



DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS BETWEEN MAARRAT AL NU'MAN AND KANSAFRA

DISPLACEMENT PROFILE

SYRIA

MARCH 2015

INTRODUCTION

Now in its fifth year, the conflict in Syria is estimated to have left a third of the country's population (7.6 million people) internally displaced¹ with at least half of this number experiencing multiple displacements.² Whether motivated by violence, the depleted capacities of host communities, or difficulties in accessing livelihoods,³ each displacement further reduces household resources.⁴ Since moving to camps or settlements is generally considered a last resort,⁵ internally displaced persons (IDPs) may view return as one of their few viable options. While available data on the needs of displaced communities is already disparate and incomplete,⁶ humanitarian actors' understanding of the situation for returnees and populations who have experienced multiple displacements is even less comprehensive, and represents an important information gap.⁷

This case study seeks to understand the intentions and humanitarian needs of two groups of IDPs in northern Syria from Maarrat al Nu'man in Idleb Governorate—a city of approximately 50,000 people—who fled to the same town following an escalation of violence in their area of origin in October 2012. Both groups of displaced people fled to Kasafra—a town of about 7,500 people⁸—that is approximately 20 kilometres away. Following the takeover by opposition forces in Maarrat al Nu'man and an escalation of violence in Kasafra in December 2014, one of these groups of IDPs (amounting to approximately 330 families) returned to their area of origin, while the other (amounting to approximately 100 families) remained in Kasafra.

While they once comprised a single community, the two groups' opposing reactions to the same set of events reflect different underlying vulnerabilities and needs. By examining the factors that underlie one movement in greater detail, it may be possible to derive insights applicable in other contexts. While some of the motivations and constraints affecting IDPs from Syria will differ for each community, some characteristics are likely to be shared among them. This case study has been developed to document and examine two distinct displacement patterns, as well as to address wider

issues related to return itself which could inform future humanitarian and post-conflict interventions.⁹

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The most recent available census data for Maarrat al Nu'man accounted for 50,008 people in 2004.¹⁰ Home to the Wadi al Deif Army Base and situated on the main highway between Aleppo and Damascus, Maarrat al Nu'man holds a strategically important position, making it the subject of intense fighting between government armed forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In 2012, fighting between the government and opposition groups became more severe and in October that year, FSA forces declared Maarrat al Nu'man to be under their control.

KEY EVENTS

March 2011: Beginning of the War in Syria

August 2012: Kasafra is the target of fatal shelling from government

October 2012: FSA claims control over Maarrat al Nu'man; aerial bombardments intensify

October 2014: Jabat al Nusra gains control of Kasafra and surrounding areas in Jabal al Zawiya

December 2014: Jabat al Nusra gains control of Maarrat al Nu'man and the Wadi al Deif Army Base

December 2014 - January 2015: IDPs begin to return to Maarrat al Nu'man from Kasafra

In the wake of the violence, and as many homes were damaged or even destroyed due to the conflict, many residents of Maarrat al Nu'man fled to rural towns and villages in the vicinity of Jabal al Zawiya¹¹, including Kasafra, which was an anti-government stronghold during the initial uprising and subsequent battle for Maarrat al Nu'man.¹² Despite being a place of refuge, due to the heavy fighting and shelling in the area, large numbers of residents of this town also were displaced.¹³ High levels of insecurity and an influx of IDPs seeking safety have both been widely documented in reports and media sources.¹⁴

¹ UNHCR Website, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, [Syria Regional Refugee Response](#)

² UNHCR Website, 'Syrian Arab republic', [2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Syrian Arab Republic](#)

³ OCHA, REACH and SNAP, [Syria Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment](#), 2014. Referred to as 'MSNA'.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), ["Syria IDP Figures Analysis."](#)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Population figures based 2004 Syrian Census data

⁹ United Nations Peacebuilding Commission–Working Group. ["Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons: An Essential Dimension Of Peacebuilding"](#), 2008.

