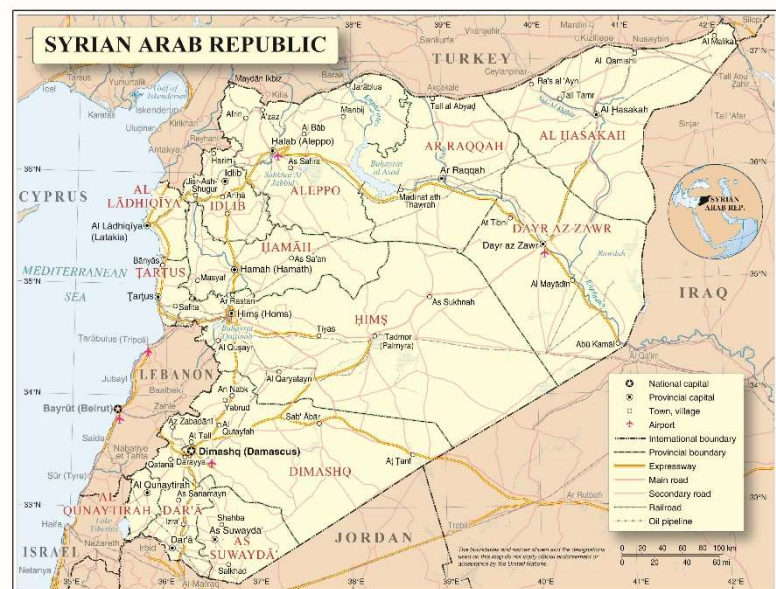


Syria

Issues regarding return



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

This brief report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this brief report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The brief report is a synthesis of information gathered from different sources, and it brings together condensed information in a relevant manner for the reader's COI needs and it organises information together thematically to form a coherent whole of the topic in question, instead of listing or quoting information source by source.

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Executive summary

There is no official requirement that Syrian refugees returning to Syria must obtain a security clearance (Arabic: موافقة أمنية, *muwafaka amniya*) prior to their return. However, there is empirical evidence that persons returning from Syria's neighbouring countries must obtain such a clearance.

Persons, who have unsettled issues with the Syrian authorities, such as illegal exit, security issues or draft evasion, must settle their status at a Syrian representation abroad prior to their return.

There are reports of returnees predominantly returning from Syria's neighbouring countries who upon their return were subjected to different forms of violations by the Syrian authorities. Among these, there are cases of returnees who obtained a security clearance or settled their status prior to their return.

Due to a lack of monitoring of return by international organisations, it is unclear how systematic and prevalent such violations are. However, violations occur.

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Introduction

This brief report aims to provide updated information about the return procedures for Syrian citizens who live outside Syria as well as the treatment that the returnees receive upon return to Syria.

The report is largely an update of the report [Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees](#) published by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in December 2020. The necessity of an update shall be seen in light of questions raised about the return procedures since the publishing of the last report as well as information on treatment of returnees published throughout the first three quarters of 2021.

The report at hand is written in compliance with the EASO COI Report Methodology.¹

The report is solely based on information from written sources. Although much of the information used in the DIS December 2020 report stems from sources interviewed by DIS in 2020, the statement from these sources are referenced in the report at hand as any other written source, i.e. by referring to the December 2020 report. The quotation marks (") are not used in the report whenever the text is a copy of the DIS December 2020 report, however, a reference is made in the footnotes to the page where the text is copied from.

Finally, attention should be called to the changeable and unstable situation in Syria and the fact that the information provided may quickly become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this report should be monitored periodically and brought up to date accordingly.

The reference period for this report is January 2020 to October 2021. The research and editing of this report was finalised on 29 October 2021.

The report can be accessed from the website of [DIS](#) and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

¹ EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Abbreviations

AI	Amnesty International
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
GoS	Government of Syria
HRW	Human Rights Watch
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

Glossary

- Security Clearance** ‘Security clearance’ (Arabic: موافقة أمنية, *muwafaka amniya*) is a process through which the Syrian authorities crosscheck whether a person is on a wanted list and is to be considered a security threat.
- Status Settlement** ‘Status settlement’ (Arabic: تسوية وضع, *taswiyat wada*) is a process through which a person, who is wanted by the GoS, applies to settle his/her issues with the GoS. If the GoS agrees to settle the person’s unsettled issues, the person’s name will be deleted from wanted lists and he/she will not be wanted anymore.

1. Background

During Syria's ongoing conflict, more than 13 million people have been displaced within and outside of Syria. People fled their home areas to escape from the intensive violence and/or to avoid persecution or military service. Since the Government of Syria (GOS) retook control over southern and central Syria in the summer of 2018, many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to the government controlled areas voluntarily or by force.²

More than half of Syria's pre-war population has been displaced, including 6.7 million IDPs and 6.6 million refugees worldwide of whom 5.6 million are hosted in countries near Syria.³ While overall displacement movements decreased in 2019 and 2018 compared to previous years, large-scale displacements continued in early 2020, mainly in the country's North-West.⁴

UNHCR recorded close to 450,000 IDP returns in 2020. However, most of these returns occurred in areas outside of government control in the North-West following the March 2020 ceasefire between Russia and Turkey in Idlib. In 2020, some 38,200 Syrian refugees spontaneously returned to Syria from countries in the region, mostly from Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon, which were significantly fewer than in 2019 when close to 95,000 refugee returns were verified. The numbers reported are only those monitored/verified by the UNHCR and are as such likely to be an underestimate.⁵

1.1. Recorded returns from abroad

1.1.1. Returns from Europe

The available information about Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) returning from the EU is limited, and the European Commission's department for statistics, Eurostat's, database does not provide statistics on how many Syrians and stateless persons from Syria returned from the EU to Syria in 2020. As a result, the available information about returns of Syrians and PRS from Europe is anecdotal and fragmented in nature. In addition to 137 voluntary returns from Denmark during 2020, EASO reported on ten persons from Damascus returning to the Syrian capital during the same year.⁶

