The Security Landscape in Syria and its Impact on the Return of Refugees

Opinion Survey

Mohamed Al Bdullah

The Security Landscape in Syria and its Impact on the Return of Refugees
An Opinion Survey

The Security Landscape in Syria and its Impact on the Return of Refugees

An Opinion Survey

Mohamed Al Bdullah

Omran Center for Strategic Studies

Omran Center for Strategic Studies

An independent think tank and policy research center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's outputs support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions

Table of Contents

I.   Executive Summary

- The main goal of the study was to inspect factors influencing the return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries. The study targeted all areas in Syria, including those controlled by the regime, opposition, and the Autonomous Administration (AA). Based on a wide and comprehensive sample, the data was then analyzed to explore the security situation, relations between citizen and state, as well as identify other causes that may be influencing the return of Syrian refugee.

- The study is based upon 620 surveys from Syrian refugees residing in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as two Focus-Group Discussions (FGD) in regime-held Dara'a and Damascus Countryside.

- The study is divided into four components; 1) overview of the general security situation, 2) relations between civilians and security apparatuses, 3) factors affecting decision to return, and 4) the experience of refugee return to the particular regions. Each component is based on field research in each of the three uniquely controlled territories in Syria. A number of conclusions were assembled from the sample's responses to the survey and within the FGDs.

1. The General Security Situation – An Overview

- The general security situation in Syria continues to be highly volatile and fragmented mirroring the political, military, and economic instability. To varying degrees, each area is experiencing a host of challenges revolving around the social and economic repercussions from the continued war.

- Based on responses from respondents residing in regime-held areas, the behavior of the security apparatuses affiliated with the Assad regime remains unchanged and persistent in utilizing the same detention and torture tactics as before 2011. The responses highlighted that the Assad-regime has even increased its brutality against civilians.

- The security apparatuses in regime, opposition, and AA held territories are unable to fully control the behavior of individuals, entities, and

groups under their respective command at varying degrees. This is mainly due to lack of accountability and corruption.

- Lack of professionalism by security-affiliated officials in opposition-held territories has contributed to the deteriorating security situation.

- In Eastern Syria, within areas under the control of the AA, the security situation varies largely from city to city. While the AA is able to control the Al-Hasaka province, the security situation in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor is deteriorating.

2. Relations between Civilians and Security Apparatuses

- The relationship between civilians and security groups in all of Syria are significantly deteriorating. When comparing the three highlighted regions, the security apparatuses in regime-held territories is significantly affecting voluntary return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries.

- Violations committed by regime security officials has reinforced public resentment, and exacerbated the negative perception of those security regime officials among citizens. The collective resentment and negative perception surrounding the regime's security apparatuses, makes it difficult for reconciliation to occur in the future, as there is loss of trust and lack of reassurances between the community and the security apparatuses.

- It is apparent that the Assad regime's security mechanism is no longer able to control the different military factions and militias. The inability to control armed groups has further ignited public wrath.

- In opposition-held areas, security groups are facing challenges in minimizing the influence of differing factions and in curbing their violations against civilians. Many of these factions refuse to abide by set rules.

- In all areas, citizens have little confidence that security apparatuses would address their complaints and believe they are biased in terms of arrests and complaint management.

- After 2011, regime security apparatuses relied increasingly on internal and external espionage networks by recruiting informants in all areas, across social classes and in countries hosting Syrian refugees. It is important to note that the Assad regime closely monitors returnees in areas in which the regime regained control.

3. Factors Affecting the Decision to Return

- With the deteriorating economic situation in Syria, access to a sustainable livelihood is among the most important factor considered by returnees. Other important factors that influence the decision to return included securing their property rights, accessing public services, and the prevalence of social and moral corruption.

- Seeking a voluntary and dignified return, Syrian participants highlighted the need for a UN-sponsored system that guarantees their security and safety upon return. Other *push factors* include: the level of services and living conditions, personal security, protection from discriminations, and legal/social stability experienced in host countries. All of these are significant factors that would influence their return.

- Most Syrian refugees attain information on the local situation through relatives and friends inside Syria, and is listed as their most relied upon source. This is followed by information from social media, international media outlets, and non-regime affiliated media outlets, as well as reports issued by civil society organizations or international organizations.

- The threat of facing arbitrary arrest by the Assad regime security, militias, and military factions was the most listed reason for delayed return among displaced Syrians. Fear of detention by the regime or other armed forces in Syria is followed by theft, abduction, and blackmailing for ransom. Other important considerations included local and foreign militias, the prevalence of assassinations, and random blasts.

- Displaced Syrians most at risk of arrest upon return to Assad regime-held areas are political activists, members of the Free Syrian Army, and members of opposition-military factions, defectors from the regime

military, and those targeted for military conscription. This is followed by employees who defected from regime institutions, individuals from anti-regime areas, and businessmen respectively.

4. Refugee Return to Regions under various control

- For a large percentage of refugees, return to regime-held territories is difficult without international guarantees of safety. Even if refugees are able to return, services are selectively distributed based on regional demographics, Additionally, the regime's security apparatuses would need to be reformed, which is close to impossible without structural changes in the country's governance systems. The security apparatuses are closely linked to the Assad regime, which refuses any reforms or restructuring.

- Opposition-held territories are fragile and suffer from security infiltrations. The instability and lack of security largely affects the lives of civilians, as they live in fear of further situational decline. Absent of a comprehensive strategy and logistical capacity, the security forces in opposition-held territory are unable to guarantee safety and stability for civilians. The security situation within these areas is likely to continue deteriorating with the Assad regime's agenda to advance and displacing more Syrians.

- AA-held territories suffering from pro-longed bureaucracies within the security apparatuses and wide-spread discriminatory practices including arbitrary arrest and protest suppression. This prevented a sense of stability within the AA regions. The lack of trust between communities and the AA's security apparatuses reflects the instability of the areas. Additionally, there remain ISIS sleeper cells also contributing to security instability. These contributing factors prevent refugees from returning to their homes in AA territories.

II.   Introduction

Entering its tenth year, the Syrian conflict has resulted in a host of challenges for Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. The topic of return is among the most critical in local and international conversations, which remains a challenge with no solution in sight. Without a conducive political, social, and economically environment, voluntary return will be limited. A number of items must be considered to elevate the option of voluntary return, including securing a safe and dignified return, maintaining regional stability, and arranging the appropriate regional and international circumstances to ensure the availability of the objective conditions necessary for such return.

When discussing the internal factors in which effect the return of Syria's displaced, the security situation is the most mentioned. The security conditions in all areas of Syria significantly influence an individual's decision to return. With deteriorating security conditions, civilians are unable to feel safe and stable. With fear of being displaced again due to security reasons, they are deterred from voluntary return. With the ongoing crisis, maintaining a secure space remains difficult for security forces in opposition, Assad regime, and Autonomous Administration (AA) held territory. The path towards providing civilians with a sense of safety and stability there must be a political and military solution. Recovery and reconstruction may only begin when a safe environment is secured.

Omran Centre for Strategic Studies implemented a survey targeting individuals from regime, opposition, and AA-held territories. This survey is integral as it illustrates the perspective of civilians concerning the security situation and factors influencing their return. From the surveys, it is apparent that locally civilians understand the security conditions intensively, and are aware. The chaotic security situation -is manifested in a host of violations that come in different forms, tools, and intensities. Thus, it reflects the fragility and volatility of the security environment, which is inconsistent with the demand that international bodies seek to fulfil as one of the

objective prerequisites for the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries.

The goal of the survey was to identify primary and secondary factors as well as indicators related to the primary indicator of security stability in Syria. These secondary indicators include the efficiency of security apparatuses as well as the legal system associated with them, the performance of these apparatuses and their security operations in addition to relevant accountability, follow-up and complaints systems, as well as the extent to which these indicators have an impact on the return of the Syrian refugees from neighboring countries. First, the survey attempts to diagnose the general security landscape in various Syrian regions, then to identify the nature of relationships between civilians and security apparatuses in these areas, furthermore identifying the most important variables that govern the refugees' decision to return to Syria. Finally, it examines the reality of the refugees' return to Assad regime-held areas, opposition-held areas, and AA areas to determine the most important indicators related to the return of refugees to these areas.

III.   Research Methodology

1. Target Population

The population targeted in this study are Syrians whom were forced to leave Syria and seek refuge in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq since 2011. According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), as of August 20, 2020, more than 5,554,915 refugees are displaced in the Syria's neighboring territories.[1] Figure (1) illustrates the distribution of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq between 2014 and 2020. The legal status of Syrian refugees in neighboring regions is diverse, while some receive asylum others receive temporary protection.

The laws concerning work and residence strikingly vary from one country to another. While some Syrians are able to attain tourist resident permits and work permits, others are forced to reside and work illegally. This is based on the conditions imposed by each country.

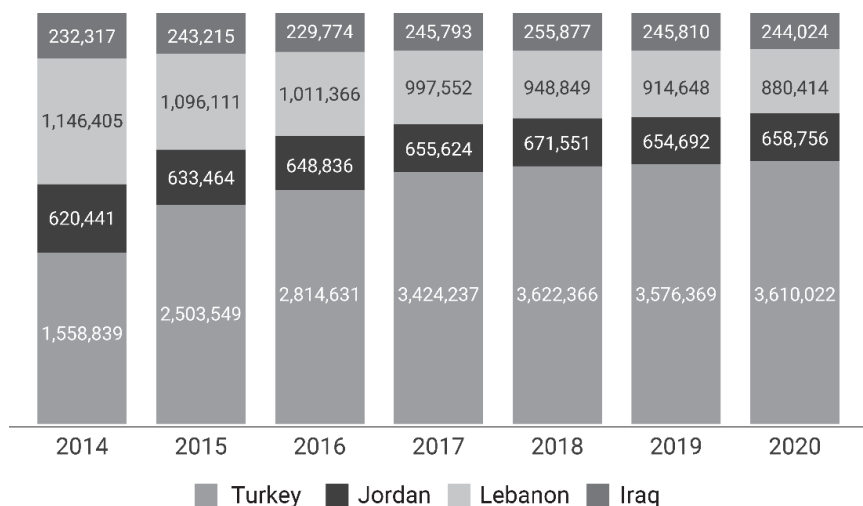|	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Iraq	232,317	243,215	229,774	245,793	255,877	245,810	244,024
Lebanon	1,146,405	1,096,111	1,011,366	997,552	948,849	914,648	880,414
Jordan	620,441	633,464	648,836	655,624	671,551	654,692	658,756
Turkey	1,558,839	2,503,549	2,814,631	3,424,237	3,622,366	3,576,369	3,610,022

Figure (1) Numbers of Syrian refugees per country 2020-2014
Source: Operational portal, refugee situations, UNHCR,
access on: 2020-09-07: https://rb.gy/ine2pl

---

[1] UNHCR, accessed on 7-9-2020, https://bit.ly/3mFvZoi

On the other hand, Figure (2) below illustrates UNHCR numbers of returnees from these countries to different Syrian areas between 2016 and July 20, 2020. As shown below, 92,075, returned from Turkey, 59,877 from Jordan, 53,985 from Lebanon, and least are 43,302 from Iraq. These figures may not reflect the real number of returnees because, in many cases, returns do not take place under the supervision of UNHCR.
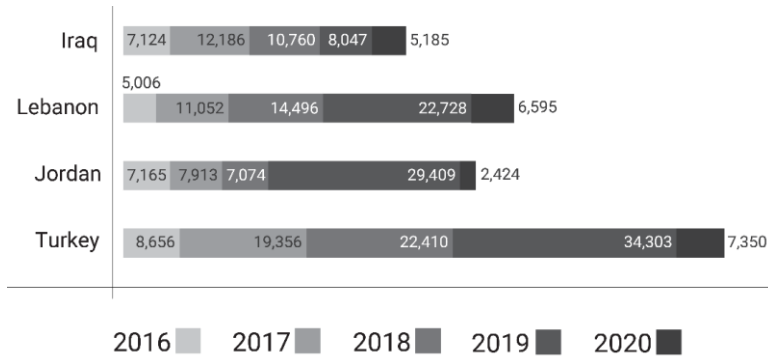

Figure (2) Numbers of returnees per country 2016 - present
Source: Operational portal, refugee situations, UNHCR,
as 2020-07-20: https://rb.gy/ine2pl

There is also discrepancy between the numbers reported above and those acknowledged by state authorities. In Turkey, the government stated that, by the end of 2019, the number of voluntary returnees reached nearly 370,000,[2] which varies from the amount reported in Figure (2). In Lebanon, the Directorate of General Security reported that the number of returnees between November 30, 2017 and December 29, 2019 reached 341,873.[3] This included those whom returned voluntarily and through organized trips.

Based on the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD), which is a part of the Jordanian Ministry of Interior (MoI), 153.000 refugees crossed the Jaber

---

[2] Turkey: Around 370 thousand Refugees Returned to Northern Syria, Enab Baladi, 26-11-2019: https://rb.gy/xm77oo

[3] George Shahin, Investigative Study of the Return of Syrians to their Country during 2019, General Security Magazine, Edition 76, Jan 2020: https://rb.gy/wreexp

Border Crossing to Syria between October 15, 2018 and September 16, 2019.[4]

Lastly, although there are no figures on the number of returnees from Iraq over the past years, some estimates indicate 850 refugees returned between March 2020 and June 7, 2020, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.[5]

Additionally, there is a variety of other data by countries and organizations involved in the Syrian conflict, such as Russia. According to the Russian Initiative on refugee return, Moscow presented its own figures. Russian statistics stated that the number of returnees between July 2018 and February 2020 reached 779,544.[6]

Figure (3) below, illustrates that according to UNHCR, 250,555 returnees arrived in Syria between 2016 and July 2020. It also maps the military control across Syria. Military control is distributed between the Syrian opposition, the Autonomous Administration (AA), and the Assad regime. The map also showcases the border crossings and the location of neighboring countries.

---

[4] Jordanian MoI: 153 thousand Syrians Left via Jaber Border Crossing, The New Arab, 17-09-2019: https://rb.gy/sugwoa

[5] After a Decision by Kurdistan Government… Syrian Refugees Voluntarily Return Home, Shafak News Agency, 07-06-2020: https://rb.gy/aiwix7

[6] Joint statement of the Joint Coordination Headquarters of Russian and Syria about problems hindering the implementation of displaced people to their selected domicile. Russian Defense Ministry website (accessed on 10-03-2020): https://rb.gy/vblubr
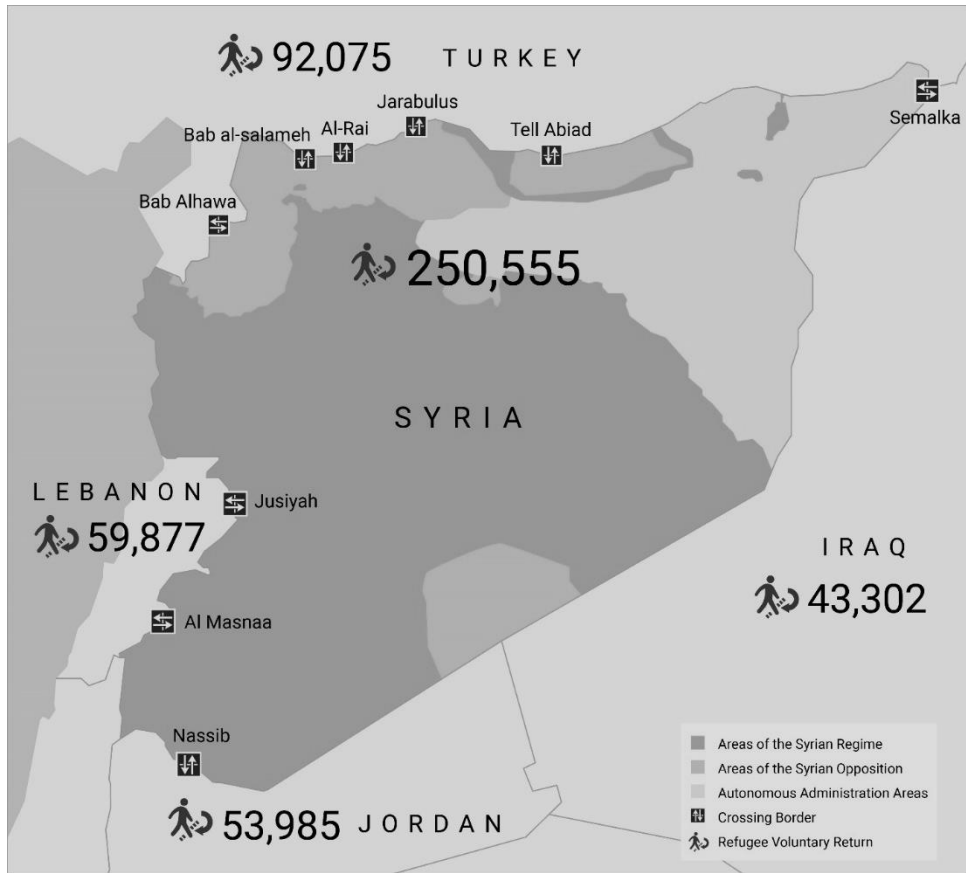
Figure (3) Total numbers of returnees per country, border crossings, and control map.
Source: https://bit.ly/33p0S8K

2. Sample

A total of 600 respondents residing in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq completed the questionnaire, and 20 returnees inside Syria participated in Focus Group Discussions (10 per FGD) in Daraa and Damascus Countryside. It is important to note that questionnaires were distributed proportionally among the four target countries. Table 1 illustrates sample distribution according to country, city and sample size.

There are three main reasons in selecting Syria's neighboring countries for this study, 1) they host the vast majority of Syrian refugees, 2) most refugees returning are from the select countries, and 3) due to a shared land-border

with Syria, each country may hold a role in future refugee return efforts. The town of Inkhil within the Daraa governorate, and Kafr Batna located in Damascus Suburbs were selected as they witnessed the return of some refugees from Jordan and Lebanon.

Country	City	Sample Size	
		Surveys	**FGDs**
Turkey	Istanbul	**100**	
	Gazi Antep	**75**	
	Sanli Urfa	**75**	
Lebanon	Ersal	**89**	
	Bekaa	**56**	
	Tripoli	**15**	
Jordan	Amman	**80**	
	Madaba	**6**	
	Al-Mafraq	**6**	
	Zarqa	**19**	
	Al-Karak	**4**	
Iraq	Erbil	**45**	
	Dahok	**25**	
	Sulaymaniyah	**5**	
Syria	Kafr Batna town - Damascus Suburbs	-	10
	Inkhil town - Daraa	-	10
Total		**600**	20

Table (1) Sample distribution by country of asylum

Despite time and geographical limitations, effort were exerted to ensure that the sample represents the study population in terms of demographics and of the proportional distribution of Syrian refugees among the countries. There were difficulties in attaining a sufficient sample, as many people hesitated to participate in the questionnaire, due to potential consequences for voicing their opinions. In addition, many of those who consented to fill in the questionnaire refrained from mentioning any personal information.

Let alone the difficulty of finding people who are fully aware of the security situation to participate in FGDs due to the fear from security apparatuses in

regime-held areas. Moreover, achieving gender balance in FGDs was a challenge due to the fact that women in these areas refused to participate for reasons related to the conservative nature of these areas, and fear of detention by security apparatuses affiliated with the Assad regime.

3. Research Tools

This study implemented two research tools:

1. Questionnaire:

A survey was conducted based on a questionnaire of 11 closed-ended questions and covered all aspects of the two main variables, i.e. **describing the security situation in Syria and the return of Syrian refugees**, in addition to the demographic characteristics of the selected sample. It allowed respondents to express their opinions on the raised questions which enabled us to assess the current situation of these variables within the study population and the availability of appropriate security circumstances for Syrian refugees to return home in line with the current reality in Assad regime-held areas, opposition-held areas and AA areas. Questionnaire designers have devised desk research inputs to construct this questionnaire (Appendix 1). These inputs included field media reports and studies related to the reality of security parameters in these areas as well as periodic preliminary reports on the security situation in Syria prepared by the Information Unit at Omran Center for Strategic Studies through the past years. The questionnaire was distributed among a group of trained field researchers (enumerators) in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq so every trained enumerator would distribute the questionnaire in the country of their residence personally or online via Google Drive. Enumerators also assisted respondents filling questionnaires by providing further explanation. Later on, enumerators sent the completed questionnaires directly to the principal researcher for analysis.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Two FGDs were held in the town of Inkhil in Daraa governorate and Kafr Batna in the countryside of Damascus, as illustrated in Table 1. Each FGD consisted of 10 participants. The main themes covered in the FGD were related to the security situation in Assad regime-held areas and their relevance on the return of Syrian refugees to these areas. Additionally, participants discussed the status of returnees in Assad regime-held areas and a perspective on returnee conditions in the future.

The enumerators faced a myriad of challenges in conducting FGDs. The challenges included; the inability to gather participants in one place out of fear of being held liable by security officials and the hesitation of some respondents to express their opinions in a group. Due to the challenges, researchers needed to follow-up with individual discussions and facilitate in smaller groups. Additionally, researchers had trouble in finding qualified people to discuss the themes outlined in the discussion guide. This may explain the difference in results between the two FGDs. The outputs of these FGDs were used and included in data analysis. A table of the main themes discussed in the two FGDs is attached in Appendix 2.

IV. Data Analysis

Following is an analysis of the questionnaire responses.

1. Characteristics of the sample

1.1 Gender

70% of the respondents are males in contrast to 30% females, as shown in Figure (4). The lower participation of females is due to the nature of the topic i.e. security situation and returnees, as men are more likely to be interested in such topics and their developments.

Women, conversely, are less interested in following these topics due to the nature of life in asylum communities. Women endure difficult conditions, and bear greater burden in looking after their families, many also holding the role of breadwinner. Yet, of course, some women may have increased interested in such topics as they hold the role of head of their household after seeking asylum in neighboring countries. Following the security situation is important, as it would impact the decision of family return to Syria.
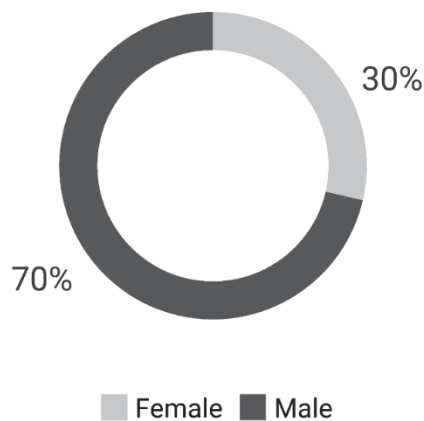

30%

70%

Female ▇ Male

Figure (4) Respondents by Gender

Lastly, social traditions in some Syrian refugee communities, which are predominately conservative, prevented women participation in the survey.