¹⁰ UN OCHA Data; figures based on the 2004 Syrian Census

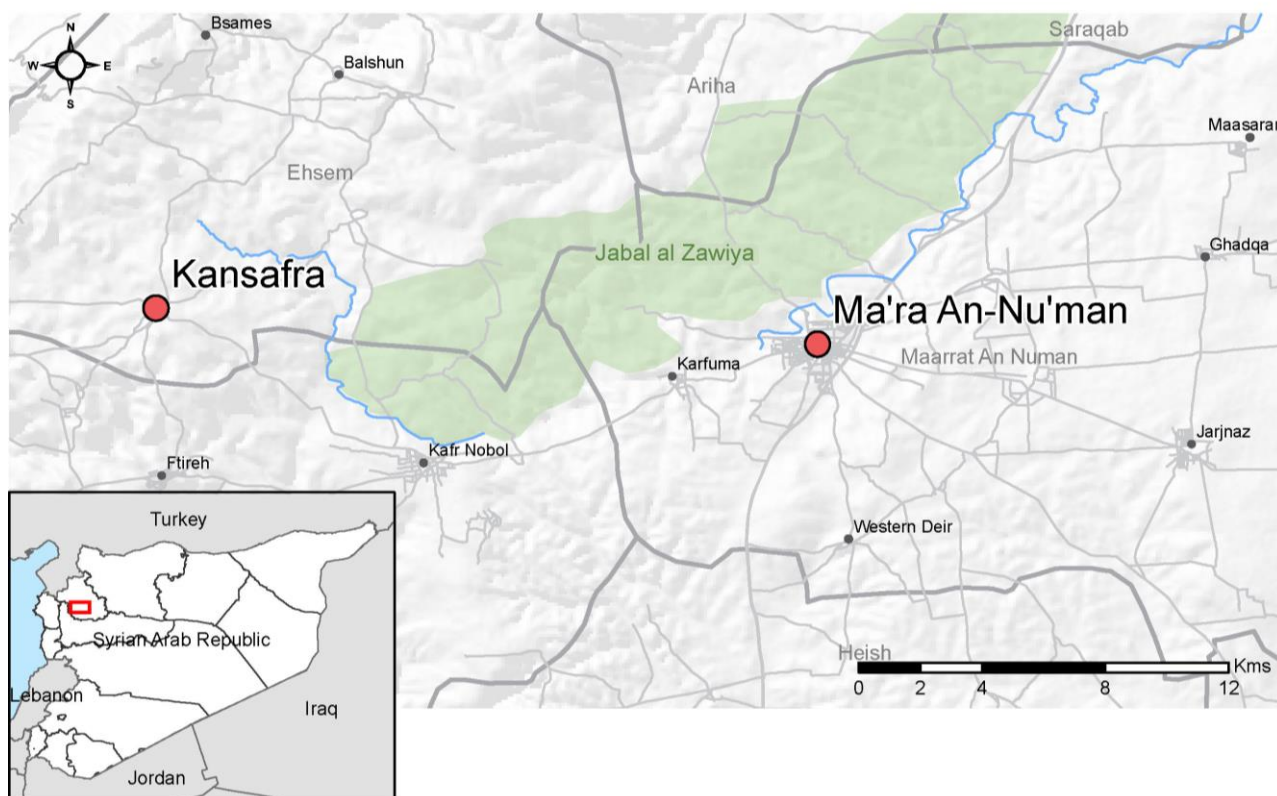
¹¹ This is the name of a mountain. Locals extend the name to the area of where it is located.

¹² Institute for the Study of War, [Middle East Security Report 3 – Syria's Armed Opposition](#), 2012.

¹³ Violation Documentation Centre, [تقارير خاصة :: تقرير حول النازحين داخلياً ومخيمات النزوح في محافظة ادلب](#)

¹⁴ Channel 4, [Syria: Across the Lines](#), 2013.