1.1.2. Returns from neighbouring countries

According to the UNHCR, as of 31 May 2021, 282,283 Syrian refugees had voluntarily returned to Syria from Syria's neighbouring countries since 2016, including:

- 110,649 from Turkey
- 64,714 from Lebanon
- 57,276 from Jordan
- 48,194 from Iraq⁷

² DIS, *Security Clearance and Status Settlement*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 4

³ UNHCR, *Syria Emergency*, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴ UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, [url](#), p. 43

⁵ UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 44-45; BBC, *Syria war: Russia and Turkey agree Idlib ceasefire*, 5 March, [url](#)

⁶ EASO, *Syria - Situation of returnees from abroad*, June 2021, [url](#), p. 11

⁷ UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response, Voluntary Syrian Refugee Returns (As of 31 March 2021)*, 31 March 2021, [url](#). The numbers reported in the UNHCR-data are only those verified or monitored by the UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of

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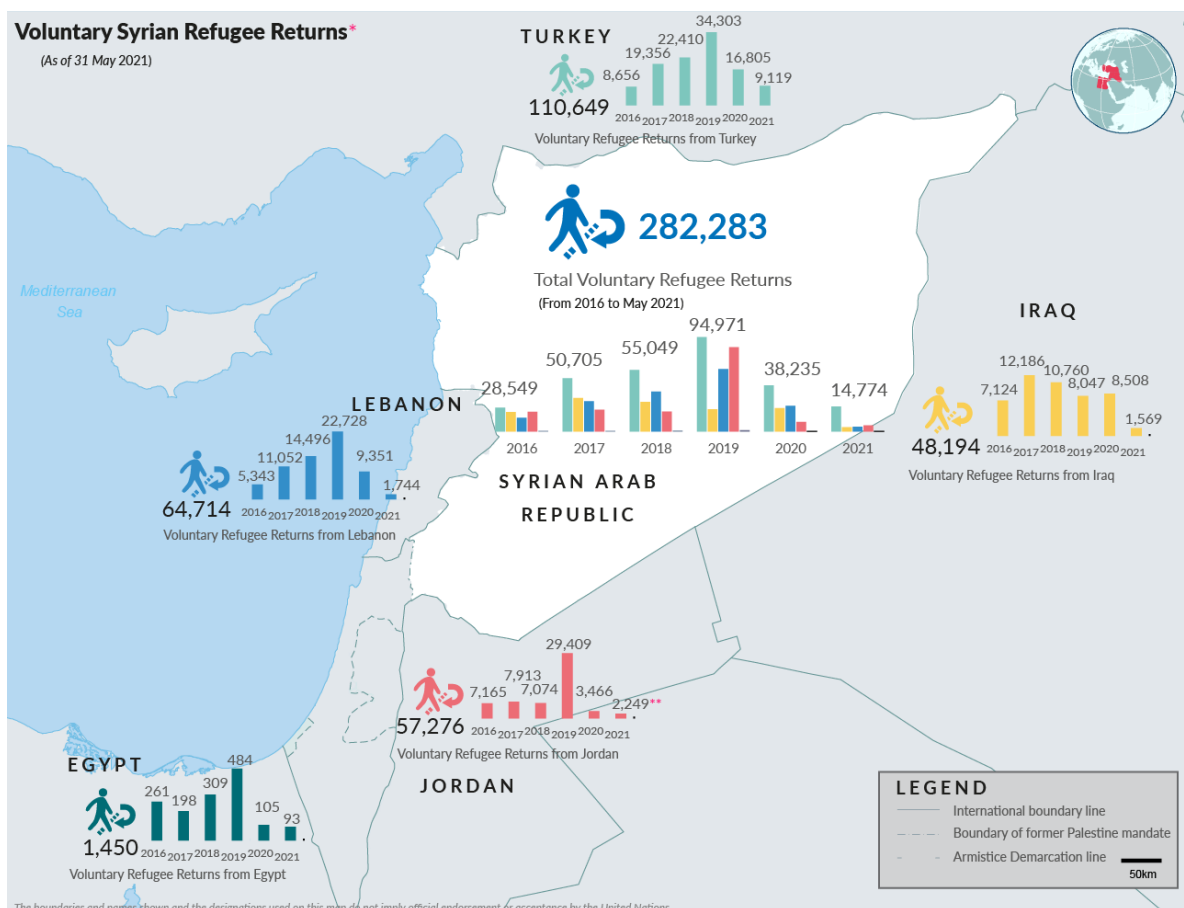


Figure 1: Voluntary Syrian Refugee Returns as of 31 March 2021⁸

Since reaching its peak in 2019, the number of voluntary returns has fallen, as illustrated in the figure below:

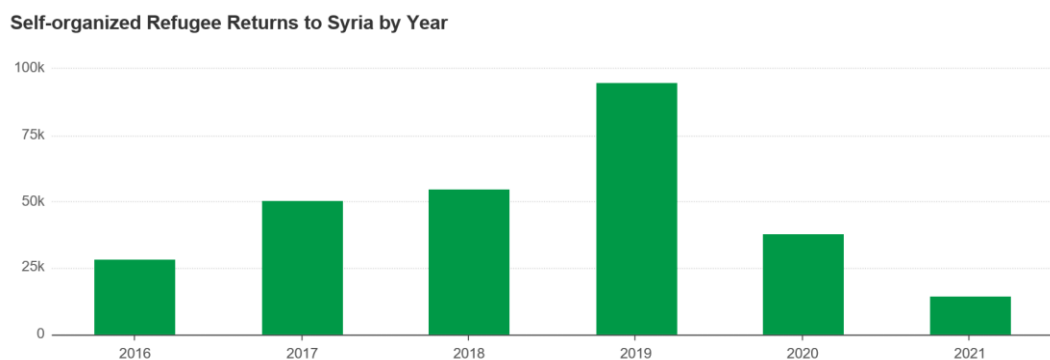


Figure 2: Self-organized Refugee Returns to Syria 2016-2021⁹

returns which may be significantly higher. The return movements recorded during the months of April and May from Lebanon took place between 1 and 23 March. Data includes only those verified by the UNHCR. The Lebanese General Security reported additional figures from their Group Returns and of these, a total of 158 individuals were not known to the UNHCR. Since the re-opening of the border on 15 October 2018, the methodology for return data was adapted by the UNHCR. The return data after 15 October 2018 remains tentative and is undergoing validation and re-adjustments according to the UNHCR.

