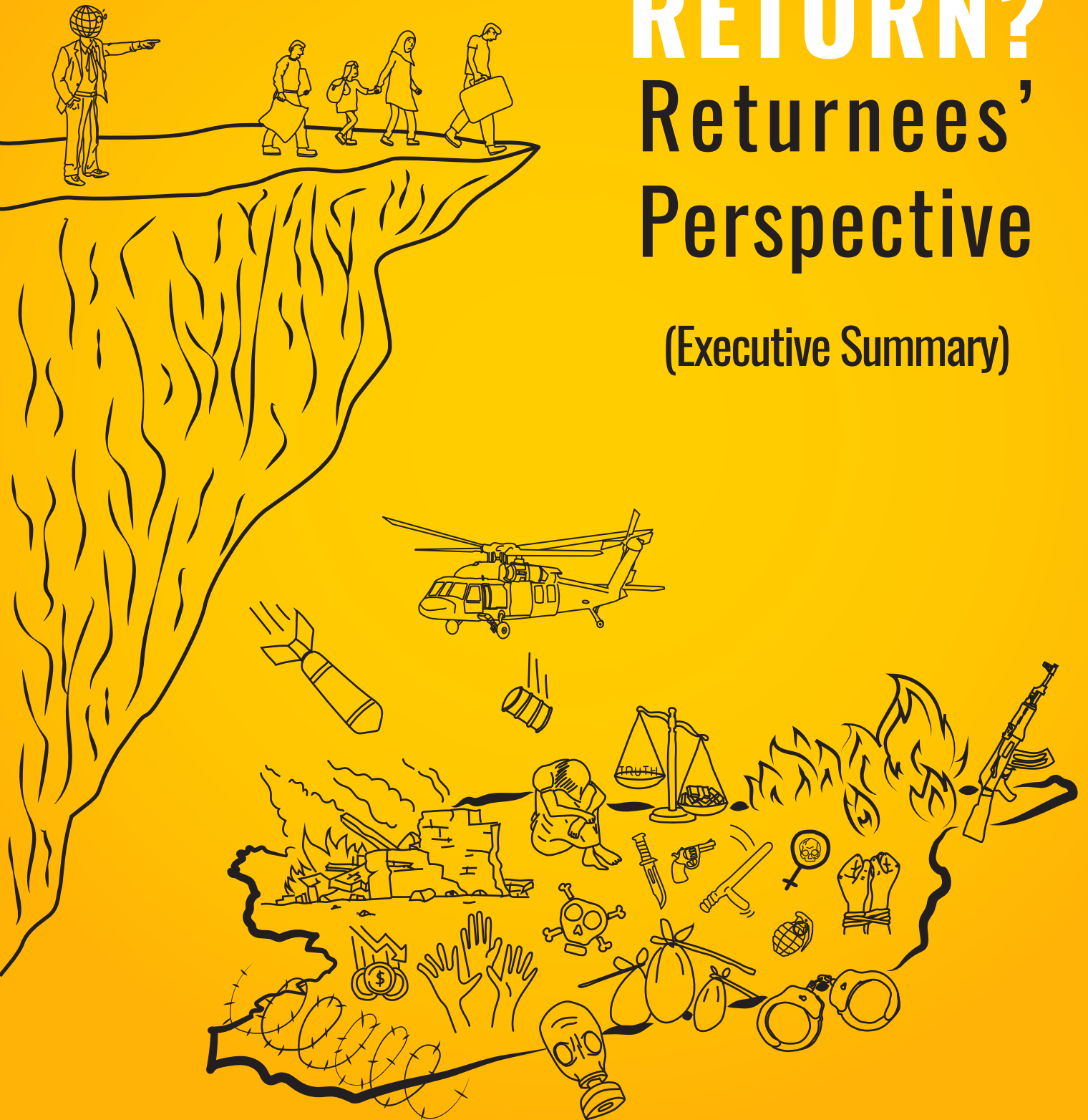




**Voices for  
Displaced Syrians**

# **IS SYRIA SAFE FOR RETURN? Returnees' Perspective**

**(Executive Summary)**



**Nov 2021**



**Voices for  
Displaced Syrians**



مركز السياسات وبحوث العمليات  
Operations & Policy Center

**Under the auspices of the Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF), this report was conducted by the Operations and Policy Center (OPC).**

#### **About VDSF:**

The Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF) gathers 40+ Syrian civil society organizations operating in Syria and refugee-hosting countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. Established in 2019, the VDSF advocates for the achievement of durable solutions to protect, respond to, and improve the quality of life of displaced Syrians inside Syria and abroad. In addition, the VDSF is a platform for cooperation, consultation, and coordination on issues concerning displacement and refugees.

