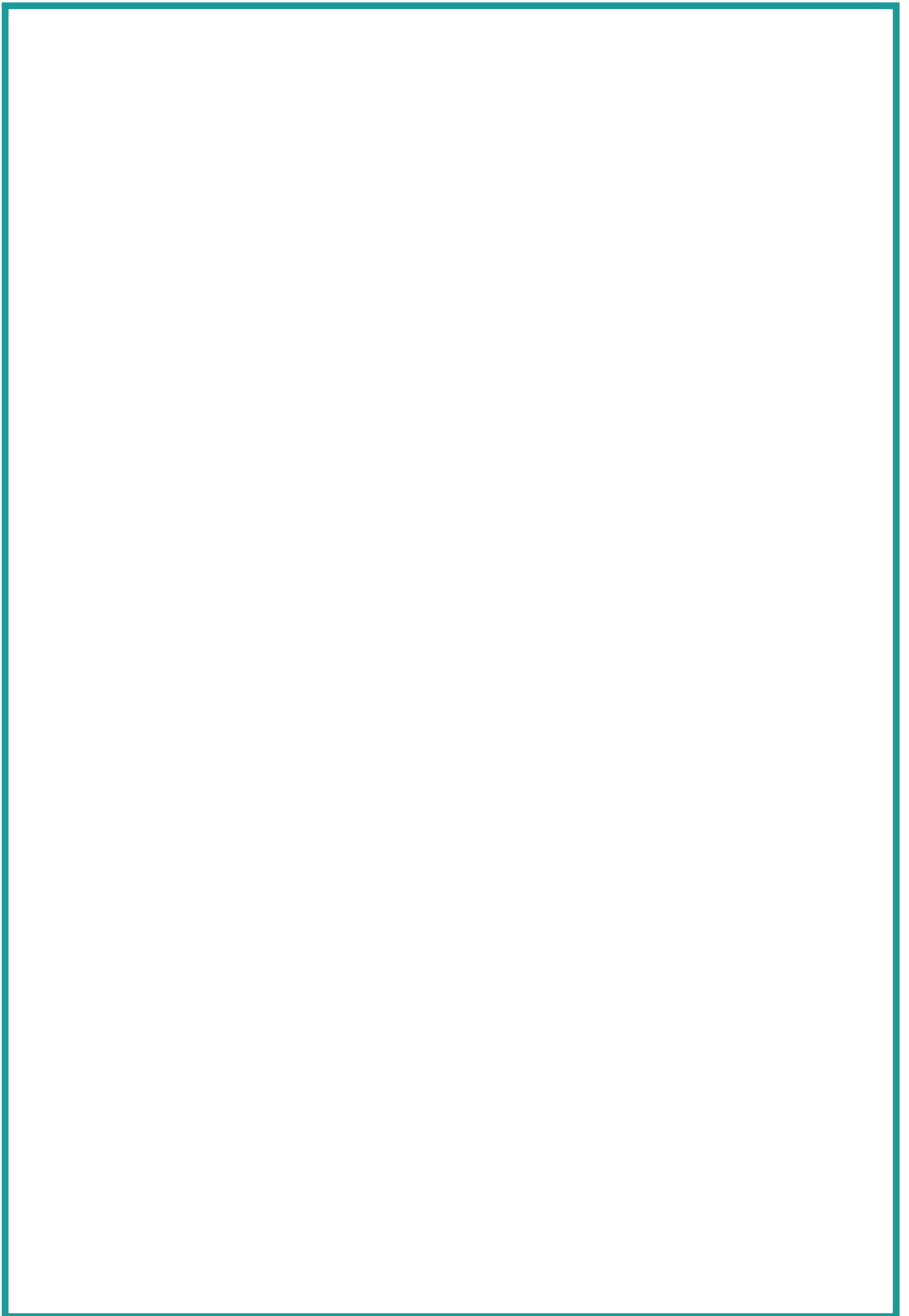


PICKING UP THE PIECES

Realities of return and reintegration
in North-East Syria



PICKING UP THE PIECES

Realities of return and reintegration in North-East Syria

November 2018

IMPACT Shaping practices
Influencing policies
Impacting lives

IMPACT Initiatives is a Geneva based think-and-do-tank, created in 2010. IMPACT's teams implement independent assessment, monitoring & evaluation and organisational capacity-building programmes in direct partnership with aid actors or through its inter-agency initiatives, REACH and AGORA. Headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT has an established field presence in over 20 countries across Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Central and South-East Asia, and Eastern Europe.



