host households face this challenge, though less so in Aleppo governorate (just 7% of HHs often dealing with stress, tension or conflict). Despite the conflict in Syria, ongoing displacement and the poor economic situation, 88% of HHs report feeling in control of their own life: 89% of hosts, 87% of IDP returnees, 91% of Refugee-returnees, and 80% of (Refugee-)Returnee IDPs. Half of respondents who answered 'no' are youth. To assess mental well-being, respondents were prompted with a list of feelings that could reflect distress, and were asked to answer the ones that they felt on a regular basis. Remarkably, according to this list, mental well-being appears higher among the sampled households in Aleppo governorate:

**Table 17: Signs of distress**

Felt on a regular basis	n
Stressed	276
Sad	195
Difficultly concentrating	155
Angry	153
Afraid	132
Lonely	105
Low self-worth	51
None of the above	280

Respondents who feel in control of their own life also reported feeling stressed (40% of them), sad (28%), angry (22%), afraid (19%), lonely (15%), and had difficulty concentrating (23%), yet low self-worth was much lower (7%).

## DURABLE SOLUTIONS AND FUTURE INTENTIONS

When presented with possible options for their future, 73% of all households opted to stay in their current location, 11% opted to move onwards either within Syria (4%) or abroad (7%) and 16% expressed being uncertain about their plans. The least likely to want to settle locally are refugee-returnees (65%), followed by IDP returnees (74%) and hosts (82%). Those who have returned to Aleppo showed more stability: 95% of IDP returnees and Refugee-returnees who returned to Aleppo governorate planned to stay there. The lack of stability in Idlib was reportedly due to the lack of safety, considering the current intervention by Turkish forces.



**I cannot go back to my original home because I am required for military service and I do not have official papers.**

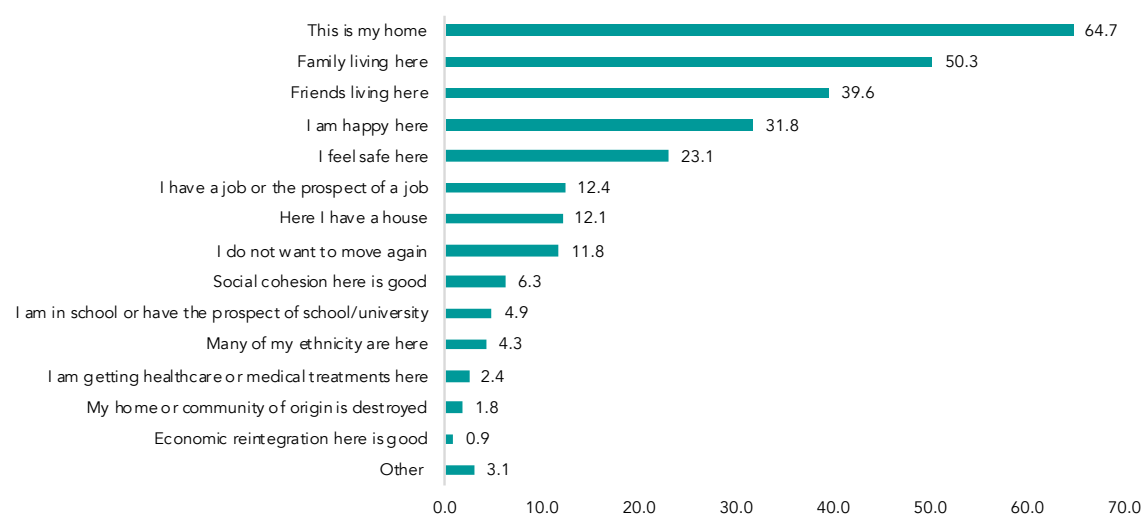
(Refugee-)Returnee IDP respondent from Damascus, male, 20

**Table 18: Breakdown of future intentions by category (in %)**

Future intentions	Host	IDP-returnee	Refugee-returnee (incl. returnee-IDP)	Total
Stay here	82	74	65	73
Move to another location in Syria	1	1	8	4
Move onwards to another country	4	8	10	7
Uncertain	13	17	17	16

The primary reasons for planning to stay are social and psychosocial – not economic (Figure 11).

**Figure 11 Reasons for staying in the same place (in %)**



**Nearly all HHs who plan to move onwards to another country were surveyed in Homs and Idlib governorates, and more than half (57%) of them are youth.** About 79% of HHs planning to move onwards are IDP returnees and Refugee-returnees, more than half of whom returned in 2016.

- Households plan to move to Turkey (43%), Europe (17%), the United States (13%), Lebanon (9%), Canada (6%), or haven't decided yet (12%).
- Most of the HHs who report planning to migrate to Turkey (18 of 20 HHs) are returnee HHs, currently living in Idlib, and four of them had most recently been displaced in Turkey.