#### **About OPC:**

Operations and Policy Center (OPC, formerly Orient Policy Center) is an independent think tank and service provider. Established in 2014, OPC conducts original research and provides consulting services to enhance policymaking, development programs, and humanitarian response projects. Syrian-led and owned, OPC combines local knowledge with technological and scientific expertise, utilizing in-house statisticians and graphic designers to create original and intuitive final products. Between 2014 and 2018, OPC was an exclusive service provider to the Orient Research Center (ORC) in Dubai. Since then, OPC has focused on cultivating relationships with governmental and non-governmental bodies working in Syria and/or with the Syrian diaspora.

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# Report Summary

The conflict in Syria has created a devastating, decade-long humanitarian crisis with ripple effects felt throughout the world. It has been described as one of the most brutal wars in recent history; its fighting tactics have included the widespread use of torture, enforced disappearances, chemical weapons, barrel bombs, and other atrocities. As of 2021, more than 12 million people—almost half of Syria’s pre-war population—have been forced to leave their homes, fleeing the violence and repression. The UNHCR estimates that 6.7 million Syrians have become internally displaced,<sup>1</sup> while 6.68 million have become refugees in both the region and in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

While hostilities have declined in recent years, the security situation remains extremely fragile. To make matters worse, economic deterioration and the COVID-19 pandemic have posed new challenges to the daily lives of the civilian population, who are still attempting to grapple with the widespread destruction and trauma experienced over the past ten years.

Despite the absence of a viable and durable political solution, and widespread reports of enduring human rights violations committed by parties to the conflict, policy discourse has begun to focus on the question of return. In particular, some refugee-hosting countries have begun espousing the narrative that Syria is safe, leading to policies that would result in the revocation of asylum status and protections for displaced Syrians. Despite ample preliminary evidence that conditions for a safe and dignified return are lacking, this narrative of safety continues to gain traction.

This report focuses on the voices, experiences, and opinions of Syrian returnees, IDPs, and residents, to establish whether or not the 22 Protection Thresholds established by the UN in its 2018 Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy (CPSS)<sup>3</sup> have been met; those objectives must be reached before any justification of a move into large-scale, facilitated returns.

The report is grounded in original research and data analysis on the safety, security, and economic conditions within each of the four primary control areas in Syria [Government of Syria (GoS), Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)], thereby providing NGOs and policymakers with the contextual information required to make well-informed decisions around the issue of return.

The research used a mixed-method approach, which included 700 surveys with residents, IDPs, and returnees, supplemented by 26 community interviews and five expert interviews to fill any data gaps. The research also conducted an in-depth literature review, which covered detailed topics including a statistical overview of Syrian displacement and returns, the legal context, policies and practices in host countries, the Syrian government’s political strategy toward returns, laws in Syria which facilitate the government’s political aims and disenfranchisement of displaced and returning Syrians, existing return procedures, and known violations upon return across the different control areas.

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1- “Refugee Data Finder,” The UN Refugee Agency, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=nvHzZ0>

2- “Refugee Data Finder,” The UN Refugee Agency, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=KeEw70>

3- UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, “Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria,” PDF download, UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), February 2018, 7-8, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63223>.

- **Of all returnees surveyed, at least 41% self-reported that they did not return to Syria voluntarily;** 22% of the subsample viewed their experience as being forced back, while 16% reported that they were pressured by authorities in their host area.
- For those returns self-reported as “voluntary,” findings reveal a complex picture. In fact, **surveys found that difficult conditions during displacement have acted as a push factor for 42% of those who returned voluntarily (30% for returnees from abroad, and 59% for returnees from within Syria). According to respondents, these superseded any pull factors—such as improved conditions in the area of origin—in their decision-making process.** The top three push factors cited included a poor living situation in host areas, an unstable security situation in host areas, and the inability to continue studying. It is useful to note that there were also discrepancies between control areas, especially in GoS-held areas, where only 21% of returns were reported as voluntary.
- Interestingly, only 54% of returnees who said they returned home voluntarily did so with an initial intent to remain there long-term, prior to leaving. In other words, a large percentage of returnees only decided to return to Syria during a temporary visit in which they either decided to stay or were prevented from leaving. This suggests that Syrians lack the information needed to make informed return decisions ahead of time, as for many, seeing conditions for themselves is the only means of obtaining adequate information.