This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) for Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, which is supported by the Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Commission (DEVCO), Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The contents of this document can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the views or positions of the RDPP.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all individuals in Hasakeh and Raqqa who participated in the study and shared their stories; all people who contributed to this research, as well as various peer reviewers who provided valuable input to the report.

Citation

This report should be cited using the following referencing style: IMPACT Initiatives (2018), Picking up the Pieces: realities of return and reintegration in North-East Syria.

Cover photo

Dara Al-Masri / DRC

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
1. INTRODUCTION	9
2. BACKGROUND	10
2.1. North-East Syria.....	10
2.2. Raqqa, Syria.....	11
2.3. Hasakeh, Syria	12
3. METHODOLOGY	13
3.1. Research objectives.....	13
3.2. Analytical framework	13
3.3. Data collection strategy.....	14
3.4. Challenges and limitations	19
4. FINDINGS	20
4.1. Decision-making on returns	20
4.2. Planning and preparation for return	24
4.3. Journey of return	25
4.4. Returnees' reintegration and progress towards durable solution	27
4.5. Dignified and rights-based returns	38
5. CONCLUSION.....	41
6. ANNEXES	44
Annex 1: Breakdown of IASC criteria of durable solutions assessed per sub-indicator	44
Annex 2: Life stories	46

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Without improved conditions, legal frameworks to ensure returnees' rights, and humanitarian access to areas of return; conditions for dignified returns are not in place. Hence, overall, returns of persons displaced by the Syrian conflict are neither promoted nor facilitated by the humanitarian community. However, in January to June 2018, it was estimated that 744,990 IDPs and 15,714 refugees returned to their areas of origin in Syria. In North-east Syria, 136,188 returns in Raqqa governorate and 18,702 in Hasakeh governorate were reported in January to June 2018. A majority of displaced Syrians who have returned were internally displaced persons (IDPs) from camps or nearby areas within their governorate of origin; rather than returning from other governorates in Syria or from neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, many Syrians remain displaced and it is suggested that the loss of the power of the so-called Islamic State of the Levant's (ISIL) alone, without a broader political settlement, will not lead to widespread refugee returns. While acknowledging that a majority of displaced Syrians have not returned - an improved understanding of the return and reintegration process can be instrumental to, eventually, facilitating durable solutions for displaced populations in the longer term. The objectives of this research were:

- To understand the returnee populations' **push** and **pull factors** in decisions to return.
- To explore returnees' **preparations** and **journey** of return.
- To assess returnees' **progress towards reintegration** according to the IASC criteria of durable solutions.

Data collection was conducted in July and August 2018, with a geographical focus on areas under self-administration in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates, north-east Syria (NES). **The study focused on households living in urban areas only and did not cover households living in IDP camps.** Four population groups were included in the study; Syrian refugee returnees, Syrian IDP returnees, Syrian IDPs and non-displaced Syrians. All data collection activities used **purposive sampling**, which consisted of (i) 813 household surveys covering all four population groups, (ii) 31 focus group discussions (FGDs) with returnees and IDPs, (iii) eight life stories with returnees and IDPs and (iv) six key informant interviews. Although the respective contexts in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates are distinct, this study focused on **comparisons across population groups** (rather than geographical area), though relevant differences in governorates were highlighted. As survey respondents were selected using purposive sampling, findings could not be tested for statistical significance and results are indicative only.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

The **lack of employment opportunities, lack of basic services and lack of safety/security** at the location of displacement were the primary **push factors** that led assessed refugees and IDPs to return to their community of origin. For refugee returnees, the lack of economic opportunities (39%) and lack of basic services (25%) were the most commonly reported primary push factors. For IDP returnees, primary push factors were the lack of basic services (39%) and the lack of safety/security (34%). This suggests that the lack of basic services was a dominant push factor for returnees, regardless of whether they were displaced inside or outside of Syria.

Primary pull factors for returns were less varied than **push factors**, in which a majority of refugee returnees (66%) and IDP returnees (72%) reported **improved safety** at the community of origin to be their primary pull factor that motivated decisions to return. This was followed by 16% of refugee returnees who reported **homesickness and nostalgia** and 10% of IDP returnees who reported **reoccupying assets** as their primary pull factor for return.

