



Syria

Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility

Country of Origin Information Report



April 2020



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It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).¹ The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The first draft of this report was finalised on 12 December 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 12 March 2020. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>.

Glossary and abbreviations

COAR	Centre for Operational Analysis and Research
DGMM	General Directorate for Migration and Management
EIP	European Institute for Peace
HDP	Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (<i>Halkların Demokratik Partisi</i>)
HTS	Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
KRI	Kurdish Region of Iraq
LFIP	Law No 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDMM	Provincial Directorate for Migration Management
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SACD	Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
<i>Sha’bt Tajneed</i>	local military recruitment branch
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
STJ	Syrians for Truth and Justice
<i>Taswiyat al-Wad’</i>	the process of regulating one’s status
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
YPG	Kurdish People’s Protection Unit

Introduction

This report was drafted by a Country of Origin Information (COI) specialist from the Swedish Migration Agency, Country of Origin Information, Section for Information Analysis, as referred to in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

The purpose of this report is to analyse the situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees in Syria and to provide an overview of legal and practical issues relating to access, freedom of movement and internal mobility in Syria. This information is relevant for international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular to inform the EASO country guidance development on Syria.

Methodology

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).³

The drafting of this report was finalised on 12 December 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 12 March 2020.

For the Terms of Reference (ToR) of this report, EASO provided input to the Swedish Section for Information Analysis, based on discussions held with COI experts and senior policy experts from EU+ countries⁴ within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. The Section for Information Analysis defined its ToR taking into account this input.

The ToR can be found in the [annex](#) of this report.

Sources

The report is based on information from UN reports, reports from human rights organisations, academic publications and news articles, relevant when analysing the situation of IDPs and returnees in Syria.

Quality control

In order to ensure that the report respects the EASO COI Report Methodology, a review was carried out by COI specialists from the countries and organisations listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

Structure and use of the report

After a brief background chapter, the report first discusses the situation of IDPs in Syria, the underlying factors and general patterns of displacement, and then focuses on the situation of IDPs in various areas of Syria: rebel-held areas, and several areas in the north.

The next chapter discusses the situation of returnees, the procedures and obstacles for returning. The chapter starts with a general background and the situation of returnees originating from areas

² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

⁴ All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

included in the reconciliation agreements, next it focuses on returnees from neighbouring countries Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. The chapter further discusses the return procedures within Syria, on security clearance, on regulating one's status in post-reconciliation areas, and the issue of military conscription. Finally, the chapter highlights issues of arrests, detentions and violations against returnees, and legal obstacles for returnees.

The fourth chapter highlights the situation of specific groups of IDPs and returnees: women and children. The final chapter focuses on internal mobility and checkpoints in government-controlled and in rebel-held areas.

The report should be read in conjunction with other recent EASO reports on Syria, in particular:

- Syria – Socio-economic situation: Damascus City (February 2020)⁵
- Syria – Situation of women (February 2020)⁶
- Syria – Exercise of authority in recaptured areas (January 2020)⁷
- Syria – Targeting of individuals (March 2020)⁸

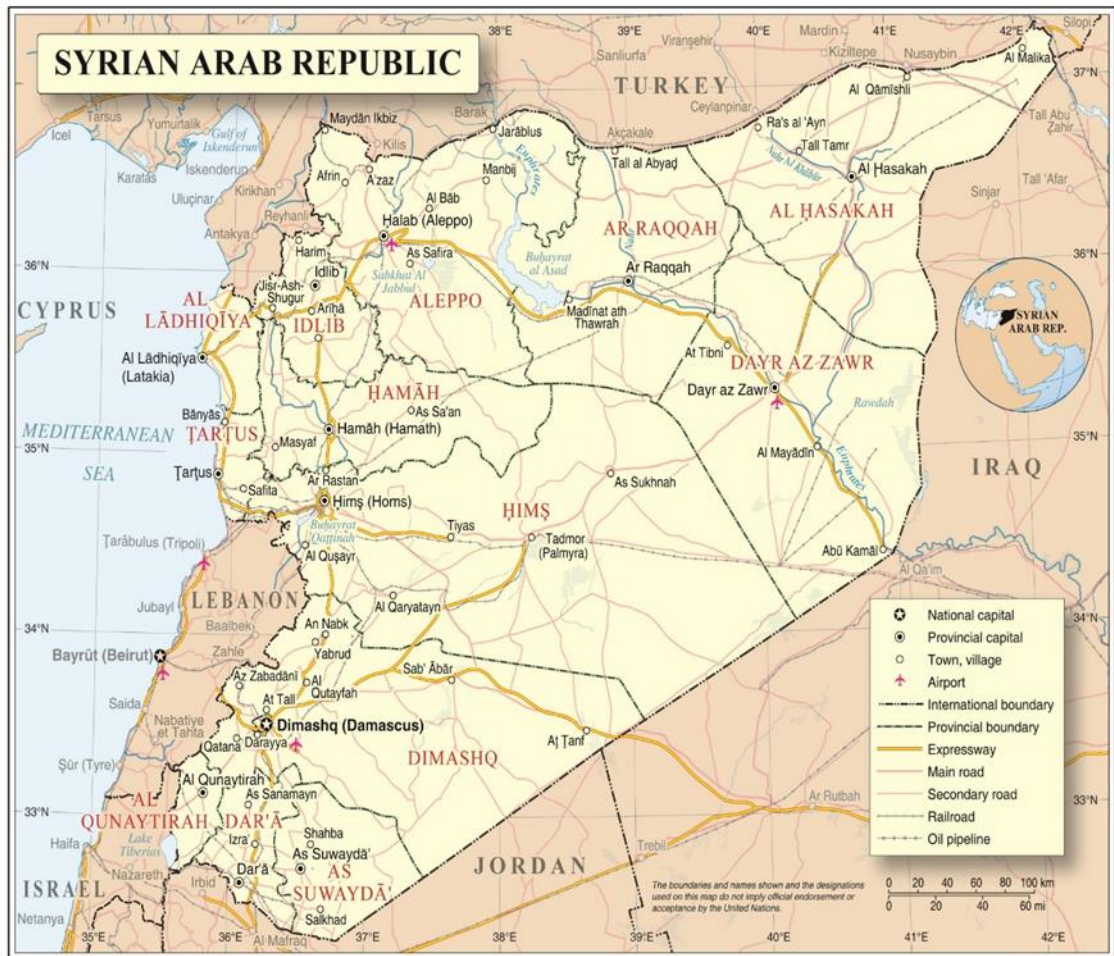
⁵ EASO, COI Report Syria: Socioeconomic situation in Damascus city, February 2020, [url](#)

⁶ EASO, COI Report Syria: Situation of women, February 2020, [url](#)

⁷ EASO, COI Report, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#)

⁸ EASO, COI Report, Syria: Targeting of individuals, March 2020, [url](#)

Map



Map 1: Syria, © United Nations⁹

⁹ Syria, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

1. Background

As the Syrian conflict entered its ninth year, the Assad government seems to have, as some observers¹⁰ put it, emerged triumphant. Following the Russian intervention in 2015, the rebel opposition lost major territorial holdings, as did the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (hereafter ISIL), which was dealt its last blow in Baghouz in March 2019. Accordingly, Assad now retains control, at the time of writing, over two thirds of the country.¹¹ Three areas remain outside government control; Al-Tanf, bordering to Iraq and Jordan, controlled by US forces and allied militias¹², the north-western border area to Turkey including Idlib, controlled by Turkish military and allied rebel forces¹³, and the north-eastern part of the country, controlled by the Kurdish SDF allied coalition, prior to the Turkish incursion in October 2019.¹⁴

The situation in Syria remains volatile, despite a decrease in hostilities following the Assad government's takeover of earlier rebel-held areas. The root causes that gave way for the uprising remain in place, if not worse, according to the Syria analyst Aron Lund.¹⁵ The country remains under pressure as a result of international sanctions. Large parts of the country's industrial base lie in ruins and the state lacks the funds and resources to rebuild the country.¹⁶ The Syrian pound continues to plummet. The pound lost more than 8 % of its value in November 2019 alone. The fall is mainly attributed to the economic crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, which remains Syria's only entry point to the global market, as well as Syria's access to foreign capital.¹⁷

The brain drain from the country has also been severe. Poverty rates have surged and millions of Syrians depend on humanitarian aid, as well as remittance from the equal number of millions living abroad sending back money to relatives at home.¹⁸

The civilian population is carrying the brunt of the hostilities. As many rural areas and suburbs fell under rebel control in 2012 these areas became the scene of intense fighting¹⁹ which prompted millions to leave their homes in pursuit of safety, within, as well as outside, Syria's borders. Aron Lund, in his report on the Syrian civil war (December 2018) maintained that approximately 73 % of the Syrian population live in areas under governmental control.²⁰ The Independent International Commission of the Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic estimated in its report from August 2019 that the conflict has led to approximately 13 million civilians having fled their homes, including 6.7 million refugees outside the country²¹, and the 6.1 million people who continue to live in protracted displacement inside Syria, as of August 2019.²²

¹⁰ Guardian (The), Syria: Assad has decisively won his brutal battle, 30 December 2018, [url](#); National Interest (The), Assad has won and America must go, 17 September 2018, [url](#); National (The), As the Syrian war nears its end, a tense new struggle is materializing, 13 September 2018, [url](#)

¹¹ Foreign Policy, Assad has not won anything, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

¹² EASO, Syria: Security Situation, November 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹³ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁴ Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), Turkey's Syria Incursion: What spurred it, and what's next, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 23; Foreign Policy, Assad has not won anything, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁷ COAR, Syria Update, 13-19 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁹ EASO, Syria: Security Situation, November 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²⁰ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 23

²¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 76

²² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, IDP tracking, August 2019, [url](#)

The unfolding events following the Turkish invasion along the border areas in northern Syria in October 2019²³ resulted into further displacement of over 200 000 civilians. The deteriorating security and humanitarian situation spilled over into the Kurdish Region of Iraq (hereafter KRI) and prompted 19 497 persons (as of 15 January 2020), to cross the border since the operation began.²⁴

In 2019, the Syrian government escalated the military operations in the Idlib area against rebel groups which continued through the first two months of 2020.²⁵ Ongoing hostilities in southern Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates generated over 200 000 IDP movements each in the months of May and December 2019.²⁶ By December 2019, the Syrian government's military offensive intensified which in turn has attracted an increased military involvement from Turkey in Idlib on the side of anti-government armed groups.²⁷ The conflict led to a humanitarian crisis in Idlib which the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator described as having the potential to become the 'biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century'.²⁸

²³ Guardian (The), Turkey unleashes airstrikes against Kurds in north-east Syria, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Displacement Movements from Syria, Weekly update #12: 9-15 January 2020, n.d., [url](#)

²⁵ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

²⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, May 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, December 2019, [url](#)

²⁷ USIP, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Syrian Regime Intensifies Idlib Offensive, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

2. Situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

2.1 The underlying factors behind displacement resulting from the civil war

The peaceful demonstrations that began in the southern city of Dar'a in 2011 turned violent after the Syrian military laid siege to the city to quell the protestors, thereby transforming the civilian uprising into an armed conflict. This subsequently developed into the opening of other fronts between government forces and large numbers of armed groups, as well as terrorist organisations such as ISIL. Hostilities and violations perpetrated against the civilian population forced millions to flee within and beyond the borders of Syria. The offensive to retake eastern Aleppo in 2016 resulted in the displacement of nearly 160 000 persons, leaving the city in ruins. The diminishing areas of safety and the targeting of civilian infrastructure, such as schools and healthcare facilities, forced many into displacement on several occasions (so-called multiple displacement).²⁹

The negotiations of cessation of hostilities, brokered by the United States and Russia in February and September 2016³⁰ brought about a temporary truce, and a subsequent decline in displacement.³¹ Soon after the agreement, fighting broke out again in the affected areas, generating new movements of displacement.³²