1.2 Age

As shown in Figure (5) below, 55% of the sample were between 25 and 35 years old, 18% were between 36 -45, 17% were under 25, 7% between 46-55, the rest 3% were above 55.

The sample age groups are diverse and proportionally balanced. The largest percentage of Syrian refugees abroad are comprised of young men. This is due to a variety of reasons, including fleeing from mandatory conscription, arbitrary detention and widespread civilian violations, as a result of the deteriorating security situation. Men also suffer from unemployment and decaying livelihood. Most don't see a future for themselves academically or professionally. In Turkey, the country that hosts the largest number of Syrians fleeing the conflict, age group (15-44) constitutes 48.6% of Syrians registered in the records of the Turkish Migration Directorate while age group (0-14) constitutes 39.6%.[7]
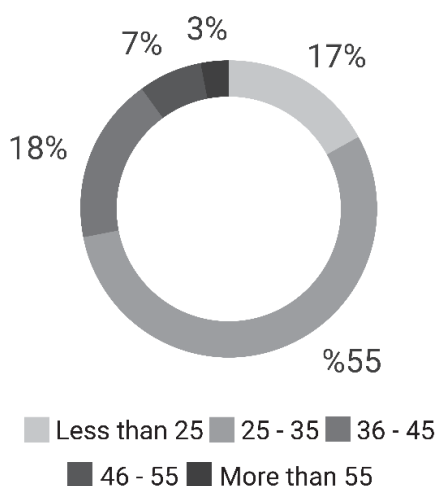

Figure (5) Respondents per Age group

1.3 Level of Education

52% of the sample held a graduate degree, 19% an intermedia institute certificate, and 29% a high school certificate, as illustrated in Figure (6).

---

[7] Directorate General of Migration Management, 27-08-2020: https://rb.gy/gghqaw
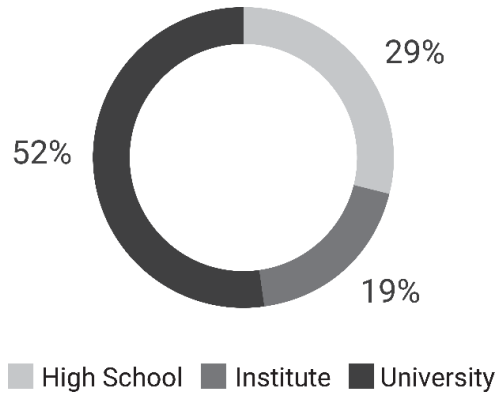
Figure (6) Respondents per Education Level

1.4 Refugees by Province of Origin

Respondents were from various provinces across Syria, as illustrated in Figure (7). The majority of Syria's governorates were represented in the sample. The percentages in the sample were as follows;

- From Syria's central region: 21% from Homs , 2% Hama 2.
- From Syria's eastern Region: 18% from Deir Ezzor, 13% from Al-Hasakah , and 5% from Raqqa.
- From Syria's southern region: 5% from Daraa, Sweida, and Quneitra, 12% from Damascus and 10% from Damascus Countryside.
- From Syria's northern region: 10% from Aleppo, and 3% from Idlib.
- From Syria's coastal region; 1% Lattakia and Tartous.

The distribution of the sample is comprehensive, as it includes the different kinds of Syrians from the various governorates. Place of origin was considered when selecting the sample.
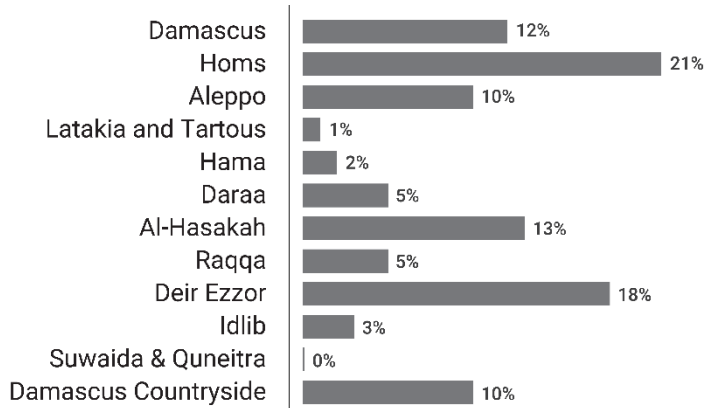
Figure (7) Illustrates the governorate where
the displaced sample originally traveled from

1.5 Current Place of Residence

The following graph, Figure (8), divides the sample by place of residence. 42% of respondents reside in turkey, 27% reside in Lebanon, 19% in Jordan, and 12% in Iraq. These percentages are proportional to the distribution of Syrians in these countries, which gives the results of the survey more credibility in terms of the sample's representation of Syrians in these countries, and thus the ability to generalize the conclusions of the survey.
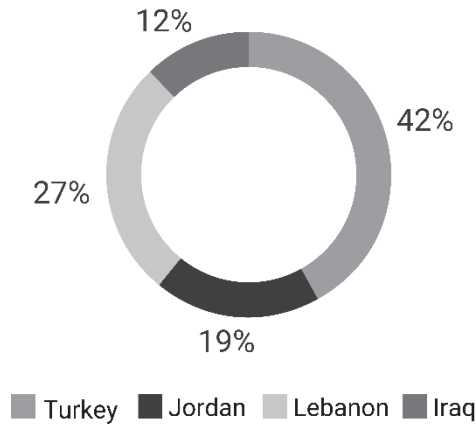
Figure (8) Illustrates place of current
residence for the sample

1.6 Years Spent in Place of Residence

In terms of the number of years of residence in the country of asylum, 60% of the sample spent more than five years, 38% spent a period of 2-5 years, and the percentage of respondents who spent less than two years did not exceed 2%, as illustrated in Figure (9). Since 2011, the outbreak of the conflict has been forcefully displacing Syrians to neighboring countries. The trend peaked in 2013-2014.
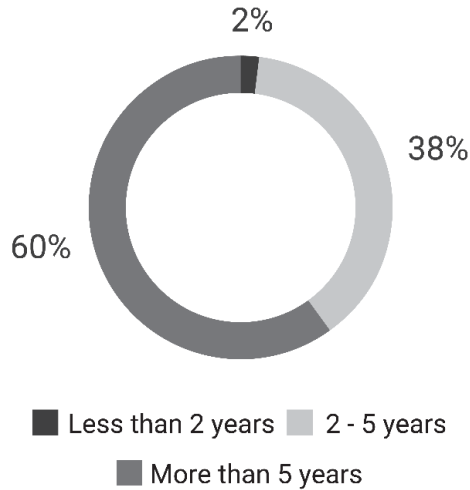
Figure (9) Respondents per Years of Residency

The trend of displacement explains why large portions of refugees have been outside of Syria for more than five years. Although displacement continued after 2014, it was at much lower rates, due to increased restrictions at the borders.

2. General Security Situation

In order to explore the reality of the general security situation, a set of general statements were prepared to measure the respondents' awareness level. It was critical to gain an understanding on their awareness, in order to identify their factors hindering or encouraging their return.

The first statement and question was related to the security situation in regime-held territory. When asked about their opinions on the security situation in regime areas, 81.8% of the sample agreed that the current behavior of the regime's security apparatuses - when compared to pre 2011- had not changed. On the contrary, their behavior has grown fiercer against civilians. Cases of arbitrary arrests, executions, and systematic torture have increased, which created a conviction among citizens that these apparatuses are irreformable in the future. 70.3% of the sample also agreed that the regime's security structures suffer from chaos and poor coordination among each other. The disorganization between the different security groups is apparent through the administrative corruption, internal competitions, and overlap in mandate. These aspects mostly result in conflict, wide-spread corruption, overstaffing compared to the amount of tasks they lead.
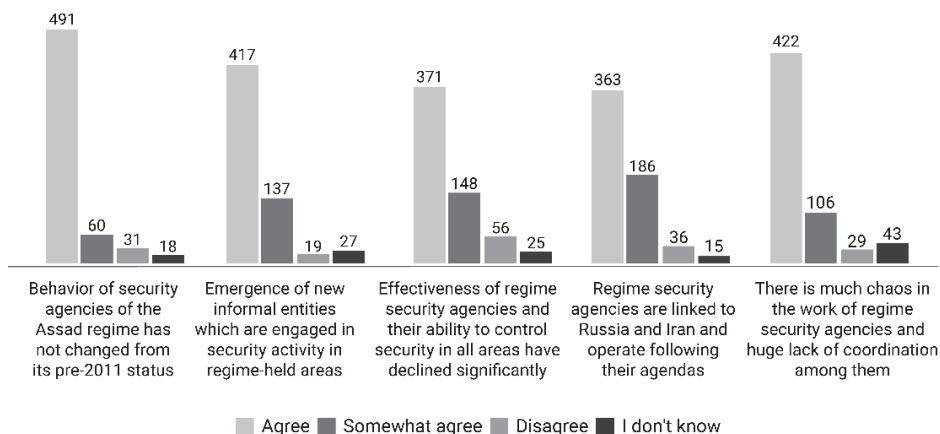
Figure (10) Parameters of the Overall Security Situation

In the same context, 69.5% of the sample agreed that security activity within regime-controlled areas is no longer limited to security apparatuses, but new entities have emerge in those areas. A decision authorizing private security companies to partake in security efforts was approved post 2011. The work of private companies has largely compensated for the shortage in the number of police officers and has contributed to providing protection for businessmen and their properties. These companies have also reduced the rate of crime, kidnappings and extortion to which businessmen have

increasingly been exposed in recent years. On the other hand, private companies have also assisted the Assad regime in maintaining loyalty of militia fighters and the families of those killed by securing jobs for them after any militia disbandment process. They also provide job opportunities for university students from the Alawite sect in Homs and Damascus. These companies reflected the strength of clientelism networks between businessmen and investors from one hand, and the regime's security, military and political cadres on the other.[8]

With regard to efficiency of the security apparatuses, 86.5% of respondents agree (fully or partially) that the efficiency of regime security forces declined significantly after the large defections in their ranks as the regime was unable to recover from the numerous defections, and also suffered from the draining economic situation. Due to the series of events, the regime's security apparatuses has not been able to regain its role from pre-2011. Despite infiltrating local structures and utilizing a violent approach with civilians, they remain unable to complete their main mission of ensuring security.

The Iranian and Russian influence is undeniable in Syria. Their influence has become increasingly apparent to the public. 91.5% of respondents agreed that a link exists between Russia, Iran, and Syria's security apparatuses. With these two powers present, they imposed their agendas in Syria, security apparatuses have lost the influence they used to enjoy before 2011, as Tehran and Moscow attempt to penetrate these security forces, control their decisions, dominate them, and utilize their work for their own goals and orientations,[9] as shown in Figure (10).

---

[8] Manhal Barish, Private Security Companies in Syria: New Proxies Serving the Regime, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, 28-07-2020: https://rb.gy/eztczo

[9] Adnan Ahmad, Iranian-Russian Conflict on Syrian Security Institutions: A Sixth Corps Soon, The New Arab, 31-05-2019: https://rb.gy/mrel2c
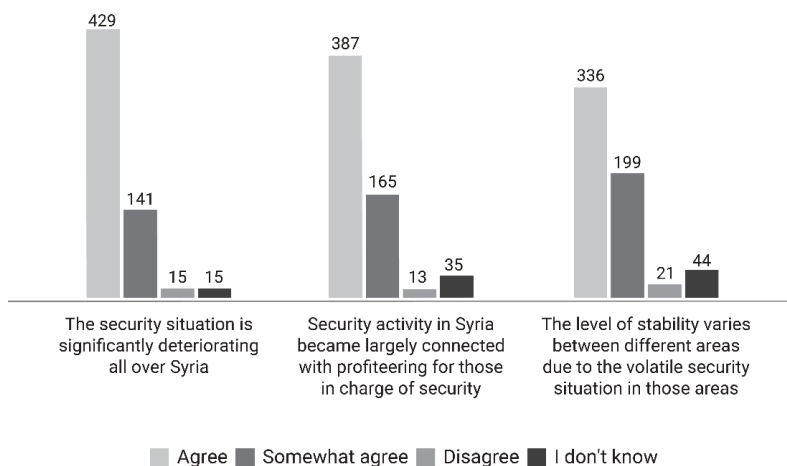
Figure (11) Parameters of the Overall Security Situation

71.5% of the sample agree and 23.5% somewhat agree that the security situation across Syria is significantly deteriorating. This is indicated by field reports from different areas over the past years. Although the severity of such security deterioration varies from one area to another, it reveals the difficult of securing a safe environment for returnees in the future.

64.5% of the sample fully agree, while 27.5% somewhat agree, that the actions of the security forces in Syria are largely linked to profiteering by those in charge. Lack of order has further aggravated the absence of accountability and control. It is increasingly difficult to manage the behavior of individuals. Additionally, the declining economic and social conditions within all areas, the crumbling living conditions, the spread of corruption, nepotism, and clientelism among the leaders of these apparatuses,[10] are among the factors that significantly impacted this sector and transformed it to into a profiteering tool for its members. The exceptionalism experienced by those in the security apparatuses, allows them to freely interfere in the lives of civilians.[11] This is predominately manifested in regime-held

---

[10] Yazan Shahdawi, Regime Shabiha and Officers are "Mafia" Economic Monopoles in Hama, Sada al-Sham, 22-05-2018: https://rb.gy/2ivomg

[11] Ansar Jasem, Cunning Authorities: Detention in Syria as Part of Political-Economic Approach, HEINRICH-BÖLL-STIFTUNG Foundation, Beruit Office, 12-01-2016: https://rb.gy/xchlod

areas,[12] and to a lesser extent in other areas such as Idleb, Euphrates Shield areas, Afrin,[13] and Autonomous Administration (AA) areas.[14]

56% of the sample agreed that the volatility of the security situation in most Syrian areas has led to discrepancy in security stability among these areas, while 33.3% somewhat agree. The security landscape continues to suffer from high volatility and fragmentation as a natural reflection of the political and military landscape volatility, while creating socio-economic instability, although to different degrees, across all areas. Moreover, this volatility continues to create more acute humanitarian crises that have affected both urban and rural areas by intensifying poverty, unemployment, disease, and the sharp increase in crime rate, which will have negative impacts on the reality and the future of local communities and their ability to progress in the post-conflict phase.

After the outbreak of the conflict, along with the spread of security chaos across all areas, the power of security agencies increased to control this chaos and establish security stabilization. 83% of the sample agree that the power of security forces have increased, taking advantage of the security void. The phenomenon of these security forces relying on the recruitment of local militias in regime-controlled areas and turning them into arms to carry out their agendas and plans also emerged. This was manifested in areas where regime regained control of areas formerly lost to the opposition.[15] Those areas suffer from increased security campaigns, arbitrary arrests and raids, such as in the governorates of Damascus countryside and Daraa,[16] which have recently witnessed the return of refugees from both Jordan and Lebanon. However, this increased influence has communicated a clear

---

[12] Regime Security Apparatus Take Over 16 Homes for Southern Damascus Displaced, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights,29-07-2019: https://rb.gy/hztsls

[13] How HTS combats "organizations corruption" in Idleb, Shaam Network, 21-11-2018: https://rb.gy/eg4xn4

[14] For Corruption Charges, Dismissal and Imprisonment of Leaders of Asayish and YPG in al-Hasakah, Shabab Post, 07-02-2017: https://rb.gy/pd6uma

[15] Amer al-Hourani, Kidnapping is its prominent work: local groups implement security agency agendas in Daraa, Mari Organization, 28-01-2020: https://rb.gy/elevb2

[16] Regime Security Apparatus Continue Their Security Campaigns in Eastern Ghouta Arresting 9 People in Saqba and Kafr Batna, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 12-03-2019: https://rb.gy/ot2b04

threat to those considering returning to these areas.[17] As shown in Figure(11).
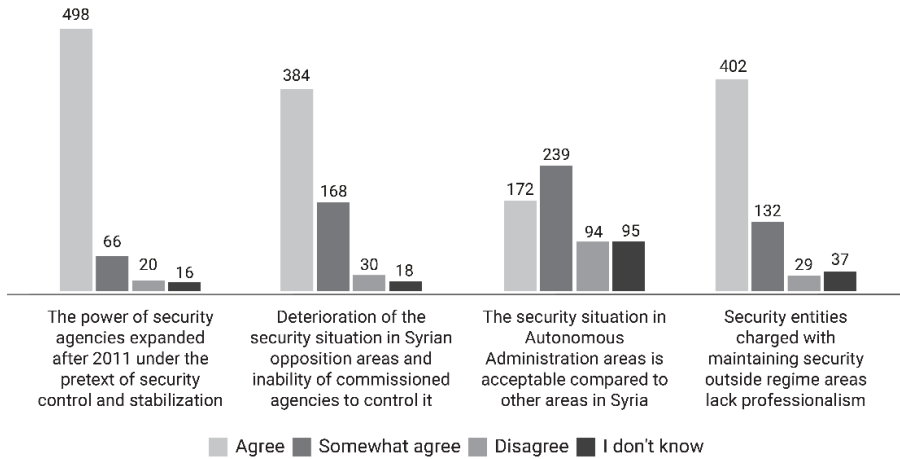
Figure (12) Parameters of the Overall Security Situation

In the same context, more than 90% of the study sample agreed that authorities responsible for maintaining security outside regime areas are not professional this further exacerbated the governance failures. The failure of authorities to maintain control of the security situation has led to various breaches, including bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and robberies. For instances, in opposition-held territories the number of assassinations increased in 2019 compared to 2018.[18] In general, the security situation is fragile, with local and regional actors unable to develop tools or mechanisms to manage and reduce risks.

Decentralization is dominant in the management of the security sector, as a central reference is absent. A multitude of actors are involved in security affairs, each playing different roles according to their capacity.[19] Despite several attempts by some opposition factions and formations to develop

---

[17] Mohammad Homs and Ahmad Jamal, Syria is Crumbling… Where would refugees return?, Enab Baladi, 15-09-2019: https://rb.gy/2uzmbi

[18] Reports on Assassinations in Opposition Areas 2018-2019, Special Reports, Omran Center for Strategic Studies: https://rb.gy/rob0ns

[19] Security Reality in Syria and the Test of Security Governance, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2017, p 101

tools and maintain security through police and military, they are still incapable of managing. This situation **first** requires restructuring these bodies, upgrading training for their staff, and providing them with the necessary logistic and technical equipment to contribute to maintaining a secure environment conducive to civil society activities. **Second**, participation and coordination with the local community is essential. **Third**, there needs to be a bridging of gaps between the internal security bodies and local community, in a way that facilitates their mission and promotes a safe environment for all people. Accountability mechanisms should finally be placed to ensure responsibility.

Moving to AA areas, 39.8% of the sample somewhat agree and 28.6% agree that the security situation in AA areas is acceptable compared to other areas in Syria. 15.6% of the sample disagreed with the above. The security landscape in AA areas sharply varies between different cities and towns. While Al-Hasakeh Governorate is considered relatively safe and secure, field reports from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor do not indicate the same. Deir Ezzor and Raqqa are described as the most dangerous areas in Syria, despite the presence of Russian, American, Iranian, international coalition, and the AA security forces.[20] This is illustrated in Figure (12).

3. Factors Influencing the Decision to Return

There are a number of factors that affect Syrian refugees' decision to return to their home. The survey aimed to inspect four variables:

1. Factors that influence an individual's decision to return.
2. Sources of information utilized by refugees to assess the security situation in Syria.
3. Returnees most targeted by the Assad regime.
4. The security threats returnees face if they decide to return.

The impact of the following variables vary based on personal circumstances and the conditions within the host country.

---

[20] Security Chaos and Thefts: What is the role of Asayesh in Raqqa, Enab Baladi, 28-7-2020, https://rb.gy/lzvrnr
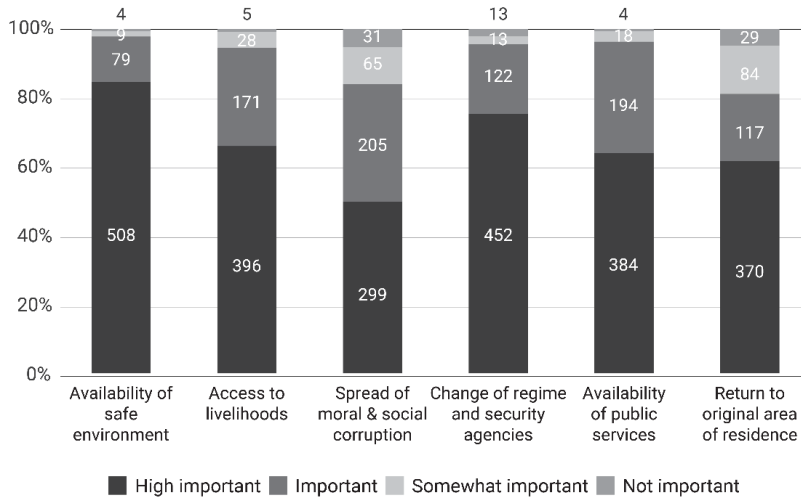
Figure (13) Factors that Affect Return Decision

85% of respondents confirmed that one of the most important factors that impact their decision to return was whether the environment was safe. 12% believed that this factor was of average importance. A safe environment in this context is defined as an effective cessation of hostilities, as well as the restriction of the different security forces over the people, preventing violations these groups commit against the people.

Several field reports on parameters related to the security situation in Syria show that those areas still suffer from lack of security to varying degrees. Millions of Syrians fled their homes due to the absence of safety and stability. They first fled to safer areas within Syria, before deciding to cross the border to neighboring countries to avoid serious threat, survive, and find a more dignified life. Securing safety is a top priority considered by a Syrian refugee when deciding to return home. A significant percentage of Syrian refugees in host countries chose to accept the social and livelihood challenges and difficulties abroad over returning to Syria without a safe environment or international guarantees to safeguard their personal and their families' security.

Along the same lines, 75% of the sample believed that a change of the ruling regime and its security apparatuses is a highly important factor influencing

their decision to return. 15% believed that it is somehow important. This is due to the significant role the Assad regime's security apparatuses has played in forced displacement through arbitrary arrests, brutal torture, killing detainees, and the informant networks established by the security apparatuses. The informant networks built over the years, pose a serious threat to the dignity and personal security of Syrian citizens.