Of those who cited pull factors as a primary motivation behind their return, 24% were pulled by family reunification. The majority of this subsample were returnees from abroad; these findings suggest that stricter asylum policies in host countries have forced some Syrians into making very difficult choices about returning, putting themselves at personal risk simply to be reunited with their loved ones, a sentiment which was expressed by several respondents.

- The survey also identified **a total of 13 returnees (4%) who reported that the UN was involved in facilitating their returns.** Eight of these returns were facilitated within Syria, three were facilitated from Lebanon, and two from Turkey.

What is notable about this group is that **only two individuals reported that their UN-facilitated return was voluntary.** The remaining individuals reported being forced back against their will or incentivized into returning by authorities; three did not feel comfortable providing details. Only four of these 13 individuals reported being counseled or provided with sufficient information prior to their return.

Additionally concerning is that these 13 returnees reported violations at greater levels than the average returnee population, **suggesting a gap in safeguarding measures.**

While these findings are not conclusive, due to the small sample size, they nonetheless counter the expectations specified in Phase 1 of the CPSS (the current phase outlined in the UNHCR report) where UN engagement should be limited to “planning, monitoring, counseling, advocacy, and ongoing analysis.” This suggests the need for further research to determine what shortcomings in formal return processes are preventing guarantees that individuals are returning completely of their own volition, without force, coercion, or incentives. All of our research results for this report call into question the voluntariness of “voluntary” returns.

- Finally, **return experiences were varied among individuals, with difficulties reported across all control areas.** Returnees from within Syria noted various military checkpoints, encounters with gangs, and a lack of safe passage corridors between areas. Those returning from abroad reported intense scrutiny and interrogations at border crossings, long and intimidating wait times, and more. Many returnees did not feel comfortable providing details of their journeys, indicating a fear for their safety, which also contributes to the persistent information gap on returns.

Physical Safety

Returnees were asked about their experiences with violence over the past 12 months. There were clear variations between control areas, perhaps because the past year has been a period of increased calm due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and pauses in armed hostilities. Despite this, **at the whole-of-Syria level 11% of returnees still reported that they or a loved one experienced physical violence or harm in their place of residence, with an additional 7% preferring not to answer**, perhaps indicating a fear to speak openly about this issue. Of the few who provided details, they reported being beaten by armed groups for unknown reasons, personal disputes, arbitrary arrest by regime forces, and arrests during COVID-19 curfews. A further 17% of returnees across all areas reported that they or a loved one experienced arbitrary arrest or detention during the past year.

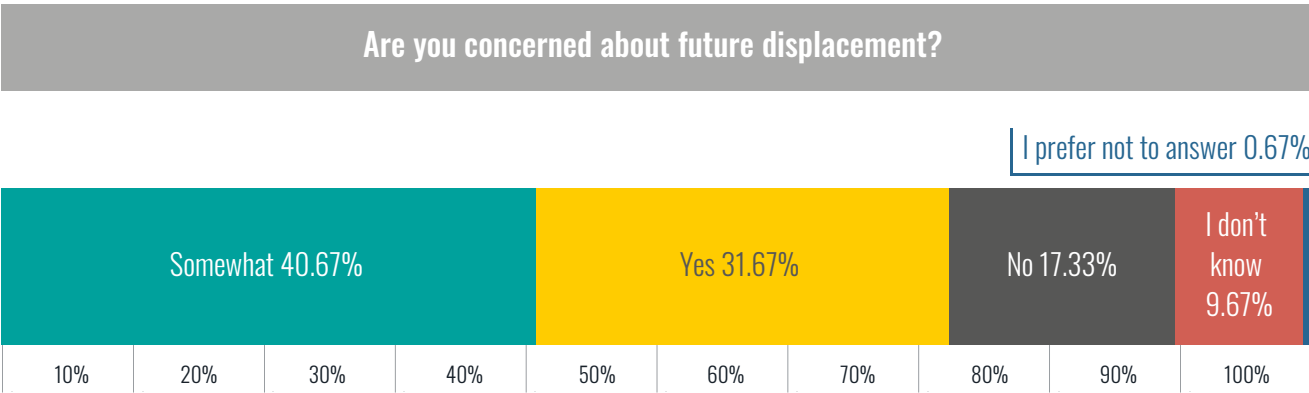
**Concerns about physical safety were raised far more frequently in areas under GoS control compared with other control areas.** Nearly half of internal returnees in GoS areas reported they or a loved one experienced arbitrary arrest or detention over the last year; nearly one-third reported they or a loved one endured physical violence or harm. Of particular note: in the GoS-control subsample, many more violations were reported by internal returnees than among those returning from abroad.