Map 1: The location of Kansafra and Maarrat al Nu'man (Ma'ra An-Nu'man) in Idleb Governorate



Maarrat al Nu'man was contested by Jabat al-Nusra forces, which took control of the surrounding area and captured the base in December 2014.¹⁵ Soon after, the city's former inhabitants, most of whom had been displaced for over two years, began to return. Towards the end of 2014, the security situation in Kansafra deteriorated. In early October 2014, Jabat al Nusra gained control over Kansafra and the surrounding towns.¹⁶

REACH first identified large movements of IDPs returning to Maarrat al Nu'man from Jabal al Zawiya in January 2015. As a result, REACH conducted interviews with community leaders in IDPs' areas of origin and areas of displacement to gather preliminary information about the size and scope of the movements, as well as to understand returnees' intentions. These interviews provided information about perceived security, access to livelihoods, shelter and services, which appeared to be significant factors in IDPs' decisions to stay or move and warranted further research.

Community leaders noted the existence of a particularly large IDP community from Maarrat al Nu'man in Kansafra, which had splintered into two groups: one that had returned, and

one that had stayed. While approximately 2,600 individuals from Maarrat al Nu'man were displaced in Kansafra at the end of 2014, nearly three-quarters had returned by February 2015.¹⁷

Preliminary interviews with community leaders suggested that IDPs were primarily motivated by differing perceptions of security: One group of IDPs returned to their area of origin due to improvements in security and fear of violence in Kansafra, while the other group of IDPs remained in Kansafra because they were afraid that violence would soon erupt again in Maarrat al Nu'man. However, they also posited other factors that may have played a role, including the ability to obtain housing, employment, and services such as education.

METHODOLOGY

REACH designed a multi-stage assessment to analyse factors that motivated some households to return to their area of origin, while others remained. Because REACH teams focused on both individual households that returned and

¹⁵ The New York Times, "[Syria's Al Qaeda Takes Base Next to Major Highway](#)," December 15, 2014,

¹⁶ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "[Jabhat al-Nusra take control on the main stronghold of SRF](#)", November 1, 2014.

¹⁷ Estimates are based on Key Informant (KI) interviews with staff of a local relief agency; KI interviews with local council members in Maarrat al Nu'man and Kansafra placed the figure much higher: 5,000 to 7,000 individuals. Additional interviews noted that according to KI, larger numbers of IDPs from Maarrat al Nu'man had initially sought refuge there, but had left for various reasons, including belief that the town was not safe.

those that stayed displaced in a single location, (Kansafra), they were able to better control for factors present in some locations but not others. Two main elements played a role in site selection: the large size of both the IDP and returnee communities, and the ability to access both KI and individual households for interviews. Triangulation of the data was possible through access to media sources, as well as to verification with other sources in the area.

Data collection was undertaken in two stages. In the first stage, REACH conducted KI interviews with local leaders and knowledgeable community members, such as doctors and teachers, regarding IDP demographics, intentions, and needs. These interviews used open-ended questions, and were intended to provide an overview of key trends and patterns. KIs also provided contact information for individual households that could subsequently be interviewed. In total, REACH conducted 12 KI interviews in Maarrat al Nu'man and 5 in Kansafra.

In the second stage, REACH interviewed individual households. These interviews sought to provide a structured approach to understanding the micro-level dynamics informing intentions within individual households. Using a snowball sampling approach, households interviewed provided the contact information of other households that could be interviewed. While IDPs who had fled to Kansafra were relatively socioeconomically homogeneous, enumerators were instructed to seek out households that were richer and poorer to ensure that perspectives across this group were included. REACH conducted 62 household interviews in total: 38 with returnees and 24 with households remaining in Kansafra.

LIMITATIONS

Although IDPs from Maarrat al Nu'man fled to many different locations in Jabal al Zawiya and elsewhere, for the purposes of this case study, REACH focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamics present in one location. Given that the focus of this research was on identifying trends within this specific context, REACH did not attempt to interview a larger or statistically significant sample of households. Issues regarding access, the stability of the populations being sampled, and lack of reliable population figures also informed the purposive sampling approach used. Households were interviewed until patterns or trends emerged. While special attention was put to identify diversity in the selected group, it is likely that some segments of the population were not interviewed.