⁸ UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response, Voluntary Syrian Refugee Returns (As of 31 March 2021)*, 31 March 2021, [url](#)
⁹ UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response, Voluntary Syrian Refugee Returns (As of 31 March 2021)*, 31 March 2021, [url](#). The numbers reported in the UNHCR-data are only those verified or monitored by UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of

2. Return procedures

In order to return, Syrians may have to go through return procedures in the form of security clearance (Arabic: موافقة أمنية, *muwafaka amniya*) and status settlement (Arabic: تسوية وضع *taswiyat wada*). Syrians may have to go through these procedures for other issues than returning from abroad. Historically and prior to the outbreak of the war in Syria, a security clearance was required – and is still required – of Syrian citizens wanting to, for example, move to a new area; rent, buy, rebuild or reconstruct a house; open a shop; apply for a job etc.¹⁰

A status settlement is, for example, required of Syrian citizens living in Syria who are wanted by the GoS and who want to sort out their unsettled issues with the GoS.¹¹

Although internally displaced persons may also be required to obtain a security clearance or to sort out their unsettled issues with the GoS in order to return to their home areas, this report will focus on these procedures in connection with the return of Syrian citizens who live outside Syria.¹²

In this report, the terms ‘security clearance’ and ‘status settlement’ should be understood as follows:

- ‘Security clearance’ (Arabic: موافقة أمنية, *muwafaka amniya*) is a process through which the Syrian authorities crosscheck whether a person is on a wanted list and is to be considered a security threat.¹³
- ‘Status settlement’¹⁴ (Arabic: تسوية وضع, *taswiyat wada*) is a process through which a person who is wanted by the GoS applies to settle his/her issues with the GoS. If the GoS agrees to settle the person’s unsettled issues, the person’s name will be deleted from wanted lists and he/she will not be wanted anymore.¹⁵

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¹⁰ DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹ DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹² DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹³ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁴ In English language COI-reports, this procedure is referred to as ‘reconciling one’s affairs’, ‘legalising status’, ‘regulating status’, ‘resolving status’ or ‘sorting out one’s unsettled issues’. EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#); Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility*, April 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Syria: Targeting of individuals*, March 2020, [url](#); ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#); DIS, *Syria: Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 3; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

2.1 Security clearance

2.1.1. Background

The requirement for obtaining a security clearance pre-dates the outbreak of the civil war.¹⁶ Syrian citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity, need to obtain a security clearance from the Syrian intelligence services in order to be allowed to complete various everyday life issues such as registering a marriage,¹⁷ moving to a new area, applying for a job etc., as mentioned above.¹⁸

2.1.2. Who needs a security clearance?

According to a query response from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) dated 22 September 2021, Syrian citizens do not need to obtain a security clearance in order to return to Syria.¹⁹

In an email to the DIS of 22 September 2021, the MFA further elaborated that the above-mentioned statement from the query response is both based on 'the absence of a Syrian regulation (law, regulation (bylaw), circular letter) that requires Syrian citizens to obtain a security clearance to return to Syria, and the practice [i.e. the implemented procedure][...] as no such security clearance has [in practice] been requested by the authorities before.' The lack of requirement to obtain a security clearance prior to return to Syria, which is still applicable to date, is in line with article 38/1 of the Syrian Constitution of 2012, which provides that citizens may not be deported or prevented from returning to the homeland.²⁰ However, it is mentioned in the email that in some exceptional cases, people may have to obtain a security clearance before return. For example, Syrian expatriates who have not completed military service in Syria and who wish to return to Syria for a short visit have to obtain a security clearance prior to their return, in order to ensure that they will not be arrested and will be able to exit Syria again freely.²¹

As of 29 October 2021, DIS could not find any information on any official website of the Syrian government, including websites of Syrian embassies in Europe, e.g. the website of the Syrian embassy in Stockholm and Paris, about Syrian citizens residing abroad being required to obtain a security clearance prior to their return to Syria. All information found on these websites are merely about status settlement.²²

However, there is empirical evidence that refugees returning from Syria's neighbouring countries have to obtain a security clearance prior to their return to Syria. For instance, all 30 Syrian refugees, who had returned from Jordan in the period 2017-2021 and who were interviewed by Human Rights Watch (HRW)

¹⁶ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁷ Security clearance is required if a Syrian is getting married to a foreign national or if the man who is getting married is in the conscription age or is serving in the armed forces. Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Marriage legislation and traditions*, 22 August 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁸ DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁹ MFA, *Query Response*, 22 September 2021

²⁰ MFA, *Query Response*, 22 September 2021; MFA email, 22 September 2021

²¹ MFA email, 22 September 2021

²² See for instance: Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, إعلان بخصوص إمكانية القيام بمعاملة [Announcement regarding the possibility of undertaking regular status settlement in Syria for expatriates residing in countries where there is no diplomatic representation of the Syrian Arab Republic], [url](#)

for its October 2021 report, mentioned that they had to go through a security clearance procedure at the Syrian embassy in Amman.²³

There are sources who state that all Syrians living abroad have to obtain a security clearance before returning to Syria. The empirical evidence provided by these sources are nevertheless limited to returns from Syria’s neighbouring countries.²⁴

Three sources consulted by EASO for its July 2021 report on the situation of returnees from abroad opined that ‘there was no clear distinction between applying for a security clearance and settling one’s status. If a Syrian residing in a neighbouring country or in an EU Member State wants to return legally to government-held Syria, he or she will have to apply at a Syrian diplomatic mission. During this procedure, which is variously referred to as ‘security approval’ or ‘status settlement’, the applicant is being checked by the Syrian authorities in one way or another.’²⁵