The de-escalation-zones³³ negotiated between Russia, Iran and Turkey in 2017, with the aim to bring down intense hostilities, were expected to reduce violence in non-government-controlled areas of Idlib, and Dar'a provinces as well as Eastern Ghouta and Homs enclaves. However, renewed government offensives on the de-escalation zones led to new waves of displacement instead.³⁴ Starting from the beginning of 2018, three out of the four de-escalation zones have been retaken by GoS forces.³⁵ The last remaining de-escalation zone covering Idlib governorate and parts of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama governorates is subject to an ongoing GoS military offensive.³⁶ In February 2020 it was estimated that around 900 000 people, the majority women and children, have been displaced since December 2019 by the hostilities in the Idlib area.³⁷

²⁹ IDMC, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

³⁰ New York Times (The), Russia and the United States reach new agreement on Syria conflict, 9 September 2016, [url](#)

³¹ IDMC, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

³² BBC News, Syria War: Aleppo ceasefire ends with clashes, 22 October 2016, Syria War: Aleppo ceasefire ends with clashes, 22 October 2016, [url](#)

³³ The de-escalation zone consisted of four ceasefire areas set up in Syria as a result of the Astana talks between Russia, Iran and Turkey in May 2017. The purpose of the zones was to bring an end to intensive fighting between the Syrian government and armed rebel groups in western and southern Syria. The zones included greater Idlib area, the Rastan pocket in Homs governorate, Eastern Ghouta (including Rural Damascus), and rebel held areas in southern Syria (parts of Dara'a and Quinetra governorates). Three of the four areas were able to reach as ceasefire through Russian intervention, leaving only one zone, Idlib, which remains a stronghold for hardline rebel fighters who refused to lay down their weapons when the Assad government retook control of in western and southern Syria. See: Aljazeera, Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#); Middle East Institute, Moscow faces new challenges in Idlib "de-escalation zone", 27 November 2017, [url](#)

³⁴ IDMC, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

³⁵ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

³⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 3, 6-8

³⁷ UN News, UN chief appeals for end to Syria's 'man-made humanitarian nightmare', 21 February 2020, [url](#)

The government offensive in Deir Ez-Zor in September 2017³⁸, against ISIL, triggered further displacement.³⁹ The US-backed Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) offensive on ISIL's proclaimed capital, Raqqa, in October 2017, caused almost the city's entire population⁴⁰ (220 000 according to IDMC), as well as an additional 250 000 persons across the governorate, to flee their homes.⁴¹ In the beginning of 2019, large-scale operations carried out by the SDF with US-led coalition support against remaining ISIL-controlled territory in Deir Ez-Zor governorate led to waves of displacements from these areas, 'in which tens of thousands of fleeing civilians were taken to makeshift settlements, including Al-Hol camp, straining the already severely overstretched humanitarian resources'.⁴²

In October 2019, Turkish forces supported by a coalition of anti-government armed groups launched a military offensive in north-east Syria against Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces-controlled areas, capturing the area between the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain.⁴³ The offensive led to the displacement of almost 200 000 persons.⁴⁴

2.2 General patterns of displacement

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (hereafter UNOCHA), some 6.1 million people continue to live in protracted displacement inside Syria.⁴⁵ The majority of the IDPs, around 3.5 million, are located in areas controlled by the Government of Syria. Approximately 30 % of the IDP population, around 1.88 million, are located in north-west Syria, while another 460 000 IDPs are living in the Kurdish-controlled areas (prior to the Turkish operation).⁴⁶

Subsequent shifts in the security situation generate repeated, multiple, displacements, as IDPs leave their place of displacement to return home, only to flee again when hostilities resume, or keep moving onwards as hostilities unfold.⁴⁷ In 2018, around 1.6 million population movements were recorded, including multiple displacements for many families.⁴⁸ The number of IDP movements recorded between January and November 2019 has reached around 1.5 million.

According to UNOCHA's update (25 February 2020) regarding IDP movement, Idlib province recorded the largest number of IDP movements (total 1 579 032 individuals). This is followed by Aleppo (total 224 836 individuals), Hama (total 194 075 individuals) and Deir Ez-Zor (total 105 956 individuals).⁴⁹

IDPs face particular hardship, including restriction in freedom of movement through encampment policies, or due to perceived affiliation to terrorist groups, for example ISIL.⁵⁰ Humanitarian access remains a challenge in many parts of Syria, due to ongoing hostilities, presence of explosive remnants, interference in humanitarian activities and administration regulations imposed by the Syrian

³⁸ Rudaw, Updated: US-backed SDF launches offensive in Syria's Deir ez-Zor, 9 September 2017, [url](#)

³⁹ REACH Initiative, Syria- Deir ez Zor Offensive: Overview of displacement patterns, dynamics and intentions as conflict escalates, 28 September 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Aljazeera, What will happen to post-ISIL Raqqa?, 17 October 2017, [url](#)

⁴¹ IDMC, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁴² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), Summary

⁴³ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁵ The latest UNOCHA figures available on the IDP stock are as of July 2019. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements, as of January 2020, last update: 25 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response plan, Monitoring Report, January-May 2019, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

⁴⁷ IDMC, Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁴⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response plan, Monitoring Report, January-May 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements, as of January 2020, last update: 25 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response plan, Monitoring Report, January-May 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 8

government and also non-state actors, currently in control of areas outside the domain of the Syrian authorities, for example northern Syria.⁵¹

2.3 Internally displaced persons in former rebel-held areas

The humanitarian situation in areas retaken by the government remains challenging. One such challenge is the ability of humanitarian organisations to provide assistance to those affected by the hostilities in these areas. The Syrian government has imposed restrictions regarding the work of humanitarian organisations. The government restricted access to UN humanitarian aid agencies across Syria⁵², granted selective approval of humanitarian projects, and required humanitarian actors to partner with security-vetted local actors. These obstacles hamper humanitarian assistance from reaching the neediest segments of the population, one of which is composed of IDPs. In addition, humanitarian organisations have very limited leverage to negotiate with the government.⁵³

UNICEF's situation report, covering the period January - August 2019, maintained that the situation remained dire in southern Syria, where over 970 000 persons, located in Sweida, Dar'a and Quneitra provinces were reportedly in need of humanitarian assistance. These areas suffer from high density of displacement and return where local communities are overburdened, suffering from poor service conditions.⁵⁴

2.4 Internally displaced in northern Syria

2.4.1 North-west Syria-Idlib province

In north-western Syria the security situation continues to deteriorate as civilians face intense violence resulting from continuous ground shelling and airstrikes.⁵⁵

Around three million civilians are reportedly trapped in Syria's remaining opposition stronghold of Idlib.⁵⁶ Almost half of that population were previously displaced from earlier rebel-held areas⁵⁷, reclaimed by the Syrian government in past years, such as Aleppo and Ghouta.⁵⁸ According to a report⁵⁹ from September 2019 published by Refugees International on the situation in Idlib, two thirds of the population of Idlib is in need of humanitarian assistance.⁶⁰

In February 2019, Syria and Russia announced a campaign to reclaim the country's last opposition stronghold in Idlib, as well as securing the major routes (the M4 and M5) linking Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia through Idlib.⁶¹ Hostilities escalated in April 2019 between the Syrian armed forces and opposition armed groups⁶², resulting in the displacement of nearly 600 000 persons. Large numbers of the displaced are sheltered in the northern districts of Idlib governorate, along the Turkish border, which remains closed.⁶³ Many of the displaced are currently residing in host communities that are

⁵¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response plan, Monitoring Report, January-May 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁵² AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵³ HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁴ UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Results, August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵ UN News, Hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk in Syria amid ongoing violence in northeast and northwest, 8 November 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶ New Humanitarian (The), Civilians see no future in Idlib as Syrian forces tighten grip, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷ Refugees International, Losing Their Last Refuge, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁸ Guardian (The), Three million caught in crossfire as Assad vows to capture every inch of Syria, 24 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹ Refugees International, Losing Their Last Refuge, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶⁰ Refugees International, Losing Their Last Refuge, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶¹ Refugees International, Losing Their Last Refuge, September 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁶² DW, Syria Idlib caught between hell and a hard place, 30 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶³ UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Results, August 2019, [url](#)

dependent on humanitarian assistance for their most basic needs. Some of the displaced have found temporary shelter in unfinished buildings or collective sites, such as schools and mosques.⁶⁴

Ongoing hostilities in southern Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates generated over 200 000 IDP movements each in the months of May and December 2019.⁶⁵ In February 2020, it was estimated that around 900 000 people, the majority women and children, have been displaced since December 2019 by the hostilities in the Idlib area.⁶⁶

Tens of makeshift encampments are spread along the Idlib countryside, out of reach for relief organisations, forcing the displaced population to fend for themselves. Living conditions are reportedly harsh and the absence of humanitarian relief is proving unsustainable for the displaced population.⁶⁷ Settlements for IDPs were reportedly being hit by attacks, resulting in civilian injuries, deaths and further displacement. Insufficient camps lead IDPs to sleep outside in freezing temperatures, with children dying because of the cold.⁶⁸

Entire towns and villages have been reportedly razed to the ground⁶⁹ and emptied of communities.⁷⁰ Some humanitarian actors suspended their operations in southern Idlib due to insecurity.⁷¹

Recent influx to host communities puts immense pressure on existing water supplies, and the access to sanitation and hygiene facilities.⁷² UNOCHA reported in its situation report on north-west Syria, as of 15 January 2020, a continued need to increase water supplies and WASH-services (i.e. water, sanitation and hygiene services) in order to prevent hygiene-related diseases.⁷³

Medical facilities continue to be targeted as a result of the military escalation. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that 61 medical facilities were damaged since hostilities broke out in April 2019. Some of the facilities were reportedly hit on multiple occasions.⁷⁴ In a press release by Amnesty International (AI) on 17 May 2019, the organisation stated that the Syrian government, aided by Russia, was carrying out systematic and deliberate attacks on hospitals and medical facilities. AI further added that staff from four hospitals in Idlib and Hama were targeted despite sharing their coordinates with the Syrian and Russian governments.⁷⁵

The concentration of IDPs has triggered tensions between different groups, who are more or less confined within the boundaries of Idlib province, with nowhere to go. Communal tensions between old and new groups of IDPs grow as they compete over the limited resources made available to them. Similar resentment is growing amongst the local residents against the IDP population. In addition, the IDP population has caused profound change to the social fabric of the local communities in Idlib province.⁷⁶

In March 2020, a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey was agreed in the Idlib area, whereby a security corridor stretching 6 kilometres to the north and 6 kilometres to the south of the M4 highway

⁶⁴ Refugees International, *Losing Their Last Refuge*, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11

⁶⁵ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements*, May 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements*, December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶ UN News, *UN chief appeals for end to Syria's 'man-made humanitarian nightmare'*, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁷ SOHR, *Tens of informal camps in Idlib countryside are outside the scope of relief organization*, 18 November 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸ UNOCHA, *Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria*, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁹ UNOCHA, *Growing Humanitarian Concerns in North-west*, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁷⁰ International Crisis Group, *The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria's Last Rebel Bastion*, 6 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁷¹ UNOCHA, *Growing Humanitarian Concerns in North-west*, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷² Refugees International, *Losing Their Last Refuge*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁷³ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria: Situation Report No. 6-as of 15 January 2020*, [url](#), pp. 5-6

⁷⁴ UN News, *Hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk in Syria amid ongoing violence in northeast and northwest*, 8 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵ AI, *Syria: at least 15 hospitals targeted in Idlib and Hama since beginning of May*, 17 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶ Refugees International, *Losing Their Last Refuge*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 16

was established, where joint Russian and Turkish patrols would be carried out.⁷⁷ The agreement does not have any provisions on a potential safe zone for IDPs.⁷⁸

2.4.2 North-east Syria

Over two million live in this region, where 1.3 million are reportedly in need of humanitarian assistance. These include 700 000 internally displaced, prior to the Turkish offensive, of which 130 000 are living in 12 camps, or informal settlements. The overall majority of the displaced are living in host communities and shelters in al-Hasakah, Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor province.⁷⁹

The situation of IDPs following the Turkish offensive

The Turkish Operation Peace Spring in north-east Syria on 9 October 2019⁸⁰ triggered a new wave of displacement, whereby over 200 000 persons fled their homes. As of 12 November 2019, 74 381 persons remain in displacement.⁸¹