In terms of persecution, **27% of returnees across all areas reported they or someone close to them faced persecution due to their place of origin, for having left Syria illegally or for lodging an asylum claim abroad; another 28% reported persecution due to an individual or family characteristic.** Again, these percentages were highest in GoS-held territories, where almost half of all returnees reported that they or a loved one had experienced such persecution. High percentages were also reported in AANES territories.

Returnees reported severe restrictions on movement, with reasons varying between control areas. Those reasons included COVID-19, military checkpoints, a rule of law absence, general concerns about safety and violence, active conflict, kidnapping, and explosive hazards.

Reports of active military recruitment came from all control areas, but were reported in especially high numbers across GoS and AANES territories.

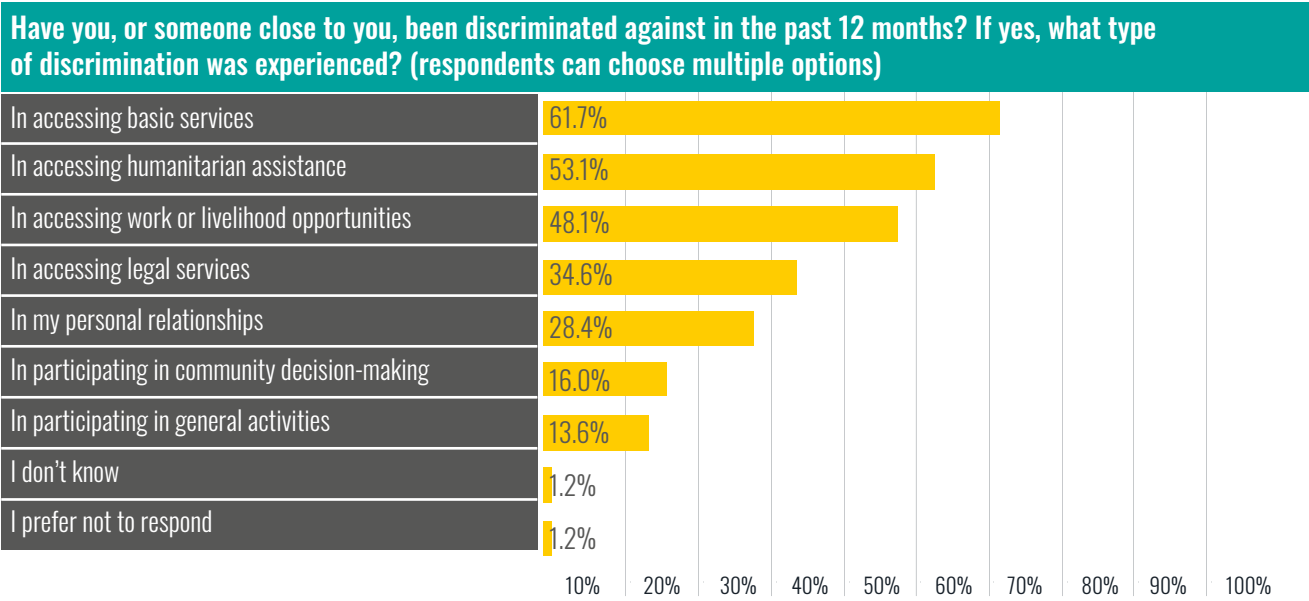
Finally, returnees in all control areas reported wide-reaching concerns that they could become displaced again in the future, with only 17% saying that they were “not concerned at all.”