2.1.3. Procedure

With regard to the application for a security clearance, the applicant is asked a number of different questions about himself/herself and his/her family members when undergoing the security clearance procedure.²⁶ The Syrian authorities crosscheck the person’s name with names on wanted lists of the security services.²⁷ In relation to the security clearance that Syrian refugees from Lebanon had to obtain in 2018 in order to return to Syria, COAR Global stated that people’s Facebook profiles and other social media activities were also checked during security screenings.²⁸ According to an article dated 11 September 2019 by Maha Yahya from Carnegie Middle East Center, it is Syria’s National Security Bureau, which is responsible for coordinating the work of Syria’s intelligence agencies that carries out security clearances and approves the return of refugees and IDPs.²⁹

When the GoS has crosschecked that the applicant is not on a wanted list [or is not otherwise considered a security threat, *ed.*], the person will be issued a document by which he or she can return to Syria.³⁰

The security clearance document is a stamped document that one needs to show at checkpoints in government-controlled areas in Syria.³¹ According to a report by the Finnish Immigration Service published

²³ HRW, “Our Lives Are Like Death”, *Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), p. 50

²⁴ See for example: EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-26; Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 7, 9-20; EASO, *Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility*, April 2020, [url](#), pp. 24-32

²⁵ EASO, *Syria - Situation of returnees from abroad*, June 2021, [url](#), p. 20

²⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

²⁷ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸ DIS and DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 23

²⁹ Yahya, M., Carnegie Middle East Center, *Into the fire*, 17 September 2019, [url](#)

³⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³¹ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5

in December 2018, a security clearance document is valid for three months. A person needs to apply for a new security clearance if it has expired, or if he/she needs a security clearance for other purposes.³²

2.1.4. Who obtains a security clearance?

According to a source interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2018, the authorities also check whether family members of the person in question are wanted. Thus, a security clearance will only be given to the applicant if he/she and his/her family members are not wanted.³³ People who are family members (first and second-degree family relation) of persons who are wanted in cases related to terrorism will face difficulties in getting a security clearance.³⁴

One source consulted by DIS for the December 2020 report mentioned that in some individual cases, some individuals had not obtained a security clearance because they had family members who were wanted by the GoS. However, this is not a systematic practice by the GoS. Many individuals have been able to get a security clearance despite having family members who were wanted. The source added that he knew of individuals who had left for Idlib and who had family members who were wanted by the GoS but who were nevertheless able to obtain a security clearance and return to the government-controlled areas. According to the source, in general, whether a person is able to obtain a security clearance depends on the type of security issue that his/her family members are wanted for.³⁵

Moreover, a person who wants to return may also be denied a security clearance for other reasons than having a family member who is wanted. For instance, in cases where the authorities find that the area in Syria to which the person wishes to return is destroyed to an extent that it is impossible to live there, the person will be denied a security clearance. This happened to some Syrians who wanted to return from Lebanon to Syria.³⁶

One source consulted by the DIS for the December 2020 report mentioned that individuals who were regarded by the GoS as pro-government would obtain a security clearance quickly.³⁷ According to the Finnish Immigration Service report published in 2018, Sunnis from specific areas, such as Homs, Daraa and Raqqa, may have to wait longer to obtain a security clearance compared to, for example, Alawites from al-Zahra in Homs.³⁸

³² Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

³³ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

³⁴ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

³⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

³⁶ DIS and DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 24. Similarly, citizens inside Syria who apply for a security clearance to return to areas that are restricted for access may not get a permission if the houses in the area are destroyed, even if they are not wanted by the GoS. DIS, *Syria: Security and Socio-Economic Situation in the Governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus*, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 21-23

³⁷ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

³⁸ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

2.2. Status settlement

2.2.1. Background

The term ‘status settlement’ appeared during the war in Syria to denote a procedure whereby all anti-government activities carried out by Syrian citizens living in Syria are “forgiven” by the GoS, in order for individuals to remain in or return to an area retaken by the GoS from the opposition. According to the UNHCR, a status settlement involves a vetting process by the Syrian security agencies that reviews the individual’s previous opposition activities. These acts include political activity against the GoS, ranging from anti-government demonstrations and participation in relief work in opposition-held areas to carrying weapons and fighting against the GoS or other activities considered by the GoS as terrorism.³⁹

At the end of 2017, the possibility of status settlement was extended to include those residing outside of Syria.⁴⁰ The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates has stated that Syrian citizens who want to return to Syria but who have left the country illegally due to the conflict, or who have unsettled military and security issues, can settle their issues with the GoS.⁴¹

The chief of the Immigration and Passport Department, General Naji Numeir, informed the DIS in a meeting in Damascus in November 2018 that Syrians who wished to return to Syria and had pending criminal charges against them would face problems upon return unless they settled their issues with the Syrian government before returning to the country.⁴²

In general, a person who is wanted by the GoS needs to apply for settling his/her status with the Syrian authorities in order to have his/her name removed from wanted lists. If this person’s application is approved, it officially means that he/she is not wanted anymore and will thus not be prosecuted by the GoS.⁴³

Al-Jazeera wrote in 2018 that the pace of status settlements had increased in recent years with the beginning of the truces conducted between the GoS and opposition groups in former opposition-controlled areas. Thousands of people were able to settle their status and obtain a document guaranteeing them the freedom to move within government-controlled areas without prosecution.⁴⁴ Persons who lived in former opposition-controlled areas and who entered the reconciliation agreements⁴⁵ had to apply for a status settlement in order to be allowed to stay in or return to their area after the GoS retook control. Currently,

³⁹ Al-Jazeera, *كابوس جديد يورق سكان محيط دمشق [Status settlement...a new nightmare haunts the residents of the surroundings of Damascus]*, 17 June 2018, [url](#); HRW, “Our Lives Are Like Death”, *Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), pp. 47-48; UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 104-107