Having established links with the country of onward movement is a determining factor in deciding where and why to migrate again. School or work prospects may come faster through established links and networks with friends/family. Of HHs reporting onward movement due to education plans or prospects, few are planning to go to Syria's neighbouring host countries: none of them to Lebanon and just one HH to Turkey.

Generally, many households citing negative reasons for onward migration, such as no jobs in Syria and tough living conditions or poor economic reintegration have established links, and many are going to Turkey. The most commonly reported reason for onward migration is that living conditions and economic reintegration are hard, pushing many HHs away to look for work and even to find happiness. Further, most HHs who think they can find happiness in their onward movement have established links.

In addition, negative reasons for onward migration reported were shared by households in Idlib, such as insufficient levels of assistance in Syria and safety/security factors.

**Table 19: Reason for onward movement to another country (all households)**

Reason for onward movement to another country (n=47)	n	Household profile
Living and economic reintegration conditions in Syria are hard	26	Many have established links and are going to Turkey
To work or have the prospect of work	23	83% have established links; few female respondents
To find happiness	14	93% have established links; over half are youth; more women answered this
To study or have the prospect of study	14	Not Lebanon and just one HH planning for Turkey; 79% have established links; 79% are youth; mostly from Homs; mostly men
To join family	13	Mixed profile of onward countries
No access to labour market/jobs in Syria	13	Half are going to Turkey; most have established links; many are youth
Level of assistance is insufficient in Syria	7	All in Idlib, mostly rural; all are returnee HHs
To join friends	5	
It is not safe here	4	75% have established links; 75% are youth; from Idlib urban; all are returnee HHs
My home or community of origin is destroyed	2	IDP returnees in Idlib
Other	6	Get healthcare, other



## LOCATION SPECIFIC DYNAMICS

**Aleppo Governorate** has the highest rate of returns in Syria in 2017, particularly in June 2017 when it witnessed nearly half of all returns just that month and in September 2017. Aleppo City was heavily under siege for several months in 2017, and parts of Aleppo City are now under government control. This timeline helps explain the dramatic numbers of displacement and returns. Though a cease-fire is formally in place, Aleppo governorate experienced fighting during data collection.



Those living in Aleppo fare better across a range of indicators, key among which are:

- **Community cohesion:** 92.6% of all respondents in Aleppo governorate felt that they belonged to their current community of residence.
- **Longing for home:** 71.5% of returnees to Aleppo had expressed their longing for home through their homesickness and nostalgia driving them to want to return.
- **Potential for business and to find work:** 43% of returnees to Aleppo identified a greater opportunity for them to do business or find work in Aleppo, ten percentage points above the survey sample average. This potential seems confirmed by the low rate of those actively looking for a job at the time of interview – 28.3% being the lowest rate of all governorates surveyed.
- **Satisfaction of the current economic situation:** 88.3% of households in Aleppo expressed being satisfied with their current economic situation, against 39.3% of the overall sample average.
  - » Housing: another positive indicator of their integration is the satisfaction with the current standard of housing that households in Aleppo have access to, as 97.1% rated their housing as good or very good, compared to a total survey. Average of 67.3%.
- **Information sources**
  - » Social networks: 28.5% of the displaced had relied on friends and family outside of Syria to prepare their return, against an average of 14.8% across the overall survey sample, indicating that stronger networks sustain returnees to Aleppo.
  - » Mass media: 67.4% of Aleppo returnees relied on mass media sources (news, internet etc.) to inform their planning on return as opposed to 55.8% for the overall sample, an indicator of their level of connectivity beyond specific locations and their ability to tap into different information streams to triangulate information and make an informed decision.

As a result of the overall positive assessments across key indicators, 90.7% of respondents in Aleppo governorate opt to stay in their location in the near future. The one indicator on which Aleppo residents ranked lower than in other locations is on the possession of legal documentation. One third of respondents do not have legal documents, almost three times higher than the overall average.

**Idlib Governorate:** Many households originally from Idlib City were most recently displaced in Harim, Idlib. In recent months, Turkish and international pressures and finally Turkish intervention in Idlib have altered the security situation in both rural and urban areas. It is estimated that between 800,000 and 900,000 people – including a staggering 550,000 IDPs – are in the Turkish intervention zone (north-eastern Idlib and western rural Aleppo governorates). There are increased kidnappings, shelling and arrests. There may be additional displacement in response to this change in safety – yet some suggest that in Idlib, HHs are still waiting it out and will not move again unless there is a greater security risk, such as airstrikes. Despite this volatile situation, or perhaps as a response to changes in conflict patterns, Idlib saw a larger number of returns in the second half of September 2017 than the first half. International humanitarian actors do not operate through direct implementation in

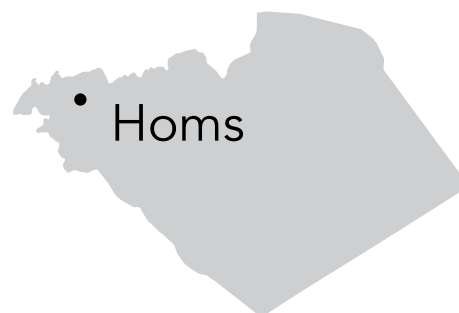


Idlib. Indeed, the aid environment in Syria is polarised: aid is either provided officially through the government in Damascus, leading to restrictions in access; or aid is provided directly into “opposition controlled areas without the consent of the Syrian government and subject to massive insecurity”<sup>57</sup>. The UN and the ICRC do not operate in opposition-held territories without the consent of the Syrian government.