The estimated number of members in the Syrian security apparatuses is around 100,000 agents and officers. Moreover, there are currently tens of thousands of militia members fighting alongside the regime. Syria is one of the countries that has highest share of secret police per capita, precisely, 1 secret police officer for every 129 citizens.[21]

When it comes to the economy, 66% of respondents identified access to livelihood as an important factor, which affects refugees' decision to return to their homeland; while 34% believe this factor is somehow important. Given the ailing economy all over Syria, access to livelihood has become a grave concern for Syrians in general. This has been accompanied by an overall degeneration in all economic and production sectors, the enormous devaluation of the Syrian currency, as well as growing inflation and poverty rates. Syrians are overburdened and consistently facing the challenge to survive in a draining economy. Moreover, the regime does not allow employees to return to their former workplaces in the areas it regained from the opposition, as it considers them, "traitors".[22] Individuals from territories re-captured by the Assad regime are under constant risk of detention and military conscription raids the regime launches in those areas.[23] These areas suffer from a complete economic collapse and do not have any signs of improving the industrial and agricultural sectors. Accordingly, the economic factor is absolutely critical to the return decision, as inability to access livelihood would be a real challenge for refugees

---

[21] Rayan Mohammad, Syrian Regime Intelligence: Mafias taken for Security Apparatus, The New Arab, 14-04-2020: https://rb.gy/k00ljj

[22] Ahmad Zakaraia, Syrian Regime Neglects Infrastructure and Prevents Public Servants from Returning to their work!, SY24 Platform,03-01-2019: https://rb.gy/ui1gzk

[23] In Eastern Ghouta, since the first quarter of 2018, the regime carried out detention and mandatory conscription campaigns which involved about 90% of males between 18 and 45 years of age in addition to systematic forced disappearance.

seeking to re-settle, as without resources they may face displacement again.[24]

In the same context, the availability of public services such as transportation, water, electricity, health care, education, and other services constitutes a major factor refugees consider when thinking about return. 64% of the surveyed sample believed this was a highly important factor, while 32% believed it was somehow important. Several field reports say that years of war have drained the country's infrastructure leading to a significant decrease in public services. The Assad regime has not been able to recover these services to their original level, due to several reasons, including the government's severe financial shortage, the serious economic disruption, and the fact that the reconstruction process has not commenced. The decrease in public services has led to internal displacement from areas controlled by the Assad regime, due to the wide disparity in the level of public services.[25] Moreover, and the public discontent without affordable basic services.[26] The regime has deprived areas it regained from basic services, or left them to be exploited by local service providers, such as the case in eastern Aleppo,[27] or even placed the burden of service provision on the public, who took the responsibility in such cases for restoring services and repairing electricity and water networks on their own. Some were forced to pay water and electricity bills accumulated over eight years with no regard to their poor financial conditions.[28] Areas out of the government's control, on the other hand, are witnessing some early recovery and a good level of service provision - albeit not as good as the locals aspire for - given the lack of security or major infrastructure and public service projects in those areas. Thus, access to public services is considered a major factor in refugees' decision to return.

---

[24] The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, The World Bank, 06-02-2019: https://rb.gy/4yr8bv

[25] Mohammad al-Ali, The Regime in Daraa: Services depend on Allegiances, al-Mudun Newspaper,19-07-2020: https://rb.gy/fcanm5

[26] Waleed Nofal, Bread in Regime-Controlled Areas: Syndrome of high corruption-low quality, Syria Direct website, 21-04-2020: https://rb.gy/ppn0xp

[27] Nine Years: Eastern Aleppo without electricity or services, SY24 Platfrom,18-04-2020: https://rb.gy/gy2snb

[28] State Institutions exploits People of Daraa by Accumulated Bills. Enab Baladi, 10-11-2019: https://rb.gy/ieindh

Furthermore, many refugees who are considering returning to Syria fear that they may be returned to areas other than their original hometowns. For many refugees, this is considered a grave violation of their right to a safe and dignified return to their homeland, and would hinder their ability to resettle in their areas. In recent years, some refugees were returned to areas other than their hometowns within regime-controlled areas.[29] For the Assad regime, returning to one's hometown is governed by security considerations related to demographic change in certain areas that are pro-opposition.[30] Ability to return to place of origin was ranked as highly important by 62% of the sample, while 32% of participants believed it was somewhat important or not very important when considering their decision to return.

Similarly, ensuring returnees' real estate property rights emerged as a significant factor as it plays a role in ensuring stability for refugees in case of return. 60% of respondents said this was a highly important factor in their return decision, while 36% said it was of average or little importance. Since 2011, the regime has issued more than 60 laws and decrees to regulate housing, lands, properties, urban planning, and investment matters. Those laws and decrees together form the legal framework for reconstruction, and grant state entities the authority to determine which areas are to be developed, and as a result enable those entities to seize private property.[31] Moreover, the regime requires citizens inside Syria or abroad to issue security clearances if they wanted to sell their properties or otherwise dispense such property. Also, in order to prevent Syrians abroad from dispensing their properties and expose them to being seized,[32] the regime issued Law No. 10 of 2018 on real estate ownership. The law gives the regime the right to seize the properties of citizens who cannot prove ownership of their properties in person which triggered strong international reactions against the decision as it would deprive a large portion of refugees

[29] Taym al-Haj, Qusayr IDPs in the North not Invited to Return to their Hometown, Enab Baladi,10-11-2019: https://rb.gy/b45spx

[30] Ashraf Suleimen, Conditional Return for People of Darayya and the Regime Exaggerates Number of Returnees, Baladi Media Network,21-12-2018: https://rb.gy/avft2n

[31] Muriel Asseburg, Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 01-07-2020

[32] "Security Clearance" protection of citizens' property or obstruction to their lives?, Enab Baladi, 10-07-2020: https://rb.gy/xwjbu8

from their real estate property.[33] In this regard, the role of militias is evident in their attempt to seize the properties of displaced people, such as the case of Hezbollah in the city of al-Qusayr, Homs,[34] and the role of brokerages and real estate agent networks prevalent in Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir Ezzor. Those have operated under the patronage of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' (IRG) agents and purchased real estate and properties owned by displaced Syrians on behalf of the IRG, with significant facilitation from the regime and its security apparatuses,[35] taking advantage of poverty and the absence of owners.[36] In addition to the above, many displaced Syrians abroad have become unable to establish ownership of their properties for several reasons.[37] The AA followed the example of the regime in seizing properties of displaced people in their areas. They issued a decision on the management of properties of absent persons. The decision was strongly condemned by refugee rights groups, that forced the AA to retract the decision.

The 9 years conflict has had a grave impact on the Syrian society and has produced customs and attitudes foreign to the otherwise mostly conservative society. The declining security, economic, and living conditions have had a great impact on the members of Syrian society, and many behaviors, not common before the conflict, have emerged, particularly moral and social corruption, such as prostitution, kidnapping, murder, and drug abuse, among other crimes.[38] In addition, negative social phenomena which were little known before 2011 prevailed after the conflict, such as theft, child marriages, bribe, fraud, and smuggling, etc. The status quo, however, forced citizens to accept such behaviors and cope with them as much as they could,

---

[33] Mervet Awf, Most Dangerous Law of All… Assad Regime Intends to Rob Property of Displaced, Sasa Post, 28-04-2018: https://rb.gy/dye6lm

[34] Ninar Khalifa, Al-Qusayr Under Hezbollah Hegemony… Shift in Real Estate Property Reality,10-09-2020: https://rb.gy/czzmet

[35] Purchasing Real Estate for Strategic Purposes… This is how Iran's brokers deceived Deir Ez-Zour residents, al-Hal Net website,31-01-2020: https://rb.gy/viiajr

[36] Anas al-Shami, Iran Consolidates its Presence in Eastern Ghouta by purchasing Real Estate, Story of a Human website, 15-02-2019: https://rb.gy/cnlh4l

[37] Ninar Khalifa, After Revoking Thousands of Ownership Contracts in Eastern Ghouta… What is the fate of people's property?, 16-06-2020: https://rb.gy/ykepph

[38] Regime Confesses… Drugs and Immoral Practices on Damascus University Campus, Zaman al-Wasl, 05-09-2019: https://rb.gy/7zrd5g

in an attempt to see this period of conflict through.[39] However, the factor of moral and social corruption prevalence exerts some influence on refugees' decision to return. 50% of the respondents believed it was a very important factor, while 34% said it was of average importance, as the return decision in great part depends not only on individual refugees, but also on their families who have a say in the decision. Most Syrian refugee families come from conservative communities, and it is very unlikely that they would accept those new behaviors or cope with them. Therefore, many Syrian refugees believe that the social situation in Syria has undergone a significant change, and that being away from it and becoming accustomed to the social norms of host countries has created a gap that would challenge their ability to cope with the social reality inside Syria, in case they decide to return,[40] as shown in Figure (13).
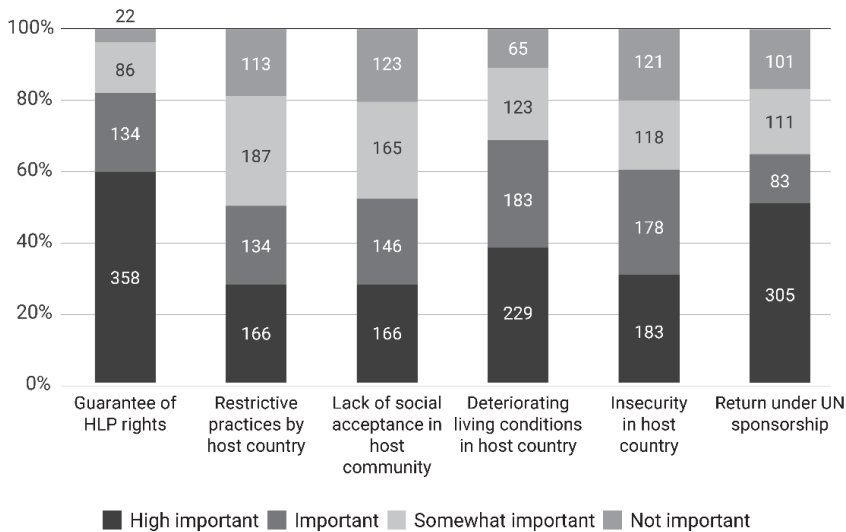
Figure (14) Factors that affect the decision to return

As for the factors related to host countries, 50% of the respondents think return needs to be monitored by the United Nations, while 34% believe that this factor is of average or little importance. 16% said this factor was not

[39] Mohammad al-Najjar, Shabiha Carry Their Corruption to Damascus as Residents Are Forced to Turn a Blind Eye, Enab Baladi, 15-03-2015: https://rb.gy/phmru6

[40] During War Time… Has Damascus Morally Fallen?, Rozana Radio, 27-02-2019: https://rb.gy/ph21mw

important in their decision to return. Based on other return mechanisms, the Assad regime and neighboring countries hosting refugees will need to be involved in the process. Within this framework, the involvement of the United Nations in necessary. Supervision by the United Nations via UNHCR, may allow returnees a dignified and coordinated return. According to previous statements released by UNHCR, the UNHCR has not officially stated that the conditions and circumstances are conducive to return, or that refugees can start thinking of return. UNHCR conducts regular assessments of the situation in Syria, final reports and statements of these assessments are a source of information for large number of refugees , given that UNHCR is the international entity concerned with their issues in their host countries until they return The average to low importance and insignificance of this factor for 50% of the respondents can be explained by their mistrust of the UNHCR, as they feel the bodies decisions may be politicized either by the international community or by governments of host countries who push towards the return of Syrian refugees, despite whether conditions of return are met.[41] In addition, the UNHCR does not provide sufficient information or advice for Syrian refugees who are consider returning to Syria.[42] Some governments have also accused the UNHCR of pressuring refugees to prevent them from returning to their homeland.[43]

When reflecting on the living conditions of Syrian refugees in host countries, 38% of the surveyed sample believed it was a very important factor in the decision to return, while 30% believed it was of average importance, 20% found it somewhat important. 12%, however, thought it was not important at all. This disparity in refugees' views on this factor can be explained by the varying living conditions per host country.

---

[41] Badea Karhani, Lebanon Haults UNHCR Residence Applications amidst Syrian Refugee Crisis, Al-Watan Newspaper, 08-06-2018: https://rb.gy/r56r7d

[42] Ammar Hammo et al., "Had we known, we wouldn't have considered visiting" Syrian refugees in Jordan denied refugee status after visiting Syria, Syria Direct,13-03-2019: https://rb.gy/ibnutg

[43] UNHCR Jordan Denies any Pressure on Syrian Refugees to Prevent Their Return, Shaam Network, 30-11-2018: https://rb.gy/ean56f

Living conditions constitute a serious dilemma for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example,[44] while they are less critical for refugees in Jordan and Iraq, and even less critical in Turkey. Overall, living conditions in those countries have cast their shadows on the economic aspects of Syrian refugees, and further worsened their suffering, especially with the disparity in support provided by governments of host countries that already suffer from high unemployment rates and disruptions in their business markets. This has rendered a large proportion of refugees in those countries unemployed and forced to live from humanitarian aid. Livelihood support provided by the UN and international organization has not been sufficient to save them from unemployment and poverty. As a result, they became more vulnerable and unstable in their host communities, which consequently made many refugees in those countries think of returning to Syria even in the absence of proper conditions.[45]

A similar percentage of respondents, about 30%, thought that factors related to refugee insecurity in host countries, societal rejection, and strict policies against them by the governments of these countries were very important. While those factors were rated of average and little importance by 20-30% respectively and 20% believed that those factors were not important at all to the return decision. These percentages can be explained by the fact that Syrian refugees have been staying for prolonged periods in these countries, which has caused resentment against refugees in these host communities. Local societies were concerned about the resettlement of refugees; some of them opposed such a step believing it meant demographic and ethnic changes.[46] Some also believe that refugees have overburdened public services in those countries, when the countries already suffer from weak infrastructures, such as the case in Jordan.[47] Most of these communities believe that the Syrian workforce in their countries has been a serious

---

[44] Increasing Restrictions and Pressures on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to force them to leave. France 24 TV, 25-07-2019: https://rb.gy/n5fper
[45] UN Official Reveals Reasons for Syrian Refugees Return from Lebanon, Gulf Online, 23-01-2019: https://rb.gy/gp2ijp
[46] Ali al-Husseini, Resettlement Alarm goes off in the Lebanese Sate, al-Afkar Magazine, 27-05-2016: https://rb.gy/o2gaxj
[47] Suhaib al-Tal et al. Syrian Displacement Poses Challenges to Infrastructure and Services in Northern Provinces, al-Dustur Newspaper,04-04-2013: https://rb.gy/05ytdk

competitor to the local workforce, elevating the host community unemployment rate and resulting in low wages. This exacerbated rejection of Syrian refugees by host communities. Furthermore, the legal status of Syrian refugees has posed a serious challenge in those countries, a status that does not provide even minimum guarantees of their rights or of their future in case they reside for longer time. In addition, the presence of Syrian refugees in those countries, such as Lebanon and Turkey, was used as a tool for political polarization among political parties; this negatively impacted the perception of Syrian refugees by host communities. These and other reasons have had a great impact on the safety, security, and social acceptance of Syrian refugees in these countries. The resentment resulted in policy changes towards refugees, implementing stricter rules, restricting movement, and resulting in stringent treatment to appease the demands of the public, political parties and other entities, out of fear of jeopardizing their public support and future in those countries.[48] This is illustrated in Figure (14).

Moving on to sources of information that Syrian refugees rely on to get information on the security conditions in Syria, 62% of the surveyed sample thought that their relatives and friends in Syria are the most important source of such information, while 20% believed that this source was of average importance. Relatives and friends are the most reliable source of information because they experience the real conditions on a daily basis, and they are very careful not to expose their relatives to any security threats if they decide to return to the country. In addition, given the different governing actors in Syria and the volatile security situation, refugees must carefully acquire information because security conditions vary from one area to the other and change quickly within and between the areas.

Social media ranked second in importance as a source of information. 42% considered social media very important, while 28% of respondents thought they were of average importance, and 14% thought they were somewhat important. It is no secret that social media plays a crucial role as a means of

---

[48] Ammar Hamo and Mohammad Ibrahim, Syrians in Turkey… Fuel for a political conflict with unknown outcomes, Syria Direct, 11-07-2019: https://rb.gy/bufdml

acquiring information and news from different areas in Syria. Some refugees rely solely on social media as mean of gaining information. However, some refugees believe that with all the advantages of social media, they should be used with caution, as some of the information spread could be unreliable, especially if they are related to security. Some of these platforms are affiliated with regime intelligence services and other entities in and outside Syria. That is why some refugees doubt information from social media when considering return to Syria.

As for media outlets, there was clear disparity in the opinions of the surveyed sample regarding how much they relied on media outlets as a source of information. International and Syrian media outlets that are not affiliated with the regime ranked higher in importance than other media with 22% respondents ranking them as very important, and about 36% of average importance, and 22% as somewhat important. 20% of respondents considered these media outlets as not important. The disparity is due to the fact that these media outlets, be it TV, radio, or internet websites, are highly politicized and reflect the viewpoints of their administrations and donors. Some media outlets also lack transparency and accuracy of information when it comes to some issues related to Syria. 38% of the sample believed that relying on media outlets in the refugees' host countries is of average importance, while 9.8% thought it was very important, and 20.6% thought it was somewhat important. The rest of the surveyed sample, 30.6%, believed that such media outlets were not important at all to them. Those media outlets focus on the local affairs of host countries and give little attention to the situation in Syria. Therefore, refugees use other media outlets to get relevant information about the security situation in Syria. Regime media ranked last in importance to refugees. 70.5% of participant said they were not important to them, and 18% said they were of little importance. Regime-affiliated news outlets have lost their credibility over the years and are known for distorting facts to align with the regime narrative. This has resulted in a large proportion of Syrians internally and externally considering them unreliable.

The percentage of respondents that relied on reports from civil society organizations was close to that of international organizations. While 20.6% of respondents found civil society organizations reports were very important, 25.5% claimed international organization reports were very important. 34.5 agreed civil society reports were somewhat important and 18.6% claimed they were not relevant. 42.5% claimed reports from international organizations are somewhat important, while 24.5% claimed they were not important.

The lower percentages reading reports from civil society and international organizations may be explained by the fact that these reports usually target educated Syrian refugees, who are aware of these reports. It is important to note that not all reports are produced at the same quality level in regard to the information, analyses, and future insights they provide. Due to the following reasons, refugees only relatively rely civil society and international organization reports when deciding on return. Figure (15) illustrates this information below.
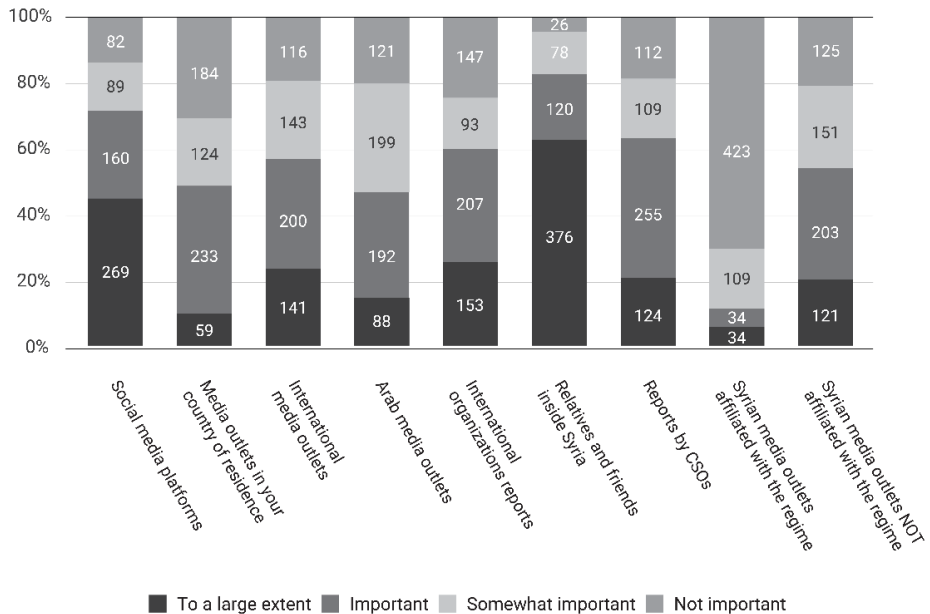

Figure (15) Sources of Information Refugees Use

As for variables related to the safe environment, the security threat variable stands out as one of the most important variables given its direct link to the life of refugees if they decide to return to Syria. According to the sample, arbitrary arrests by regime security forces, militias, and military factions is the highest threat. This threat was highlighted by 84.3% of the respondents as very influential to their decision to return. Arbitrary arrests remain a widespread threat all over Syria. In the absence of a centralized authority, it is difficult to control the volatile security situation. Due to the abundant number of actors influencing safety and security in Syria, the situation remains charged. Additionally, an effective judicial system is not present, as it does not have the power to enforce any ruling.

This has, therefore, increased arrests in different areas, posing a serious threat to residents and their personal safety. The number of arbitrary arrests in 2019 reached 4,671 cases according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Out of these, the regime was responsible for 2,797 cases, the AA for 1,102 cases, opposition factions for 405 cases, HTS for 303 cases, and ISIS for at least 64 cases. Of the 7,706 in 2018, 5,607 were conducted by the regime.[49]

Another security threat that stands out in the same context is detention by the security branches in areas under regime control, and to a lesser extent in areas outside regime control. Risk of detention in the Assad regime's security branches was seen as the most influential component impacting decision to return. Crimes against detainees, have been a landmark in the history of the Syrian conflict, due to the atrocities against detainees, including humiliation, sexual assault, and all sorts of torture that took the lives of many and left many of those who survived with permanent disabilities and chronic diseases. For this reason, risk of detention in security branches ranked first with 72.6%, followed by sexual assaults with 43.6%, respondents saying it is a very important factor, and 25% saying it is of average importance to their return decision. The Syrian Network for Human

---

[49] The Annual Report of the Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2019: A Destroyed State and Displaced People, SNHR, 23-01-2020: https://rb.gy/selid2

Rights documented 305 deaths under torture in 2019, 275 of whom were killed by the regime. The number was around 976 cases in 2018.[50]

In a relevant context, kidnapping and extortion were considered very important by 32% and 53% of respondents, respectively. They ranked of average importance by 31%-37% of respondents respectively. Kidnapping and extortion are prevalent all over Syria as means of financial and personal gains by demanding ransoms.[51] Different groups are behind such operations. For example, as a result of the uncontrolled proliferation of arms, local armed groups emerged, some of which were affiliated with factions and armed militias, and some that only operate gains. With the state of insecurity prevailing all over Syria, such practices are used for financial gains by profiteers, in an effort to increase their wealth by employing local networks in different areas. These factors have also influenced refugee decision to return to Syria.[52] Respondent results are highlighted in Figure (16) below.