Psychosocial Safety

Feelings of safety also varied dramatically between return areas. For instance, **the majority of returnees in GoS areas (57%) reported feeling “unsafe” or only “somewhat safe” walking in their neighborhood during the day. The number of those feeling unsafe/somewhat safe was 37% in SIG/SSG territories (with highest numbers in Idlib at 50%), and lowest numbers in AANES territories at 20%.**

Experiences of discrimination can contribute to an individual feeling unsafe. Overall, 27% of returnees reported that they or someone close to them had been discriminated against during the past year. Although reports were common across control areas, dramatically higher numbers came from within GoS-held territories—especially in Damascus city, where 56% reported they or a loved one experienced discrimination over the past year. Reports were highest among returnees from within Syria, as well as among men in Damascus city and women in Jaramana. The most common forms of discrimination were in accessing basic services, humanitarian assistance, legal services, and livelihood opportunities. **By a significant margin, returnees across all areas reported their “place of origin” as the primary cause of discrimination**, followed by their family or tribe, their gender, and their history of migrating from Syria or claiming asylum abroad.

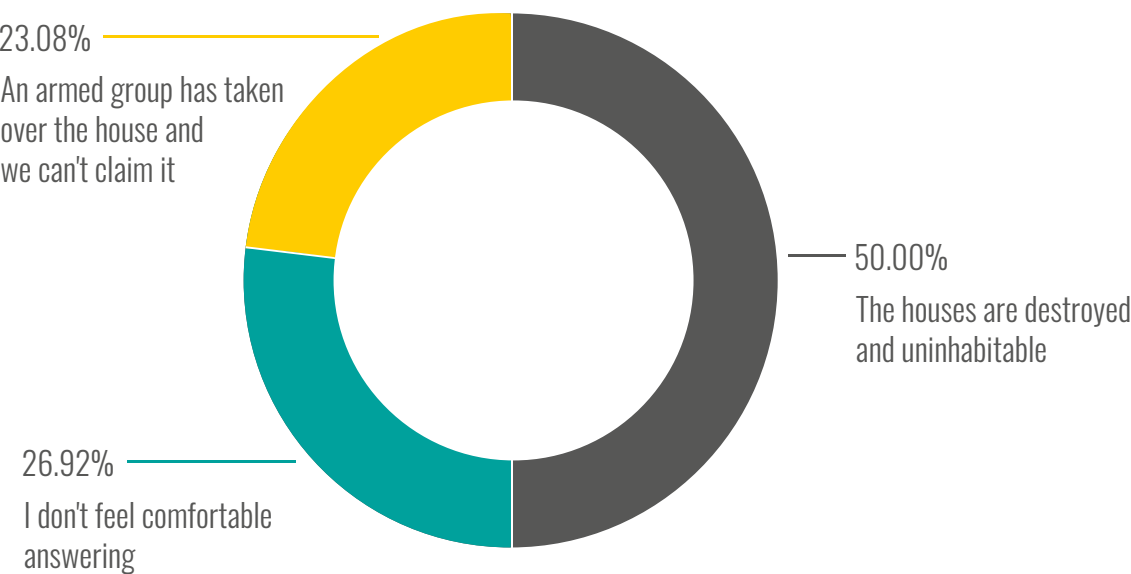


Discrimination can develop into harassment and physical threats, which were reported by 17% of returnees at the whole-of-Syria level over the past year, with an additional 9% preferring not to answer. Most of this subsample preferred not to elaborate upon the causes, while 20% attributed it to their family or tribe, and another 20% to their place of origin.

Reports of harassment or physical threats were much higher in GoS areas, and all reports of gender-based harassment or threats came from within GoS areas. Ethnic and religious harassment or threats were reported almost exclusively in GoS areas as well, although they played a more minor role than other forms.

Housing, land, and property (HLP) rights are another issue of importance for Syrian returnees. The survey found that, at the whole-of-Syria level, 11% of returnees who owned HLP in their area have been unable to reclaim it, with an additional 6% preferring not to answer. The main reasons cited were destruction of the home, or the home being overtaken by armed groups.

Have you, or your close family, ever owned housing, land or property in your area? If you have not been able to successfully reclaim it, and you feel comfortable to do so, please explain what happened.



**In GoS areas specifically, 24% of returnees who owned HLP in the area have been unable to reclaim it**, with an additional 14% preferring not to answer. Most reported their houses have been destroyed or are uninhabitable; a sizable minority reported that their property has been overtaken by armed groups.