Indeed, while the households interviewed in this assessment tended to fall within specific socioeconomic strata, interviews with KIs pointed to the existence of a small but significant

subset of the IDP population that was significantly poorer than the rest. This group has remained dependent upon humanitarian aid and lacks the means to return. Because household selection was based on snowball sampling techniques, and may have been prone to community bias, it is likely that members of this group were not accounted for in interviews.

KEY FINDINGS

DISPLACEMENT

In household interviews, IDPs reported leaving Maarrat al Nu'man for Kansafra as early as June 2012, with most fleeing in October 2012, and some leaving as late as the spring of 2013. They typically fled in waves and as groups of five to six other families. Kansafra was the first place of refuge for the majority of households.

Approximately 2,600 individuals (430 families) that went to Kansafra during 2012 and 2013 remained there until the end of 2014. However, KIs indicated that the initial influx of IDPs from Maarrat al Nu'man may have been as large as 5,000-6,000 individuals. KIs and relief agencies alike reported that only half of the population that initially fled to Kansafra remained at the beginning of 2014, with those who left earlier having gone to other nearby host communities or camps. As of March 2015, approximately 600 individuals (100 households) remained.

Patterns of displacement from and return to Maarrat al Nu'man were largely stratified by socioeconomic class. Findings revealed that individuals were largely members of the middle and working classes: small shop owners, skilled construction workers, mechanics, artisans, and factory workers. Public officials tended to flee to government-controlled areas in the south and west of Syria; however, during the course of its research, REACH interviewed an army officer, civil servant, and social worker who were among those who fled to Kansafra. Typically only the poorest members of the community, unskilled workers and daily labourers, sought refuge in camps in Northern Syria and Turkey. Overall, those with means as well as the poorest residents who went to camps are reportedly not likely to return until the crisis is resolved, which is an indication of the level of vulnerability.

The availability of shelter in Kansafra made it more attractive for working and middle-class families to establish themselves there than in other nearby villages. IDPs who arrived the earliest were able to find accommodation in apartments, with host families, or in houses vacated by residents of the town who fled. The fact that the IDP community in Kansafra was

smaller, at least initially, was attractive because it offered an environment where there was less competition for shelter and livelihood opportunities. Security also played a role; despite having been the site of violent incidents in the past, Kansafra was also positioned further away from the frontlines than other villages.

RETURN VS PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT

Households' decisions to return to Maarrat al Nu'man or remain in Kansafra were based on a number of factors, but considerations relating to security, livelihoods, and housing appeared to have played the greatest roles. Asked to rank the main factors that informed their decisions, IDP households that stayed in Kansafra cited insecurity in Maarrat al Nu'man (their area of origin) as their most important consideration, while those who left cited insecurity in Kansafra as a reason for returning. After security, returnees also frequently cited factors related to livelihoods, such a lack of employment in Kansafra and depleted savings. Those who remained in Kansafra frequently cited a lack of housing and resources to rebuild in Maarrat al Nu'man if they returned. A summary of the factors most frequently mentioned by both groups is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The four most commonly cited factors to inform intentions to relocate

	IDPs in Kansafra	Returnees in Maarrat al Nu'man
1	Insecurity in Maarrat al Nu'man	Insecurity in Kansafra
2	Lack of adequate housing in Maarrat al Nu'man	Lack of employment opportunities in Kansafra
3	Lack of resources to rebuild in Maarrat al Nu'man	Security in Maarrat al Nu'man
4	Lack of employment in Maarrat al Nu'man	Depleted savings and resources from living in Kansafra

Questions were designed to account for the fact that individuals may be influenced by “push” and “pull” factors simultaneously. Such a dynamic was only observed among returnees, who cited a deterioration of security in Kansafra along with an improvement of security in Maarrat al Nu'man.