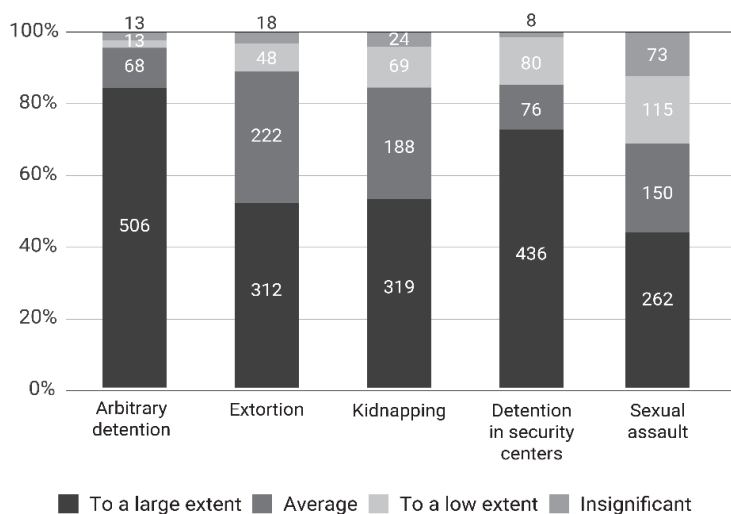**Figure (16) Security Threats that Affects Refugees Return**

---

[50] Ibid.

[51] Zein al-Halabi, Al-Suweida… either security void or submission (government). Mari Organization, 18-01-2020: https://rb.gy/4vakzj

[52] Kidnappers Thrive in Syria: Caused by insecurity and displacement… child recruitment and organ trafficking main violations. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 02-08-2020: https://rb.gy/yf4lqc

In the same vein, one of the prominent security threats that is a source of concern for Syrian refugees is the power local and foreign militias have in Syria. Local and foreign militia have gained more power and expanded their control in Syria. Militias have increased their authority in public life, services, industrial and commercial chambers, as well as the local councils.[53] Militias' influence has made them an important component of Syria's security landscape.[54] These militias are affiliated with different actors, and conflict is persistent given the interest that arises among them to acquire the largest share of influence and spoils. With the overall decrease in the hostilities in Syria between the main conflicting parties, a new phenomenon surfaces every now and then in Syria, which is inter-militia fighting for their own interests, namely, power and profit. In addition, they ally with locals to create a constituency in areas of under their control. These incidents pose long-term threats to the stability and security in Syria, which will have a direct impact on refugees' decision to return.[55] Therefore, the dominance of local and foreign militias was considered of high impact by 67.3% of respondents, and of average impact by 24.6%. While the infighting between armed groups was ranked as a high-impact security threat by 60.5% of respondents and as an average-impact security threat by 28%.

In addition to militias, the phenomenon of arms proliferation throughout Syria stands out as an obvious security threat. Arms trade has become a popular and prosperous business, but at the same time, a serious challenge to the capabilities of security authorities in controlling arms possession and use among locals. In addition, it has become a resort for militias to arm its members and impose their power. Within this chaotic scene, refugees consider their return decision with doubt and hesitation, given the direct threat these arms pose to the lives of citizens and their social stability.[56] This threat was ranked as a high-impact factor in the return decision by

---

[53] Salah al-Duhni, Sources: Leaders of pro-Iran militias win Assad's local elections, Arabi 21Website, 21-09-2018: https://rb.gy/ojh2ls
[54] Syria changes from Assad's state to state of militias, Al-Arab Newspaper, 29-07-2017: https://rb.gy/zdbi3c
[55] Adnan Ahmad, Mushrooming Militias… Russia's arms to gain control in Aleppo and east of the Euphrates, The New Arab, 07-02-2020: https://rb.gy/6tjhld
[56] Armed Civilians… Who controls the random arms proliferation in Syria?, Enab Baladi, 25-02-2018: https://rb.gy/y7av8w

63.8% of respondents, and as an average-impact factor by 19.8%, and as a low-impact factor by 14.3%.

Another security threat arises when discussing of the issue of arms proliferation, are bombings and assassinations, a phenomenon that is currently topmost among security threats all over Syria. This is one of the weapons that parties to the Syrian conflict use for security disruption and destabilization in areas of their adversaries. Between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020, 50 blasts and assassinations took place in the governorate of al-Hasakah, 162 in Deir Ezzor, and 168 in Daraa. In opposition-controlled areas, the number was 162 in the governorate of Aleppo, 46 in Idlib, 28 in al-Hasakah, and 30 in Raqqa.[57] The blasts left many militants and innocent civilians dead and posed a direct threat to the lives of the entire Syrian population. They also had a direct role in the displacement of many locals in Syria, who had to seek refuge in other areas in Syria or go toward Turkey along the northern border.[58] There is conflicting information on who is behind these blasts, given the major security breaches in areas where they happen, and the existence of internal networks in these areas that have affiliations with different military actors.[59] This threat was considered very important by 47.3% of the sample, and of average importance by 37.8%.

In another context relevant to the security landscape, theft is considered a security threat all over Syria. This phenomenon is caused by social, economic, and security reasons, but it has risen dramatically and poses a direct threat to the social and economic stability of local populations in different areas. This is accompanied by increasing rates of poverty, unemployment, and moral deterrents by the perpetrators of those crimes given the disastrous deterioration of their living conditions. Moreover, the weak security condition encourages perpetrators to commit such felonies.[60]

---

[57] Internal unpublished reports on assassinations and blasts in Syria between 2019-2020, Omran Center for Strategic Studies.

[58] Qasef: Escaping the bombing - The use of explosive weapons in populated areas and forced displacement: perspectives from Syrian refugees, Handicap International, 28-090-2016: https://rb.gy/kzg1r7

[59] Ward Furati, Booby traps in northern Syria… who is responsible?, Noon Post Website,07-01-2020: https://rb.gy/djgtut

[60] Theft tops the list of most common crimes in Syria, Damascus News Network, 19-06-2019: https://rb.gy/ytaijf

As this threat spreads widely, refugees are less willing to return to their homeland or protect their own properties from theft and looting. This threat was ranked as a high-impact factor in the return decision by 45.3% of respondents, and as an average-impact factor by 30%, and as a low-impact factor by 21.3%. The abovementioned security threats are reflections of the deteriorating security landscape in Syria. This is reflected in the latest statistics, where Syria's crime rate ranks first among Arab countries and tenth globally based on the Global Crime Index report released mid-2020.[61] This contradicts the statement released by the regime claiming Syria's crime rate had decreased as they have regained control of their areas.[62] See Figure (17) below.
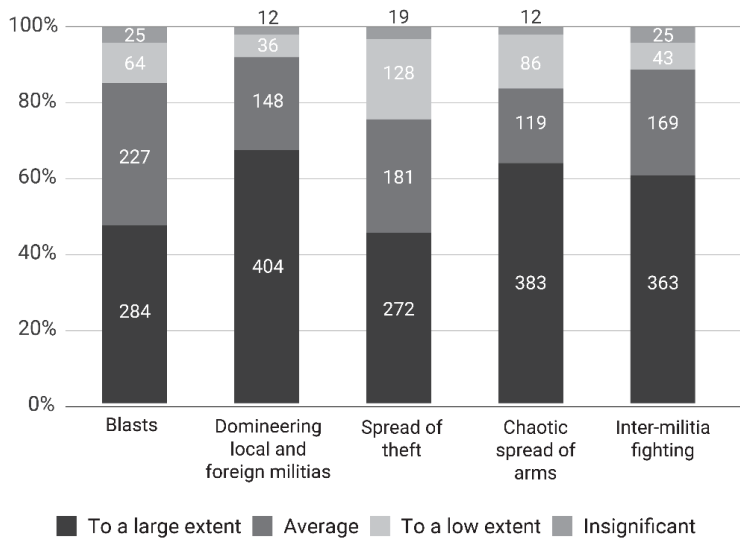
Figure (17) shows security threats affecting refugees' decision to return

In addition to crime, returnees fear persecution upon their return. This variable closely reflects the opinions of refugees about which groups they think are potentially at risk if they return to regime-controlled areas. The sample believed that the groups targeted the most by the regime are political activists, members of the Free Syrian Army, opposition armed factions,

---

[61] Crime Index by Country 2020 Mid-Year, https://rb.gy/11xqq6, access on: 23-08-2020
[62] Ahmad Zakariya, Have crime rates dropped in Syria? Legal professional refutes regime narrative. Hebr Newspaper, 15-12-2019: https://rb.gy/audqpl

military defectors, and individuals wanted by regime for evading military conscription. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the number of fugitives from the compulsory military service in Syria is more than 150,000 persons.[63]

These categories were given a high rating by 77%-86.6% of the surveyed sample, and civil revolutionaries were given a high rating by 67.9%, while 28.8% gave it an average rating. In addition, employees who have defected from regime institutions, families from anti-regime areas, and businessmen, all received similar ratings by respondents when asked about the likelihood of them being targeted by the regime. 38.6%-40.3% of respondents said the probability was high, while 35.8-49% said it was average, see Figure (18).
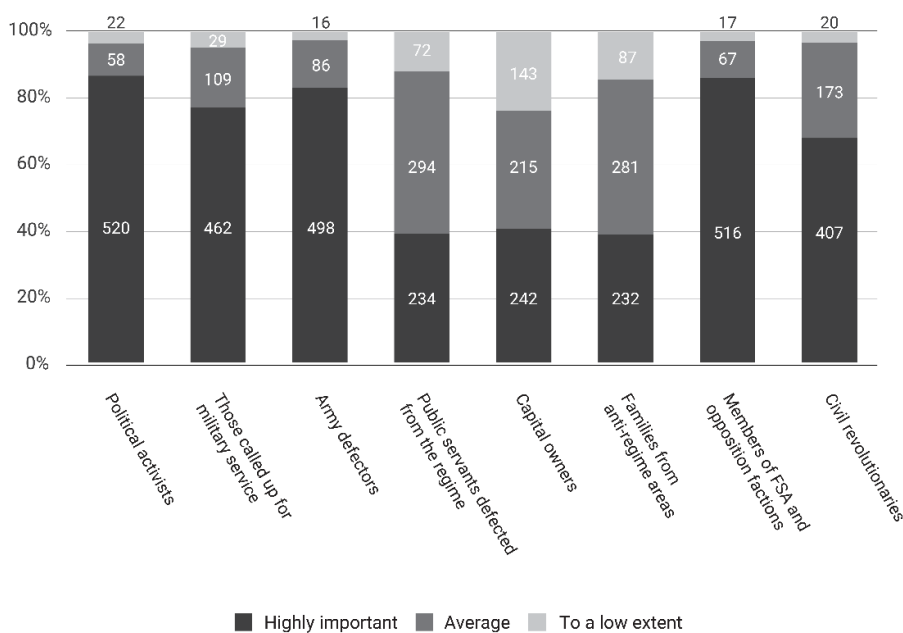
Figure (18) Vulnerable Refugee Groups

---

[63] Amnesty for Deserters of the Syrian Army… what does it implicate for refugees?, DW Website, 15-11-2018: https://rb.gy/toqbkl

4. Relations between Civilians and Security Apparatuses

In theory, security apparatuses are an integral institution of the executive authority, mandated with undertaking the function of maintaining internal peace and security. Broadly, security forces are meant to protect resources and citizens, while maintaining a safe environment for all. The relationship between civilians and security forces depends on several considerations; some are related to civilians themselves while others are related to the behavior of such apparatus personnel and how skilled and professional they are in meeting the needs of citizens in relation to security. In addition, whether these organizations are able to provide a sense of safety for their lives and properties.

As part of our analysis of the reality of the security landscape in Syria, it is quite important to analyze the nature of the relationship between security apparatuses and civilians as it represents a fundamental variable that characterize this landscape and a catalyst or obstacle to the voluntary return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries. Below, we attempt to present a set of parameters related to the relationship between citizens and security apparatuses in different Syrian areas according to the influence of the entity in control of each area.

According to 90.5% of the sample, the security apparatuses in regime-controlled areas have significant violations of the rights and dignity of citizens. The relation between these forces and citizens prior to 2011 was characterized by a dark history of violations and encroachment upon citizens' rights and dignity, but those encroachments and violations were not publicly visible due to the tight security grip of these apparatuses on all aspects of life in Syria. After 2011, the power of these organizations increased and their violations intensified in order to suppress the popular uprising against the Assad regime and peruse all individuals who oppose this regime. This posed a significant threat even to Syrians abroad who consider returning to those areas.

In the same context, 52.5% of the sample agrees that there are violations in the Syrian opposition areas, while 31.8% disagrees, and the remaining

15.6% do not know. However, according to field reports from those areas, there are some violations by the security forces, but they constitute individual cases by some employees of these agencies rather than the conduct governing the functioning of these apparatuses, unlike the case in regime areas. This is basically because the management of the security forces in opposition-held territory is nascent and newly-formed. They have not yet reached a level of control or professionalism that enables them to fully control the behavior of their personnel in addition to the poor financial support provided to these apparatuses including salaries and incentives to their staff. This might be a motive for some of their individuals to encroach upon the rights of civilians just to achieve some material profit. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that these apparatuses have encroached upon the dignity of citizens and humiliated them in order to subjugate them and make them comply with their demands.[64]

With regard to AA areas, 38% of the sample agreed that there are abuses by the AA security apparatuses against the rights and dignity of citizens, while 19.6% disagrees, and 42% do not know. Due to the special nature of the area under AA in terms of ethnic diversity in such areas and the attempt by the administration, which belongs to the Kurdish component, to impose itself as a governing power, it resorted to imposing its power through its agency, including the security agency (Asayish). Field reports suggest the Asayish is responsible for wide violations against its opponents from other ethnic groups and even from the opposition within the Kurdish individuals. These abuses occur in their detention centers and the systematic torture of some opposing civilian activists.[65] However, some believe that these abuses, although present, do not amount to the level of abuses in regime areas. There is wide spread unawareness that such abuses occur. The AA imposes media blackouts, which makes it significantly less feasible to obtain regular reports of such abuses. As shown in Figure (19).

---

[64] Afrin… Fresh violations by "Al-Hamza Division" against civilian victims, tension rises in the area. Story of a Human website.30-05-2020: https://rb.gy/ujcvmm

[65] Sima Yousuf, Violations and Abuses by SDF and its security organ "Asayish", Ninar Press Website,25-04-2020: https://rb.gy/pvz114
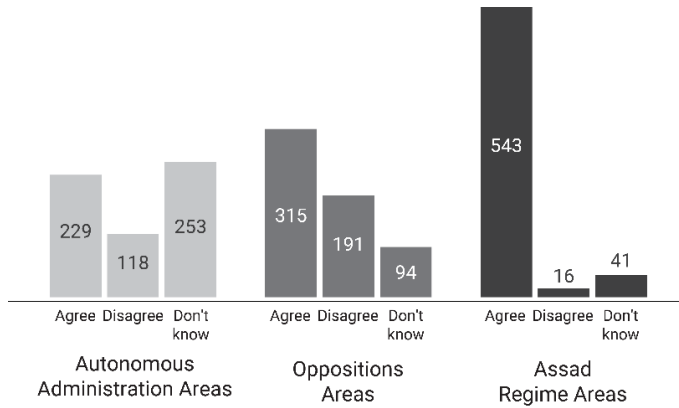
Figure (19) Shows the extent of abuse by the security apparatuses in terms of violating citizens' rights and dignity in the Syrian areas

With the outbreak of the uprising at the beginning of 2011, the brutal behavior of the regime's security apparatuses was evident through the large-scale arrests, torture, and extra-judicial executions of peaceful protesters. Such behaviors constituted violations that augmented public resentment, deepened feelings of fear, and strengthened the negative perception towards the regime's security forces. This renders reconciliation between civilians and security forces unlikely, as all trust is gone. This constitutes an obstacle, which undermines the process of voluntary return for Syrian refugees. 82.5% of the sample agrees that the perception of security apparatuses among Syrian citizens is associated with fear and insecurity.

Moving to opposition areas, 47.6% of the sample agrees that such association exists between the perception of these apparatuses among citizens and the fear and insecurity to deal with them, while 36.3% disagree to this. Such percentages are attributed to the long-standing negative perception held by citizens towards the security apparatuses, prior to 2011. Changing such a perception and related feelings of fear and anxiety by citizens requires a significant period of time. On the other hand, part of the sample says that the perception of the security apparatuses in opposition areas cannot be compared to that of regime areas neither in terms of behavior nor in terms of social acceptance. Even if they are characterized by poor

performance, weak mechanisms, and low compliance by its staff, they cannot be compared to the regime's security apparatuses.

In AA areas, 40% of the sample agrees that there is an association between the perception of security apparatuses and the sense of insecurity when dealing with them. A large segment of society does not accept the authority of the AA, and this has affected civilian perception of the security apparatuses associated. Security forces tied to the AA have participated in numerous abuses, violations, and crimes against civilians. Such violations took place in eastern Syria, since 2014, as they attempted to control the area. A small percentage (13.6%) of the sample, however, believes that there is no such association, which may be attributed to factors linked to the Kurds' national sentiment for establishing a homeland, and the need for a strong security agency capable of controlling any movement that may affect the achievement of such ambition. Figure (20) shows responses of citizens when asked about the mental image and perception towards security apparatuses being based on fear, discomfort and mistrust.
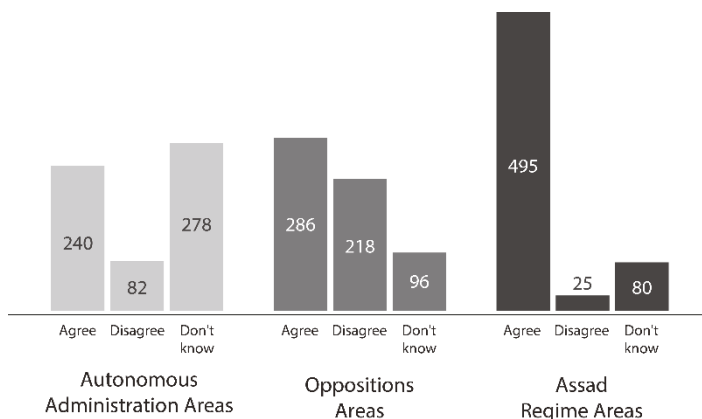
Figure (20) The perception of security agencies is associated with fear and apprehension when dealing with them

With the spread of militias and military factions in Syria in late 2011, their significant effect manifested in the security landscape. Destabilizing citizens' security and encroaching upon their rights are unacceptable behaviors by the militias towards the local populations. However, the presence of such militias and their impact on the security of citizens varied

across different Syrian areas. The largest concentration of these militias and military factions to date has been in regime-controlled areas, which has posed a major challenge for regime security apparatuses to control the behavior of these militias and factions towards citizens, encroaching on their rights, and infringing their stability in areas where they are present. This is due to the fact that security forces are unable to control the behavior of such militias, as their influence and military power has grown. Security forces also avoid conflict, in order to prevent significant repercussions on the security situation in regime areas in general.[66] According to some sources, there are more than fifty militias affiliated with Iran in Syria, with about 100,000 armed men in their ranks.[67] 75.6% of the sample agrees to this idea, i.e. the inability of the regime's security apparatuses to control the behavior of militias and military factions towards civilians. Numerous field reports cite cases that confirm this phenomenon. On the other hand, some believe that since the peaceful demonstrations began in 2011, Assad regime has created an environment conducive to chaos by withdrawing its security apparatuses, giving Shabiha free hand in areas of popular uprising. The regime also issued a multitude of public amnesties releasing perpetrators of crimes and ex-cons. These people have deliberately destabilized those areas. Thus, kidnapping, robbery, and theft incidents increased. This organized chaos, created by the regime and its security apparatuses, was aimed at discouraging demonstrators from their demands and making them accept to the conditions set for to maintain security and stability.[68] The negative consequences of such actions continues to effect the security situation deterring Syrian refugee's wish to return.

In opposition areas, 67% of the sample agrees that the security apparatuses in those areas are unable to control the behaviors of militias and military factions towards civilians, while 17.6% disagrees. It should be noted that since the regime lost control over those areas, such factions assumed a prominent role and infiltrated into all aspects of society. When security

---

[66] Mazen Ezzi, The Regime and Loyal Militias Will Struggle to Disentangle Their Relationship, Chatham House, 02-07-2017: https://rb.gy/za3f2c

[67] Abdulkarim al-Thalji, Iranian Militias Suffocate Southern Aleppo, Aleppo Fox Magazine, 28-02-2020: https://rb.gy/0h0aor

[68] Syria Between Assad's Reign and Insecurity, Levant News Website, 23-06-2020: https://rb.gy/xptm65

forces formed to control and regulate the security situation, they faced a number of challenges on methods to reduce the influence of the factions and curb their abuses towards civilians. They still face difficulties in this regard until today, because of the obstinacy of such factions to comply with decisions of these apparatuses.[69]

In AA areas, 31.8% of the sample agrees that the security apparatuses in these areas are unable to control the behaviors of militias, while 24% disagrees. This is attributed to the fact that there are no militia formations or military factions in this area, unlike other areas. However, these areas still have some ISIS sleeper cells and sleeper cells of Assad and Iranian militias, who attempt to disrupt the security situation and pit the population against the AA authority, such as using blasts and assassinations against AA members. Therefore, the security authorities of the AA face considerable difficulties in tracking and capturing these cells.[70] Figure (21) shows responses to the question of the ability of security apparatuses to control the behavior of armed groups with civilians.
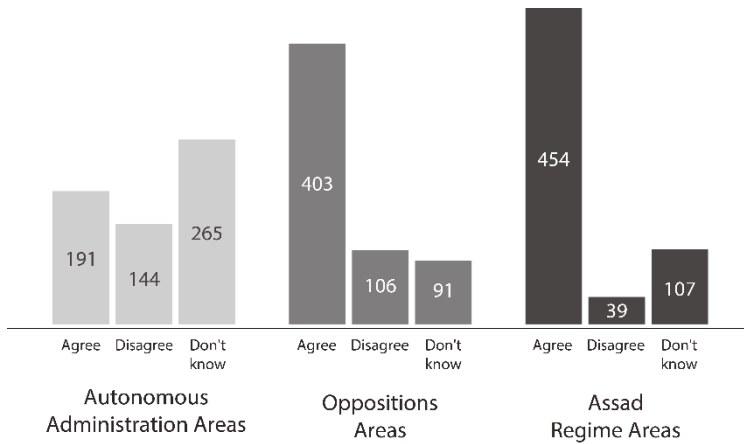
Figure (21) Security agencies are unable to control the behavior of militias and military factions towards civilians

---

[69] Adnan Ahmad, Police Corps in Northern Syria: Can it challenge factions authority?, The New Arab, 26-05-2020: https://cutt.ly/vfixa8p

[70] Mohammad Hassan, "ISIS" East of the Euphrates… Security warfare, assassinations and elimination of civilians, Daraj, 26-05-2020: https://rb.gy/oi2sen

Moving to the sample's confidence in the way security apparatuses handle their complaints, 81% agree that there is a low level of confidence among citizens in the way security apparatuses handle their complaints in regime-held areas. Many citizens are reluctant to resort to these agencies, as they fear any questioning that they might be subjected to. Many of them are aware that complaints submitted to these bodies do not receive the required attention to address them. The security forces are influenced by bribes, nepotism and bias when responding to or addressing any complaint. This explains the low trust level among citizens in this regard. This level of trust has further declined after 2011 and the visibility of the brutal behavior of these apparatuses towards civilians.