⁴⁰ Enab Baladi, *النظام يطالب من غادر سوريا بطريقة “غير مشروعة” بمراجعة السفارات [The regime demands those who left Syria “illegally” to contact embassies]*, 4 October 2017, [url](#)

⁴¹ Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *خدمات أخرى [Other services]*, [url](#)

⁴² DIS and DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁴³ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁴ Al-Jazeera, *كابوس جديد يورق سكان محيط دمشق [Status settlement...a new nightmare haunts the residents of the surroundings of Damascus]*, 17 June 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁵ The GoS concluded reconciliation agreements with opposition groups that controlled areas besieged by the GoS and its allies. The reconciliation processes vary from one area to another. For more information about reconciliation agreements, see: Syria Studies, Vol 9 No 2 (2017): *The Day After: Post-Uprising Realities & Challenges*: Raymond Hinnibusch and Omar Imady, *Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements*, [url](#); EASO, *Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#)

persons who reside in opposition-controlled areas such as Idlib and who are wanted by the GoS have to apply for the same procedure to be allowed to return to government-controlled areas without facing prosecution.⁴⁶

2.2.2. Who needs a status settlement?

Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) who live abroad and want to return to Syria are required to apply for a status settlement for a number of issues, including illegal exit, security issues and payment of the exemption fee by military draft evaders.⁴⁷

An unsettled security issue includes anti-government activities such as participating in demonstrations, stating anti-government slogans, taking up arms against the GoS, evading or deserting from reserve and mandatory military service (in which a status settlement entails that the person will not be prosecuted for evasion; he will, however, have to complete his military service after returning to Syria).⁴⁸

A man, who has exited Syria illegally or has unsettled security issues, and who wants to be exempted from military service by paying an exemption fee, must apply for a status settlement to be allowed to pay the exemption fee.⁴⁹

Sometimes, individuals are unsure whether they are wanted by the GoS. Therefore, they might seek to have it clarified before they approach a Syrian representation abroad and return to Syria. Syrians often have acquaintances in Syria, or sometimes even abroad (e.g. in Jordan or Lebanon), who have connections within the Syrian security apparatus and who in return for payment can provide information on whether someone is wanted by the GoS.⁵⁰ This information is corroborated by EASO, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group in their 2021 and 2020 reports about returns to Syria.⁵¹ According to the EASO report, such collecting information about one's status through informal networks (*wasta*) is not exhaustive. It means that if a returnee finds out through *wasta* that he or she is not wanted

⁴⁶ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#) p. 7. For more information about the procedure of status settlement for persons residing inside Syria, see: EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020), Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 8. With regard to military service, the Syrian Ministry of Defence created an electronic system in September 2020 through which individuals can check their military service status and thereby check whether they are wanted for reserve military service or mandatory military service. Enab Baladi, *الدفاع "يتيح الاطلاع على أسماء المدعوين للخدمة العسكرية"*, 26 September 2020, [url](#). The electronic system for mandatory military service: Syrian Ministry of Defence, *نظام البحث للمطلوبين إلى الخدمة الالزامية*, [url](#); The electronic system for the reserve: Syrian Ministry of Defence, *نظام البحث للمطلوبين إلى الخدمة الاحتياطية*, [url](#)

⁴⁸ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

⁴⁹ DIS, *Syria: Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 26-27

⁵⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 8; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 87

⁵¹ EASO, *Syria - Situation of returnees from abroad*, June 2021, [url](#), p. 20; AI, *You're going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), p. 16; HRW, *"Our Lives Are Like Death", Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), pp. 48-49; ICG, *Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon*, 13 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 15-16

by the Syrian authorities, there is no guarantee that he or she will not be arrested and detained upon return.⁵²

The consular section of the Syrian embassy in Stockholm informed Landinfo in a phone interview on 7 December 2020 that the embassy encouraged all Syrians who wished to return to Syria to get clarified with the Syrian authorities whether they had any unsettled issues with the GoS prior to their return. This could also be done by a relative in Syria. In the event it turns out that they do have an unsettled issue, they can apply for a status settlement at the embassy.⁵³

A source interviewed by the DIS for the December 2020 report said that many Syrians did not trust the Syrian authorities and therefore would not settle their unsettled security issues through the Syrian embassies or consulates. They would instead prefer to bribe an employee in the specific security branch by which they are wanted to have their name removed from a wanted list.⁵⁴

2.2.3. Procedure

A Syrian refugee who wants to settle his issues will have to apply for it at the nearest Syrian representation (embassy or consulate).⁵⁵

In the event the person lives in a country with no Syrian embassy or consulate, the status settlement can be conducted by a close relative in Syria. According to the Syrian embassy in Stockholm, a relative must submit the applicant's CV (Arabic: *sira thatiyya*) and inform the authorities about the date the applicant exited Syria (legal as well as illegal exit), which border or border crossing was used to exit Syria, and the applicant's address abroad.⁵⁶ When applying for a status settlement at the embassy, the person must first prove that he is a Syrian national by showing a Syrian ID or a Syrian passport. After registration, the applicant is given a special application form for status settlement that he/she must fill in.⁵⁷

The form, which consists of two to three pages, contains a number of detailed questions about the applicant, including whether the applicant has been involved in – or knows someone inside or outside Syria who has been involved in - armed opposition against the GoS. In addition, the individual will be asked about when and how he or she left Syria, where the individual has stayed outside Syria, and what he has done during the stay abroad. On the form, the applicant is also asked to provide information about his/her close

⁵² EASO, *Syria - Situation of returnees from abroad*, June 2021, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁵³ Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

⁵⁴ SOHR (phone interview 24 November 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁵⁵ Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *خدمات أخرى [Other services]*, [url](#); Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020), Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 8; Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7. According to Landinfo, persons who want to return from the neighbouring countries, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, can apply for a status settlement after they return to Syria. In this case, they will have to apply within three to six months. Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁶ Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *إعلان بخصوص إمكانية القيام بمعاملة تسوية الوضع في سورية للمغتربين المقيمين في دول لا يوجد فيها تمثيل دبلوماسي للجمهورية العربية السورية [Announcement regarding the possibility of undertaking regular status settlement in Syria for expatriates residing in countries where there is no diplomatic representation of the Syrian Arab Republic]*, [url](#)