The matrix below presents a summary of the factors cited by households during interviews regarding their decisions to remain in Kansafra or to return to Maarrat al Nu'man. The four most commonly mentioned factors for each group are written in bold typeface, while others were mentioned by some households, albeit less frequently.

Table 2: Push and pull factors affecting IDP intentions

Factors cited for remaining in Kansafra	
Pull factors	Security in Kansafra Access to education in Kansafra
Push factors	Insecurity in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of housing in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of resources to rebuild in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of employment opportunities in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of access to education in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of access to health care in Maarrat al Nu'man Lack of access to food and water in Maarrat al Nu'man Negative emotional factors associated with return to Maarrat al Nu'man
Reasons for returning to Maarrat al Nu'man	
Pull factors	Security in Maarrat al Nu'man Family and friends have returned to Maarrat al Nu'man Positive emotional factors associated with return to Maarrat al Nu'man Employment opportunities in Maarrat al Nu'man Access to housing in Maarrat al Nu'man
Push factors	Insecurity in Kansafra Lack of employment in Kansafra Depleted savings and resources from living in Kansafra Lack of access to education in Kansafra Lack of access to health care in Kansafra Lack of access to aid in Kansafra Lack of access to housing in Kansafra

Returnees and those who remained displaced were influenced primarily by “push” factors—an absence of key conditions and needs that remained unfulfilled. With most households' responses falling into one of three categories—security, livelihoods, and shelter—it is worthwhile to examine each of these independently.

SECURITY

While security was the factor most frequently cited by both groups of households, there was a substantial disparity in how the two groups viewed threats of violence in each community. Security was also the most important primary factor informing the decisions of nearly two-thirds of IDPs that stayed in Kansafrā. Of the households that stayed, all but one cited insecurity in Maarrat al Nu'man as discouraging their return, in this case, serving as a "push" factor. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of returnee households reported that improved security was an important factor in their decision-making and typically ranked it as their first or second concern. Households that returned were nearly three times as likely to mention the "push" of the deteriorating security context in Kansafrā as influencing their decisions, rather than the "pull" of increased security in Maarrat al Nu'man.

According to KIs, returnees left Kansafrā despite knowing that the government might retaliate in the area, and despite a high likelihood of recurring violence based on prior events. One mitigating factor appears to have been a staggered return, whereby large numbers of households waited to see how those that went before them fared before making their own decisions. This aligns with the general idea that safety in displaced peoples' area of origin is one of the preconditions associated with return.¹⁸ It is unlikely that households that intended to return viewed the situation as being safe and stable in the long term, and were therefore looking to early returnees in order to evaluate their own options of return.

The importance of security as an explanatory factor in this case, however, may be limited. Further research from other contexts shows that once a threat that causes initial displacement is removed, security alone may enable return, but does not necessarily provide an incentive to do so.¹⁹

For this reason, the simultaneous decline of security in Kansafrā and improvement in Maarrat al Nu'man may have convinced some households that whatever advantage they enjoyed by remaining in Kansafrā had dissipated. Notably, as security declined in Kansafrā, there did not appear to be significant movement to another third location; households appeared to view their choices as remaining or returning, but not going elsewhere.

LIVELIHOODS

Returnees more frequently cited push factors related to livelihoods as reasons for their decisions, namely an inability to obtain work and depleted savings. While a number of IDPs households in Kansafrā reported that they stayed in Maarrat al Nu'man because of a lack of employment opportunities, they seemed to attach less importance to livelihoods concerns. Findings related to individual households' livelihoods suggest that the extent to which families were able to access income-generating opportunities while displaced affected their decision about whether to stay or return.