Despite various ceasefires brokered in conjunction to the Turkish offensive, sporadic fighting continues in various areas. However, recent hostilities do not appear to have triggered new flows of IDPs. Nevertheless, the humanitarian situation following the offensive is dire, and many communities are struggling to provide services for the IDPs, in terms of food items, as well as non-food items, including fuel. Health facilities are under pressure, due to lack of staff and resource shortages. The city of al-Hasakah is particularly affected, and the local authorities have reported that it cannot absorb more numbers of IDPs.⁸²

The Turkish operation caused international humanitarian actors to evacuate.⁸³ Only a few international relief workers have returned. UNHCR continues to work from Qamishli, providing emergency items and community-based protection in camps, collective shelters and host communities.⁸⁴ Local relief workers working for international humanitarian organisation have fled because they are concerned that they may be targeted as a result of the return of the Syrian government to the region. Local organisations and civil society groups have stepped up their efforts to provide relief. However, their resources are limited.⁸⁵

The Kurdish self-administration launched a number of internet-based campaigns for the boycott of Turkish goods, in retaliation for the Turkish incursion. As a result, market conditions have worsened. The north-east depends heavily on Turkish goods, which are not only cheaper than commodities produced in government-controlled areas, but also higher in quality. The closure of the border crossings of Semalka (linking Syria with the Kurdish Region in Iraq) and the al-Aoun in Menbij (linking SDF-held territories to north-west Syria), two vital consumer lifelines, are likely to cause serious food shortages (such as flour), but also cause further increase in prices.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Aljazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸ BBC, Syria war: Idlib ceasefire between Russia and Turkey begins, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁹ Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰ On 9 October 2019, Turkey launched an offensive, code-named Operation Peace Spring, into northeast Syria aimed to push back the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from the border area, and also to secure a “safe zone” along the Syrian border where up to two million Syrian refugees, residing in Turkey, can be returned (BBC News, Turkey-Syria offensive. Erdogan vows to press on with ‘safe zone’, 16 October 2019, [url](#)). The SDF are led by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers as a terrorist organisation. CNN, Turkey launches military offensive in Syria, days after Trump announced pullback of US troops, 10 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: North east Syria displacement, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁸² Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁸³ Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁴ UNHCR, Syria Situation Report for the North East Syria Humanitarian Emergency, 16 October 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁸⁵ Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁶ COAR, Syria Update, 13-19 November 2019, [url](#)

Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Turkish Operation Peace Spring sparked a mass exodus of civilians towards the KRI. Approximately 19 500 refugees have as of mid-January 2020, arrived in the KRI.⁸⁷ The overall majority of the Syrian refugees are hosted in three major camps within Dohuk province: Domiz, Bardash and Gawilan.⁸⁸ The majority of the refugees come from the provinces of al-Hasakah (58 %), Aleppo (32 %) and Raqqa (10 %). Those fleeing from al-Hasakah province mainly originate from al-Hasakah centre (13 %) and Qamishli centre (17 %), whilst those fleeing from Aleppo province mainly originate from Ain al-Arab (Kobani) (23 %).⁸⁹

Refugees arriving to the KRI reported to have been prevented by the SDF from leaving Syria, thereby forcing them to seek illegal means by paying smugglers, around USD 500⁹⁰ to 700⁹¹, to cross into the KRI.⁹²

Refugees arriving to KRI consist of a large number of young men who fear conscription into the SDF, or alternatively the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). This comes amid the recent agreement reached between the SDF and the Syrian government, allowing the Syrian army access to the Kurdish territories, in exchange for protection from the Turkish forces.⁹³ Other refugees fear retribution and abuse by Turkish-backed militias, similar to those committed by the same forces in Afrin in 2018.⁹⁴

Although the flow of refugees entering the KRI has abated, Syrian refugees continue to trickle into Iraq in search of a safe haven.⁹⁵ Kurdish officials have expressed concerns that the numbers of arrivals from Syria could reach 250 000.⁹⁶

⁸⁷ IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Displacement Movements from Syria, Weekly update #12: 9-15 January 2020, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁸ IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Displacement Movements from Syria, Weekly update #12: 9-15 January 2020, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁹ IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Displacement Movements from Syria, Weekly update #12: 9-15 January 2020, n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁰ Reuters, Displaced by war, Kurdish families stuck at Syria-Iraq border point, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹ Middle East Eye, Turned away at the Iraqi border, displaced Syrians resort to smugglers, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹² Reuters, Displaced by war, Kurdish families stuck at Syria-Iraq border point, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹³ Middle East Eye, Turned away at the Iraqi border, displaced Syrians resort to smugglers, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁴ Rudaw, Syrian Refugees resort to smugglers to enter Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁵ Drafter's comment, see also IOM's Daily update of the Data Tracking Matrix regarding Displacement Movements from Syria, [url](#); Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish Invasion of Northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁶ Refugees International, Displacement and Despair: The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 12 November 2019, [url](#)

3. Situation of returnees

3.1 Background

The Syrian civil war has gradually fragmented the country, politically, socially and geographically. Given the Syrian forces' territorial gains over the past years, the government is trying to foster the image of stability⁹⁷ and is now calling on refugees to return.⁹⁸ This contravenes the Syrian government's earlier approach on return, which perceived the mass exodus as a means of gaining a more homogenous society and ensuring subservience from the civilian population.⁹⁹ Members of the Syrian armed forces previously threatened refugees and IDPs contemplating return to their areas of origin.¹⁰⁰

UNOCHA's Humanitarian response reported over 460 000 spontaneous IDP returns, between January and November 2019.¹⁰¹ The same source recorded the highest number of IDP spontaneous return, as of November 2019, to the province of Dar'a (total 87 274 individuals), the majority of which (total 85 807 individuals) were previously displaced within the province. The second highest number of spontaneous returns is recorded to Idlib province (total 85 807 individuals). Other provinces recording high numbers of return are reported to Deir Ez-Zor (total 58 570 individuals), followed by Aleppo (total 52 955 individuals), al-Hasakah (total 41 783 individuals) and Rural Damascus (total 41 267 individuals).¹⁰²

According to authors Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, cited in Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, the Syrian government's policy of besiegement over the past years is also a significant driver that contributed to the levels of displacement, through the evacuation of rebel armed groups. In some areas, government sieges and bombardment led to high death rates, while in other areas the sieges resulted in large numbers of displacement.¹⁰³ According to the Clingendael Institute, the policy benefited the government by 'neutralising' any perceived dissent in former opposition strongholds. Similar strategic considerations are being applied to the government's return policy in retaken areas that fall under the so-called 'reconciliation agreements' (see [3.2.1](#)), in which the government has made few active efforts to return refugees or IDPs to their places of origin.¹⁰⁴

Notwithstanding the Assad government's earlier position on return, the matter is controversial as it is complex, and has according to the Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD) frequently received less attention in the political forums concerning the conflict in Syria, ranging from the UN-sponsored Geneva talks to the Astana talks.¹⁰⁵ The government's new approach to return has subsequently

⁹⁷ Clingendael, Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime Controls Refugee Return, September 2018, [url](#), p. 2

⁹⁸ NBC News, Syrian Government calls on refugees to return home, 4 July 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁹ Clingendael, Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime Controls Refugee Return, September 2018, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰⁰ DW, "شبيغل": أحد أبرز ضباط الأسد يهدد اللاجئين الراغبين بالعودة, [Shabighil: Assad's high ranking officer threatens refugees wanting to return], 11 September 2017, [url](#); Clingendael, Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime controls refugee return, September 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Return, as of November 2019, update: 23 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Return, as of November 2019, update: 23 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³ Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime Controls Refugee Return, September 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁴ Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime Controls Refugee Return, September 2018, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁰⁵ SACD, Between Hammer and Anvil: Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Assad-held Areas, n.d. [October 2019], [url](#), p. 3

brought the issue to the forefront. Neighbouring countries such as Lebanon¹⁰⁶ and Turkey¹⁰⁷ have also increased pressure on Syrian refugees to return. Economic and political challenges facing both countries are additional push factors to return refugees to Syria¹⁰⁸ (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2). The Turkish military offensive in October 2019, Operation Peace Spring¹⁰⁹, was partly aimed to establish a safe zone in which up to two million Syrian refugees in Turkey could be returned.¹¹⁰ Noteworthy, the majority of Turkey's 3.6 million Syrian refugees are Sunni Arabs, originating from areas outside the Kurdish-dominated areas of the north-east. A population movement of this magnitude is feared to have an altering effect on the demographic balance in the area.¹¹¹

Some of the challenges for displaced persons seeking to return include: lack of state guarantees, to both individuals and communities; lack of adequate procedural information; as well as imposed restrictions from the Syrian government on international agencies carrying out data collection and monitoring of returnees.¹¹²

A study conducted by SACD¹¹³ documenting the security situation of returnees and others living in areas covered by the 'reconciliation agreements' concluded that nearly 60 % of the interviewees reported that they were considering leaving 'the regime-held areas they are currently in'. Most of the interviewees attributed their motives to leave to lack of decent livelihood, as well as lack of security, fear of arrest and the risk of conscription.¹¹⁴

The following two sections examine the situation of returnees to areas under the so-called reconciliation agreements and the return of Syrian refugees from neighbouring countries, that is, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

3.2 The situation of returnees from areas included in the reconciliation agreements

3.2.1 The reconciliation agreements - an overview

The popular uprising that broke out in 2011 soon morphed into an armed conflict which left the Syrian government in control of 25 % of Syrian territory in 2015.¹¹⁵ At the time, the government's territorial losses had included Idlib, eastern Homs, and Dar'a in south, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor¹¹⁶, as well as the vital south-western suburbs of Damascus.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁶ AP, In Lebanon, Syrian refugees face new pressure to go home, 20 June 2019, [url](#); Foreign Policy, Time is running out for Syrians in Lebanon, 14 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷ BBC News, Turkey-Syria offensive: Erdogan vows to press with 'safe zone' plan, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸ AP, In Lebanon, Syrian refugees face new pressure to go home, 20 June 2019, [url](#); Foreign Policy, Time is running out for Syrians in Lebanon, 14 August 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Turkey-Syria offensive: Erdogan vows to press with 'safe zone' plan, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ New Arab (The), What is next after Operation Peace Spring?, 15 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Reuters, Turkey's plan to settle refugees in northeast Syria alarms allies, 8 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹ Aljazeera, Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria, 22 October 2019, [url](#); New Arab (The), What is next after Operation Peace Spring?, 15 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹² EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹¹³ The study is based on research conducted by the Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD) based on testimonies from people who have returned to government-held areas and those who remained in formerly opposition controlled areas after they were retaken by Syrian government forces. SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's promise to displaced people, n.d. [October 2019], [url](#)

¹¹⁴ SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's promise to displaced people, n.d. [October 2019], [url](#), pp. 32-33

¹¹⁵ Time, These 5 facts explain Bashar Assad's hold in Syria, 22 September 2015, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ Guardian (The), String of losses in Syria leaves Assad regime increasingly precarious, June 2015, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ Reuters, Syrian rebels fight to break blockade of Damascus suburbs, 24 September 2013, [url](#)

Despite ongoing military escalations and sieges, local negotiations were brokered between the Syrian government and opposition representatives since the early stages of the conflict. Some of the talks led to local ceasefires, but were often broken whenever one of the sides felt strong enough to launch an offensive.¹¹⁸ The first of these ceasefires were reached in Braze¹¹⁹, northern Damascus¹²⁰, shortly followed by a ceasefire in the Old City of Homs in February 2014.¹²¹ The Russian intervention in 2015, was the game changer that tilted the military balance in favour of the Assad government, hence, bringing about significant changes in negotiations dynamics that led to conclusive local agreements. These agreements came to be known as Reconciliation Agreements.¹²² The evacuation of the rebel-held community of Daraya in August 2016, was the first reconciliation agreement used by the Syrian government to recapture rebel-held territories.¹²³ In September 2015, the Russian air force alongside Syrian and Iranian-backed forces on the ground, started to launch attacks on rebel-held areas across the country. In July 2016, government forces encircled the rebel-held eastern part of Aleppo.¹²⁴ After a protracted siege on the city, rebel forces negotiated a deal - brokered by Russia and Turkey - in December 2016¹²⁵, agreeing to surrender and subsequently evacuate alongside civilians to rebel-controlled areas in Idlib province.¹²⁶ Similar agreements were reached as rebel-held areas fell, often after sieges that forced rebels to surrender.¹²⁷ A common characteristic for the areas brokered through reconciliation agreements is that they all were besieged at some point in time during the conflict, some for years, before an agreement was eventually reached. The situation for the besieged areas vary from one place to another, and as well in duration.¹²⁸ The primary aim of the agreements is to subsume both the population and territories into the state, according to the PhD researcher Marika Sosnowski, at the University of Melbourne.¹²⁹ Professor Raymond Hennesbusch and Research Fellow Omar Imady, at the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrew, divide the reconciliation agreements into four categories:

1. Unbalanced agreements, which led to the displacement of the entire population. This was the case in Zabadani, Daraya and Qalamoun.
2. Submissive agreements, which are less punitive, requiring opposition fighters and activists to submit in return for lifting the sieges and restoring services. This was implemented in the cases of Qudsaya, al-Tal, Madaya and al-Hama (Rural Damascus), as well as the suburbs of eastern Damascus, among others. In these areas opposition fighters were incorporated into the local militias. Members of the reconciliation delegations became local leaders with temporary authority.
3. Balanced agreements, where rebels were allowed to maintain control of their areas provided they handed over heavy weaponry, and who subsequently seized all aggression against the government forces. In return, the siege was lifted and the displaced were allowed to return. The Barzeh and Jiroud ceasefires in 2014 fall under this category, as well as Jiroud al-Sananayn in Dar'a.
4. The fourth category of reconciliations were those reached through bargaining, where opposition groups held control over crucial resources for the government, like Wadi Barada that controlled vital water sources, on which the capital Damascus relied for its supply of drinking water. In the town of Masha, rebels held control over gas pipelines, which supplied

¹¹⁸ Adleh, F., Favier, A., Local Reconciliation Agreements, June 2017, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹⁹ Reuters, Damascus ceasefire bring respite but no end to conflict, 14 March 2014, [url](#)

¹²⁰ Reuters, Damascus ceasefire bring respite but no end to conflict, 14 March 2014, [url](#)

¹²¹ Middle East Eye, Besiege, bombard, retake: Reconciliation agreements in Syria, 28 March 2018, [url](#)

¹²² Adleh, F., Favier, A., Local Reconciliation Agreements, June 2017, [url](#), p. 2

¹²³ Middle East Eye, Besiege, bombard, retake: Reconciliation agreements in Syria, 28 March 2018, [url](#),

¹²⁴ EASO, Syria: Security Situation, November 2019, [url](#), p. 13

¹²⁵ New Yorker (The), The battle for Aleppo, Syria's Stalingrad, ends, 13 December 2016, [url](#)

¹²⁶ BBC News, Aleppo Syria Battle: Evacuation of rebel-held east, 15 December 2016, [url](#)

¹²⁷ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 22

¹²⁸ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 13

¹²⁹ Middle East Eye, Besiege, bombard, retake: Reconciliation agreements in Syria, 28 March 2018, [url](#)

power plants in Damascus. The thermal power plant in Aleppo was the bargaining chip between the regime and the rebels during the siege.¹³⁰

More information on the reconciliation agreements in the reclaimed areas can be found in the [EASO COI report Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#).¹³¹

3.2.2 The impact of the reconciliation agreements on return

The situation in the areas under the reconciliation agreements is described in the [EASO COI report Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#), drafted by the Norwegian COI unit Landinfo.¹³²

The areas under the reconciliation agreements, according to the report, are described as follows:

Rural Damascus governorate/Eastern Ghouta

These suburbs cover large areas surrounding Damascus. Most of the areas that were taken by opposition groups were reclaimed in 2018. Many of these areas were severely pressured during the SAA's siege.¹³³

The siege in Daraya went on for long time, before it was reclaimed in 2016. The town was almost entirely depopulated. Many were displaced to neighbouring Muadamiya or Damascus. Others were evacuated to Idlib. Reportedly, segments were allowed to return in the summer of 2018.¹³⁴

Madaya and Zabadani are two affected suburbs that reached an agreement with the Syrian government. The agreement was part of a so-called four-town-agreement that was reached with the towns of Zabadani and Madaya on the one part, and the towns of Fu'a and Kafraya, in Idlib-province on the other part.¹³⁵ According to one source mentioned in the EASO report on the exercise of authority in recaptured areas, drafted by Landinfo, the deal was brokered through Qatari and Iranian mediation, in 2017. Another source in the same report maintains that the deal was signed by Ahrar al-Sham, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Hezbollah. A large segment of the population of Zabadani was displaced to Madaya, while others fled to Lebanon. As of November 2018, according to the head of Zabadani local council, around 4 500 families had returned since. Reportedly, the poor conditions in Lebanon have prompted many to return.¹³⁶

Duma, another contested area in Eastern Ghouta was besieged for a number of years before an agreement could be reached, in April 2018, after the government opened humanitarian corridors, by the SAA and the Russian forces, allowing civilians to leave. The area also suffered heavy bombardment by the governmental forces. The destruction is widespread, but access has improved. Residents and visitors have to acquire permission from the authorities to enter or leave the suburb.¹³⁷

Fleeing civilians were registered and screened by the authorities before they were reverted to centres, established for displaced from Eastern Ghouta.¹³⁸ The European Institute for Peace (EIP) stated in its report on refugee return to Syria that IDP shelters operated as detention centres.¹³⁹ The Middle East Institute reported that the shelters are spread in number of locations across Eastern Ghouta, such as

¹³⁰ Hinnebusch, R., Imady, O., University of St. Andrew, Centre for Syrian Studies, Syria's Reconciliation Agreements, 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-11

¹³¹ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#)

¹³² EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#)

¹³³ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 22

¹³⁴ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 22-23

¹³⁵ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 25

¹³⁶ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 26-27

¹³⁷ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 28

¹³⁸ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 28

¹³⁹ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 28

al-Doier, al-Nashabia, Adra Electricity Center, Adra School and al-Horjaleh (which was later closed). As of January 2019, 40 000 persons were reportedly residing in the shelters.¹⁴⁰

Another area that suffered destruction is the suburb of Yarmouk. The suburb, home to 160 000 UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees, was the scene of heavy fighting in 2012, forcing 140 000 Palestinians and thousands of Syrians to flee. Larger parts of the Yarmouk refugee camp fell under ISIL control in 2015, which forced more Palestinians to flee to neighbouring areas. The suburb was subsequently reclaimed by the Syrian forces in the spring of 2018. Most of Yarmouk suburb stands in ruins today. Between 40 to 60 % of the suburb has been destroyed. According to UNRWA sources Landinfo spoke to in the spring of 2019, around 4 000 Palestinians remained in Yarmouk. Persons wishing access to the area have to acquire permission from the authorities to visit the premises. Visitors are also required to leave their identification cards at the check points when entering, and to retrieve them when leaving.¹⁴¹

Dar'a governorate

Dar'a city had been under opposition control for several years before the SAA launched an offensive on the city in June 2018, hence submitting the city to government control. Russian intervention played a pivotal role in the negotiations, which resulted in the evacuation of 15 000 individuals to Idlib, including 5 000 opposition fighters.¹⁴² International Crisis Group stated in its report-Lessons from the Syrian State's return to the south- that the Syrian government's retake of the south was faster and less destructive. One of the contributing factors to that is attributed to rebel commanders who opted to accept the Russian-mediated surrender deals. The agreement underlined the return of state authority to previously rebel-held areas, and by doing so the rebels would be allowed to keep their light weapons. The rebels were also to undergo a vetting process that would take them off the security agencies' wanted lists.¹⁴³

The EASO report on the exercise of authority in recaptured areas, drafted by Landinfo, also stated that armed rebels were still in control of parts of the city, as of May 2019. Regular Syrian forces and police are as a result of the reconciliation agreements not allowed to enter areas which were controlled by armed opposition groups.¹⁴⁴ Attacks continue to take place even after the government gain control of cities and the province. Mass arrests of previous members of the negotiations' delegations have also been reported.¹⁴⁵

Aleppo governorate

The siege on eastern Aleppo, between July and December 2016, resulted in a Russian brokered agreement with the Ahrar al-Sham, resulting in the evacuation of the fighters and their families.¹⁴⁶ The offensive has left the neighbourhood in ruins. Reconstruction is limited and the overall majority of the population of eastern Aleppo remain displaced in other parts of Aleppo.¹⁴⁷

Homs governorate

The most affected areas within Homs city are al-Wa'ir and Baba Amr. Both areas were heavily targeted by fighting during the conflict, leaving behind heavy devastation. Baba Amr is one of the first areas where the opposition gained control, and where the destruction, as result, has been the hardest.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ Middle East Institute/Etana Syria, *Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta*, May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁴¹ EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 32-33

¹⁴² EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), p. 34

¹⁴³ International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's return to the south*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. i

¹⁴⁴ EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), p. 35

¹⁴⁵ EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), p. 35

¹⁴⁶ Al, *We leave or we die*, 2017, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹⁴⁷ EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁴⁸ EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), p. 39

The area did not undergo an agreement, but instead, rebel forces were asked to withdraw to neighbouring rebel-held areas, allowing the Syrian government to reclaim the territory. Despite devastation, civilians are reported to have returned, in smaller numbers.¹⁴⁹

Al-Wa'ir had undergone several agreements (2014, 2015 and 2016) before a conclusive ceasefire was reached. In February 2017, Syrian forces launched a new offensive, which resulted in an agreement between local representatives and Russian officers. The agreement resulted in the evacuation of 20 000 civilians to Idlib province¹⁵⁰, including 3 700 opposition fighters. Some of the evacuees have reportedly returned, totalling 1 150 individuals. Further reports mentioned in Landinfo's report maintain that 600 individuals returned from Jarablus shortly after evacuation, due to the hard living conditions there. Around 45 000 of al-Wa'ir's 100 000 inhabitants are reported to be living in the town.¹⁵¹

3.3 Return of Syrian refugees

The Syrian conflict has created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.¹⁵² UNHCR has registered a total 5 556 732 Syrian refugees, as of 9 January 2020, who fled to neighbouring countries, which includes Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.¹⁵³

Most refugees in neighbouring countries do not live in camp settings, but are located in urban settings across their countries of refuge, relying on cash-based transfers for their livelihood.¹⁵⁴

The Syrian government's consolidated control over larger areas of Syrian territory in recent years has also caused pressure in neighbouring countries to return refugees.¹⁵⁵ Neighbouring countries are facing increased domestic pressure for the refugees to return.¹⁵⁶

The international community remains divided on how to tackle the refugee issue, particularly as the fighting decreases. Western countries, including the United States, remain reluctant to the repatriation of refugees, while Russia and Iran are calling for return of refugees.¹⁵⁷

This section examines the situation of Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, and the underlying dynamics in the designated countries, leading to the return of refugees to Syria.