⁵⁷ On the website of the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, it is mentioned that the fee for applying for status settlement is 50 Euro. Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *الرسوم القنصلية [Consular fees]*, [url](#)

family members, including parents, sisters, brothers, children and spouse.⁵⁸ He will have to give information about their names, work and place of residence, whether they are wanted, and whether they were active in the opposition against the GoS. When the form is completed, the person in charge at the embassy or consulate may - based on the information provided on the form - ask the applicant to provide more information in writing to some of the questions on the form.⁵⁹

In Syria, the application will be processed by the involvement of central and local security officers. They will check the submitted information and decide whether to settle the person's issues or, in other words, whether to agree to delete the person's name from wanted lists.⁶⁰

Sometimes, the security services in Syria may ask for more information on some issues. In that case, the consulate or embassy will contact the person and ask him/her to provide the information requested in writing. If there is someone in the applicant's family or among his/her relatives who is affiliated with the armed opposition, the applicant will be asked to provide detailed information about the person in question, his/her activities and whereabouts.⁶¹

In case the authorities in Syria approve the status settlement application, the person will be informed about this by the consulate or embassy. When the person's application for status settlement is approved, his/her name will be deleted from the wanted list(s).⁶²

When an application for status settlement is approved and the person's name is removed from the wanted list(s), the person will receive a stamped document indicating that he/she can return to Syria.⁶³ If the application for status settlement is not approved, the case will be put on hold and the applicant will not receive any response from Syria confirming that he or she cannot return.⁶⁴

The person, whose application for status settlement has been approved, will be asked to contact the security branch mentioned on the status settlement document upon return to Syria for further

⁵⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020), Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; International Crisis Group uses the terms "resolving status" or "reconciling status" referring to the procedure that previous opposition activists inside Syria (such as participants in protests, relief workers in rebel-held areas or fighters with the opposition) go through in order to settle their status with the GoS. International Crisis Group describes the status settlement procedure for those living inside Syria as follows: A person will be asked to answer 12 questions about his or her activities and relations with the opposition since 2011. The person is also required to sign a 'pledge document' in which he or she 'vows not to carry out any activities that harm the internal or the external security of the Syrian Arab Republic.' After a few days, the person will obtain a form signed and stamped by the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). The form is to indicate that person in question's name has been removed from the wanted lists and this person is supposed to move through checkpoints without being harassed or arrested. ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2. For more information on what specific information Syrian refugees are requested to write in the status settlement form, see: EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁵⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶¹ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶² Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶³ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

investigation.⁶⁵ When the person returns and reports to the security service in question, the person will mainly be asked about his or her family members and about people from his or her area who joined the armed opposition or who are residing outside Syria. In addition, the person will be asked about what he/she did during the anti-government protests and the early years of the uprising.⁶⁶

Contrary to other sources, Amnesty International (AI) stated in its September 2021 report that there is no official status settlement process (referred to as 'reconciliation' in the AI report) outside of Syria and that returnees can only settle their status vis-à-vis the government once they are back in Syria.⁶⁷

2.2.3.1. *Settling draft evasion from military service by paying an exemption fee*

Men of military service age (18-42) wanting to settle their evasion by paying the exemption fee should, in addition to the application form mentioned above, also fill in a separate form relating to their military service status and an additional application form used to pay the exemption fee. This will be sent to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and to the security services in Syria together with the status settlement application.⁶⁸

It is not until after the application for status settlement has been approved that draft evaders who want to be exempted by paying the exemption fee are able to pay the fee and be exempted from military service.⁶⁹ When the exemption fee has been paid, the person will receive a stamp in his military service book indicating his exemption from military service.⁷⁰ He will also receive a receipt stating that the exemption fee has been paid, and he will have to show this receipt to the Recruitment Division in Syria upon return.⁷¹

Unlike persons who settle their illegal exit and unsettled security issues, men who settle their draft evasion and pay the exemption fee will not be asked to report their return to the security services.⁷²

⁶⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁷ AI, *You're going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁶⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020), Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) and Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷¹ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷² Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10

3. Treatment upon return

No systematic research has been undertaken to trace returnees from outside or inside Syria to monitor what happens to them upon return. The UNHCR is unable to systematically monitor and collect data on the returns of refugees and IDPs and faces high limits imposed by the Syrian government in monitoring what happens with refugees who return to Syria. Thus, reliable figures on arrests and detention cases of returnees are not available.⁷³ The UNHCR and other UN agencies are required to have prior authorisation from the GoS to access territories and conduct operations. For example, UNHCR Syria can only get in contact with a minority of those Syrian refugees who returned through the operations organised by Lebanon’s intelligence service and immigration authority, General Security.⁷⁴ In some cases, the UNHCR has subcontracted local NGOs, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) to carry out surveys and ‘protection missions’ in the country.⁷⁵

The regular restrictions imposed by GoS on humanitarian agencies hamper these organisations from playing a part in the repatriation of Syrians, often leaving the organisations with little space to negotiate with the government. The UN and international organisations wanting to operate in Syria can only do so by partnering with GoS-approved local actors. The Syrian security agencies regularly engage with these local partners and can 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 risk being shut down.⁷⁶

In spite of the difficulties with monitoring returns systematically, several organisations have documented violations against returnees.⁷⁷ The information provided by these organisations are primarily based on interviews with refugees who have returned to Syria. However, it does not appear from the recently published reports how the returnees interviewed for these reports were selected,⁷⁸ and thus to what extent the consulted persons are to be considered a representative sample of the whole group of Syrians returning to Syria.