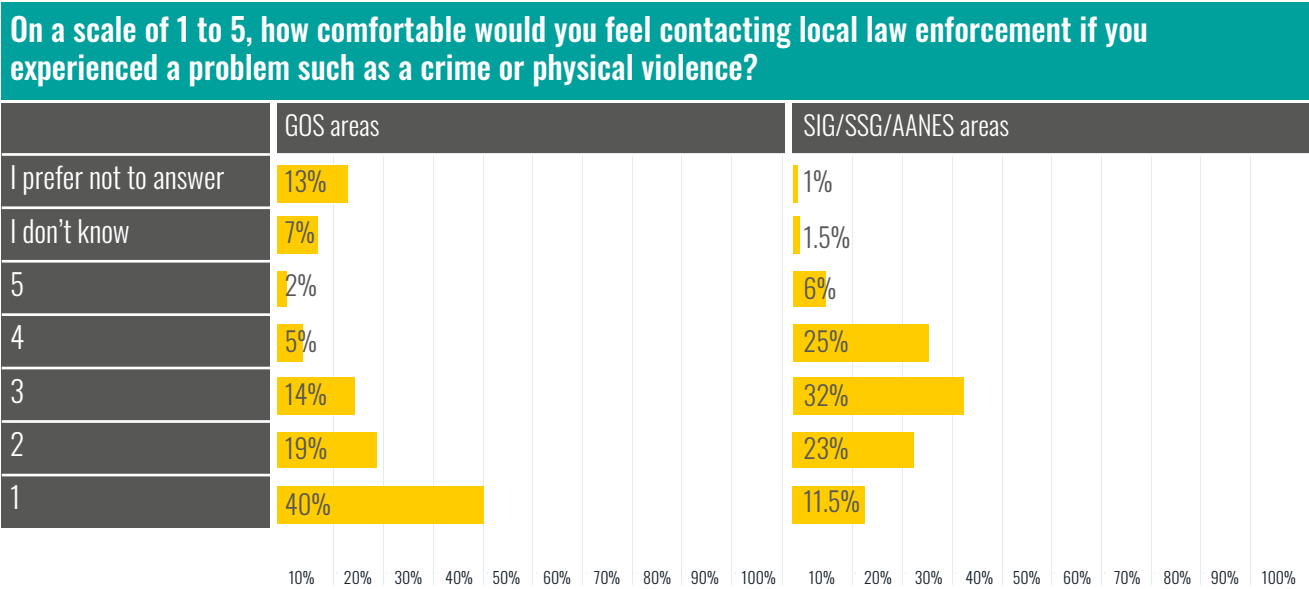
**In terms of reclaiming property, it is also important to note that there are large differences between returnees and IDPs; IDPs report greater difficulty in reclaiming their property, and in much higher numbers than returnees.**

Finally, **the deterioration of living conditions and basic services is well-documented throughout Syria. In GoS areas**, 69% of respondents said they have not had adequate and regular access to electricity or heating over the past year (a mere 4% said they did); 54% said they did not have regular and adequate access to safe drinking water, 29% did not have regular access to health services (including pharmacies), and 13% did not have regular access to education.

**Similar conditions were emphasized in the remaining SIG-, SSG-, and AANES-controlled territories**, with an emphasis on the poor purchasing power of their currency, unaffordable rent combined with rising costs of living and a shortage of jobs, frequent shortages and poor quality of food, lack of electricity and water, shortages and high prices of medication, and poor education services. All of these factors contribute to the poor material safety and security of Syrians throughout the country, and can thereby exacerbate other forms of violations.

Finally, legal safety in this report concerns access to documentation, justice mechanisms, and law enforcement. In terms of documentation, **at least 32% of returnees report that they or a loved one have experienced at least some difficulty in obtaining documentation for children born outside Syria, foreign spouses, or others. This number is highest by far for returnees in GoS areas, especially those who returned from within Syria.** When asked to provide details, returnees at the whole-of-Syria level reported that they struggled to obtain passports (21%), register children born outside of Syria (21%), and register a marriage (16%). One-fourth of returnees detailed that they or family members were missing official (Syrian government-issued) documentation.

Moreover, few returnees confirmed the presence of justice and law enforcement channels to help them sufficiently address violations they have suffered in their communities; a full 27% of returnees stated that these channels do not exist, while only 15% state that they do. Narrowing to GoS areas specifically, returnees reported that these channels were virtually nonexistent (only 3% overall and 0% in Damascus City said they exist). For comparison, this number stood at 20% in SIG/SSG territories, and 21% in AANES territories.