3.3.1 Lebanon

The Syrian refugee crises caused major challenges for the Lebanese government.¹⁵⁸ The country hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrians¹⁵⁹, of which 914 648 are registered with UNHCR.¹⁶⁰ The refugee situation in Lebanon has had significant implications on the country's economic and social stability. In addition, foreign aid to Lebanon continues to drop. In 2018, 18 to 22 % of the required aid was received, subsequently forcing agencies like UNHCR to limit its support to the most vulnerable families.¹⁶¹

¹⁴⁹ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁵⁰ Al, We leave or we die, 2017, [url](#), p. 48

¹⁵¹ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁵² Mercy Corps, Quick Facts: What we need to know about the Syrian crisis, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵³ UNHCR, Operational Portal, Syria Regional Refugee Response, update 9 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ IPS, Syrian crisis enters ninth year with 11 million refugees oversee & 6 million home, 13 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵⁶ Guardian (The), Syria's neighbours press for help to return refugees, April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Middle East Institute, International politics of Syrian refugee return: The case of Lebanon, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ Middle East Institute, International politics of Syrian refugee return: The case of Lebanon, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹ New Humanitarian (The), Syrian deportations leave behind hardship, fear in Lebanon, 17 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ UNHCR, Operational Portal, Syria Regional Refugee Response, Lebanon, updated 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶¹ Middle East Institute, International politics of Syrian refugee return: The case of Lebanon, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

The refugee issue has further divided the country domestically, where pro-Assad coalitions (Hezbollah, and the president's Free Patriotic Movement) support return, as they fear that the continued presence of Syrian refugees is likely to tilt the demographic balance, and that could lead to instability. Anti-Assad parties have opposed forced return, projecting the implications return would have on dissents and conscripts.¹⁶²

In April 2019, Lebanon's Higher Defence Council, an inter-ministerial body in charge of national defence policy, took the decision to deport refugees who entered Lebanon 'illegally' after the date of 24 April 2019.¹⁶³ The decision was implemented on 13 May 2019 by the General Security Directorate.¹⁶⁴ More than 2 700 Syrian refugees were deported between 21 May and 28 August 2019¹⁶⁵, by the General Security Directorate.¹⁶⁶

As anti-refugee sentiments continue to grow, Lebanese authorities have restricted refugees' access to jobs. In June 2019, the Higher Defence Council ordered the destruction of 5 600 structures housing Syrian refugees, deeming them illegal.¹⁶⁷ In 2014, Lebanese authorities imposed an annual fee of USD 200 for refugees wishing to obtain or renew their resident permits. In May 2015, UNHCR suspended the registration of Syrian refugees at the request of the government of Lebanon.¹⁶⁸ In 2017, the Lebanese government took the decision to waive the annual USD 200 fee for refugees that registered with UNHCR prior to 1 January 2015, or obtained their residency at least once in 2015 or 2016. According to Human Rights Watch almost 500 000 people are not registered by UNHCR. The waiver does not, however, include Palestinian refugees from Syria.¹⁶⁹

As of February 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defence stated that over 52 000 Syrian refugees had returned from Lebanon to Syria since July 2018.¹⁷⁰ A similar statement was cited by the head of Lebanon's General Security Directorate, General Abbas Ibrahim, in an article published by Reuters in September 2018. General Ibrahim maintained that the return was coordinated with the Syrian government, whereby list of names were sent to Damascus for approval.¹⁷¹

UNHCR's July/August 2019 update on durable solutions records a total of 9 676 returns by Syrian refugees from Lebanon during 2019. The number of returnees consists of those monitored or verified by UNHCR. The Lebanese General Security Directorate recorded an additional 484 individuals not known to UNHCR. According to the same source, as of June 2019, the numbers of returns from Lebanon recorded by UNHCR between 2016 and up to 2019 reached a total of 40 230.¹⁷²

3.3.2 Turkey

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian Refugees in the region, around 3.6 million as of 19 March 2020.¹⁷³ According to the Directorate General of Migration and Management 63 452 Syrian refugees are living in shelter centres.¹⁷⁴ The rest live in Turkish cities and towns.¹⁷⁵ Around half a

¹⁶² Middle East Institute, International politics of Syrian refugee return: The case of Lebanon, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶³ Aljazeera, Syrian refugees panic as threat of deportation rises in Lebanon, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ Al, Lebanon: Authorities must immediately halt deportations of Syrian refugees, 27 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ New Humanitarian (The), Syrian deportations leave behind hardship, fear in Lebanon, 17 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ Al, Lebanon: Authorities must immediately halt deportations of Syrian refugees, 27 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷ Middle East Eye, Lebanon deported nearly 2,500 Syrian refugees in three months: Amnesty, 27 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ HRW, Lebanon: New Refugee Policy a Step Forward, 14 February 2017, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹ HRW, Lebanon: New Refugee Policy a Step Forward, 14 February 2017, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁷¹ Reuters, Fifty thousand Syrians returned to Syria from Lebanon this year, official, 25 September 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷² UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷³ UNHCR, Operational portal: Turkey, last updated 19 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴ Turkey, Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Statistics: Distribution of Syrian refugees in the scope of temporary protection according to shelter centers, as of 24 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ New York Times (The), What's the future of Syrian refugees in Turkey?, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

million Syrians are registered in Istanbul, however, estimates suggest that twice as many Syrians are actually living in the city.¹⁷⁶

Turkey grants temporary protection for refugees from Syria.¹⁷⁷ According to the European Council of Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)/Asylum Information Database (AIDA) country report on Turkey, Temporary protection is a discretionary measure (stipulated in Article 91 of Law No 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), April 2013) that is deployed in situations induced by mass influx of refugees, and where individual eligibility processes are deemed impractical. The General Directorate for Migration and Management (DGMM), under the Ministry of Interior, is the lead agency responsible for the registration and processing of applications of Syrian nationals wishing to take up residence in Turkey.¹⁷⁸ Registration is carried out by the provincial directorates within the DGMM – known as the Provincial Directorate for Migration Management (PDMM). Prior to registration applicants are screened in a pre-registration interview for exclusion assessment, whereby a security check is carried out within 30-days. Following registration applicants are issued a Temporary Protection Identity Card. Applicants whose claims fall within the criteria of exclusion will not be granted a Temporary Protection Identity Card.¹⁷⁹

However, these policies are not always followed. Instead, as will be shown in this section, indications show growing concern in the shift in the Turkish government's treatment of Syrian refugees over the years. AI stated in its October 2019 report that Syrian refugees are finding it increasingly difficult to register with the authorities.¹⁸⁰ A number of Provincial Directorates (PDMM) have in recent months stopped registering refugees, these according to AI include the provinces of: Antalya, Aydin, Balikesir, Bursa, Canakkale, Edirne, Istanbul, Izmir, Kirklareli, Kocaeli and Mugla.¹⁸¹ The ECRE/AIDA country report on Turkey also stated that the PDMM in provinces like Istanbul, Hatay and Mardin had *de facto* stopped registering and granting documents to newly arriving Syrians, with the exception to vulnerable cases. The report also stated that other areas like Sanliurfa still registered newcomers.¹⁸²

According to AI, Syrians with expired identity cards do not manage to have them renewed by the Turkish authorities. Without valid identity documentation, Syrians refugees are unable to access community services, like healthcare, education or social assistance.¹⁸³

Turkey's economy is struggling and unemployment rates stand at 13 %. Turks in socially and economically impeded areas believe that Syrian refugees are competing for their jobs, and that the government grants Syrian refugees more privileges. A study conducted by Kadir Has University in Istanbul showed that 67.7 % of the participants were 'not content with the presence of Syrian refugees' in Turkey.¹⁸⁴ In June 2019, locals attacked shops and other properties belonging to Syrians in the district of Kucukcekmece in western Istanbul.¹⁸⁵ Similar incidents were reported in Ankara in 2016.¹⁸⁶ In September 2019, shops belonging to Syrian refugees were attacked in Adana, after a Syrian man was falsely accused of sexually assaulting an 11-year-old boy.¹⁸⁷

In July of 2019, Turkish authorities imposed a one-month deadline on unregistered refugees in Istanbul, pushing them to return to their area of registration within Turkey, or face deportation.

¹⁷⁶ BBC News, Syrian migrants in Turkey face deadline to leave Istanbul, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷ ECRE/AIDA, Country Report: Turkey: Introduction to the asylum context in Turkey, updated 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ ECRE/AIDA, Country Report: Turkey: Temporary protection procedure, scope and activation procedure, updated 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹ ECRE/AIDA, Country Report: Turkey: Registration under temporary protection, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸¹ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸² ECRE/ AIDA, Country Report: Turkey: Registration under temporary protection, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸⁴ New York Times (The), What's the future of Syrian refugees in Turkey?, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵ Reuters, 'They want to kill you': Anger at Syrians erupts in Istanbul, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶ Al-Monitor, Syrian Refugees becoming scapegoats for Turkey's troubles, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷ Ahval, A group attacks foreigner's shops in Turkey's Adana over sexual assault rumors, 20 September 2019, [url](#)

Syrians who spoke to the BBC at the time said that many were being deported to Idlib, inside Syria. They further added that they are being forced to sign voluntary return documents that they cannot read or understand.¹⁸⁸ The deadline was later extended until 30 October 2019.¹⁸⁹

Syrian refugees who previously entered on tourist visas were able to legalise their stay by extending their visas in the country. The Syrian opposition media outlet *Zaman al-wasl* cited in an article, published in November 2019, that the Turkish authorities will no longer extend tourist visas for foreigners in the country, as of 1 January 2020. The article further cited that the decision taken by the Turkish authorities further requires all foreign residents wishing to extend their residency to apply for a work permit, or other residence permits.¹⁹⁰

The Syrian refugee issue has also become the focus of political debate in Turkey. Following the municipal elections in March 2019, Syrian refugees have become scapegoats for Turkey's faltering economy, according to media reports.¹⁹¹ President Erdogan's political opponents have criticised him for allowing Syrian refugees to enter the country. One of them is the newly elected mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, who in an interview to Reuters maintained the need to 'create a basis for Syrian migrants to return'.¹⁹² However, Islamist groups have on the other hand criticised Erdogan for his decision to establish a 'safe zone' in Syria to repatriate Syrian Refugees in Turkey.¹⁹³

The proposal for the 'safe zone', which Erdogan announced in parliament in September 2019¹⁹⁴, according to an article published by al-Monitor, includes the resettlement of around 1 million Syrians into 140 villages, with 5 000 inhabitants and 50 districts of 30 000 inhabitants.¹⁹⁵

The issue of the repatriation of Syrian refugees exacerbated following the Turkish incursion into northern Syria in October 2019. According to an article published by al-Monitor on 11 October 2019, experts and human rights groups have warned that Turkey's repatriation plans are in violation with international law and refugee rights. The same article also mentioned that lawmakers from the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP)) expressed concerns on the consequences the repatriation will have on the demographic balance in northern Syria¹⁹⁶, where large segments of Syria's Kurdish and other minority population lives.¹⁹⁷ Refugee expert and president of the Research Centre on Asylum and Migration, Metin Corabatir, maintained in an interview with al-Monitor, that most Syrians will not return voluntarily. He also warned of spill-overs which could cause further instability in the 'safe zone'.¹⁹⁸

On 22 October 2019, Turkey and Russia held talks in Sochi, in conjunction to the Turkish operation in north-east Syria. The parties reached an agreement allowing Turkey to control the area between the Syrian towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. The Memorandum of Understanding which resulted from the talks also includes a joint commitment "to facilitate the return of refugees in a safe and voluntary manner".¹⁹⁹

Turkey's interior minister, Suleyman Soylu, said in 2019 that around 350 000 have voluntarily returned to Syria.²⁰⁰ A research conducted by AI revealed that Turkey is unlawfully deporting refugees to danger

¹⁸⁸ BBC News, Syrian migrants in Turkey face deadline to leave Istanbul, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ Aljazeera, Deadline extended for unregistered Syrians to leave Istanbul, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ Zaman al-Wasl, [حول الإقامة السياحية.. قرار تركي يضيق الخناق على السوريين], concerning tourist residency... Turkish decision tightens the noose on Syrians], 21 November 2019, [url](#) (access 8 December 2019)

¹⁹¹ Al-Monitor, Syrian Refugees becoming scapegoats for Turkey's troubles, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹² Reuters, 'They want to kill you': Anger at Syrians erupts in Istanbul, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³ Al-Monitor, Erdogan plays Syrian refugee card against Europe, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ Hurriyet Daily News, Erdogan calls on politicians to unite for Turkey, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ Al-Monitor, Is Erdogan resettlement plan for Syrians refugees really viable?, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶ Al-Monitor, Is Erdogan resettlement plan for Syrians refugees really viable?, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ New York Times (The), Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them in Syria?, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸ Al-Monitor, Is Erdogan resettlement plan for Syrians refugees really viable?, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁹ Aljazeera, Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria, 22 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁰ Economist (The), Turkey tightens restrictions on Syrian refugees, 5 September 2019, [url](#)

in Syria. The Turkish government denies the statement, maintaining that returns are carried out in a voluntary manner.²⁰¹ Human Rights Watch conducted 12 telephone interviews, as well as two in person, with Syrians who had been deported to Idlib province. The deported Syrians maintained that the police handed them over to the immigration authorities, who held them for various periods (between one hour and 42 days), without charging them, before deporting them. The persons were given various reasons to their detention, like not having protection permits or that their permit had expired. The interviewees stated that they were forced to sign forms, but were not allowed to read them. Some of those interviewed stated that they were slapped or coerced into signing the forms.²⁰²