Before the crisis, both groups were similar in terms of occupational status and income, and households earned approximately 27,000 SYP per month on average (398 USD per month)²⁰. Households that remained in Kansafrā were more likely to have found income-generating opportunities while they were displaced. All but one head of household reported being employed, earning 25,000 SYP (119 USD) per month on average at today's exchange rate. While suffering a marginal decrease in household income (and a steeper decrease in real income, considering inflation rates), nearly all continued with the occupations they held previously in Maarrat al Nu'man.

By contrast, findings show that households that returned to Maarrat al Nu'man had high levels of unemployment and low wages while they were displaced in Kansafrā. Less than a third of the heads of household worked in Kansafrā, and when they did, they tended to report lower incomes than those who worked and remained.

By returning, households that could not find work in Kansafrā were able to at least partially restore their previous livelihoods. Approximately three-quarters of returnee heads of household already reported working and half reported resuming the occupations or trades they held before the crisis, with many earning the income they did before.

According to findings, households that fared the best were the ones that owned and managed their own businesses in Maarrat al Nu'man. These were able to relocate their businesses to Kansafrā, but they were the exception. The vast majority of IDPs from Maarrat al Nu'man could not find work or restart their businesses, instead relying on savings, humanitarian aid, and host community resources in order to survive.

¹⁸ United States Institute of Peace, [Return and Resettlement of Refugees and Internally Displaced Populations](#).

¹⁹ I. Serrano, "Understanding the Dynamics of Return: The Importance of Microfoundations," *Refugee*, Vol. 25, Num.1, 2008

²⁰ This conversion uses the exchange rate in October 2012, when the majority of IDPs are reported to have left Maarrat al Nu'man. Significant inflation of the Syrian pound has taken place since.

For this reason, much of the burden in supporting these households fell on the host community. The local council, in cooperation with religious leaders and charities, formed a committee to coordinate relief efforts. When IDPs were unable to find accommodation in abandoned houses, local families were encouraged to host them. Approximately 50% of IDPs were hosted rent free at some time during their stay in Maarrat al Nu'man. As time went on, the majority of IDP households — approximately three quarters by some estimates — were paying some rent.

OTHER FACTORS

While there appears to be a strong relationship between both perceived security and livelihood conditions to households' decisions, it is also worth outlining the role played by other factors. Although cited less frequently, shelter, access to goods and services, host community relationships, and emotive factors were mentioned by some households but were often ranked as being of secondary or tertiary importance.

Shelter: While a lack of housing and adequate resources to rebuild in Maarrat al Nu'man were cited as factors among those that remained in Kansafra, it is unclear how these may have influenced household decisions. It may be that the homes of these families were damaged more extensively than those of IDPs who returned, but this research was unable to evaluate whether this was the case. Households that remained frequently cited a lack of resources to rebuild, but given the fact that they appeared to have been better off than those who returned, it is unclear how it may have affected households' decisions, particularly in comparison with returnees.

Access to goods and services: Access to goods and services (such as education, healthcare, food, and water) appeared to play a role in some households' decisions, but they were closely tied to livelihoods and served as "push" factors. IDPs who remained in Kansafra expressed reservations about their ability to access goods and services in Maarrat al Nu'man, and IDPs who returned reported having low levels of access while they were displaced.

KIs described an economy of shortages, in which goods and services were available but at high prices. Accordingly, those with adequate livelihoods are likely to have had better access than those without. Water, fuel, non-food items (NFIs) and food, particularly bread, all commanded high prices. Access to healthcare and education, once free, were also not immune

to the impact of market forces. Long-term residents of Kansafra were also not immune to the impact of these shortages and were also forced to pay higher prices to buy goods and access services.

Host community relationships: Increasing tensions between IDPs and residents of Kansafra at the moment of return were apparent only in KI interviews but may have served as a push factor for some IDPs. As highlighted in the multi-sector needs analysis (MSNA), host communities in Syria are willing to assist IDPs, but only for a limited amount of time. Tensions may become particularly acute in areas where fighting is still ongoing, such as in this case.²¹ This was particularly accurate in Kansafra, where the influx of IDPs was a heavy burden for the host community.²² Already vulnerable and the target of violence, residents were called upon to provide additional shelter and food to IDPs. In the wake of the influx, the community faced bakeries with no bread left and supplies of fuel and medicine had been nearly exhausted.²³ While the early intensity of conditions associated with households' initial arrival likely subsided, the long-term effect of shortages and competition for goods and services is likely to have taken a toll on local residents' capacity and attitudes toward hosting.