In opposition areas, 56.6% of the sample agrees that there is a low level of confidence in these apparatuses to address their complaints as they are still newly established and need a sufficient period of time to respond effectively to complaints submitted by citizens. Additionally, they lack sufficient executive arms to effectively respond to such complaints. However, a lower percentage (40%) agrees to this in AA areas. This low percentage is due to the fact that citizens are suffering from amplified bureaucracy in and from partisanship in their ranks, which largely affects the extent of responsiveness to the submitted complaint. As shown in Figure (22).
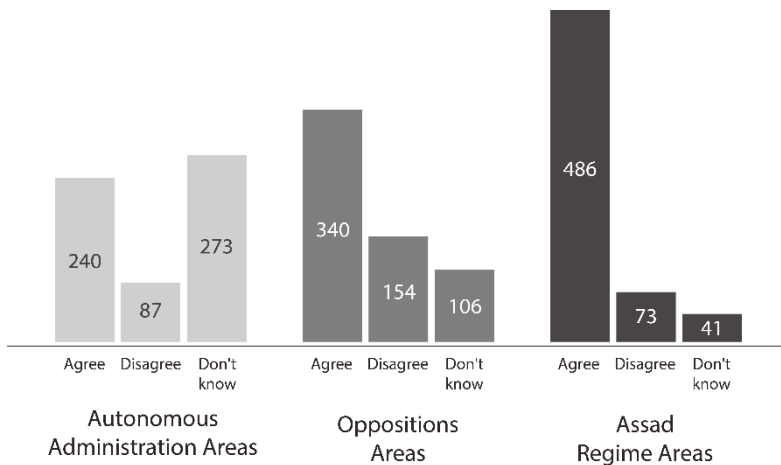
Figure (22) Citizens have little confidence that security agencies address their complaints

When asked about the extent to which security apparatuses are biased towards citizens in terms of arrests, 73% of the sample agreed that there is bias among security apparatuses in regime areas, as there is often discrimination in the arrests of citizens in relation to ethnic, regional and religious affiliation. This was evident after the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria. This is still true today. Although the number of arrests have dropped, the targets of arrest remain the same. In opposition areas, 48.3% agree that such bias exists in the security apparatuses, while 30.3% disagree. However, bias in cases of arrest operations by security forces can be identified. This is mostly attributed to material and ethnic factors, in addition to the lack of effective judicial authorities that can limit such violations by some military factions in those areas.[71]

Moreover, 37.8% of the sample agrees that such bias exists in AA areas, while 14.6% disagrees. 47.5% said they are not aware of such bias. In our interpretation of these percentages, some light must be shed on the reality of these operations. According to field reports, arrests in AA areas follow a policy similar to the Assad regime in its implementation, as there are no arrest warrants, but arrests are carried out by kidnapping from streets, markets and public places, or raiding the offices of political parties and civil actors without judicial warrants. In general, they basically constitute arbitrary arrests and systematic repression of freedoms in those areas simply for expressing any opposing opinion or engaging in political or civil activity that is contrary to the views of the AA or defies its authority within these areas.[72] On the other hand, security apparatuses rely on the pretext that detainees belonging to ISIS or persons who release press statements to Turkish media. Most of these detainees are Arabs who oppose the existence of AA in those areas, especially in the governorates of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.[73] As shown in Figure (23).

---

[71] Among Three Powers… People of Afrin Opt for Silence, Enab Baladi, 16-09-2018: https://cutt.ly/JficBno

[72] Autonomous Administration Forces Escalate Arbitrary Arrests and Suppression of Freedoms in their areas of power. SNHR, 19-08-2016: https://cutt.ly/dfilQXq

[73] Human Rights Report Documents Autonomous Administration arrest of 19 Civilians in Raqqa in September, Enab Baladi, 04-10-2019: https://cutt.ly/1fiznaS
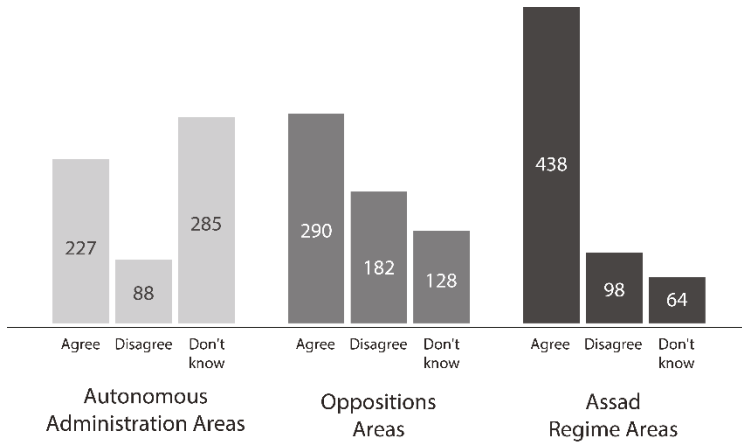
Figure (23) Security agencies are remarkably biased in terms
of detentions and responding to complaints

Another common phenomenon is relying on a network of informants among civilian ranks. The sample agrees by 89.6% on the existence of such a phenomenon in regime areas, where the regime security apparatuses have used many internal spy networks and employed individuals from different social classes to facilitate security control over the community and restrain any movement against the ruling authority.[74] At the same time, this phenomenon has created a deterrent factor for citizens to express their opinions and criticism of the ruling authority and its security apparatuses. At the same time, the tactic spread doubt between community members creating an atmosphere of distrust within society.[75] This may constitute the greatest threat for the refugee return process, as the regime has been recently trying to focus its informant networks on returnees, with the potential risk of getting arrested.

In opposition areas, 44% of the sample agrees that such a phenomenon exists, while 33.8% disagrees that security forces use informant networks. In opposition-held areas, given the limited technical and logistical capabilities of the security forces, the likelihood of relying on a network of

---

[74] Mustafa Alloush, Informants: The Artery of Security Authorities in Syria, 25-08-2016: https://cutt.ly/wfiQDH2
[75] Syria, The Republic of Fear: Security file for every citizen, armies of informants monitor every breath, to watch and intimidate. Al-Shark Al-Awsat, 28-09-2012: https://cutt.ly/IfiWOV2

informants remains very high, but the nature of information they target from this network is based primarily on tracking the sleeper cells of SDF, ISIS and Assad regime. The gravity of the security threat to these areas makes it imperative for security forces to resort to such options for the public's interest and to attain a safe environment. In AA areas, 33.6% of the study sample agreed that such a phenomenon exists, while 19.3% disagreed.

However, given the nature of the situation in the AA areas, in terms of ethnic and societal diversity, the presence of large numbers of sleeper cells of ISIS, Iranian militias and the Assad regime, the need for security organs to be able to track the movement of these cells and arrest them, as well as obtaining intelligence on individuals opposing their authority, employing informants to cooperate with the security apparatuses is very likely. However, the ability of these forces to infiltrate communities by informant networks is impaired by community cohesion in certain areas that cannot be easily penetrated, such as some areas in Deir Ezzor governorate. As shown in Figure (24).
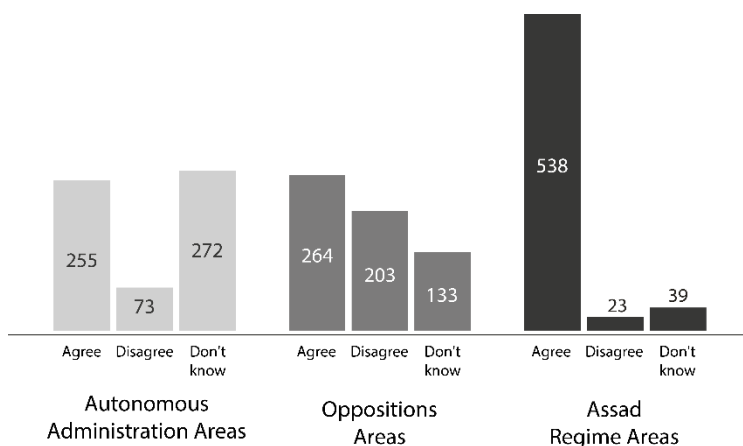
Figure (24) Security agencies recruit informants in civilian ranks as a means to control security

The relationship between civilians and security apparatuses is a logical, necessary, and inevitable one. The better the relationship, the more it reflects on the stability of the political and security situation This is because the cooperation between citizens and security apparatuses yields several

positive results, most importantly increasing the effectiveness security forces and their preparedness to maintain public order, as well as to counter any security breach or emergencies. This can be achieved by citizens providing security forces with relevant information to elevate their work.

The relationship between citizens and security forces remains one of distrust in regime areas. 74% of the study sample agrees to this. This distrust is elevated through informant networks that heighten any cooperation as spying. In opposition areas, 47% agree to this, as people in these areas still carry the same perception about dealing with security forces as in other areas. However, 36% of the sample does not agree to this as they see such cooperation as a necessity in those areas and that failure by citizens to help these security forces control the situation will lead to a delay in attaining a safe environment.

By contrast, in AA areas, the percentage of those who agree to this was 33.6%, as individuals collaborating with security forces are often seen as agents and informants, regardless of their ethnic origin. However, 19.3% do not agree, and describe the relationship as a form of cooperation by voluntarily providing such forces with information, as opposed to being a kind of intelligence work for security forces, as shown in Figure (25).
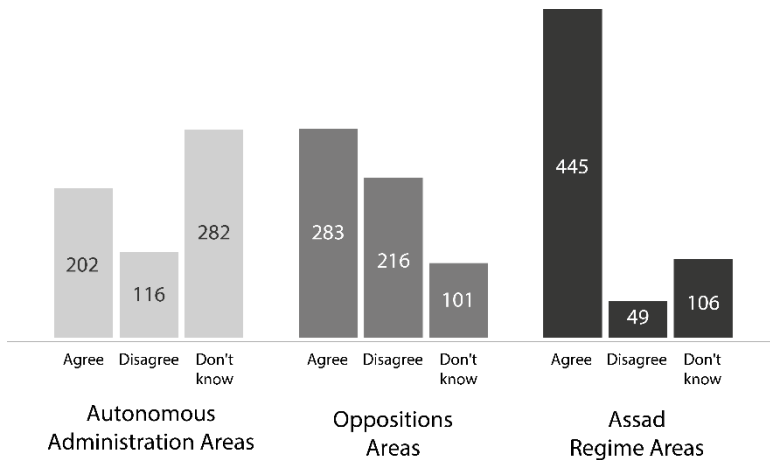
Figure (25) Any cooperation between security agencies and citizens is regarded with suspicion in the local community

The primary objective of security apparatuses is to provide a safe and secure environment, where citizens feel their life and properties are protected. When asked about the ability of such apparatuses to provide a safe environment for citizens, 77% of the sample agreed that security forces in regime areas are unable to provide a safe environment, which is one of the key components of instability.[76-77] Moreover, after 2011 regime security forces lost much of their capacity and capability in terms of its ability to control outlaws and criminals. After the conflict, there were wide spread defections of more than 15,000 police officers, out of 53,000 from various departments of the ministry of the interior, not to mention civil servants. Most prominent defectors belong to the internal security forces, whose numbers were 43,000 according to the 2011 statistics.[78] This is evident in the situation of insecurity in various areas under regime control and the inability of these apparatuses to respond in many of the cases.[79] Additionally, the relationship between the regime security apparatuses and Iranian, Russian and Lebanese Hezbollah militias is close. In many areas the regime coordinates with relevant militias to impose violent and exploitative behavior towards the population of regained areas.[80]

In the same context, 61% of respondents agree that the state of insecurity and the inability of the security apparatuses to control it exist in opposition-controlled areas, while 24.3% disagree. The security sector is one of the most important complex problems facing opposition-controlled areas in northern Syria, and the most important obstacle and challenge that the security forces are trying to find solutions to, within a turbulent security environment, due to the multiplicity of controlling parties with conflicting interests in addition to direct regional interventions and the ensuing counter-reactions by various parties through their sleeper cells to destabilize the

[76] Insecurity in Suweida and the People Blame it on the Regime, Syria Press Website, 29-01-2020: https://rb.gy/klwr93

[77] Waleed al-Noufal, Assassinations in Daraa: Assad Regime's Way of Tightening Security Grip over Southern Syria, Syria Direct, 21-07-2020: https://rb.gy/ogjxak

[78] Manhal Barish, Private Security Firms in Syria: New Agents for the Regime, ibid

[79] Who could control security disorder in Ziraa neighbourhood in Lattakia, Enab Baladi, 28-06-2020: https://rb.gy/067yrt

[80] People flee regime- and Iran-controlled areas in Deir Ez-Zour… what is it?, SY 24 Platform, 16-08-2020: https://rb.gy/ygarsd

areas not to mention the continuous bombardment by Assad and allies on some of those areas[81] and the resulted unstable security situation. Therefore, the burden on these security forces to reduce the chaos is difficult and requires an abundant amount of resources and capacity building. On the other hand, the deterioration of the security situation results in the discontent of the local population and threatens their social and economic stability.[82]

In AA areas, 39% of the sample agrees that security forces are not able to secure a safe environment in their areas, while 17.5% disagrees. However, the largest proportion of the sample, 43.3%, had no knowledge of the ability of security apparatuses in these areas to control the security situation, for reasons related to the media censorship by the AA. The scarcity of information available about these areas prevents awareness on the efficiency of these security forces and their ability to provide a safe environment. Some field reports from those areas indicate that there is a regional disparity in the level of providing a safe environment. The further away from al-Hasakah Governorate, the greater the security instability becomes, due to the differences between these areas in terms of demographic composition. There is discrimination by security forces when addressing security issues that arise in those areas, which exacerbates tension among the population towards such behavior and thus increases instability.[83] Moreover, incidents of murder, robbery, kidnapping, assassination and other crimes have increased so much that the areas of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa under AA started to be seen as the most dangerous areas in Syria[84] as a result of the large proliferation of weapons and gangs that have become a threat to the residents of these areas, under the lack of a law that controls the security situation.[85] Security forces have been directly accused by the local

---

[81] Imad Karkas, Security Disorder Continues in Northern Aleppo: SDF Most Interested, The New Arab, 21-07-2020: https://rb.gy/mmkwur

[82] Salem Nasif, Protest in "Al-Bab" Condemning Deteriorating Security Conditions in Northern Syria, Syrian Solution Website, 13-07-2020: https://rb.gy/uehhp7

[83] Terrifying Phenomenon Haunts People of Raqqa, SY24 Platform, 28-07-2020: https://rb.gy/ycjtgp

[84] In Deir Ez-Zour, ISIS assassinates 40 every month in SDF areas, SY24 Platform, 24-05-2020: https://rb.gy/izyr8e

[85] Civilian Casualties due to Insecurity in SDF Areas, Shahed News Agency, 18-08-2020: https://rb.gy/fjmw3y

population of deliberately spreading insecurity in these areas,[86] and of suppressing any protests by the citizens against their security behavior. This was evident in its suppression of certain demonstrations in Deir Ezzor using arms against demonstrators.[87] Consequently, security forces have not played the role required to provide peace and security. Due to the above reasons, refugees from these areas consider the uncertain future before deciding to return to such a security environment. As shown in Figure (26).
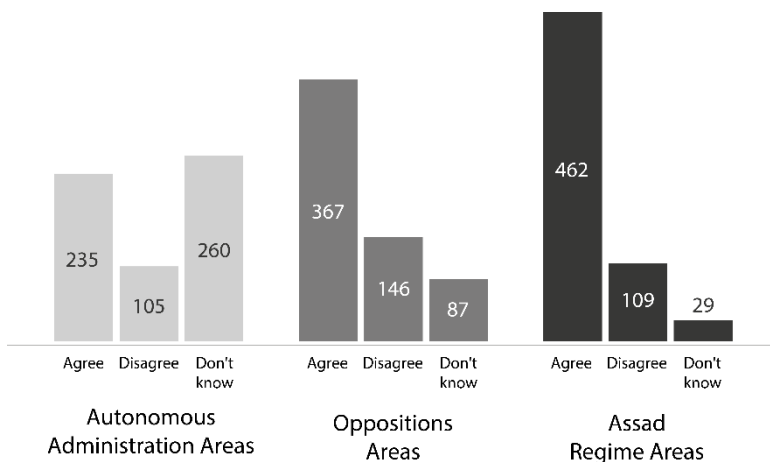
Figure (26) Security agencies are unable to provide safe environment for citizens through keeping peace and internal secutiry

To learn more about the reality of parameters associated with the return of refugees, a set of general statements was formulated in an attempt to measure the sample's opinion on the possibility of return to different areas of Syria.

5. Return to Regime-held Areas

When taking the sample's opinion on the possibility of returning to regime areas, 71.6% of the study sample strongly agreed that refugees do not trust

---

[86] Amidst Security Chaos.. Tribe Leaders Assassinated in Deir Ez-Zour, Enab Baladi,04-08-2020: https://rb.gy/siwc8u

[87] SDF Carry Out Security Campaign in Towns Protesting against them and Accuses Regime and ISIS of "Sedition", Zaman al-Wasl, 05-08-2020: https://rb.gy/7zfklg

amnesty decrees issued by the regime due to their lack of credibility from their point of view.[88] Many amnesty decrees issued by the Assad regime are not perceived as credible by a large proportion Syrians living abroad, as they were very broad and complex, rendering them ineffective and only applicable to limited groups that the regime wishes to pardon.[89]

Moreover, 69.8% of the study sample agrees that there are no international guarantees to insure the security of returnees. The lack of international guarantees was evident when even Russia was incapable of guaranteeing safety of returnees to regime-held areas, therefore the Russian initiative to encourage returns failed.[90] The regime contributed to the failure of the initiative, seeking to control whom may return. Selective lists were imposed by the regime to suit its demographics change agenda.[91-92]

The authorities in Lebanon also attempted to organize for refugee return. Sponsored by more than one party, the Lebanese Cabinet approved a response for Syrian refugee return over the past few years, but its plans only succeeded in returning a few hundred. In order for a plan to succeed there must be coordination and cooperation with the Syrian State, which is the only body capable of securing the necessary guarantees. According to influential leaders in Lebanon, return will occur in stages and will be effected by a number of external factors, most notably in the current stage, the Covid-19 epidemic, and the economic crisis in Lebanon.[93] According to analysts, the Lebanese Government's approach to return is dangerous and based on the assumption that the context is conducive to refugee return. The approach by Lebanese authorities significantly simplifies a difficult

---

[88] Amnesty for Deserters of the Syrian Army… what does it implicate for refugees?, DW Website, 15-11-2018: https://rb.gy/toqbkl

[89] After 17 Amnesty Decrees… 130 thousand detainees remain in regime prisons, Enab Baladi, 24-03-2020: https://rb.gy/ezov8b

[90] Amin Habla, Will Russians succeed in returning Syrian refugees? Al-Jazeera Net, 27-07-2018: https://rb.gy/3bvwad

[91] Why Assad ruined Russian plan to reconstruct Syria and end refugees tragedy with European funds? Arabi Post Website, 08-05-2019: https://rb.gy/ngrqzx

[92] Fresh Group of Refugees Return from Lebanon… Regime Picks Lists of Returnees, Shaam Network,16-10-2018: https://rb.gy/gcp76g

[93] Based on Coordination with Damascus… Lebanon Introduces Plan for Refugee Return, Shaam Network, 17-07-2020: https://rb.gy/cnn0rs

situation with no political solution and ignores an ongoing economic collapse in Syria.[94]

In the same context, 58% of the sample strongly agrees and 15.3% somewhat agrees that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is unable to document security threats faced by returnees to regime areas. A number of field reports indicate that the UNHCR attempted to communicate with the returnees. Despite attempts to gain access to areas refugees can return to, the UNHCR is unable to overcome the security and logistical challenges with the Syrian-regime concerning those areas.[95] Consequently, it is difficult for the UNHCR to construct a comprehensive assessment of the security situation of returnees across all areas.[96] In addition, the regime security forces restrict returnees' ability to communicate with external agencies and criminalize individuals that defy their wishes, as shown in Figure (27).
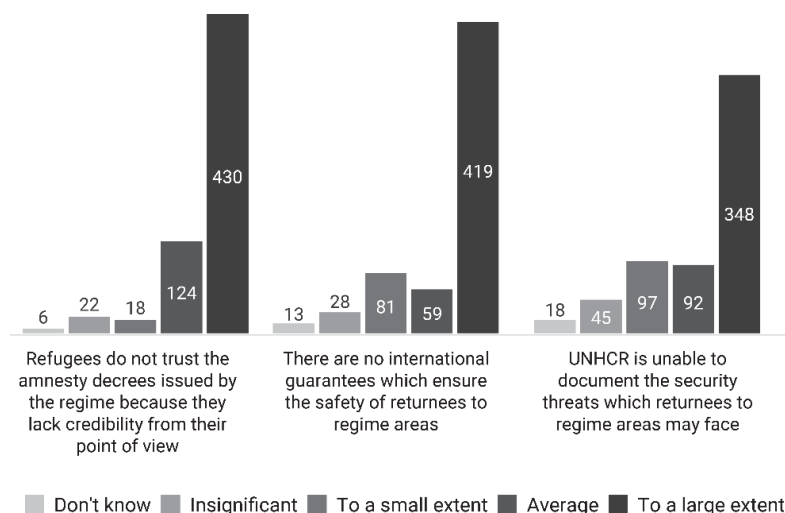
Figure (27) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about returning to areas controlled by the Assad regime

---

[94] Lebanon's Plan for Refugee Return: Risky oversimplification of a complicated reality, Issam Feras Studies Institute, analytical article, Daraj Website,04-08-2020: https://rb.gy/raqqge

[95] UNHCR Urges Syria to Allow Access to all Areas to Monitor Return of IDPs and Refugees, France 24 TV, 10-03-2019: https://rb.gy/tqo3wz

[96] Marwa Hashem, Syrian Returnees Face Unknown Fate, 24 Website, 12-12-2018: https://rb.gy/6uggxi

60.5% of the sample strongly agrees and 22.3% somewhat agrees that it is difficult to attain accurate information concerning return, as information is often inconsistent. Incorrect information received by returnees has resulted in repeated displacement. Refugees who select to return based on the information, only to be surprised with a different reality. As a result, in many cases, returnees returned back to their previous places in neighboring countries.[97] Many lost their legal status in the host country.[98] The Responsibility of sharing information with refugees in host countries is shared by UNHCR, government agencies, NGOs, and local organizations, all of whom reflect disconnected realities and spread fragmented pieces of information. Due to this, refugees are left with a collection of inconsistencies.