An article published by the Economist in September 2019, reported that officials acknowledged that refugees deemed a threat to public order or security are regularly forced to choose between returning to Syria or spending a year in a detention centre. The same article also added that the state news agency further reported on the deportation of over 6 000 persons, from a single border crossing in the first six months of 2019.²⁰³

An article published by the Syrian media outlet, *Enab Baladi*, reported on ongoing deportations of Syrians from Bab al Hawa crossing point. According to statistics made available by the crossing point's public relations office on 3 December 2019, over 5 800 persons are believed to have been deported since November 2019. The deportees were mainly persons who had entered Turkey illegally (through smuggling) or did not have documentation in Turkey (i.e. identity cards); a third category of deportees were Syrians who had work but could not obtain a permit to work in the country.²⁰⁴

The Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) stated in its Syria update 20-26 November 2019 that between 40 to 70 Syrians have been deported to northern Syria from Urfa province since 15 November 2019. The deportees were all holders of temporary protection status, but were deported for working without permits in Urfa. The deportees were offered the option of deportation or a one-year imprisonment in Turkey. COAR further cited other returns of Syrians under unclear circumstances from the border crossing of Bab al-Salameh. Approximately 100 Syrians are believed to have returned to Syria on a daily basis during the reporting period, en route to Turkish-held areas in Syria. COAR maintains that the increase in recent deportations indicates that the economic concerns that prompted Istanbul to push back Syrians from the city have now spread to other provinces. The increase in the number of returns is difficult to assess given the lack of reliable data on the actual drivers behind the return, for example voluntary return or coercion from the part of the authorities. However, COAR maintains that the recent deportations from Urfa may serve as an indication of Turkey's willingness to move forward with its plans to return refugees to the 'safe zone' it has set up in Syria.²⁰⁵

Provisions for voluntary return are not included in Turkish law. AI cites the lack of clarity as to whether the authorities engage in 'voluntary return' interviews, assuring refugees free and voluntary consent to return. According to testimonies collected by AI from Syrian refugees, all return documents were disguised as 'voluntary return'. Refugees were either misled or threatened into signing a form saying that they were to be sent to Syria.²⁰⁶ The overall majority of the deportees are men. Family members of the deportees are usually prompted to return to Syria shortly after due to the vulnerability of their situation following the deportation of the main breadwinner. Deportations appear to take place

²⁰¹ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12

²⁰² HRW, Syrians being deported to danger, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³ Economist (The), Turkey tightens restrictions on Syrian refugees, 5 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁴ Enab Baladi, *باب الهوى يعلن عدد المرحّلين من تركيا إلى سوريا*, [Bab al Hawa announces the number of deportees from Turkey to Syria], 8 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁵ COAR, Syria Update, 20 - 26 November 2019, [url](#), section 4

²⁰⁶ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 11, 12

through the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa. One deportee was reported by AI to have been arrested and imprisoned by Islamist groups on the Syrian side of the border.²⁰⁷

UNHCR's July/August 2019 update on durable solutions records a total of 12 017 self-organised returns by Syrian refugees from Turkey as of June 2019. This number of returnees consists of those monitored or verified by UNHCR.²⁰⁸

3.3.3 Jordan

Jordan is, according to UNHCR, one of the countries most affected by the Syria crisis, hosting the second highest share of refugees per capita in the world.²⁰⁹ The country hosts 1.4 million Syrians, of which over 658 000 are registered with UNHCR.²¹⁰ Syrians started arriving to Jordan at the outbreak of the crisis in 2011. Around 84 % of Syrian refugees live in urban settings, and 16 % in three camps; Zaatari, Azraq and Emirati Jordanian camp.²¹¹

In 2014, the Jordanian government imposed restrictions, controlling entry of Syrians into the country.²¹² In June 2016, Jordan closed its borders to Syrian refugees, declaring its northern and north-eastern borders a military zone, following a bomb attack that killed six Jordanian security personnel²¹³ close to the Rukban Camp. The camp situated on the border to Jordan, hosts IDPs who earlier fled from eastern Syrian cities and towns taken over by ISIL in 2014.²¹⁴

According to an article published in al-Monitor in August 2019, an estimate of 11 000 to 24 000 displaced Syrians are also believed to be living in the remote camp of Rukban. Living conditions are reported to be harsh and humanitarian assistance is scarce. The article cited that the last delivery of aid to the camp was in February 2019.²¹⁵ Camp residents wishing to return to their place of origin are sent to government-run shelters where they risk forced disappearances and other violations. Reportedly, returnees to Homs have faced prolonged stays in government-run shelters in Homs, undergoing security clearance before they were allowed to resume residency in their place of origin.²¹⁶

However, despite security restrictions following the Rukban crisis, Jordanian and Syrian authorities agreed to open the Nassib border crossing in October 2018, primarily to restore trade. The strategic border crossing is a transit route for goods transported between Turkey, Lebanon and the Gulf States, and therefore a crucial source of revenue for both Syria and Jordan prior to 2011.²¹⁷

UNHCR's July/August 2019 update on durable solutions estimated the numbers of self-organised returns by Syrian refugees from Jordan during 2019 to a total of 16 037, which is the highest recorded since 2016.²¹⁸

Despite the rising figures in return, and efforts undertaken by the Jordanian authorities to encourage Syrians to return, many remain reluctant to return to Syria, fearing for their well-being, citing government arrests carried out against earlier returnees, including destruction of property,

²⁰⁷ AI, Sent to a War Zone: Turkey's illegal deportations of Syrian refugees, 25 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 14

²⁰⁸ UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹ UNHCR, Fact Sheet: Jordan, May 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰ UNHCR, Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report, Universal Periodic Review: 3rd Cycle, 31st Session, n.d., [url](#), p. 1

²¹¹ UNHCR, Fact Sheet: Jordan, May 2019, [url](#)

²¹² UNHCR, Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report, Universal Periodic Review: 3rd Cycle, 31st Session, n.d., [url](#), p. 1

²¹³ New York Times (The), Jordan closes border to Syrian refugees after suicide bomb kills 6, 21 June 2016, [url](#)

²¹⁴ Foreign Policy (FP), Turkey's deportation policy is killing Syrian refugees, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵ Al-Monitor, Syrians in makeshift displacement camp face 'impossible choice', 27 August 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁶ Al-Monitor, Syrians in makeshift displacement camp face 'impossible choice', 27 August 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁷ Reuters, Syria says to reopen important Nassib crossing with Jordan on October 10, 29 September 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁸ Based on reading of MapSelf-Organized Syrian refugee returns as verified by UNHCR as of 30 June 2019. See: UNHCR, Update: Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees, July/August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

deteriorating living conditions and lack of community services in Syria.²¹⁹ A survey examining living conditions for Syrian refugees in Jordan between 2017 and 2018, carried out by Norway's FAfo institute for Labor and Social Research, in collaboration with Jordan's Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, took up the issue of refugees' attitude towards return. 88 % of respondents stated that they were likely to remain in Jordan two years from the date of the interview.²²⁰

3.4 Return procedures

3.4.1 Security clearance

All Syrians wishing to return to their place of origin have to, at some stage, interact with the security sector, where they are obliged to provide information to the authorities, about themselves, as well as family members, in order to receive permission or clearance to return. The procedure applies to all Syrians, that is Syrian refugees and diaspora returning from abroad or IDPs looking to return from opposition-held areas to areas controlled by the government, or reconciliation areas. Returnees are required to fill in certain forms. Those who do not submit the forms cannot return, or could be subjected to access restriction and may also risk arrest. Below are two comparative examples of repatriation forms issued by UNHCR and the Government of Syria respectively, published by the European Institute of Peace.²²¹

Table 1: Example Repatriation Forms: UNHCR (left) and Government of Syria (right)²²²

UNHCR example Voluntary Repatriation Form	Syrian Information Bulletin
Linked cases: Family/Group Number: Address/Location in Camp: Identity/Ration Card Number: Family Name: First Name: Sex: Year of Birth: Place of Birth: Relationship: Skills: Special Needs: Intended departure date: Reception Centre: Intended destination: I, the undersigned principal applicant, declare that I (and my Dependents) after due consideration wish to be repatriated to:....	Name and Surname: Father: Mother: Date of birth: Place and number of register: National ID number: Previous address: Current address: Cell phone number, Landline: Brief of your life: Political orientation: Current job: Previous job: Sentences and arrests: Have you ever raised a gun against the SAA? Have you ever committed a crime against innocent civilians or Had blood on your hands? Have you travelled outside the country?

²¹⁹ Al-Monitor, Why Syrians in Jordan refuse to return home, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

²²⁰ Tiltnes, Å., Zhang, H. and Pedersen, J., The Living Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Jordan, April 2019, [url](#), p. 137

²²¹ Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²²² EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 20

	<p>Do you have any relatives detained during the current events?</p> <p>Date: --/--/2018</p> <p>Name and signature</p> <p>Left thumb fingerprint</p>
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The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) cited in its February 2019 report - the Chief of Immigration and Passport Department in Damascus, stating that Syrians wishing to return to Syria have to apply for return at the nearest Syrian representation at their country of residence, that is, the embassy or consulate. The applicant is requested to inform how and why he or she left the country, and what he or she has been doing in the host country, as well as provide information concerning his or her source of income in the host country. The source further maintained that the information is later forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry then conducts a security check of the applicant in order to verify the applicant's Syrian nationality. The purpose of the procedure is, according to the source, twofold: 1) to ensure that the person entering the country is a Syrian national, and 2) to inform the applicant as to whether there are criminal charges brought against him/her. The report further maintained that persons with criminal charges are likely to face problems upon return, unless they can settle their issues with the government before returning to Syria.²²³

In formerly besieged areas the forms are more extensive. Other than the information mentioned in the Information Bulletin form, applicants are also required to provide detailed responses regarding:

- involvement in protests, riots, and armed terrorist activities;
- information on terrorist groups, their commanders, command centres, and positions;
- information on weapon warehouses, ammunition, explosives, or material set to be used in terrorist activities;
- details on the involvement of relatives in current events.²²⁴

Returnees are required to fill the forms in designated IDP-shelters, which reportedly operate as detention centres.²²⁵ This, for example, is the case for returnees to Eastern Ghouta. Thousands of returnees were held in shelters for weeks before they could return. Accordingly, an estimated 40 000 persons were reported to be still held in these shelters as of January 2019. In addition, even civilians who remained in their homes or in the areas of Eastern Ghouta, prior to the government's takeover, are obliged to complete the forms before they can move through checkpoints.²²⁶

The forms also require information about the activities and whereabouts of family members. EIP maintains that these requirements are a way for the security apparatus to reinforce its control over the population – a sort of 'security through fear'. The process also acts as a means for the government to re-ignite its former reliance on informants to provide allegations, or false information against those perceived as a threat to the government.²²⁷

For those returning from Lebanon, sources interviewed by the International Crisis Group maintained that security clearance issued by central intelligence services in Damascus is mandatory. While the

²²³ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

²²⁴ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 21

²²⁵ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 21

²²⁶ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 21

²²⁷ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 22

clearance helps reduce uncertainty that the returnees face, it 'does not protect would-be returnees from abusive militias or future persecution'.²²⁸

3.4.2 Regulating status in post-reconciliation areas

Persons from former rebel-held areas, wishing to regulate their status with the Syrian authorities are scrutinised by security agencies, with the support of pro-government local committees at the person's place of residence.²²⁹ However, it remains unclear who the targeted profiles are. Haid Haid, a consulting Research Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, maintains that some sources concluded that all males and females between 18 and 55 years should fill the required forms, while other sources state that only anti-government groups, or their international supporters, armed groups and media or political opposition are subject to government scrutiny. Haid attributes part of the confusion to the variety in the implementation of the process, which in turn depends on the level of anti-government resistance, as well as the actors controlling the regained area (e.g. the Syrian government, Iran, Russia).²³⁰

Applicants wishing to regulate their status have to fill two forms, one contains questions about the applicants' personal data, career, political orientation, criminal records and terrorist activities, as well as relatives' activities. The second form contains detailed information about the individuals' role in any anti-government activities, such as demonstrations, armed rebellion and terrorist activities, including information about terrorist activities in the area, as well as names, whereabouts of rebel groups and their leaders.²³¹