**Respondents in Idlib rated lowest on a range of indicators related to protection, including:**

- **Access to employment opportunities are not meeting household needs** for 79.4% of respondents. While the majority in Aleppo are satisfied, and mixed responses have been given in Homs, Idlib stands out with an overwhelmingly stark view of economic opportunities. While the total average is 50% across the entire sample, Irbil ranks 30 percentage points lower.
- **The top needs** among Idlib respondents is for livelihoods, income and cash (67%), followed by safety (66%) and basic infrastructure (60.5%). These rates are 1.5 to 3 times higher than in other locations. In addition, 61% of school aged children are enrolled in school, compared to 85.4% in Homs and 92% in Aleppo.
- **Reduction of food quantity or quality for lack of means:** the lack of economic security translates into food insecurity for Idlib respondents. They are 86.7% to report reducing their food intake as a coping mechanism. This is 15 percentage points higher than Homs and 14 percentage points higher than in Aleppo.
- **Households are heavily indebted** with 68.7% reporting holding a debt, against 25.5% in Homs and 27.8% in Aleppo. The situation of those living in Idlib is an outlier in terms of economic insecurity. As a result, 60.6% are not satisfied with their current economic situation in Idlib.
- **There is a social impact to the lack of economic prospects and continued conflict in Idlib:** Less than half of the respondents in Idlib engage in social activities. 54.1% never engage in any activity, while 30.4% do so infrequently, and 15.5% have an active social life. They mainly keep to their immediate family members. Out of all locations surveyed, Idlib showcased the lowest rate of family separation. One third reported having family members outside their community, against 72% in Homs and 63.4% in Aleppo.
- **The majority would not advise their relatives to move back to Syria (60.1%),** a rate double the sample average across locations.

**Homs:** Returns to Homs governorate in 6 months preceding the survey more than doubled the rate of returns within the previous 6 months. Moreover, 46% of non-host HHs currently in Homs reported officially deciding to return 1-6 months preceding the survey, showing a quite recent influx in spontaneous returns as compared to 2016. IDP Households originally from Homs governorate (Al Qusayr and Homs City) were most recently displaced in 2016 in Damascus (Damascus), Tartous (Safita, Tartous), and Homs (Tall Kalakh, Homs City), prior to returning to their community of origin as well as to Sadad. Homs governorate also experienced fighting during data collection, and has one of the higher rates of damaged shelter/homes, reflecting years of conflict that led to frequent and multiple displacements.



All three governorates experienced fighting during data collection of the household surveys, reflecting the continued volatile state of Syria. In addition, data sets and information continue to reflect a large number of movements to and from Idlib, Aleppo and other governorates in Syria, reflecting a pattern of continued displacement.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> MSF, “The ‘new Humanitarian Aid Landscape’ Case Study: MSF Interaction with Non-Traditional and Emerging Aid Actors in Syria 2013-14,” 2014.

<sup>58</sup> KI-1, Sept 15, 2017

The situation in Homs is mid-way between that of Aleppo and Idlib. However, respondents in Homs seem less embedded economically, and socially, in their communities, translating more recent arrivals. More time is needed to gauge the level of reintegration to this location. Among notable indicators to be tracked across time are the following:

- **The ability to borrow money is more constrained and uncertain in Homs:** 48.6% said they could borrow money if they needed to while 12% remained uncertain. This is in contrast with the rates in Idlib (64.8%) and Aleppo (66.3%), and the overall sample average of 60%.
- **Respondents who currently work are a minority - 46.8%** - with a 7%-point difference from the overall sample average.
- **Households in Homs are less likely to feel in control of their lives.** When asked this question, 78.7% reporting feeling in control, 16.7% responded negatively, and 4.6% did not know.
- **Health needs were reported with higher rates in Homs (57%) than in other locations:** with 17 percentage point difference with Idlib, and 10 percentage points with Aleppo, Homs respondents are reporting more health needs and their lack of access to health care.