In the same context, 56.5% of the sample strongly agreed and 26% somewhat agreed that the UNHCR is unable to access or follow-up on refugees within certain territories. This is due to the obstacles set up by the Assad regime to impede UNHCR's ability to accompany returnees inside the country, preventing the UNHCR from closely monitoring the challenges faced by returnees. Therefore, the UNHCR is unable to insure the stability and protection of returnees from security violations.[99] The sample also strongly agrees by 41.8% and somewhat agrees by 36% that regime security agencies are able to track refugees abroad, posing a great threat to them if they return.[100] Numerous reports indicate that the regime has planted spy networks to monitor refugees and their movements in neighboring countries since 2012,[101-102] as shown in Figure (28).

---

[97] What Return: Conditions and Obsessions of Syrian Refugees, Sawa for Development and Relief, Lebanon, February 2019: https://rb.gy/owckon

[98] Ammar Hamo and others, "If We Knew, We Would not have Though of Visiting it", Syrian Refugees in Jordan lose their refugee status after visiting Syria, 13-3-2019, Syria Direct, https://bit.ly/36UQTZO

[99] Ninar Khalifa, What Awaits Returnees? Ambiguity Shrouds Syrian Refugees' Return from Lebanon, Enab Baladi, 16-12-2018: https://rb.gy/rt7qxa

[100] Naser Adnan and Ahlam Ibrahim, Documented… How Assad spied on Syrians abroad. Syria TV, 27-09-2020: https://rb.gy/uxkzck

[101] Capturing 'Sleeper Cells' in Zaatari Camp, Amon News Agency, 25-08-2012: https://rb.gy/gck8ge

[102] Ahmad Zaza, Refugees in Turkey aid Syrian intelligence, Asia Times, 04-04-2019: https://rb.gy/2ijsvo
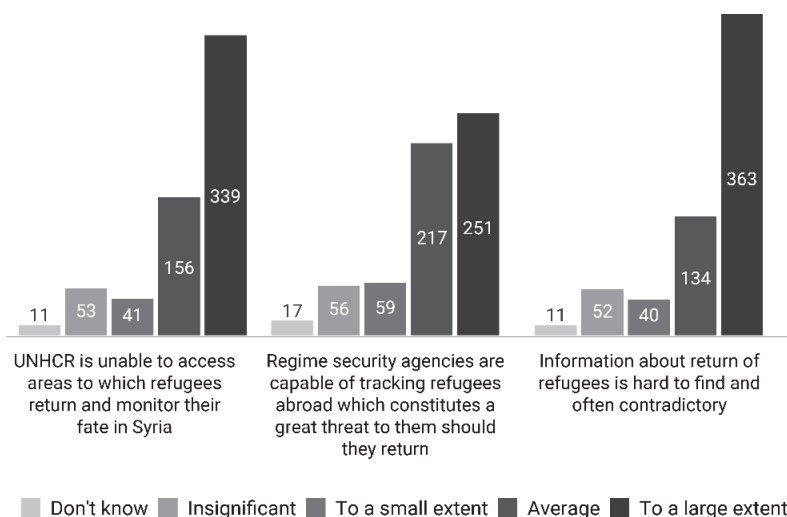
Figure (28) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees
about returning to areas controlled by the Assad regime

Furthermore, 64.5% of respondents strongly agree and 26% somewhat agree that they do not trust the guarantees provided by government agencies in the countries hosting Syrian refugees and other bodies that communicate with the regime's institutions in order to facilitate the return of refugees and ensure their safe return. In Lebanon, in West Bekaa, local committees played an important role in the return of small groups of refugees to Zabadani and Eastern Ghouta in Damascus Countryside Governorate.[103] Moreover, the Syrian political parties present in Lebanon and the associations (including the Syrian Workers Union in Lebanon and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party) hold a similar role to local committees. Tribal and clan networks in Syria also influence the mechanisms of return send their representatives to organize return or to transport returnees from the border crossings.

Lebanese political parties are also active in refugee return. However, the aforementioned entities work without oversight or standards to deal with refugees, making it more likely that their actions are misleading and

---

[103] Local committee are groups of representatives affiliated with the Syrian government and acting as brokers between officials, mayors and refugees and the Syrian government.

coercive, undermining the principles of *Do No Harm* to refugees.[104] In Jordan, after the opening of the Nassib border crossing on October 15, 2018, the regime and Russia worked to recruit people and associations to help those who intend to return and bear their embassy expenses or help them solve problems in the Syrian embassy in Amman. During the first months of opening the border crossing, many refugees returned to place of origin, but the trend of return froze when visitors from Syria came to Jordan to visit their refugee relatives and were informed of the security risks of return, arrests, conscription of young men into the regime forces, as well as the absence of services, and the difficult living conditions in their towns in the governorates of Daraa and Quneitra.[105]

63.8% of the sample strongly agree and 26.6% somewhat agree that return of Syrians to regime-held areas often poses a threat to them and to their families. Many field reports mentioned arrests made by regime security agencies. Individuals arrested or detained later disappeared within the mechanism of the security apparatuses. Till today, the fate of many remains unknown, as families are unable to access information about them. With no avenue to attain information about imprisoned loved ones, families resort to bribing security officials, sometimes paying thousands to broker deals. Therefore, return has become a security threat to the lives of the returnees despite guarantees by regime security forces that they will not harm the refugees in the event of their return.[106] In addition, security agencies try to take advantage of returnees as a source of information about their relatives and friends abroad. Forcing them into the web of the informant network to endanger the lives of their relatives, is another deterrent for refugees to return in the future.[107]

In the same context, 59.8% of the sample strongly agrees and 26.6% somewhat agrees that the return of a refugee is linked to the necessity of

---

[104] What Return: Conditions and Obsessions of Syrian Refugees, ibid.

[105] Khaled al-Khatib, Why are Syrian refugees in Jordan afraid of returning to their areas in southern Syria?, Al-Monitor, 11-10-2019: https://rb.gy/nk1xn4

[106] Human Rights Network Warns: Assad killed and detained hundreds of returnees to Syria, SNHR, 16-08-2019: https://rb.gy/5mssrt

[107] Louisa Loveluck, Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, The Washington post, 02-06-2019: https://rb.gy/isfimq

obtaining a security permit from or a status adjustment with the security agencies of the Assad regime. Regime security forces are requesting all individuals to attain security permits prior to returning. Many returnees were reportedly arrested because they did not possess the new documents requested. As the regime regained control of some of the areas that were under opposition control, status adjustments turned into a very important new milestone in the lives of the people in those areas, as it will define their fate for months and possibly years to come. However, the scope of this requirement extended to include even those residing outside Syria, as the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates dedicated a page on its website entitled "Status Adjustment":[108] "In order to adjust the status of Syrians who left the country illegally, due to the current circumstances, and as per the leadership's desire to encourage citizens, especially those eligible for conscription, to return to the homeland and adjust their conscription and security status, regardless of the circumstances that forced them to leave. The abovementioned citizens can visit the Syrian embassy in their country of residence or the nearest Syrian embassy in order to submit requests to adjust their status duly."[109]

The regime, using its official media outlets, has promoted these adjustments through numerous reports that show reconciliation agreements across the country. Some investigative reports have shown that adjustment papers involve a significant trap for signatories, forcing any person to provide information they know about the opposition, activists, or any military information related to the opposition upon signature. Some answers alone constitute a sufficient reason for arrest. It was later discovered that the adjustment papers provided by the Assad regime embassies in Europe, included notes determining some of those willing to return had taken up arms against the state. This is illustrated in Figure (29).

---

[108] The term "adjustment" or "status adjustment" emerged in Syria during the war. It connotes a procedure through which all "terrorist" acts exercised by a person against the Assad regime are scrutinized and then they are pardoned to resume their normal life.

[109] Sulafa Jabbour, Status Adjustment… A new nightmare that haunts inhabitants of areas around Damascus, Al-Jazeera Net, 17-06-2018: https://rb.gy/3dhhrx
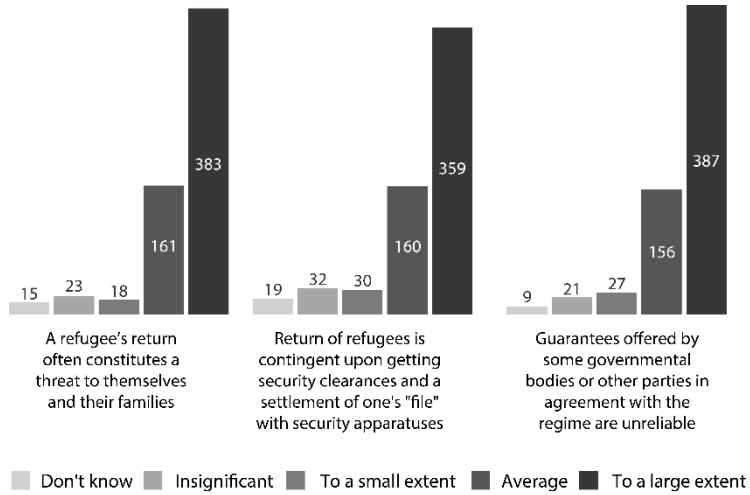
Figure (29) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about
returning to areas controlled by the Assad regime

In the same context, when addressing the issue of the return of Syrian refugees to regime-held areas, it is necessary to discuss the regime's security apparatuses, as they are one of the fundamental components of a secure and safe environment within regime held areas. The process of reforming or restructuring these regime's security forces serves as a critical factor to successfully transition democratically. Consequently, this process is important as it seeks decrease the effects of the security forces on internal safety and stability. The security apparatuses remain critical, as it is the sole source that can insure a safe and stable environment.

When taking the sample's opinion about security agencies' ability of to be reformed or restructured, a high percentage (86.6%) agreed that these agencies could not be reformed or restructured due to their organic link to the Assad regime. Therefore, political change must take place before starting this process. Over the years, there has been a growing conviction in the Syrian community that radical change needs to occur in the security apparatus, as their sole purpose is to consolidate the authority of the regime.

On the other hand, others argue that the Syrian state does not have a "security sector" to begin with but mere apparatuses, thus reform of these bodies is difficult. The current security forces work collectively and

separately to protect the regime and are considered essential to its survival. The current security apparatuses have been consolidating the foundations of the regime's rule, interfering in all social, economic, political, and religious aspects of life. They adopted a work philosophy and security doctrine that prioritize the needs of the ruler over the ruled.[110]

With regard to the security agencies acceptance of reform, 77.3% of the sample agrees that these agencies do not accept any initiatives aimed at reforming or restructuring them. The process of restructuring these agencies is a comprehensive process, rather than partial patchwork. Therefore, in order for this process to succeed, it must be comprehensive. This may not be feasible given the multitude of different security actors in Syria and the inability to subject all of them to the same level of restructuring. In addition, the restructuring process will require that these agencies change their ideological foundation from the protection of the regime to maintaining the security of society and individuals, as well as respecting human rights within the rule of law framework. This can be difficult to implement for these agencies.

In this context, 63.5% of the sample strongly agrees and 29.3% somewhat agrees that reforming these agencies is difficult because of the extent to which they have deeply penetrated the Syrian society. The security establishment in Syria, with its various agencies, was able to penetrate society and control the details of public life. Among the forms of intervention is their stipulation of what is known as security vetting and clearance for a number of social, economic, and political activities. The results of this deep penetration have been catastrophic due to the damage they caused to the societal system and state institutions. For example, they have sustained the manifestations of corruption in state institutions and formed networks of material interests with local forces which hindered meeting the demands of local communities. They also spread a culture of fear from authority and flattery to it. These agencies were, to a large extent, able to maintain their control of the public prior to 2011. Their wide-spread casting of fear among the public showcases their aim of protecting the the regime at the expense of the security of society, as shown in Figure (30).

---

[110] Maen Tallaa, The Syrian Security Services and the Need for Structural and Functional Change, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 14-07-2016: https://rb.gy/d0vd9q
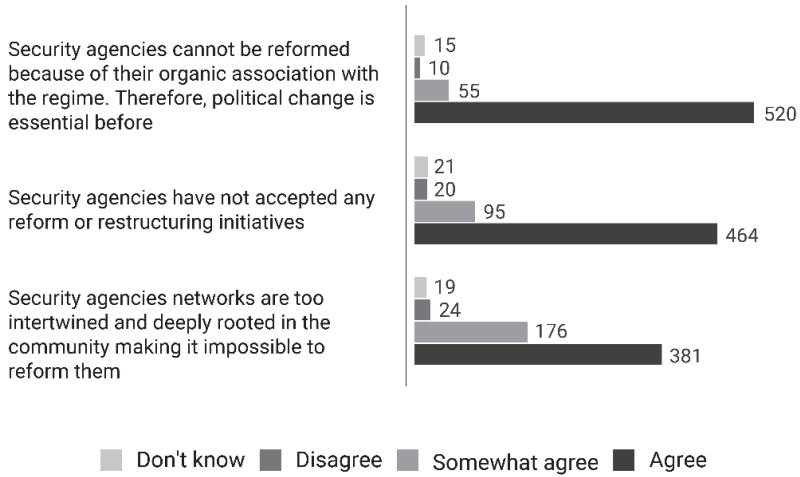
**Figure (30) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees
about reforming the security services of the Assad regime**

71.8% of the sample strongly agrees and 18.5% somewhat agrees that reforming the security establishment cannot take place in isolation from reforming other governmental institutions related to its work. The interlocking relationship between the security establishment with its agencies, and the various state institutions, which was the product of the security domination of these agencies at all social, economic, and political levels in the country, made the success of the process of restructuring or reforming these agencies organically linked to the reform of state institutions related to these agencies, so that the restructuring process can only take place in parallel among these government entities. In addition, 42.5% of the sample strongly agrees and 40.6% somewhat agrees that the effective implementation of transitional justice will guarantee reform of security agencies. The institutional reform process in general and the reform of security agencies that used oppression and committed crimes or reforming the ones that provided the legal cover for the continuation of violations in particular represent one of the most important objectives of transitional justice. The active road of transitional justice will secure the necessary accountability mechanism under the judiciary, alleviating the

violations being committed on human rights and prevent judicial and security bodies from serving the interest of the ruling political class in Syria.

Meanwhile, 47.8% strongly agreed, 27% somewhat agreed, and 18.5% disagreed that reforming security agencies can be achieved by introducing new provisions to constitution that focus on regulating the work of security apparatuses and restraining their powers. Amending constitutional provisions related to the security apparatuses, in terms of their administrative affiliation and legal guarantees to control their work, has become a necessity to establish a new social contract between the people and these agencies, so that they do not continue to assume the same role as the guardian of stability and security without clear mechanisms for transparency and oversight over their work. Therefore, the new constitution must provide guarantees, not only for the impartiality of these agencies and stopping their domination of citizens and violation of their rights, but also to oblige them to fulfill their duties of maintaining citizens' security and offering reassurance to them, ensuring that they enjoy their rights and exercise their public and individual freedoms. This constitution must also stipulate a neutral and apolitical role for security agencies as well as monitoring mechanisms for their work such as the formation of parliamentary and human rights committees to monitor their behavior and investigate any of their violations,[111] as shown in Figure (31).

---

[111] Nael Jerjis, Security Apparatuses in the New Syrian Constitution, Geiroon Media Network, 22-06-2018: https://rb.gy/ef63a8

Security agencies may be reformed through introducing provisions in the new constitution which regulate their work and restrict their powers — 39, 111, 163, 287

Effective implementation of transitional justice will ensure reforming security agencies — 39, 62, 244, 255

The security establishment could not be reformed without reforming other governmental institutions associated with it — 25, 33, 111, 431

Don't know   Disagree   Somewhat agree   Agree

Figure (31) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about reforming the security services of the Assad regime

With regard to reforming security apparatuses, 43.6% of respondents strongly agree, 37.3% somewhat agree and 23.3% disagree about the importance of non-governmental organizations monitoring and raising awareness of the agreed upon reforms of the security apparatuses. The importance of civil society organizations in mending civil-military relations is an integral part in altering the negative perceptions in the future, and raising awareness of the newfound structures being built on democratic principles. This process and its timetable should be explained to the public via these organizations to manage public expectations about them. These organizations are the most capable of communication with the public, and may be responsible for much of the process of restoring confidence between the new security sector and the people. Moreover, encouraging civilian participation in drafting the security policy during the restructuring process may also generate more responsiveness from the communities towards the new developments. Despite their essential role of connecting the security sector to the people, non-governmental organizations should not have the sole role, as they are not in position to influence the security conditions in Syria.

In the same context, 37.8% of the sample strongly agreed, 30.8% somewhat agreed and 23.3% disagreed on the important role of the Syrian People's

Assembly (Parliament) in the process of reforming the security apparatuses, as role of supervising the performance and reporting transparently. Parliamentary oversight is an essential element to ensure the security sector's dynamics are consistent with and conform to the democratic path and to constantly affirm that this sector is capable of responding early to security threats. The parliament is responsible for reviewing and monitoring the actions of the executive authority in the field of security policies. This oversight integrates and bridges public opinions into the structure.

The parliament can also improve security performance by exercising its powers by allocating resources to the security sector in the budget. The Parliament is able to reject or approve special funding requests, and negotiate additional budgets further amplifying its role in determining the direction, management, control, and priorities of the security apparatuses. This depends on the amount of information available to MPs and their understanding of security issues, ability to develop a national vision for security, defining sound legal frameworks, and providing a more responsive and comprehensive approach that reflects the needs of all. The Parliament holds an essential role in reforming the security apparatuses, but with the current conditions, it seems unlikely it will be influential in the future. During the recent Parliamentary elections in Syria, security forces approved those selected to join the Parliament, and those approved will be the individuals who will sign the new constitution and nominate the next President. Given the method of selection, it is evident the regime is still in control of these agencies and not much will change if the process is not re-done in an independent and democratic manner.[112]

66.6% of the sample strongly agreed and 25.6% somewhat agreed that the main point of entry to reforming the security sector in Syria is reliant on dissolving existing security agencies and forming a central security agency. Many believe that these agencies cannot be reformed or restructured, given their organic link to the ruling authority in Syria. However, it must be taken into account that dissolving these agencies completely and dismissing former officers may create an obstacle in restructuring the security sector.

---

[112] People's Assembly Elections in Syria: War Profiteers Get Into Politics, Al-Souria Net, 13-07-2020: https://rb.gy/l5rxju

The security apparatuses currently lack the experience necessary for enduring stability and rule of law. Furthermore, young individuals may not be willing to join the newly reformed security agencies, as a result of the negative perception built over the years. Consequently, despite the security apparatus's oppressive practices that demand their dissolution, it is important to note that the democratic transition may not necessarily require completely dismantling them, but rather requires democratic restructuring of these agencies and subordinating them to civilian leadership and parliamentary oversight. This can be done after banishing offenders and perpetrators of crimes through transitional justice programs and keeping those not involved in oppressive practices, as shown in Figure (32).
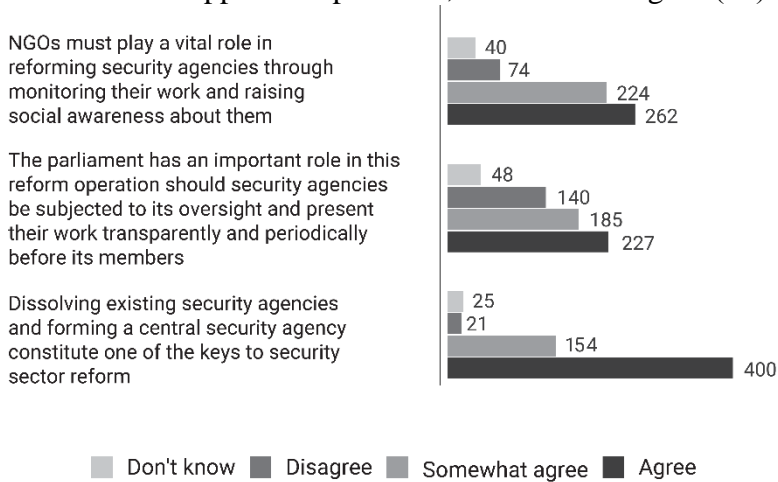
Figure (32) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about reforming the security services of the Assad regime

79.3% of the sample strongly agree and 14% somewhat agreed that, if a transitional governing body is formed in Syria, it is necessary to grant it full powers to supervise and monitor the activities of security agencies. The current security apparatuses accumulated various crimes on the social, economic, and political lives of the public, thus building a corrupt persona with distinctive traits of all those who participated or are members of. Without oversight, security officials are in full control of the different forces, operating without methods of accountability. To create change, it is imperative to have full control over the work of these agencies. If this is achieved, these agencies will be held accountable and will be capable of

meeting security needs, as assigned. They will then reduce the risk of violence, and ensure a safe community.

Also in relation to the security landscape, 65.5% of the sample strongly agrees and 24.8% somewhat agrees on the disarmament of all militia fighters and the reintegration of those willing into a central security agency. The reintegration efforts would occur after intensive rehabilitation, given many participated in a dangerous role with militias or security forces. Although this step is critical, its success is reliant on a multitude of difficult steps, including a political agreement, the implementation of transitional justice, mending the diverse ideological backgrounds of these militias, and whether it is possible to reform or restructure security agencies to equip them with the necessary capacities,[113] as shown in Figure (33).

In case it is agreed to form a TGB, it must be given full authority to supervise and oversee security agencies
- 21
- 18
- 85
- 476

All militia fighters must be disarmed and those willing can be integrated into a central security agency after being rehabilitated after the conflict
- 27
- 31
- 149
- 393

Don't know   Disagree   Somewhat agree   Agree
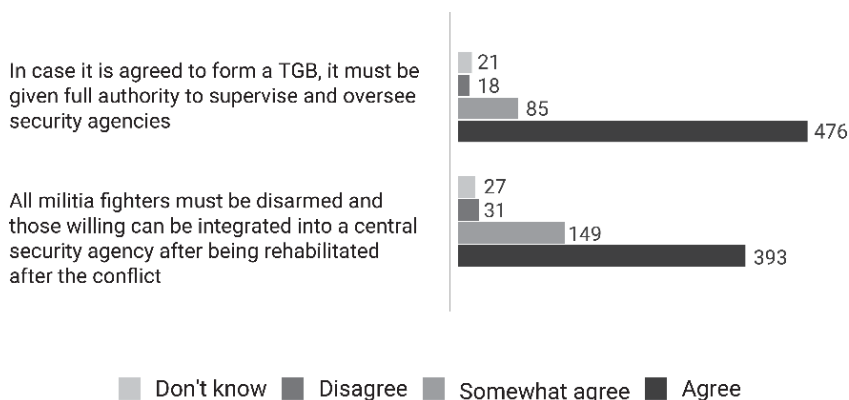
Figure (33) Shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about reforming the security services of the Assad regime

6. Return to Opposition Areas

When asked about the possibility of returning to opposition areas, 70.06% of respondents agreed and 24% somewhat agreed that these areas remain fragile and infiltrated, in security terms, which undermines the likelihood of resettlement in these areas.