The information is then sent to the local security branch to crosscheck against information, files, they have on the applicant. Haid maintains that the government uses multiple levels of verification to assess the credibility of the submitted information. For those with no record, a new file is created, particularly if they had ties with oppositional elements. The information is also crosschecked with other security branches, however, according to Haid, that seldom happens due to rivalry and competition between the security branches. Once the information is verified the applicants receive a document, proving that they have successfully completed the process. The document will also enable them to pass through checkpoints. Rejections are attributed to giving false information. Rejected individuals are also asked to refile their applications at their local security branch, which likely results in detention. The prevalence of using informants is widely abused, often to pursue grudges or vendettas.²³² People who are denied security clearance cannot obtain documentation, or open businesses.²³³

3.4.3 Wanted lists

The head of Air Force Intelligence, Jamil Hassan, stated in a private meeting reported by an opposition news outlet last year that there are three million names on the Syrian government's wanted list. The list includes persons wanted for military service. However, the figures are hard to verify, and anti-

²²⁸ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²²⁹ EASO, Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), p. 16. For more information on the process of regulating one's status, see International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2, and DIS, Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#)

²³⁰ Haid, H., The details of 'Reconciliation Deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

²³¹ Haid, H., Chatham House, The details of 'Reconciliation Deals' expose how they are anything but, August 2018, [url](#)

²³² Haid, H., Chatham House, The details of 'Reconciliation Deals' expose how they are anything but, August 2018, [url](#)

²³³ Haid, H., Chatham House, The details of 'Reconciliation Deals' expose how they are anything but, August 2018, [url](#)

government media outlets (e.g. *Zaman al wasl*, *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)*) have been known to publish names of persons wanted by the Syrian government.²³⁴

3.4.4 Military conscription in post-reconciliation areas

The Syrian government has applied various coercive methods to pressure targeted rebel areas to surrender. Negotiation committees were established, mainly composed of local mediators with ties to the government. Once an agreement was reached, the negotiation committee would register all the names of activists and armed combatants, and whether they wished to remain or leave. The lists were later submitted to the various intelligence and military security bodies for assessment as to who can remain and who is to be relocated.²³⁵ Combatants between the ages of 18-42 were given a six month grace period to settle their affairs and register with the local military recruitment branch (*Sha'bt Tajneed*). This process came to be known as *Taswiyat al-Wad'*. Those who do not report voluntarily risk being arrested and forcibly enlisted.²³⁶

3.5 Arrests, detentions and violations committed against returnees

The Syrian government's regular restrictions on humanitarian agencies hamper these organisations from playing a part in the repatriation of Syrians, often leaving these agencies and organisations with little space to negotiate with the government. UN and international organisations that want to operate in Syria can do so only if they partner with government-approved local actors. The Syrian security agencies regularly engage with these local partners, and can therefore gain access to their beneficiary lists and programming. As a result, organisations often find themselves having to comply with the demands of the government, so as not to lose access, or even risk being shut down.²³⁷ UNHCR has only limited access to communities of IDPs and returnees, and is therefore unable to monitor and collect data on IDPs or returnees without government permission. The agency has in some cases subcontracted local NGOs, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) to carry out surveys and 'protection missions' in the country.²³⁸

The EIP report on refugee return in Syria cites data collected from the UN system, as well as Syrian human rights organisations, like Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and Urnammu, relating to arrests and detention of IDPs and returnees. SNHR documented 312 arrests carried out in Syria of persons who returned from abroad in 2017, and no less than 719 in 2018. The organisation further reported over 5 600 arrests carried out in 2018 against returnees inside Syria to government-controlled areas.²³⁹ Both organisations attributed the rise in the number of detentions, reportedly since October 2018, to the increase in the numbers of return to formerly held opposition areas. EIP further noted that returnees from Idlib to Hama and Idlib to Eastern Ghouta are particularly vulnerable to arrest, as well as those returning without prior clearance.²⁴⁰

Despite having reconciled their status, and completed their papers with the authorities, returnees from rebel-controlled areas are reported to have faced detention upon return.²⁴¹ The town of Zabadani reported some arrests of returnees. Although most have been released after questioning, some remain missing. Locals in Zabadani also report being stopped and harassed at checkpoints, and

²³⁴ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 14

²³⁵ Haid, H., Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How Syrian regime reintegrates former rebel fighters*, July 2018, [url](#)

²³⁶ Haid, H., Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How Syrian regime reintegrates former rebel fighters*, July 2018, [url](#)

²³⁷ HRW, *Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria*, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

²³⁸ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 23

²³⁹ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 23

²⁴⁰ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 23

²⁴¹ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

having their phones searched. Others have been questioned for communicating with relatives in Idlib.²⁴²

The threat of detention, torture and death by Syrian security state upon return can reportedly be unpredictable. Refugees interviewed by the International Crisis Group between November 2018 and July 2019 stated ‘that refraining from anti-regime activities does not guarantee safe return’.²⁴³ In September 2019, Human Rights Watch reported on the arrest and detention of Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon. Witnesses Human Rights Watch spoke to said that they were arrested and deported by the General Security Directorate in Lebanon, whereupon they were handed over to the Syrian border authorities upon deportation. Recent detainees informed that they were tortured in government custody within months of their return to Syria.²⁴⁴

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have pointed out that another risk they fear upon returning is the practice of writing a *taqrir* (a ‘report’, meaning reporting people to the security agencies). They reported on instances of detention upon return as a result of being denounced by neighbours or even family members. The practice of writing a *taqrir* is reportedly used either to avoid being targeted, for personal gain or vengeance.²⁴⁵

3.6 Legal obstacles to housing, land and property rights

Several regions are inhospitable for return due to heavy destruction.²⁴⁶ For people returning this is likely to pose several challenges, particularly for those returning to reconciled areas. According to Syria Direct, an independent Syrian news site, the Syrian government is using old and new laws relating to property rights to implement reconstruction projects through arbitrary demolition within former opposition-held areas.²⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch reported on demolitions carried out by the Syrian armed forces between 2012 and 2013 in Damascus and Hama as means to punish the civilian population in previous opposition strongholds, causing thousands of families to lose their homes.²⁴⁸

In April 2018, the government adopted a new law, aiming to speed up expropriation procedures for reconstruction, as well dealing with illegal/informal settlements. The law, which goes under the name of Law 10, established a 30-day deadline for people to prove ownership over property subject to expropriation.²⁴⁹

Law 10 is an extension of Presidential Decree 66, which was adopted in 2012. The decree was designated to target informal settlements in Damascus for development.²⁵⁰ However, the timeframe stipulated in Law 10 was later amended in 2018 by Law 42, which gives property owners one year to establish ownership of property. Residents who can prove property ownership are given shares in new property developments, provided that they comply with other registration laws.²⁵¹

The government has further issued 45 laws and decrees related to housing, land and property, which have subsequently resulted in hampering returns. One such law is Law 3 of the year 2018. The law concerns the removal of rubble of buildings damaged as a result of natural or abnormal causes.

²⁴² EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 25

²⁴³ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁴⁴ HRW, Syrians deported by Lebanon arrested at home, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

²⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 22, 24

²⁴⁷ Syria Direct, ‘A new Syria’: Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁴⁸ HRW, Razed to the Ground, 30 January 2014, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ HRW, Q&A: Syria’s new property law, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁰ Syria Direct, ‘A new Syria’: Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Syria Direct, ‘A new Syria’: Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

However, the broad definition to the term rubble stipulated by the law, has resulted in the closing of neighbourhoods and residential areas, and therefore denied civilians to access their homes.²⁵²

Decrees 11 and 12, adopted in 2016 are another example of obstacles civilians face to access their properties. Decree 11 stops property registration in areas affected by an emergency security situation, and Decree 12, which concerns production of digital copies of real estate records, contains loopholes which allow government and local officials to claim property via witnesses.²⁵³

Another controversial decree is Decree 63 of 2012, which legislates the right to confiscate 'movable and immovable' property belonging to persons accused of terrorism against the state.²⁵⁴ An article published by the Lebanese anti-Syrian news site al-Modon, cited that Syria's Ministry of Finance published lists of 40 000 cases of seizure of assets in 2017 on the grounds of terrorist activities perpetrated by their owners, compared to 2016 where the ministry reported 30 000 such cases. According to the article, the government has also compiled lists of implicated Syrians nationals living abroad, as well as family members of government opponents, including children.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Syria Direct, 'A new Syria': Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁵³ Syria Direct, 'A new Syria': Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ Syria Direct, 'A new Syria': Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ Al-Modon, الإرهاب الاقتصادي للنظام: 70 ألف حجز احتياطي, [Economic terrorism for the regime: 70 thousand temporary confiscation], 8 November 2018, [url](#)

4. Particular groups

The UNOCHA reported in its Humanitarian Needs review for 2019, that humanitarian needs in Syria remain severe and complex. The report estimates that 11.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The report attributed the situation to the ongoing hostilities, and to new and protracted displacement, as well as the increase in the number of increased self-organised returns.²⁵⁶

This section examines the impact of the population movements, resulting from the conflict in Syria, on two particular groups within the IDP and returnee population: women and children.

4.1 Women

A joint report by Amnesty International UK (AI UK), Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, Women Now for Development in response to the UK national action plan on women, peace and security (hereafter the joint response on the UK national action plan) maintained that accessibility to humanitarian assistance to IDP women is limited.²⁵⁷

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) disclosed in two reports on gender-based violence – Voices from Syria 2018 and 2019 – that displaced women and girls without male support or protection, specifically those living in camps and shelters, are more susceptible to violence than men and boys, including sexual violence, child marriage and movement restrictions.²⁵⁸ The report further reported on women coerced into marrying men at distribution centres, or distribution staff, for a short period of time – for sexual purposes – in order to receive assistance.²⁵⁹

IDP women residing in informal camp settings do not have regular access to sexual and reproductive health services. And when such services are available, they are often understaffed or lack specialist gynaecologists. Lack of information on where to go, or not having access to transportation, in addition to relatives that prevent women from gaining access to needed services are other challenges IDP preventing women from obtaining the health services they need.²⁶⁰

The Syrian American Medical Society reported that women generally suffer disproportionately from the lack of access to medical services in times of conflict. Displaced and refugee women suffer even more under these circumstances. Decline in international funding further reduces women access to health services. Displacement and refugee life have negative consequences on women's mental health, often triggered by lack of food and livelihood opportunities, in addition to social burdens such as having to ensure care and education for their children. Women access to mental health services is less in comparison to men.²⁶¹

A UN Women report on gender and return noted, based on initial regional trends that female refugees may be returning at a larger rate, in comparison to male refugees. The report attributed conscription to military service as the reason deterring male Syrian refugees from wanting to return. Another

²⁵⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Return, as of November 2019, update 12 December 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²⁵⁷ Amnesty International UK (AI UK), Gender Action for Peace and Security (gaps), Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, Women Now for Development, Syria Response Consultations on the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, May 2017, [url](#), p. 22

²⁵⁸ UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 34; UNPFA Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 24

²⁵⁹ UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 58; UNPFA Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²⁶⁰ Amnesty International UK (AI UK), Gender Action for Peace and Security (gaps), Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, Women Now for Development, Syria Response Consultations on the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, May 2017, [url](#), p. 22 ; UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 47

²⁶¹ Syrian American Medical Society, Women health services lacking for Syrian refugees, 14 February 2019, [url](#)

reason for the high number of female returns is ascribed to the high male death rates caused by the conflict, which has contributed to demographic population changes, and subsequently led to an increase in the number of Syrian female-headed households.²⁶²

International Crisis Group reported that many women living in Lebanon do not want to return because they would have to leave their husbands or sons behind or, when returning together, see them conscripted in the army.²⁶³

IDP returnees, and refugees returning to their place of origin generally face a number of challenges when it comes to obtaining vital information to bolster their decision to return (e.g. security legal issues, return procedures), as well as accessing basic goods and services.²⁶⁴ According to the UN Women report on gender and return, women have less access to information on return than men. The report attributes this lack of information to a number of factors: the lack of social network, lack of access to social media, ownership of mobile telephone and low literacy rates. This, according to the report, puts women more at risk to exploitation and abuse.²⁶⁵