⁷³ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5, 19, 23; UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 51-52

⁷⁴ EuroMed Rights, *Return Mania. Mapping policies and practices in the EuroMed region, Chapter 6, Pushbacks and expulsions from Cyprus and Lebanon: The dangers of (chain) refoulement to Syria*, March 2021, [url](#), p. 22

⁷⁵ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5, 19

⁷⁶ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 18, 23

⁷⁷ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, *The Syrian regime prevents hundreds of Syrians from returning from Lebanon to their homeland*, September 2020, [url](#); AI, *You’re going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#); HRW, *“Our Lives Are Like Death”, Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁸ See for instance: AI, *You’re going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-10; HRW, *“Our Lives Are Like Death”, Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), pp. 7-8

3.1. Treatment of returnees

From the beginning of 2014 until August 2019, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented the arrest of at least 1,916 Syrian refugees, including 219 children and 157 women, by the GoS after their return to Syria from abroad.⁷⁹

In an article by Syria Direct published in October 2020, SNHR stated that GoS had arrested 237 individuals who returned to Syria between January 2019 and October 2020. When the article was published, 194 of those individuals were still detained and 176 of those had been forcibly disappeared. Five persons were tortured to death in detention centres.⁸⁰

The European Institute of Peace (EIP) wrote in a July 2019 report that even among the voluntary returnees, hundreds of detentions and arrests were reported in 2019. Some of the released persons explained that they had been tortured while in custody. In addition, deaths in custody among returnees were recorded.⁸¹

According to a February 2019 article from Medico International, at least two returnees from Germany, who voluntarily repatriated, disappeared after having been interrogated by the security services.⁸²

In the December 2020 DIS report, two sources stated that most applications for status settlement get approved by the GoS. The two sources assessed that a person without an approved status settlement application would most likely be arrested and interrogated upon return to Syria.⁸³ An example of this was the arrest of many Syrians who were forced to return to Syria from Lebanon in 2018 before obtaining a status settlement.⁸⁴ The assessment was shared by EIP in its 2019 report.⁸⁵ However, EIP mentioned that many returnees had been arrested, detained, harassed or conscripted despite having completed the settlement procedure.⁸⁶

Amnesty International published a report in September 2021 documenting 66 cases of violations against returnees by the Syrian authorities in the period between mid-2017 and spring 2021. 22 persons had gone through some sort of clearance process but were nonetheless subjected to different kinds of violations.⁸⁷ Likewise, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented cases of arrest, detention, torture, kidnappings, extra-judicial killings and forced disappearance committed against returnees upon their return by the Syrian authorities in a report published on 20 October 2021, based on interviews with 65 returnees from Lebanon and Jordan.⁸⁸

⁷⁹ SNHR could not determine the total number of refugees who have returned in the period between 2014 and 2019, as monitoring of the number of returnees is not at the heart of its work. SNHR, *The Syrian Regime Continues to Pose a Severe Barbaric Threat and Syrian refugees Should Never Return to Syria*, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸⁰ Syria Direct, *The agony of refugees at risk of being returned to Syria: "Between death and going back to Syria, I choose death"*, 27 October 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

⁸² Medico International, *Starthilfe in den Tod*, 11 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸³ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁸⁴ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p.11

⁸⁵ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁸⁶ EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

⁸⁷ AI, *You're going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁸ HRW, *"Our Lives Are Like Death", Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#)

In both reports, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented cases of persons who were subjected to violations despite having obtained a security clearance or settled their status with the Syrian authorities prior to their return.⁸⁹ A lack of coordination between different intelligence agencies that each have their own wanted list is mentioned as a reason for such violations as the individual's name may remain on some of these lists in spite of having completed the security clearance or the status settlement procedure.⁹⁰

EASO reported on the case of Mazen al-Hamada, a Syrian who had been arrested three times by the Syrian authorities before fleeing to the Netherlands in 2014. During his stay in the Netherlands, Mazen spoke openly about his experience as a torture survivor, testifying against the Syrian authorities at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. Mazen settled his status with the Syrian authorities at the Syrian embassy in Berlin before he returned to Syria in 2020. No one heard from Mazen upon his arrival at the airport in Damascus. Many thus believe that he was forcibly disappeared by the Syrian authorities. According to Jusoor for Studies, Mazen was imprisoned at Sednaya Prison and referred to the Terrorism Court.⁹¹

A number of sources have pointed out that treatment of returnees in GoS-controlled areas of Syria depends among other things on their place of residence prior to leaving Syria⁹² as the GoS considers Syrians who have left government-controlled areas as well as those who have lived in areas that have been under opposition-control as traitors.⁹³

According to International Crisis Group (ICG), although a person is not wanted, he/she can still risk to be detained as a consequence of being 'reported by GoS informers'. Informers report people to the security agencies in order to achieve personal gains or to lift doubts about their own loyalty. International Crisis Group mentioned two cases of Syrians who were arrested after they returned to GoS-controlled areas because informers had reported them.⁹⁴

3.1.1. Treatment of returnees with status settlements regarding illegal exit or evasion

According to two sources consulted by the DIS for the December 2020 report, persons who apply for status settlement because of illegal exit or evasion from military service (in order to buy themselves out of military service by paying the exemption fee) would most likely obtain it.⁹⁵ This group of returnees usually do not face any problems with the GoS upon return.⁹⁶ However, another source interviewed by the DIS in

⁸⁹ AI, *You're going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), p. 17; HRW, "Our Lives Are Like Death", *Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), pp. 47, 50-51

⁹⁰ AI, *You're going to your death: Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria*, September 2021, [url](#), p. 17; HRW, "Our Lives Are Like Death", *Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan*, 20 October 2021, [url](#), p. 50

⁹¹ EASO, *Syria - Situation of returnees from abroad*, June 2021, [url](#), p. 29

⁹² Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 20; EIP, *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 21; EuroMed Rights, *Return Mania. Mapping policies and practices in the EuroMed region, Chapter 6, Pushbacks and expulsions from Cyprus and Lebanon: The dangers of (chain) refoulement to Syria*, March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

⁹³ EuroMed Rights, *Return Mania. Mapping policies and practices in the EuroMed region, Chapter 6, Pushbacks and expulsions from Cyprus and Lebanon: The dangers of (chain) refoulement to Syria*, March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

⁹⁴ ICG, *Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon*, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁹⁵ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁹⁶ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