Although some returnees reported the lack of basic services as a push factor (which could relate to the lack of humanitarian assistance), FGD findings suggest that the level of **humanitarian assistance** at the community of origin was not a significant pull factor that motivated decisions to return. Returnees were reportedly not aware of the level of humanitarian assistance available at their community of origin or perceived they would not qualify for aid. However, returnees reported the need for assistance upon return and reintegration.

PLANNING AND JOURNEY OF RETURN

To obtain information on whether and how to return, returnees mainly relied on information from family, relatives and friends who returned before them or were living in the community of origin, as well as on news updates from the media. A large majority of assessed returnees in FGDs reported that the father, husband or head of household made the decision to return, and all household members agreed with the decision to return. For some returnee households, the father or head of household returned first to ensure general safety and to restore the house before the rest of the family returned after a few days or weeks.

According to FGDs, information was sometimes found to be inaccurate or the volatile situation meant that returnees faced unexpected risks along the journey, e.g. explosive remnants of war (ERW) risks, despite obtaining advice from friends and relatives when planning the route. Some returnees relied on smugglers that charged high costs, and/or had to pay a large sum of money, faced abuse, harassment or even kidnappings when passing through checkpoints.

PROGRESS TOWARDS REINTEGRATION BASED ON IASC'S CRITERIA ON DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Household surveys found no distinct patterns to suggest that IDP returnees and/or refugee returnees faced higher levels of vulnerability (in relation to IASC criteria assessed) compared to the non-displaced. IDPs scored lowest in progress towards indicators outlined under IASC's criteria for durable solutions, compared to returnees and the non-displaced.

- **Safety and security:** Although improved safety was the primary pull factor for return, FGD findings suggest that returnees feared ERW, kidnappings, gun shootings and harassment. Returnees also mentioned the fear of renewed conflict that would force them to be displaced again, which suggests that returns could be unsustainable.
- **Access to goods and services:** When assessing access to basic food, drinking water, housing and healthcare, the lowest proportion of households reported having access to drinking water. This ranged from 30% of refugee returnee households to 40% of IDP households reporting sufficient and regular access. Returnees and IDPs alike mentioned high living costs and the need for assistance (e.g. distributing water tanks to store water, food assistance, improved medical facilities).
- **Access to income-generating opportunities:** Low proportions of each population group - including 67% of IDPs, 76% of IDP returnees, 76% of the non-displaced and 78% of refugee returnee households - reported having access to income-generating opportunities. Returnees reportedly spent a lot of money abroad including paying high smuggling costs to return, which result in returnees lacking the capital to start businesses.
- **Access to mechanisms in restoring Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights or receiving compensation:** A considerable proportion of IDP returnees (30%) and refugee returnees (29%) reported their house to be damaged in the community of origin, with very few respondents reported receiving compensation for their property damage. Returnees relied on relatives' support to rehabilitate their house, while some IDPs reported not being able to return as their houses were completely damaged.
- **Access to and replacement of personal and other documentation:** High proportion of households reported having access to documentation. Refugee returnees (86%) had the lowest proportion of households with family booklets; and IDPs (97%) had the lowest proportion of households with national ID cards. However, percentages are likely to be significantly lower for households in camps (not covered in this study) given documents could be confiscated.
- **Voluntary reunification with family members:** Refugee returnees (25%) had the highest proportion of households reporting family separation; compared to the non-displaced (7%), IDPs (9%) and IDP returnees (9%). A majority (67%) of respondents were reunited with all family members that were separated during displacement.

- **Access to humanitarian assistance:** A higher proportion of IDPs reported having access to humanitarian assistance (45%) compared to returnees and non-displaced (23% combined). Regarding perceptions, the non-displaced (33%) were least likely to perceive equal access. As findings suggest that the non-displaced also faced vulnerabilities, more attention is needed to address the needs of the non-displaced to avoid any community tension caused by the presence of IDPs and returnees.

As returns were self-organised, findings suggest that **community network and resources** (e.g. relatives, friends) played an important role in facilitating returns and reintegration. This included influencing returnees' (i) motivation to return to unite with them now that they have returned, (ii) provision of information and assurance that their community of origin was safe to return, (iii) provision of reintegration support (e.g. restoring the house, providing loans) upon return. This suggests that the social network was an important factor that could influence patterns of return.