# Chapter 5

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on spontaneous returns to Syria focuses on three core aspects of return – preparedness, protection and reintegration. Overall, host communities remain vulnerable and share similar needs with returnee households. A review of the main findings of the report reveals that:

**Return is prepared, but reintegration is not.** Those who return are largely staying close to their place of origin, returning to the same governorate, they are also among the most recently displaced. The location of origin and length of displacement are strong predictors of return. While income and livelihoods are common reasons to return, differences are seen between IDP and refugee returnees on their secondary drivers of return. The lack of money and conflict were reported by IDP returnees, while difficult socio-cultural environments in displacement, racism and discrimination were greater concerns for refugee returnees. Refugee returnee households seek a lower cost of living in Syria, feeling pressured to leave their host country, no longer able to afford the cost of living. A perceived improvement in their economic situation motivates, in part, their decision to return. At the same time, information on jobs and livelihoods is limited. Both IDP returnees and refugee returnees focus on safety, security, the cost and the logistics of return from point A to point B. Their post-return lives are in effect less well prepared: they often lack information on reintegration.

**Protection needs are high across all groups.** Upon return, the key household needs to be targeted are: livelihoods and income, health, and safety. Two other household needs ranked closely: the need for basic infrastructure, schools and education for children. Lastly, access to civil documentation (including legal documents such as birth, death, marriage and divorce certificates) is lacking in all locations and across groups. The fighting between government and non-government groups has made acquiring civil documentation a challenge for all. When asked if they returned alone or with their household, close to one in four returnee households reported being part of a split family. Refugee returnees were more likely to have returned on their own indicating instances of “go and see” efforts, of single individuals in a household traveling home to check on property, security and economic conditions, and the viability of return. Given the uncertainty of conditions upon return, refugee returnees were more likely to rely on splitting their family. Youth are particularly vulnerable to family separation. This means that families are often relying on their younger members to “go and see” the situation in various parts of Syria, which is a coping mechanism that can come with specific sets of protection challenges for the youth.

**Needs and vulnerabilities affect all groups.** Three quarters of the households surveyed would opt to stay in their current location. Yet reintegration challenges affect all groups, at times with no differences between groups. Some of the most significant differences pertain to the choice of location more than the history of displacement: in Aleppo, host households tend to fare better when it comes to livelihoods and access to basic services. This is not the case in Idlib and Homs, where there are no significant differences with returnees and former IDPs. In no location are the displaced at a disadvantage compared to hosts in the safety dimension. When comparing overall resilience scores (irrespective of governorate and migration history) in rural vs urban environments, it emerges that residents of rural areas fare slightly worse in terms of documentation and livelihoods, considerably worse in terms of access to basic services, but markedly better in terms of safety.

By contrast, overall scores in all locations according to displacement profile reveal that only the livelihood (and to a lesser degree, the safety) dimension is generally dependent on displacement profile, with returnee-IDPs scoring markedly lower. It follows then that the relationship between displacement profile and the resilience is likely to be context-dependent and to vary from one location to another. This highlights the need for area-based, integrated, interventions as the **local context matters: it is not possible to speak of “returns to Syria” generally – protection needs vary by location.**

**Location is the key variable in determining programming:** Residents of Aleppo score poorly on documentation and basic services, while residents of Idlib score poorest on safety and livelihoods. Residents of Homs appear to be doing better overall although key indicators show a lack of embeddedness in their current location, either due to more recent arrivals or to the need to monitor indicators across time.

In summary, five findings are highlighted in this report:

1. **The relationship between displacement profile and resilience is context-dependent and to vary from one location to another.** This implies that programming should focus on building evidence and intervening on area-specific needs. The longer-term impact will need to be assessed as returns are recent (2016-17).
2. **Social networks drive and support returns** – but both host communities and returnees have little resilience to external shocks – which suggests instability in the long-term if not addressed structurally. Many of the returns are recent (2016-2017) and the impact on households and communities need to be assessed. An area-based approach will be required as a result, with community-level reintegration support.
3. **Split and temporary returns are a key component of spontaneous refugee returns** – family separation and return of individuals on their own indicate that splitting households is a coping strategy. Households have an interest to return but opt to first send one of their youth to go and see the situation in Syria.
4. **Youth respondents present specific needs** – covering all dimensions of protection, from the possession of legal documentation to their ability to secure employment or to rely on strong social networks. This will require youth-specific interventions to support youth in exile and upon return.
5. **Returnees stay close to their place of origin returning to the same governorate: the governorate of origin is a strong indicator and predictor of return trends. Returnees are among the more recently displaced:** The length of displacement acts as a second predictor of returns: returns are favoured by those who have been displaced for shorter periods of time.

The situation of returnee-IDPs is particularly concerning but the sample – 57 respondents – is too low to draw conclusions. One of the key take-aways from this research: of all categories of populations, those displaced multiple times – the returnee-IDPs – are more likely to fare worse on key dimensions of protection. However, additional research will be needed with larger samples, dedicated to understanding their situation.