August 2020 said that some people who settled their illegal exit or evasion might get temporarily arrested upon return. The source also assumed that some might be subjected to torture.⁹⁷

A Syrian researcher knew two individuals who were arrested upon return because of accusations of being a part of the opposition, despite having settled their illegal exit. These arrests occurred when they reported their return to the security branch that they were referred to by the Syrian authorities. One such individual was a 43-year-old man from Dumair in the northeastern part of Rural Damascus governorate. He returned from Lebanon and was detained for approximately 40 days. He was interrogated about some opposition commanders. After his release, he was called in for further interrogations. However, he was not re-arrested. The second person was a 24-year-old man from Damascus who was arrested a couple of weeks after he went back to Syria from Egypt. There was no specific reason for the arrest other than extortion. He was released after his family paid 14,000 USD.⁹⁸

3.1.1.1. *Consequences of settlement of illegal exit or draft evasion for family members*

The Syrian researcher further stated that a person's application for status settlement did not have consequences for his family members (e.g. interrogation or arrest). However, their names and information about them would be recorded in the security file of the person who had applied for status settlement.⁹⁹ Another source similarly assessed in the same DIS report that family members of a person who applied for status settlement because of illegal exit or unsettled military service issues would not face any issues as a result of the person's application.¹⁰⁰

3.1.2. *Illegal return*

On 15 September 2020, the Arabic online news site Asharq Al-Awsat reported that the number of Syrians returning to Syria through illegal borders had increased in recent years. According to the news site, irregular returns took place due to the returnees' illegal status in Lebanon caused by the strict regulations for entry into Lebanon and the high fees imposed by the Lebanese authorities to cross regular borders and reside in Lebanon. Other reasons mentioned were the returnees' inability to meet the requirement to exchange 100 USD that the Syrian authorities had imposed on its adult citizens when entering Syrian territory¹⁰¹ and – since the outbreak of Covid-19 – the inability to pay for a PCR test.¹⁰²

The Syrian NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented in a May 2020 report the arrest of at least 16 people who returned from Lebanon through illegal routes between January and late March 2020. They were initially held in a Covid-19 quarantine centre at the border and later brought before the Anti-

⁹⁷ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁹⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁹⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁰⁰ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁰¹ On 7 July 2020, the Government of Syria issued a decree requiring all adult Syrians returning from abroad to exchange US\$ 100 or its equivalent in a foreign currency that is accepted by the Central Bank of Syria. As the new policy requires that the exchange is based on the official Central Bank rate, returnees are forced to convert cash at approximately half its actual market value. UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update VI*, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 45-46

¹⁰² Asharq Al-Awsat, *الإجراءات اللبنانية والسورية تنشط خطوط تهريب اللاجئين عبر الحدود [Lebanese and Syrian measures activate cross-border smuggling lines for refugees]*, 15 September 2020, [url](#)

Terrorism Court.¹⁰³ In the same report, a Syrian returnee from Lebanon explained that 25 returnees who were placed in the Covid-19 quarantine centre in April 2020 were told by the Syrian authorities that they would be put on trial because they had entered Lebanon illegally (i.e. illegal exit from Syria).¹⁰⁴ It is not mentioned in the report whether these returnees had completed status settlement prior to their return.

3.1.3. *Treatment of persons who obtained a status settlement due to an unsettled security issue*

Jusoor for Studies, which was interviewed by the DIS in 2020, assessed that it was risky to return to Syria on the basis of the settlement of a security issue.¹⁰⁵ A Syrian researcher mentioned that there were cases of persons who were arrested when they reported their return to a security branch even though they had settled their security issues with the GoS.¹⁰⁶

Jusoor for Studies stated that persons who applied for a status settlement would also have their profiles on social media investigated by the Syrian security forces. A person might be interrogated about any anti-government activity on his/her profiles upon return to Syria. Even if a person has a status settlement paper, the person may face problems; for example, if a friend of his/her has liked a post that the GoS regards as anti-government.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, two other sources stated that having settled one's security issues and having had one's name removed from wanted lists did not necessarily mean that one would avoid problems with the authorities upon return; one may risk facing new accusations and being arrested upon return despite one's status settlement.¹⁰⁸ One source knew of people who completed a status settlement for having unsettled security issues but who were nonetheless arrested upon return. According to the source, there were also cases of people who entered and exited Syria without having settled their status even though they were wanted by a security branch. Those people did not face any problems because they were lucky that they did not run into the security branch that they were wanted by.¹⁰⁹

3.1.3.1. *Consequences of settlement of security issues for family members*

The brothers and parents of a person who is wanted for security issues may risk being called in for interrogation by the Syrian authorities as a consequence of this person's application for a status settlement. In general, the family members will be asked about the person's motives to return to Syria and about his/her work and activity in the foreign country he/she is applying from. Syria Direct assumed that the person's relatives might be verbally harassed as well. In addition, Syria Direct knew of persons whose relatives were affiliated with the opposition and who faced issues with the authorities upon their return to Syria despite having settled their issues prior to return. The source mentioned a case related to the "Al-Bouaidani" family who is a well-known family in Douma in Rural Damascus governorate. Most of this family,

¹⁰³ STJ, Hama: *Arrests against Syrians Returning from Lebanon Illegally*, 23 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ STJ, Hama: *Arrests against Syrians Returning from Lebanon Illegally*, 23 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁰⁵ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁰⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi (Skype meeting 5 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁰⁷ Jusoor for Studies (Skype meeting 25 August 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 11-12

¹⁰⁸ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) and SOHR (phone interview 24 November 2020 in) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁰⁹ SOHR (phone interview 24 November 2020 in) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 12

including a former opposition leader, had participated in the armed opposition against the GoS. A person from this family had his land and car seized, and he was interrogated when he returned to Syria in 2019. This happened even though he was not wanted by the GoS, neither for military service nor for opposition activities.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Syria Direct (Skype meeting 10-11 August, 2 October 2020) in DIS, *Syria: Security clearance and status settlement for returnees*, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

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