Another challenge mentioned by UN Women relate to legal disadvantages women face in accessing their rights to housing, land and property (HLP), as women do not have equal rights when it comes to inheritance and property issues. In addition, women are less likely to have HLP registered in their names.²⁶⁶

The same applies to accessibility to identification and civil documentation. Many registry offices around the country were either closed or destroyed as a result of the conflict. The absence of digitalised records in some areas can result in permanent loss of information for those IDPs who have lost their original documents.²⁶⁷ International Rescue Committee determined in its report on documentation in northern Syria that IDPs ran a considerable risk of losing their documents. Women are particularly dependent on marriage certificate in order to claim access property, financial benefits and child custody in the absence of their husbands.²⁶⁸

For more information on the situation of women in Syria, including IDP women, see the [EASO COI report Syria – Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#).²⁶⁹

4.2 Children

United Nations estimates that 4.7 million children (out of a total of 11 million people in need) are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 3.1 million under the age of five requiring nutritional support.²⁷⁰

UNICEF reported that 2.6 million children in Syria are displaced as a result of the conflict.²⁷¹ The upheaval resulting from displacement has diminished the capacity of many host communities to absorb and provide services to large numbers of IDPs, including children's access to education. This

²⁶² UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, Why gender matters in the Discussion on Returns to Syria, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶³ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁶⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Return, as of November 2019, update 12 December 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²⁶⁵ UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, Why gender matters in the Discussion on Returns to Syria, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶⁶ UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, Why gender matters in the Discussion on Returns to Syria, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶⁷ Forced Migration Review (FMR), Establishing legal Identity for displaced Syrians, FMR 57, February 2018, [url](#)

²⁶⁸ International Rescue Committee, Identify Me: The Documentation Crisis in Northern Syria, July 2016, [url](#), p. 2

²⁶⁹ EASO, COI Report: Syria – Situation of women, February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁰ UNICEF, UNICEF Appeal, Syrian Arab Republic, update 3 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹ UNICEF, Syria Crisis Fast Facts, August 2019, [url](#)

has resulted in an increase in the level of children dropping out of school, which in turn has an impact on the increase of child labour and underage marriage.²⁷²

Displaced children are also vulnerable to recruitment to armed groups. Human Rights Watch reported an increase in child recruitment by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), for military participation within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Recruitment is reported to be taking place inside displacement camps under YPG control. Interviews carried out by Human Rights Watch in three displacement camps in north-eastern Syria report that the YPG and the Asayish (Kurdish internal security) were encouraging young boys and girls to enlist. The interviewed families of those children who enlisted were not informed of their children's whereabouts. The interviewed families stated that their children enlisted in order to support the family. One mother said that she received USD 300 a month for her daughter's enlistment.²⁷³

The United Nations asserted the recruitment of children for combat purposes in the report of the Secretary-General: Children and Armed Conflict. The report stated that the majority of the children were recruited by the YPG, followed by HTS and groups affiliated to the Free Syrian Army (FSA).²⁷⁴ The report does not specify on the recruitment of displaced children.

Children born in formerly rebel-held areas lack recognised documentation. The same applies for children to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.²⁷⁵

²⁷² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Return, as of November 2019, update 12 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 11, 13

²⁷³ HRW, Syria: Armed group recruiting children in camps, 30 August 2018, [url](#)

²⁷⁴ UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General: Children and Armed Conflict, 20 June 2019, [url](#), para. 174

²⁷⁵ NRC, Dangerous Ground: Syria's refugees face an uncertain future, n.d., [url](#), p. 17

5. Mobility

Checkpoints have become a way of life in Syria and an important source of income for those who man them. There are several reports of harassment and intimidation of travellers attempting to drive through the multitude of checkpoints that have been set up throughout the conflict.²⁷⁶

5.1 Checkpoints in government-controlled areas

Government checkpoints are run by a wide range of security agencies, such as the main branches of the state intelligence services, that is, the Air Force Intelligence, the Military Intelligence Directorate and State Security Directorates, as well as regular units from the SAA.²⁷⁷

The DIS, in conjunction with the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) published a report on the security situation in Damascus province based on interviews conducted in November 2018. The report cites an international organisation that stated that there has been an improvement in the general situation in Damascus province since May of 2018. The number of checkpoints within Damascus province have been reduced with about 90 % inside Damascus. In an interview with Christopher Kozak, from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Kozak stated that checkpoints were mainly focused at the entrances of Damascus, that is, highways headed towards Lebanon, Damascus International Airport, as well as the M5 headed toward Homs. Prior restrictions on the road between the airport and Damascus city are reportedly lifted.²⁷⁸

Controls conducted at checkpoints in Damascus vary. Reportedly, checkpoints carried out within the city are carried out in a hasty manner, while being more thorough in areas outside the city. The performance also varies depending on the security agents manning the checkpoints. According to sources interviewed by DIS/DRC, the Air Force Intelligence is considered the strictest of all the branches, and are therefore likely to be the most rigorous in their checks.²⁷⁹

Further information regarding requirements and process for access to Damascus province for individuals from former rebel-held areas can be found in the Danish Immigration Service report- Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria.²⁸⁰

Information regarding mobility and freedom of movement in Damascus city can be found in the [EASO COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(February 2020\)](#).²⁸¹

COAR Global, an independent research and analysis enterprise, stated in a meeting with the DIS/DRC in Beirut, in November 2018 that the security situation in other government-controlled areas vary. Government control becomes more decentralised the further away one travels from the capital Damascus.²⁸²

According to the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic from 11 September 2019, government forces have set up checkpoints every 200 metres throughout Duma, to restrict and control movement of civilians wishing to exit the area. Residents are

²⁷⁶ Orient Net, Assad Checkpoints; pay more, pass quicker, 9 February 2016, [url](#)

²⁷⁷ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²⁷⁸ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-13

²⁷⁹ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

²⁸⁰ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²⁸¹ EASO, COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation in Damascus city, February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸² DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Appendix 1: Meeting minutes, Meeting With COAR-Global, Beirut 17 November 2018, Published February 2019, [url](#), p. 56

required to obtain permission to commute to Damascus. Reportedly, soldiers manning the checkpoints in Duma had access to a computerised system to track movements of civilians.²⁸³

Checkpoints set up in Eastern Ghouta have divided the area into enclaves, whereby checkpoints are placed at crossroads, connecting cities and towns. The checkpoints were initially manned by the SAA and the Republican Guards, before they were handed over to personnel from State Security and the Air Force Intelligence. Mobile searches are conducted at the checkpoints, and civilians are questioned about the contents, as well as deleted items on their phones.²⁸⁴ In Zabadani for example, mobile searches led to the arrests and questioning of civilians, allegedly for communicating with relatives in Idlib.²⁸⁵

According to the Middle East Institute report on Eastern Ghouta, there are ten fixed crossing points around Eastern Ghouta and at the entrances of some of the strategic sites. Six of the ten crossing points surround densely populated areas. These crossing points are entirely supervised by the Republican Guards and State Security, where the vast majority of arrests, and forced conscriptions, reportedly take place. The military areas Zamalka, Ein Tarma and the 7th Bridge Crossing, are restricted to military personnel only. The Jobar district is reportedly the most isolated and heavily restricted areas, where civilians are denied access, with the exception for labourers working for the 4th Division that have approved access to the area. In the areas south-east of Ghouta, where checkpoints are subject to mixed supervision, civilians are able to move more easily. These areas are primarily small isolated communities and therefore less populous. Internal security checkpoints separate this part from other areas, blocking access leading to the main central road of Eastern Ghouta.²⁸⁶

Several incidents of infighting between government agencies over disputes pertaining to checkpoint bribes have also been reported.²⁸⁷ According to Kozak (ISW), flying checkpoints, established by government forces to search for conscripts and draft evaders, are more frequent in former rebel-held areas, such as Eastern Ghouta.²⁸⁸ People's names are checked against wanted lists at checkpoints, however not on regular or systematic bases. Each security branch within the government's security has its own lists. However, the different branches do not coordinate the lists with each other. It is generally difficult for people to obtain personal information from the Syrian authorities concerning their status, and whether they are subjects of interest to the authorities. Trying to access information is a risk in itself, which can lead to arrests.²⁸⁹ Additionally, persons interviewed by EIP reported that persons who earlier did not have problems with the authorities have recently found themselves on arrest lists, suggesting that the lists are continuously updated (so-called live lists) where names are added or subtracted.²⁹⁰

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that

'a network of checkpoints remained across "reconciled areas", including in Dar'a and eastern Ghutah [Ghouta], in contravention of the assurances made during "reconciliation processes". This has severely restricted the freedom of movement of the civilian population, primarily affecting adult men who feared apprehension and forced conscription. Recently, the use of rapidly deployed ad hoc checkpoints in Duma, has instilled additional fear among the population.'

²⁸³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), para 73

²⁸⁴ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 29

²⁸⁵ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 25

²⁸⁶ Middle East Institute/Etana Syria, Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta, May 2019, [url](#), p. 62

²⁸⁷ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 29

²⁸⁸ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²⁸⁹ DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²⁹⁰ EIP, Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 12

Checkpoints have been used by the security services for extortion, which in turn have obstructed access to basic services.²⁹¹

COAR-Global further listed in its meeting with the DIS/DRC profiles likely to face scrutiny when passing checkpoints: 'Individuals who originate from reconciled area, former oppositions activists, individuals wanted for conscription, anyone with any relation to political actors (both secular or Islamist), individuals from large and famous families who are known to the government and individuals who have similar names to wanted people'.²⁹²

5.2 Checkpoints in rebel-held areas in Idlib province:

As of 2 April 2019, field researchers of the Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) monitoring crossings and checkpoints in areas held by rebel from HTS in Idlib identified four main checkpoints between the areas of control of HTS and the Syrian government forces: Al-Rashdeen, Tel al-Sultan/Tel Touqan, Murek and Qalat al-Madeeq.²⁹³

The checkpoints were by April 2019 primarily run by HTS, with the exception of Tel al-Sultan/Tel Touqan which is controlled by the al-Sham legion. Al-Rasheen checkpoint was also used as a prisoner 'swap' crossing point. The other checkpoints were opened and closed at intervals on the side of the Syrian government forces.²⁹⁴

No information could be found relating to the procedures undertaken by the HTS or other rebel factions manning checkpoints in Idlib.

5.3 Damascus International Airport

Information regarding Damascus Airport and flight connections can be found in the [EASO COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(February 2020\)](#).²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 14

²⁹² DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Appendix 1: Meeting minutes, Meeting With COAR-Global, Beirut 17 November 2018, February 2019, [url](#), p. 58

²⁹³ STJ, Fact Sheet: Crossings and Checkpoints in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-held territories, 2 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁴ STJ, Fact Sheet: Crossings and Checkpoints in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-held territories, 2 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁵ EASO, COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation in Damascus city, February 2020, [url](#)

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Terms of Reference

The ToR mainly focus on the general situation of IDPs, returnees (including return of refugees from neighboring countries as well as other countries) and subsequently the challenges these groups are facing, in their place of displacement and/or upon return to their place of origin. Other related topics include: identifying particular groups of IDPs or returnees that maybe subject of interest to the Syrian government, or other actors, within the area of displacement or upon return.

Research should aim to cover:

- IDPs
 - General background of the IDP situation
 - An overview of the patterns/trends of displacement, numbers, location of displacement, place of origin
 - Humanitarian situation in the place of displacement
 - Challenges facing IDPs
 - Prospects of return
 - Protracted displacement
- Returnees
 - An overview of the pattern of return, numbers, location of return
 - The situation of returnees, earlier displaced within the country
 - Humanitarian situation in the place of origin
 - The situation of returnees from abroad
 - Prospects and challenges pertaining to return
 - Procedures for return (government decrees, legislation)
- Particular groups IDPs/Returnees
 - Conscripts, draft evaders, particularly from previously rebel held areas
 - Persons originating from formerly rebel held areas
 - Women
 - Children
 - Other groups
- Internal mobility
 - Road security (ex. checkpoints)
 - Accessibility procedures into formerly rebel held areas
 - Entry procedures for returnees from abroad
 - Security clearance and the consequences it has on persons wishing to return to their place of origin, or take up residence in other parts of the country.



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