Regrets About Return

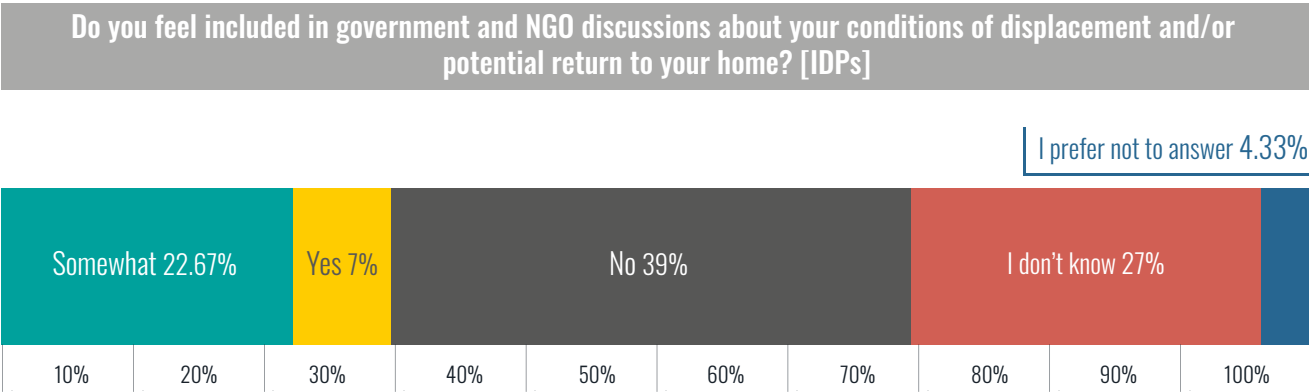
All of the above conditions influence individual perceptions about a decision to return. **At the whole-of-Syria level, regrets about return were split, with just over half of returnees (52%) feeling confident about their decision, and the other half either regretting it entirely (15%) or expressing doubts and uncertainties (34%).** These responses varied widely between areas. The starkest difference was observed between returnees from within Syria and those from abroad, where 64% of internal returnees felt return was the right decision, compared with only 40% of returnees from abroad.

Regardless of whether returnees felt secure in their decision to return or not, only 21% of all returnees felt that they had access to the relevant information needed to obtain resources and/or make informed plans for their future.

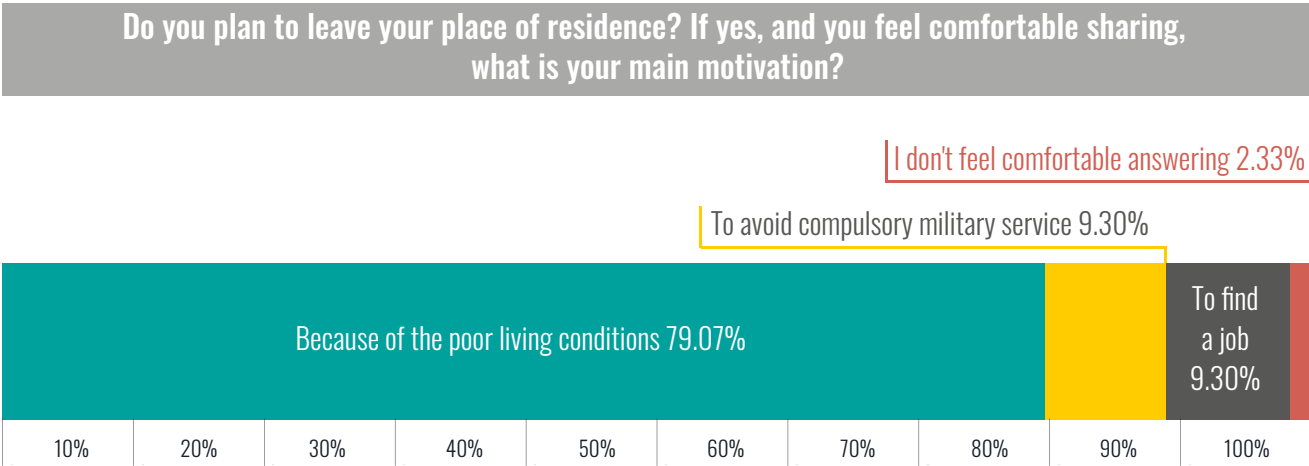
### Intentions to Return (IDPs) or Migrate (Non-displaced residents)

The survey also asked IDPs across Syria about their experiences and intentions to return, and non-displaced residents in GoS areas about their intentions to migrate in the future.