Emotive factors: KIs emphasized the importance of the emotional factors associated with return, such as homesickness, a desire to reconnect with their communities, and a sense of victory associated with the end of government control, as reasons for returning. Despite the emphasis placed on these factors, individual households cited them as primary, secondary, or even tertiary reasons for returning, with a desire to connect with family and friends or to rebuild being the most frequently mentioned.

CONCLUSION

This case study examined the intentions of two groups of IDPs following a decrease of conflict in their area of origin (Maarrat al Nu'man), and an escalation of violence in their area of displacement (Kansafra). In response to changing dynamics, one group returned to their area of origin, and the other remained in the host community. Through interviews with populations from both groups, this research was able to identify factors that influenced IDP households' decisions.

Both groups initially comprised a single community, drawn primarily from working and middle class households from the same city and fled together in response to violence. While

²¹ OCHA, REACH and SNAP, note 3 *supra*

²² Channel 4, note 14 *supra*

²³ *Ibid.*

sharing certain characteristics initially, conditions households experienced in displacement appear to have provided the impetus for the community to split.

While perceptions of security were emphasised by both groups of households, the community as a whole did not experience the same threats and its role may be limited. Security likely acted as an exogenous shock that made some households re-evaluate the benefits of staying displaced or returning.

Individual households did, however, experience conditions in displacement that made some more vulnerable than others. While limited, data collected in this assessment appears to strongly suggest that individual households' abilities to maintain or secure livelihoods were closely related to their decisions. Put more simply, households that secured jobs remained displaced, while those that did not returned.

The fact that most returnees tended to view their decisions negatively and motivated by a preponderance of "push" factors does not mean that decisions were taken against their will or that the humanitarian principles of safety, voluntariness, or dignity that underlie return and resettlement were violated. However, some underlying elements – the fact that it was at least partially a response to violence and depleted resources – means that this movement shares some features of displacement.

Certainly, access to shelter, goods, services, and relationships established with the host community also appear to have played an important role for IDPs deciding to return or stay. However, these were influenced by livelihoods as well, with households' ability to secure their own house or apartment or pay for goods and services likely to make the conditions of their displacement either sustainable or unsustainable in the long term.

The common factors that influenced this movement are likely present elsewhere. Therefore, the study of this particular case can help understand not only the needs and context of a single community in different displacement patterns, but can also support the analysis of other similar movements.

While humanitarian actors often anticipate that IDP communities will react to shocks collectively, underlying differences amongst households that form and accumulate over time will likely become increasingly important determinants of how communities respond and whether they split or stay together. IDP movements, specifically return, may be increasingly mediated by these factors, with individual households driven by concerns based on their ability to access livelihoods.

Whether this research informs better support for IDPs during displacement, or for their decisions to return, will vary by context. For humanitarian actors, finding ways to ensure that displacement is understood, and even anticipated, and that returns remain safe, voluntary and dignified, is of importance to understand and better assist displaced populations within Syria.

Cover image of Kansafra, February 2015 © REACH

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of two international non-governmental organizations – ACTED and IMPACT Initiatives – and the UN Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT). The REACH initiative seeks to strengthen evidence-based decision making by aid actors through efficient data collection, management and analysis before, during and after an emergency. By doing so, all partners contribute to ensuring that communities affected by emergencies receive the support they need. All activities conducted by REACH are in support of, and within the framework of, inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms.

For more information please visit the website: www.reach-initiative.org browse resources on the Resource Centre: www.reachresourcecentre.info or contact us directly at: geneva@reach-initiative.org