---

[113] Haid Haid, Reintegration of Syrian Armed Groups: Mechanisms, Actors and Shortfalls, Carnegie Middle East Center, 17-12-2018: https://rb.gy/hc4vue

Some local sources in these areas indicate that despite the spread of checkpoints manned by the Free Police Force and the Syrian National Army, security breaches persist. This constitutes a major source of concern for the civilian population, IDPs, and even the refugees residing in Turkey. Security breaches are present in all the towns and villages across of the border, including the Euphrates Shield territory, Afrin, and Peace Spring. This section provides further insight into the nature and degree of security and stability in these areas, method of management, and the ability to control through prevailing forces. This is prominent especially with the increase of terrorist attacks, the varied goals and perpetrators, and the various methods being employed in their execution. The main reasons for these breaches can be attributed to the absence of an effective central security containment plan, the presence of various armed opposition groups in the same locality, dereliction of duty, exchange of accusations of negligence, and absence of any effective role by competent officers and defectors within the ranks.[114] The main culprits for these attacks seem to be sleeper cells of the Islamic State, the Assad regime, and remnants of PYD/YPG, which operate under the so-called "Olive Wrath Operations Room,"[115] mainly targeting the Afrin region. PYD/YPG-affiliated groups view Afrin, the local fighters, and displaced populations that settled, as an extension of Turkish influence, and hence a legitimate target for their operations. There has been intense operations under this pretext without discrimination between civilians and combatants.[116] In addition to the primary goal of seeking to destabilize these areas, each of the aforementioned parties has a specific goal and different backer. These security breaches and state of fragility can also be found in Idlib province in both the areas under the control of the National Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

---

[114] Ahmad Zakaria, What is behind continued "insecurity" in Euphrates Shield Areas?, Horrya Press, 13-07-2018: https://rb.gy/wsmnf3

[115] Olive Branch operations room, according to its own definition on official outlets, is a group of young men and women from Afrin. It is believed to be affiliated with YPG forces affiliated with PYD. They assassinate Turkish combatants in the area as well as local fighters supported by Turkey.

[116] Assassinations in Opposition Areas between August and December 2019, Special Report, Omran Center for Strategic Studies,31-01-2020: https://rb.gy/fk7dy7

Likewise, 52.8% of respondents agreed and 40.8% somewhat agreed that security agencies in these areas demonstrate a low level of professionalism, which directly reflects the declining security situation in these areas. Despite several campaigns to tighten up security, these agencies failed to prevent security breaches. This failure can be mainly attributed to the insufficient number of officers specialized in security, the personnel's lack of competence, absence of an effective plan, and lack of interaction between the judiciary and security agencies. Generally, the opposition's security agencies do not have the prerequisites of a competent security institution, due to the different points of reference, deficient human resources, shortage of specialist, and absence of coherent comprehensive strategies of action.

On the other hand, these agencies have taken some concrete steps to develop their work and improve their performance. For example, a women's police battalion was formed in the Euphrates Shield region, which significantly contributed to confronting many terrorist attacks and addressing shortcomings, specifically related to terrorist disguising themselves as women.[117] Moreover, these agencies are seeking to develop their tools through the civil and military police forces, by increasing their members and offering training courses for new recruits. However, they are still unable to prevent security breaches, nor are they able to capture perpetrators. This requires radical restructuring of these agencies and offering more training to their personnel, as shown in Figure (34).

---

[117] Ezzat Madi, Outstanding Successes for "Euphrates Shield" Policewomen in Northern Rural Aleppo, Anadolu Agency, 01-12-2017: https://rb.gy/qdl5gn
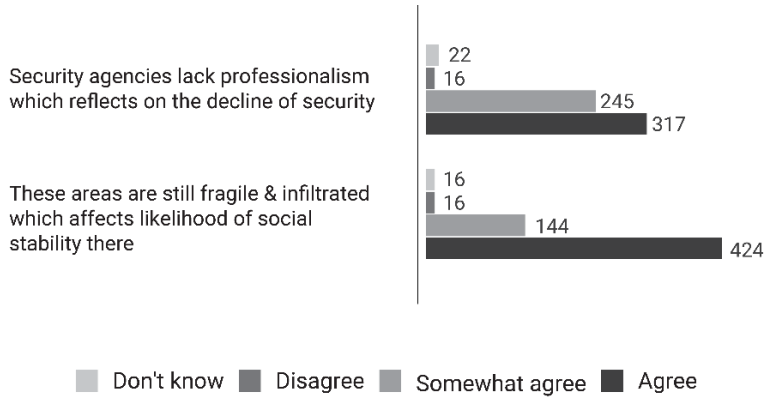
Figure (34) Syrian Refugees' opinions on
return to opposition-controlled areas

Furthermore, 52% of respondents agreed and only 35.6% somewhat agreed that logistic and technical equipment necessary to tighten up security is minimal. In fact, many major towns are short of surveillance cameras and other necessary equipment in public places, such as marketplaces and main streets. There is a need to supply security forces with all logistic and technical equipment to control the security situation in a way that would contribute to sustaining a safe environment for civil activity. In addition to administrative support for the police and public security agencies in the region, the Turkish government has been providing military and logistic support, such as vehicles for the transport of police personnel and armored military vehicles for Syrian commandos, as well as monthly salaries for police officers.[118]

On the other hand, the relationship between security agencies and the local communities in these areas is good when compared to other areas as 44.6% of respondents agreed and 38.8% somewhat agreed with this fact, while 8% disagreed.

---

[118] Hussein al-Khatib, How does Turkey Run the Euphrates Shield Area?, Noon Post, 25-11-2018: https://rb.gy/j9ejki

These areas are considered the best option for refugees return due to availability of personal security factors compared to other areas
42
103
199
256

Relation between internal security formations and local communities is good compared to other areas
50
49
233
268

Logistic and technical resources necessary to control security within these areas stand out in comparison with opposition areas
45
29
214
312

Don't know ■ Disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Agree

Figure (35) Syrian Refugees' opinions on
return to opposition-controlled areas

The relationship between the security forces and the civilian population varies from one region to another. While the relationship is relatively positive in the Euphrates Shield region, tension prevails in the Afrin region as a result of encroachments against the local population. The relationship between civilian and security personnel in the Peace Spring region is still unstable due to the gross interference in civilian life by military factions.[119]

With regard to the relation between civilians and security forces in Idlib, the Salvation Government's Ministry of Endowments has imposed religious and administrative supervision on all aspects of society to ensure its compliance with the provisions of Islamic law and public morality.[120] The security apparatuses monitor the rules set, which is known as "Arms of Goodness." Their attempt to implement law has has provoked substantial public outrage and several direct confrontations with civilians in direct support from the security brigades of HTS.[121] Therefore, it can be said that

---

[119] Chaos and insecurity in Syrian pro-Turkey "Peace Spring" areas drive people out, Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper, 17-02-2020: https://rb.gy/l2fd2l

[120] Tareq Abo Ziyad, Arms of Goodness in Idlib… "Hesba" to Teach Syrians Their Faith, Enab Baladi, 22-04-2018: https://rb.gy/xmzcdz

[121] HTS gives "Arms of Goodness" free hand in Idlib under "Falah Center", Shaam Network, 10-05-2020: https://rb.gy/cumex3

these relations, being an essential component of the current security landscape, cannot contribute to the creation of appropriate safe environment conducive to the return of refugees from Turkey. The parties controlling these regions must work to bridge the gaps between internal security forces structures and local communities in a way that facilitates their mission, improves security, and encourages local community engagement and coordination.

When asked if they view these regions as the best option for the return of refugees in terms of personal security, 42.6% of respondents agreed, while 33% somewhat agreed, and 17% disagreed. In the case Syrian refugees in Turkey are incentivized to return, these regions would be their preferred choice, although the security situation is not ideal. Moreover, the behavior of security agencies in these areas cannot be compared to the security forces of the Assad regime, which are known to pursue and detain returnees or the AA security forces, whom are unable to provide safety in their areas of control. Those in charge of the opposition-controlled areas are seeking to improve the security situation, making tremendous efforts to institutionalize, restructure and develop security arrangements so as to provide the civilian population with stability. These efforts are being carried out in cooperation with the Turkish government which is also making substantial efforts in this regard with the aim of encouraging the voluntary return of Syrian refugees on its territory to those areas. It should be noted that Turkey's commitment to the principle of voluntary return of Syrian refugees on its territory has been subject to debate,[122] as is shown in Figure(36).

---

[122] Safe Zone in Northern Syria… Are Refugees Leaving Turkey Voluntarily?, DW Radio, 05-11-2019: https://rb.gy/ujagjw
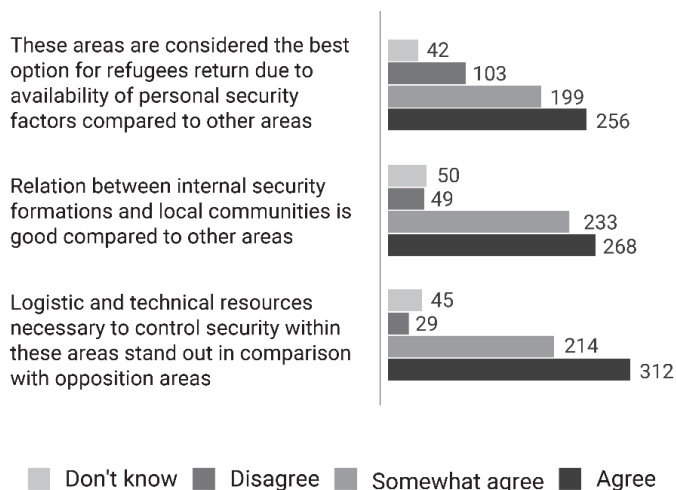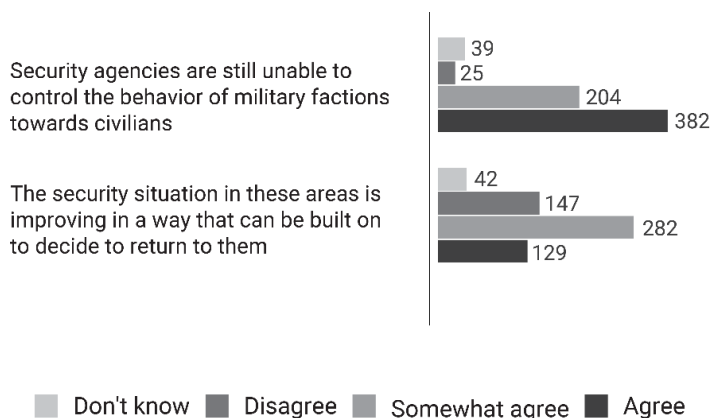
Figure (36) Syrian Refugees' opinions on return to opposition-controlled areas

In regards to the relationship between security forces and military factions, 55.3% agreed and 34% somewhat agreed that the security forces are not able to control violations committed by military factions against civilians. For example, in Afrin there have been frequent violations and encroachments by military factions members against civilians, both locals and IDPs, including increasing incidents of seizing property and houses, eviction of owners or the IDP inhabitants, and imposing fines and royalties on residents.[123] This has resulted in increasing public resentment. In general, violations by the military factions have become a prominent feature of opposition-held areas.[124] Analysts agree that several factors contribute to these violations, including the poor structure and command in the "National Army," the nature and approach of the factions which lack a central authority as well as the international position that rejects turning the "National Army" into a major unified military establishment. Other factors include the forced displacement of thousands of persons and fighters from several areas to the north of Syria, which created a new reality of multiple tribal and regional components, where social integration is a challenge. The poor living conditions and fragmented economic situation are also

---

[123] Malek al-Rifae, Protests Across Afrin as Turkey-backed Factions Commit Violations, al-Hal Net, 29-05-2020: https://rb.gy/3hbtfz

[124] Houshnik Hassan, "National Army" practices preclude return of Ras al-Ain IDPs to their homes, Marie Organization, 29-03-2020: https://rb.gy/lonjsy

contributing factors in encouraging fighters to join factions without receiving proper education or gaining an understanding of laws. All of these factors resulted in the lack of discipline in these factions, including among commanders and in prioritizing personal gains. This will result in serious consequences in the future, as it undermines their public constituency.[125]

In an attempt to restrain military factions, the Ministry of Defense and the National Army's General Staff created a military court and military police for the north and east of Aleppo to replace security institutions in these areas.[126] However, the effectiveness of these two bodies has been largely undermined by several factors, including factions' disregard of rulings and judicial warrants. The military police suffer from obstruction by factions, poor cooperation and refusal to deliver wanted persons, and regularly avoid confrontation with the factions.[127]

As for the decision to return, there is a considerable difference in the sample responses to the improvement in security in these areas being a factor in such a decision. 21.5% of the sample agreed, 47% somewhat agreed and 24.5% disagreed. The security situation in the remaining areas within the Idlib governorate, regardless of the controlling forces, may deteriorate in the future as a result of the continuous military attacks by the regime and its allies. This will result in displacing tens of thousands of residents, as well as local factions. Security failure remains a growing risk, given the overpopulation, which may occur in some areas due to displacement. Additionally, the movement of displaced factions into the control areas of other factions may possibly create a more complex security challenges that require collective organized efforts. The security situation in Euphrates Shield areas, Afrin and Peace Spring is not stable as well, given the intermittent clashes with the regime and SDF and the continuous security infringements, which undermines the notion of a safe environment that allows for the return of refugees, as shown in Figure (36).

---

[125] Ali Darwish et al, Violations by the Military…Who controls "National Army" Factions?, Enab Baladi, 07-06-2020: https://rb.gy/gnncnk

[126] Court and Military Police Established in Euphrates Shield Region, Syria News, 20-02-2018: https://rb.gy/4fczaa

[127] Violations by the Military…Who controls "National Army" Factions?, ibid.

7. Return to the Autonomous Administration (AA) Areas

Based on the answers from the sample, it is evident that those whom answered do not have sufficient awareness of the security situation in the AA region. This is due to several reasons, most important of which are: AA control of the media's coverage concerning the security situation, the prosecution of media activists, and the attempt to control the provision of internet services and wireless communications. Having granted four companies licenses to provide these services, according to observers, the AA intends to dominate and monopolize the telecommunications sector in these areas by controlling supply and economic returns, as well as the surveillance and security control via these companies. These companies are likely to be owned by parties linked to the Democratic Union Party. These efforts reflect the AA desire to replace Turkish internet networks, whose services cover most of the border areas, as well as local communication companies, such as Syriatel.[128]

Attempting to understand the security apparatuses in the areas under the AA, the survey illustrated clear disparities in perspective. When asked about the existence of a central administration for security forces in the AA territories, 43.3% somewhat agreed, 13.6% agreed, and 16% disagreed that it was an advantage that helps control the security situation. Despite the existence of this administration, the area is still far from reaching stability, due to factors related to the bureaucracy of the AA administration and its security agencies, as well as its discriminatory practices against the residents of these areas by suppressing protests and arrests[129]. The level of security varies in areas under the control of AA.[130] In addition, "ISIS", regime, Iranian militias, and other parties' sleeper cells still persist in these areas, playing a prominent role in the instability of these areas in terms of security. Furthermore, AA areas still witness a state of severe political and military polarization among the international actors present in them, posing a threat

---

[128] Ibrahim al-Abdullah, Autonomous Administration Monopolizes the Internet to Impose Political Realities, Geiroon Website, 18-03-2019: https://rb.gy/ws5png

[129] Fresh Protests in Hasakah Countryside against SDF Practices, Athar Press, 28-06-2020: https://rb.gy/6j7lsw

[130] Security Chaos and Robbery… Where is the role of Asayish in Raqqa?, Enab Baladi, 28-07-2020: https://rb.gy/ws5png

to the AA's project of a federal entity, as well as its implications for the security landscape in these areas.[131]

Logistic and technical resources necessary to control security within these areas stand out in comparison with opposition areas
- Don't know: 182
- Disagree: 82
- Somewhat agree: 230
- Agree: 106

Presence of American troops in this area contributed to controlling security there
- Don't know: 189
- Disagree: 102
- Somewhat agree: 243
- Agree: 66

The area stands out for its central administration of security agencies which helps control security in these areas
- Don't know: 161
- Disagree: 97
- Somewhat agree: 260
- Agree: 82

Legend: Don't know | Disagree | Somewhat agree | Agree

Figure (37) shows the opinion of Syrian refugees about return to the Autonomous Administration areas

With regard to the quality of the logistic and technical resources necessary for controlling the security situation and the extent to which they are appropriately available in comparison to opposition areas, the sample's opinion varied where 38.3% somewhat agreed, 17.6% agreed, and 13.6% disagreed that they are appropriately available. The United States played an important role, supplying security agencies with logistical support, technical equipment, and supplies over the past years, in an effort to battle ISIS and eliminate sleeper cells. They also facilitated and led military and security campaigns of the International Coalition forces. The United States Department of Defense has allocated 550 million dollars in the 2019 budget, 300 million of which were used for training and equipment and 250 million for supporting a border security force run by "SDF" forces.[132] The Internal Security Forces of the Autonomous Administration "Asayish" installed surveillance cameras to enhance the security situation in AA areas.

---

[131] Socrate al-Alow, Implications of Competition East the Euphrates for Local Actors and the Syrian Crisis, Al-Jazeera Studies Center, 03-06-2020: https://rb.gy/7jdnhn

[132] SDF Plans for a New Military Structure after Eliminating ISIS, Enab Baladi, 18-02-2019: https://rb.gy/gw8b3d

Moreover, this comes within the framework of security measures taken by these forces in response to the repeated incidents that target the security and military personnel of the AA.[133]

To further understand the influence of US and coalition forces on security within the AA region, the survey asked whether respondents felt they were a contributing source for stability. 40% somewhat agreed, 11% agreed, and 17% disagreed. The presence of US forces in these areas is perceived as temporary and unsustainable. Conflicting statements by the USA administration on intentions to withdraw has led to evaluation on whether AA is able to maintain security and military influence with the presences of Russia, Turkish, and Iranian forces. This is illustrated in Figure (37).[134]

When taking the sample's opinion about the possibility of returning to the AA areas, there was a clear discrepancy in the sample's responses: 37% somewhat agree, 15% agree, and 20.3% disagree on whether return relied mainly on economic conditions more than the security situation. Occasionally, AA territories will experience protests against the declining economic and living conditions, administrative corruption, and the AA's monopolization of resources without sharing revenues with local population. In addition, public services are either absent or deteriorated and arbitrary arrest campaigns are launched against the locals of these areas.[135] The AA has become stricter in controlling the economy of the areas it controls thanks to the strength it got from its successive victories against "ISIS" with support from the US-led international coalition.[136]

29% somewhat agreed, 21% agreed, and 9% disagreed that adjustment of status with AA security forces was necessary. According to a number of reports, returnees from outside or inside Syria are required to "settle" their security status with the AA security apparatus before attaining permission

[133] Mays Nour Eddin, CCTV Project to Promote Security in Raqqa, Smart News Agency,03-12-2019: https://rb.gy/sosonm

[134] Fuad Hassan, American Presence in Syria: Military Bases and Implications of Anticipated Withdrawal, France 24 TV, 21-12-2018: https://rb.gy/v4pizy

[135] Demonstrations in Deir Ez-Zour Countryside against "Corruption" of "Autonomous Administration" Local Councils, Enab Baladi, 29-06-2020: https://rb.gy/how1hw

[136] Sinan Hatahet, Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, Middle East Directions Project, European University Institute, 27-01-2020: https://rb.gy/dwcfis

to enter. The AA also demands sponsorships and residence documents for persons who wish to enter its areas from other areas in Syria.[137]

Respondent answers varied when discussing AA security apparatuses' relations with civilian. 27.5% to 31% somewhat agreed, 8% to 11.3% agreed, and 25% to 29.6% disagreed that the relationship between civilian and security forces was positive. This reflects the mistrust that exists between civilians and security apparatuses. As we have previously noted, the security practices of the AA security forces have deepened popular dissatisfaction with them even in Kurdish areas. There has been a multitude of cases of arresting –especially- Kurdish activists who oppose the rule, the policies, and the practices of the AA, silencing civilian and human rights voices. Additionally, there is conscription of young people, and kidnapping of children to conscript them in the armed forces. Security forces also commit a host of violations in majority Arab regions under their control. According to some legal researchers, the United States is the most prominent supporter of the AA, and bears a great responsibility for the persistence of corrupt and discriminatory practices that contravene the international law. It is unacceptable to provide military and logistic support to groups that kill, kidnap, violate the most basic rights of civilians under its control on a daily basis, and undermine the activities of civil society.[138] Accordingly, this data clearly indicate that the requirements of a safe environment that encourages the return of refugees who are originally from these areas are lacking, as shown in Figure (38).

---

[137] Obeida Nabwani, SDF Prevents Dozens of Families from Entering Raqqa for not having Sponsors, Smart News Agency, 12-09-2019: https://rb.gy/rfqjwz

[138] SDF Undermines Civil Activity in North Eastern Syria, Euro-Mediterranean Institute for Human Rights, 29-03-2020: https://rb.gy/jpvagk

Return to this area is more associated with economic conditions than security conditions
- 165
- 122
- 222
- 91

Refugees returning to Autonomous Administration areas need to adjust their status with the security agencies affiliated with the administration before they could return
- 244
- 55
- 174
- 127

Relation between security agencies and the population is good and based on trust and cooperation
- 208
- 178
- 165
- 49

There is general public satisfaction by residents of this area in general despite some security breaches
- 195
- 150
- 187
- 68

Don't know   Disagree   Somewhat agree   Agree

Figure (38) shows the opinion of Syrian refugees
about returning to the Autonomous Administration areas

V. Findings

1. General Security Situation in Syria

- The security situation in Syria continues to decline. The degree of deterioration varies from one area to another and it reveals the challenges of security for a safe environment for return. With a high volatile and fragmented political and military situation leading to an unstable economic and social situation, refugees are hesitant to return.

- In regime-held areas, behavior of security forces has not changed since pre-2011, but has grown more brutal towards civilians with increasing detentions, systematic torture, and murder. This has amplified the belief among citizens that security apparatuses cannot be reformed in the future. In addition, regime security agencies suffer from chaos and lack of coordination among themselves, which has paved way to corruption and overstaffing. It is important to note, that security apparatuses are no longer contained to regime held territories, as private security firms are being contracted. Security agencies have lost much of their effectiveness after the abundant defections and collapsing economy, diminishing their ability to control the region, as they did pre-2011. The security forces are also largely influenced by Iranian and Russian forces, who utilize them to implement their agendas in Syria.