Among IDPs, **82% had been displaced more than once; 21% had been displaced five times or more.** The largest group of IDPs was last displaced in 2019. IDPs provided many reasons for becoming displaced most recently; the most cited, unsurprisingly, was the conflict and lack of security at 73%, followed by deterioration in economic conditions and the lack of basic services. **While most IDP respondents said they have a desire to return to their place of origin prior to the conflict, a lower percentage said they have an actual plan in place to do so. Furthermore, of those who do have a plan to return, three-fourths do not know yet when they will attempt the journey—suggesting that for most, their plans are rather loose.**

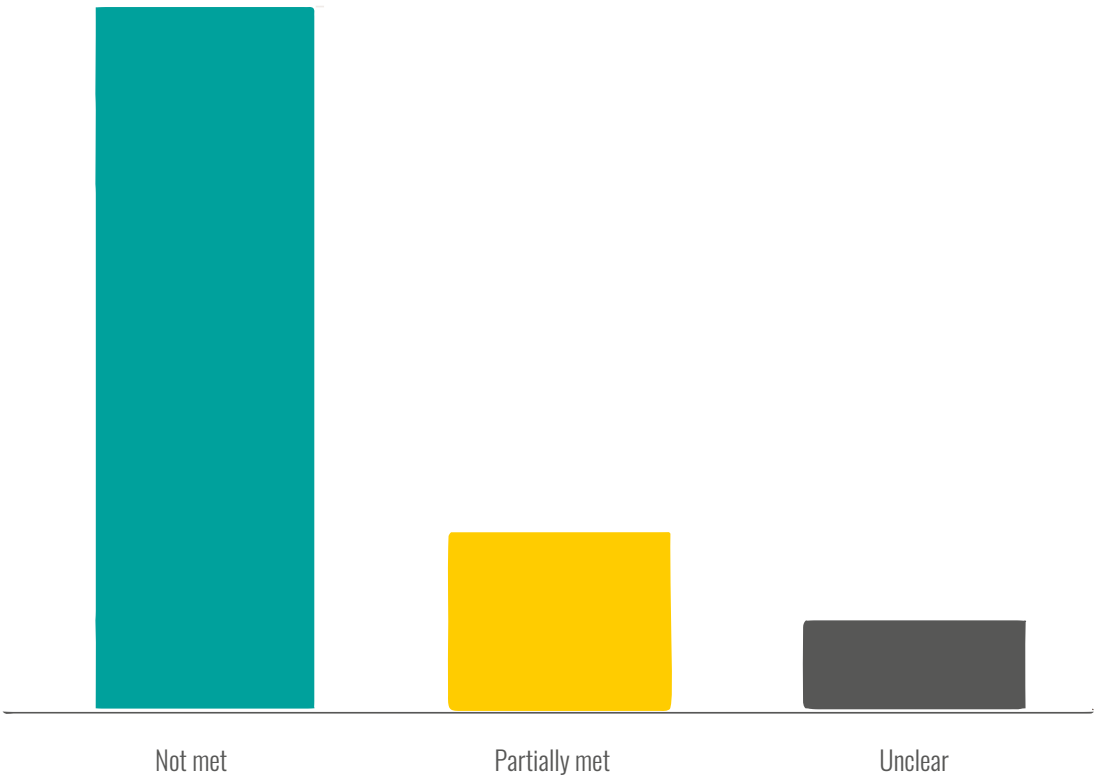


Among non-displaced residents (neither returnees nor IDPs), a notable **58% surveyed in GoS areas expressed a desire to leave their homes, and 75% of those who felt comfortable answering this question (and many did not) reported having a plan in place to do so.** While the majority do not know yet when they will leave, 30% said they plan to leave within the next 6 months, and all said they would prefer to go to a different country rather than to another part of Syria.



In conclusion, the 22 Protection Thresholds established by the UN are currently the main indicators being used to justify a move into large-scale and facilitated returns. This report found that, out of the 22, a total of 16 thresholds are currently considered not met. Furthermore, 4 thresholds can be considered partially met, while 2 thresholds are too unclear to make a well-informed determination on their status, and therefore require further research.

Assessment of protection thresholds



In other words, **none of the thresholds were considered sufficiently met**. Based on this determination, conditions are currently not suitable enough to allow the facilitated return of Syrian refugees.



## Voices for Displaced Syrians