- Corruption and seeking profit have become a wide-spread practice among security forces. The lack of accountability, monitoring, and management of security apparatuses has allowed security personnel to engage in corrupt and violent behavior. This is significantly visible in regime-held areas and to a lesser degree in other areas. Security forces are attempting to establish stability and have been using local militias to implement their agenda. Security agencies in areas outside regime control lack professionalism and are unable to secure a safe environment in northern Syria. Moreover, the security situation in eastern Syria varies between cities and towns. While the security situation in Al-Hasakah is

relatively safe, the security situation in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor continues to deteriorate.

2. Civil-Security Relations

- The relationship between citizens and security agencies is one filled with distrust. The most distrust exists between Syrian citizens and the regime-controlled security apparatuses. Fearing arbitrary arrest and detention, refugees are deterred from returning to regime-controlled region out of fear for their lives. The security forces have committed a string of systematic violations in regime-held areas by encroaching upon citizens' rights and dignity. Moreover, individual violations by security personnel can be found in opposition-held territory, that is mostly tied to material gain and absence of funding support.

- There are major violations by security agencies in AA areas against civilian activists who oppose the AA. Violations include arrests and systematic torture, but do not amount to the level of violations in regime areas.

- Violations committed by the regime's security forces have reinforce public resentment, heightened the sense of fear, and exacerbated the negative perception of those agencies among citizens. The abundant violations by regime security officials has destroyed trust or reassurance of the people, making it challenge to reconcile the relationship. Although negative perception of security forces in opposition-held territory exist, they do not amount to the negative perception tied to regime security forces.

- With the spread of militias and military factions in regime-held areas, regime security agencies are no longer able to control the behavior of those militias and factions towards civilians, as the latter's influence and military might multiplied and security agencies are unwilling to engage in conflicts therewith further igniting public wrath towards them. This only increased public resentment which would have many negative implications on the ability of the regime and its agencies to provide safe

environment for those residing in its own areas, let alone speaking of the possibility of refugee return in light of this security context.

- In opposition areas, security agencies are still facing challenges in minimizing the influence of factions and curbing their violations against civilians. Some factions refuse to abide by the decisions of the security forces. While no such militias or factions are present in AA areas, security authorities there face major challenges in chasing down and capturing ISIS cells.

- In all areas, citizens have little confidence that security agencies would address their complaints and believe they are biased in terms of arrests and complaint management. This perception is more common in regime areas due to the spread of bribery and nepotism and the arrests of citizens from particular ethnicities, regions or faith. Lack of trust in opposition areas, on the other hand, can be explained by security agencies' lack of sufficient executive tools to effectively respond to these complaints. In addition, these agencies are biased in their arrest practice mainly on financial and ethnic grounds. As for the AA areas, lack of trust can be attributed to bureaucratic mode of operation in those agencies and partisanship in their ranks which greatly affect their responsiveness to submitted complaints. In addition, there is widespread arbitrary arrest of those who oppose the authorities in these areas. The bulk of detainees are Arabs opposing the presence of the AA in these areas particularly the governorates of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor.

- After 2011, regime security forces relied increasingly on internal and external informant networks by recruiting informants in all areas and across social classes. This allowed them to monitoring returnees in areas over which the regime regained control. This constitutes one of the main threats to voluntary return of refugees to regime areas. Hence, any relation between these agencies and the citizens is regarded as suspicious in the local community. In opposition areas, on the other hand, given the limited technical and logistic capacities of security agencies, it is very likely that they rely on a network of informants due to the huge security threat which sleeper cells of certain organizations

constitute in these areas. Therefore, citizens are aware of the importance of cooperating with these agencies and assisting them to control security in order to reach a safe and stable environment for the local community. In AA areas, it is very likely that security agencies would resort to recruiting informants, due to the ethnic and communal diversity in these areas, as well as the presence of ISIS sleeper cells. These agencies are able to infiltrate local communities through informant networks mainly targeting Arab majority areas. As for cooperation and relations between security forces and citizens, individuals cooperating with these security forces are often regarded as informants regardless of their ethnicity or origin.

- The **regime's security apparatuses** have not been able to secure a safe environment. To the contrary, the regime's security apparatuses were a major source of instability, having lost much of their capacity and resources. A complex challenge in **opposition-held areas in northern Syria**, security forces are unable to manage the turbulent environment leading to unsecure and unstable environment. Security forces in opposition-held territories are in need of capacity building, monetary support, and structure to better manage their region. **In the AA regions**, there is clear disparity in the objective of securing a safe region for citizens. While in al-Hasaka the region is considered relatively secure, in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor it is unstable. This is mostly due to the various demographics within the area, highlighting discriminatory practices by the AA security apparatuses. The actions of the AA security apparatuses only heighten civilian resentment and further increasing social and security instability.

3. Variables Affecting the Return Decision

- The availability of a safe environment is the most important factor impacting Syrian refugees' return. To create a conducive environment, an effective cessation of hostilities must be implement, as well as restricting the authority of security agencies over public life. Due diligence is necessary to prevent the violation of citizens rights by

military and security forces nationwide. To accomplish this, there must be a change in the ruling regime, as well as the associated security apparatuses. These bodies largely influence refugee decision to return, as they play a major role in displacing Syrians and stripping their sense of safety and dignity.

- Access to livelihoods is another important factor influencing Syrian refugee's decision to return. With the deteriorating economy across Syria, returnees are unable to gain the resources necessary for survival. Additionally, access to public services such as transportation, water, power, health, education and other services plays an important role in refugees considering the option of return. The lack of access to public services has led to increasing citizen resentment. Furthermore, many refugees are concerned they will not be able to return to their original homes, as agendas for demographic changes are being advanced.

- Securing property rights of returnees is a critical factor that cannot be overlooked. As one of the pillars of stability, all Syrians should have access to their property. Additionally, the spread of moral and social corruption including prostitution, abduction, murder, drug abuse and other crimes impact refugees' return decision particularly in regime areas.

- The role of host countries may affect Syrian refugees' decision to return. Many believe the return should be coordinated through the UNHCR, in order to secure voluntary and dignified return. The United Nations has yet to declare the environment is safe for return. In addition, the living conditions of refugees in host countries may also affect their decision. Living conditions vary among host countries, as some provide more livelihood challenges than others.

- Syrian refugees mostly rely on information from friends and relatives inside Syria for information on the security situation, followed by social media. International media outlets and non-Syrian media outlets, which are not affiliated with the regime, are also preferred to other media outlets as a source of information although refugees have reservations

related to transparency and politicization in the coverage of the conflict in Syria in some of those media outlets. Regime media outlets ranked last as a source of information for refugees. Due to their presentation of distorted on the conflict over the years. Refugees also rely to a medium extent on reports issued by civil society organizations and international organizations.

- Security threats is among the top factor that affect decisions to return, as it is a direct threat to Syrian citizen lives if they return to Syria. Arbitrary detention by regime security apparatuses, militias and military factions across Syrian territories are among the top threats. The fear of being taken to regime's detention centers is due to the brutalities done on detainees by security officials that include systematic torture and sexual assault. Furthermore, kidnapping and extortion for material and personal gain and ransom seeking constitute a security threat which has become widely common across Syrian territories.

- Local and foreign militias are perceived as a threat by Syrians. Syrian refugees regard them with much apprehension and suspicion as they extend their power and infiltrate into Syrian regions and assume control of different aspects of public life and services. In the same context, the chaotic spread of arms across Syrian areas emerged as an obvious security threat. In addition, the increasing number of explosions threatens innocent civilian lives, displacing many across the border.

- Theft has become prominent, and is spreading widely across Syria. Theft caused social and economic instability for residents. The rise in the rate of theft can be attributed to the rapid increase of poverty and unemployment rates and absence of ethical and religious deterrents as the perpetrators' living conditions deteriorated to catastrophic levels.

- Political activists, members of the Free Syrian Army, and those whom join opposition military factions are most likely to be arrested in regime-held territories. This is followed by army defectors, those required to military service, defected public servants, families from anti-regime areas, and businessmen.

4. Return to Regime-held Areas

- Return to regime-held areas is an unlikely option for a large percentage of refugees in different countries. Although the regime issued many amnesty decrees, refugees do not trust such decrees as they lack credibility from their point of view. Additionally, there are no international guarantees by impartial parties, that would ensure the safety of those who choose to return. Furthermore, the regime is unwilling to allow refugees to return to original homes, as a part of its demographic changes agenda.

- In the same context, international agencies which oversee refugees' return, most prominently the UNHCR, remain unable to document security threats which returnees to regime areas may face, as the UNHCR have no access to these areas and thus is unable to monitor the situation of returnees closely. In addition, refugees receive incomplete and contradictory information from different sources in relation to return. They also believe that the regime's security apparatuses are capable of tracking their activity in host countries via their informant networks in those countries.

- Syrian refugees do not trust guarantees offered by the governments of host countries. This is due a number of experiences that prove the guarantees of safe return false and put the lives of returnees and their families in danger. There are many cases documented cases of detention, mandatory conscription, disappearances after detention, and execution in security centers. The regime's security forces also force returnees to report their relatives and friends which could put the latter's lives at risk should they return in the future.

- In addition to the above, refugees are required to attain a security clearance or status adjustment prior to return. Many returnees did not attain an adjustment papers were reported to have been arrested. Some investigative studies uncover the adjustment papers as a trap for the signatories.

- In terms of reforming and restructuring security apparatuses, it is safe to say that they cannot be reformed or restructured due to its organic relation with the Assad regime. Therefore, political change is essential

before such reform can be undertaken. The continuation of the regime's security apparatuses as is would extinguish hope for real political change in the country, as the security forces are deeply tied to the Assad regime. Furthermore, these apparatuses do not accept any reform or restructure initiatives.

- Another challenging factor is that the regime's security apparatuses has deeply infiltrated the Syrian community. Rooted informant networks enable bullying of individuals with details of their lives. This has significantly damaged society and state institutions. Reforming security institutions cannot be done in isolation; reform must be done in parallel with other governmental institutions, as they are intertwined.

- In order to successfully reform the security apparatuses, there must be active implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. Among the main goals of transitional justices is the institutional reform of the security sector. Reform may require the provisions in the new constitution, which will regulate and restrict the power of the security sector. Such constitution must provide for an impartial and apolitical role for security sector and establish oversight mechanisms such as the parliament and human rights commissions, who are mandated with monitoring and investigating the violations of the security sector.

- Nongovernmental organizations hold an important role in reforming these agencies by monitoring their work and raising social awareness. They may also be able to change the civilian-military relations by altering the community's negative perception of the security sector and raising awareness of the importance of restructuring these institutions on democratic foundations. The important role of the parliament in reforming those agencies is also essential, as they may be tasked with oversight.

- Some people call for dissolving existing security agencies and forming a central security agency as a step to reforming the security sector in Syria. It is important, however, to take into consideration that the complete dissolution of those agencies and demobilization of former officers could create an obstacle before the restructuring process which is lack of security experience. By removing those present, it may be

difficult to fill the gap with qualified individuals with a security background. Therefore, democratic transition in post-conflict states does not necessarily require dismantling these agencies. Rather, it requires restructuring them on democratic basis and introducing civilian leadership and parliamentary oversight after banishing offenders and perpetrators of crimes through transitional justice programs. If a transitional governing body in Syria is placed, it must be given complete authority to supervise and monitor the work of the security sector. This should be paired with a disarmament program to reduce the arms present in the public and integrate those willing into the central security mechanism after rehabilitation.

5. Return to Opposition Areas

- Areas under opposition control continue to be fragile and suffer security infiltrations, not allowing citizens to live a stable life. This haunts civilian residents, IDPs and even refugees residing in Turkey. The inability to manage the security situation is due to lack of professionalism, resources, and capacity in addition to other external factors.

- Relations between security forces in these areas and local communities vary. An essential part of creating a safe environment, community relations with security forces is a vital component, that influences refugee decision to return. As for relations between security agencies and military factions, security agencies are still unable to control violations perpetrated by military factions against civilians, which has caused a rise in public resentment towards those factions for their continued violations.

- Generally, Syrian opposition areas are relatively acceptable and are considered the best option for the return by Syrian refugees compared to other areas of control despite some signs of insecurity and possibility for additional deterioration due to continued military operations by the regime and its allies.

6. Return to Autonomous Administration Areas

- Notwithstanding the presence of a single central administration for security affairs, these areas are still far from establishing stability for reasons related to the bureaucracy of security apparatus and their discriminatory practices in terms of suppressing protests and making arrests. Hence, the level of security varies among those areas. Furthermore, there are ISIS sleeper cells which contribute greatly to instability.

- These areas continue to witness sharp political and military polarization among international actors present. Logistical support and technical equipment of security forces in these areas are relatively good compared to Syrian opposition areas. This is due to US support to SDF forces over the past years. Additionally, the presence of US and other coalition forces also play a role in security stability within the AA region.

- Parallel to relative stability in these areas, economic reality and living conditions are considered some of the most important parameters which govern Syrian refugees' return to these areas. Regularly these areas witness protests induced by the declining economic and living conditions, administrative corruption in AA institutions, and their control of resources without any returns for the local population. In addition to the above, for refugees or IDPs to return to those areas, they are required to "settle" their security status with the AA security forces apparatuses prior to entering.

- Relations between citizens and AA security forces in these areas are filled with mistrust, which reflects greatly on public dissatisfaction with the security situation. Hence, these areas lack incentives for the return of refugee.

VI. Conclusion

The issue of return grows in significance daily, as the major humanitarian, social, and security implications, among others are effected by the political stalemate and divergent vision of major actors. The issue of return is utilized as a negotiation tool by international and regional actors regularly. Due to its discussion and importance, the issue of return is an anticipated topic tied to the political solution in Syria. Given it relevance, the issue of return is susceptible to contradictory approaches that are designed to serve the political agendas of those involved. The lack of a political solution, a multitude of factors have led to no plan or agenda concerning a comprehensive national approach for the return of the displaced abroad and in Syria.

The need for an impartial and independent strategy for refugee return, it has become imperative for organizations on the international, regional and local levels to join ranks and pressure major actors to adopt the issue of refugee return as a national political requirement that is indispensable for stability. The issue of return is a fundamental pillar for the success of any future political solution. This opposes the Russian narrative to present the issue of return as a non-urgent governance, which fails to observe the security and social factors conducive to stability.

This opinion survey and following studies provide an integral perspective of Syria's security landscape in all areas. It is evident that the relationship between citizen and security forces is one of mistrust. Based on the results, it is evident that refugees are unable to return to a safe and stable environment, thus six million refugees remain in neighboring countries.

VII. Appendices

1. The Questionnaire

Dear Sir/Madame,

Greetings.

Omran Center for Strategic Studies is undertaking an analytical study on "safety and security indicators in Syria and their relation with refugees' voluntary return."

Your contribution to this study by responding to the following questionnaire would be much appreciated.

Thanks in advance for your effort and interest.

1. Respondent's Information

Gender	Female				Male	
Age	Younger than 25	35-25	45-36		55-46	Older than 55
Level of Education	High school or less		Institute		University or higher	
Place of residence in Syria	Damascus	Homs	Aleppo	Hama	Lattakia and Tartous	Daraa
	Hasaka	Raqqa	Deir Ez-Zour	Idleb	Suweida and Quneitra	Rural Damascus
Duration of stay in current country of residence	Less than two years		2-5 years		More than 5 years	
Current area of residence	Turkey		Jordan		Lebanon	Iraq

*Put (X) in the appropriate field

2. Indicate the relative importance of the following parameters which may affect your decision to return to Syria.

Parameter	Very Important	Average Importance	Somewhat Important	Insignificant
Availability of safe environment*				
*Safe environment: by safe environment we mean effective cessation of hostilities، restricting the authority of security apparatus over public life or encroaching upon citizens' rights by these apparatuses or militias and military factions.				
Access to livelihoods				
Spread of moral and social corruption				
Change of regime and security apparatuses				
Availability of public services (education, health, water…etc.)				
Return to original area of residence				
Guarantee of real estate property rights				
Restrictive practices by host country				
Lack of social acceptance in host community				
Deteriorating living conditions in host country				
Insecurity in host country				
Return under UN sponsorship				

3. To what extent do you rely on the following sources to assess the security situation inside Syria?

Source	To a large extent	Average	To a small extent	Not at all
Social media platforms				
Media outlets in your country of residence				

International media outlets				
Arab media outlets				
International organizations reports				
Relatives and friends inside Syria				
Reports be civil society organizations				
Syrian media outlets affiliated with the regime				
Syrian media outlets not affiliated with the regime				

4. Which of the following categories of refugees are most targeted by the regime in case of return?

Category	To a large extent	Average	To a small extent
Political activists			
Those called up for military service			
Army defectors			
Public servants defected from the regime			
Businessmen			
Families from anti-regime areas			
Members of FSA and opposition factions			
Civil revolutionaries			

5. Which of the following security threats significantly affects your decision to return to Syria?

Threat	To a large extent	Average	To a small extent	Insignificant
Arbitrary detention				
Extortion				
Kidnapping				
Being held in custody in security centers				
Sexual assault				

Blasts				
Domineering local and foreign militias				
Spread of theft				
Chaotic spread of arms				
Inter-militia fighting				

6. Based on your knowledge of the situation in Syria, how do you generally regard the security situation in Syria in light of the following statements?

Statement	Agree	Somewh at agree	Disagree	I don't know
Behavior of security agencies of the Assad regime has not changed from its pre-2011 status.				
The security situation is significantly deteriorating all over Syria.				
The power of security agencies expanded after 2011 under the pretext of security control and stabilization.				
Emergence of new informal entities which are engaged in security activity in addition to regime security agencies in regime-held areas				
Effectiveness of regime security agencies and their ability to control security in all areas have declined significantly.				
Regime security agencies are linked to Russia and Iran and operate following their agendas which stripped them from much of their power.				
Deterioration of the security situation in Syrian opposition areas and inability of commissioned agencies to control it.				
The security situation in Autonomous Administration areas is acceptable compared to other areas in Syria.				
Security agencies tasked with security control in areas outside regime control lack professionalism and are short on capacities.				
Security activity in all Syrian regions became connected with profiteering for those in charge of security using detention for financial extortion, levying royalties, seeking ransom among other means.				

There is much chaos in the work of regime security agencies and huge lack of coordination among them.			
The level of stability varies between different areas due to the volatile security situation in those areas.			

7. How do you view relations between citizens and security agencies inside Syria at present?

Statement	Regime Areas			Opposition Areas			Autonomous Administration Areas		
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Security agencies commit major violations by encroaching on citizens' rights and dignity.									
Security agencies are unable to control the behavior of militias and military factions towards civilians.									
Citizens have little confidence that security agencies address their complaints.									
Security agencies are remarkably biased in terms of detentions and responding to complaints.									
Security agencies recruit informants in civilian ranks as a means to control security.									
Security agencies are unable to provide safe environment for citizens through keeping peace and internal security.									
The perception of security agencies is associated with fear and apprehension when dealing with them.									

Any cooperation between security agencies and citizens is regarded with suspicion in the local community.									

8. Following are some statements related to security and which may affect your decision to return to regime areas in Syria. Please give your view as per the scale below.

Statement	To a large extent	Average	To a small extent	Insignificant	Don't know
Information about return of refugees is hard to find and often contradictory.					
Regime security agencies are capable of tracking refugees abroad which constitutes a great threat to them should they return.					
UNHCR is unable to access areas to which refugees return and monitor their fate in Syria.					
UNHCR is unable to document the security threats which returnees to regime areas may face.					
There are no international guarantees which ensure the safety of returnees to regime areas.					
Refugees do not trust the amnesty decrees issued by the regime because they lack credibility from their point of view.					
Guarantees offered by some governmental bodies, local agencies, notables and civil society organizations in Syria or host countries in agreement with the regime are unreliable.					
For refugees to return they must receive security clearance and status adjustment from regime security agencies.					
A refugee's return often constitutes a threat to themselves and their families because they are constantly monitored and voluntarily provide information to security agencies.					

9. Refugees return to regime areas may be greatly linked to changing or reforming existing security agencies. Please indicate your view of the following statements using the scale below.

Statement	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Security agencies cannot be reformed because of their organic association with the regime. Therefore, political change is essential before reform of security agencies is undertaken.				
Security agencies have not accepted any reform or restructuring initiatives.				
Security agencies networks are too intertwined and deeply rooted in the community making it impossible to reform them.				
Security agencies may be reformed through introducing provisions in the new constitution which regulate their work and restrict their powers.				
Effective implementation of transitional justice will ensure reforming security agencies.				
The security establishment could not be reformed without reforming other governmental institutions associated with it.				
NGOs must play a vital role in reforming security agencies through monitoring their work and raising social awareness about them.				
The parliament has an important role in this reform operation should security agencies be subjected to its oversight and present their work transparently and periodically before its members.				
Dissolving existing security agencies and forming a central security agency constitute one of the keys to security sector reform.				
In case it is agreed to form a TGB, it must be given full authority to supervise and oversee security agencies.				

All militia fighters must be disarmed and those willing can be integrated into a central security agency after being rehabilitated after the conflict.				

10. Refugees return to Syrian opposition areas is associated with the level of stability. Please indicate your views regarding the following statements as per the scale below.

Statement	Agree	Relatively Agree	Disagree	Don't know
These areas are still fragile and infiltrated which affects likelihood of social stability there.				
Security agencies lack professionalism which reflects on the decline of security.				
Logistic and technical resources necessary to control security within these areas are still minimal.				
Relation between internal security formations and local communities is good compared to other areas.				
These areas are considered the best option for refugees return due to availability of personal security factors compared to other areas.				
The security situation in these areas is improving in a way that can be built on to decide to return to them.				
Security agencies are still not completely able to control violations by military factions against civilians.				

11. Refugees return to Autonomous Administration areas is related to level of stability there. Please indicate your views of the following statements using the scale below.

Statement	Agree	Relatively Agree	Disagree	Don't know
The area stands out for its central administration of security agencies which helps control security in this area.				
Presence of American troops presence in this area contributed to controlling security there.				
Logistic and technical resources necessary to control security within these areas stand out in comparison with opposition areas.				
There is general public satisfaction by residents of this area in general despite some security breaches.				
Relation between security agencies and the population is good and based on trust and cooperation.				
Refugees returning to Autonomous Administration areas need to adjust their status with the security agencies affiliated with the administration before they could return.				
Return to this area is more associated with economic conditions than security conditions.				

2. Focus Group Themes

Each focus group discussion focused on the following major questions:

1. How would you describe the general security landscape in your area?

2. What are the most important security threats in your area and how are they addressed by security agencies?

3. What are the parameters that govern the relationship between security agencies and the local population at present? How do you view the future of such relationship?

4. What are the factors that affect security stability in your area?

5. How do security agencies deal with returnees to these areas from inside Syria and abroad?

Is your area prepared for the return of refugees and IDPs? What are the most prominent challenges?