DIGNIFIED AND RIGHTS-BASED RETURNS

Upon return, 34% of refugee returnees and 19% of IDP returnees reported the situation at their community of origin to be **worse than they had expected**. A few FGD participants reported receiving false information (e.g. availability of shelter rehabilitation support). FGD findings suggest that although respondents did not regret their decision to return, their **threshold for return and expectations were extremely low**. Households returned despite knowing that their house was damaged and the lack of basic services available at their communities of origin. With poor living conditions in displaced locations (and community of origin), some households preferred returning to be closer to family and friends.

Overall, the rights of displaced Syrians should be upheld regardless of whether people stay, return or move elsewhere. To tackle the protracted nature of displacement, further research could identify opportunities for broader collaboration between humanitarian, development and stabilisation actors.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ERW	Explosive remnants of war
FGD	Focus group discussions
GoS	Government of Syria
HAO	Humanitarian Affairs Office
HH	Household
HLP	Housing, land and property
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally displaced persons
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KI	Key informant
KII	Key informant interview
NES	North-east Syria
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SYP	Syrian pounds
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UN Refugee Agency)
UXO	Unexploded ordinance
YPG	People's Protection Unit

GEOGRAPHIC CLASSIFICATIONS

Governorate	Highest form of governance below the national level (admin level 1)
District	Sub-division of a governorate in which government institutions operate (admin level 2)
Sub-district	Sub-division of a district in which government institutions operate (admin level 3)
Community	Bounded clustering of population in the form of a city, town or village (admin level 4)
Neighbourhood	Lowest administrative unit within a city (admin level 5 or 6)

1. INTRODUCTION

Without improved conditions, legal frameworks to ensure returnees' rights, and humanitarian access to areas of return; conditions for dignified returns are not in place.¹ Hence, overall, returns of displaced Syrians are neither promoted nor facilitated by the humanitarian community. However, in January to June 2018, it was estimated that 760,704 IDPs and refugees returned to their areas of origin in Syria.² This included 15,714 refugees returning from Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt - i.e. only 2% of the total returnee numbers were refugee returnees (as opposed to IDP returnees).³ In north-east Syria (NES) specifically, thousands reportedly returned to their areas of origin in 2017 and 2018.⁴ From January to June 2018, 136,188 and 18,702 returnees were recorded in Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates respectively though with no breakdown by IDP and refugee status.⁵ A majority of IDP returnees were reportedly returning from camps and other areas within their governorate of origin, with very few IDPs returning from other Syrian governorates outside of NES.⁶ Thus, many Syrians are still displaced and it is anticipated that the loss of power of the Islamic State and the Levant's (ISIL) alone, without a broader political settlement, will not lead to widespread refugee returns.⁷ On top of that, as recent reports suggest, returnees are returning to areas where physical, material and legal conditions for resuming normal lives are not in place.⁸

Whereas conditions for return are not in place, achieving durable solutions to displacement is a gradual process, in which an increased understanding of the process can be instrumental to - eventually - facilitating durable solutions for displaced populations in the longer term. This study therefore seeks to explore the intention and decision-making processes of Syrian refugee returnees and IDP returnees in urban areas in Hasakeh and Raqqa governed by the self-administration.⁹ This includes exploring the push and pull factors in decisions to return; as well as the planning and preparations for return. It also assesses progress towards return and reintegration as a durable solution in NES. It is hoped that this study will support the humanitarian community, as well interested UN agencies, governments, donors, researchers and practitioners, to inform policy, programming and advocacy.

While this study focuses on 'realities of return and reintegration', it acknowledges the importance of other durable solutions (e.g. local integration at country of asylum and resettlement elsewhere in or outside the country) that should be available for displaced Syrians. Additionally, as a majority of Syrian refugees in Iraq originated from NES, assessing return in NES also has implications on potential future return movement of Syrian refugees in Iraq. This study is complementary to IMPACT's other research, which adopted the same methodological approach to explore intentions of Syrian refugees in Iraq and their progress towards local integration as a durable solution.¹⁰

- 1 Refugees Deeply (2018), Assad Needs the U.N.'s Help for Refugees to Return Safely, August 2018.
- 2 From 1 January 1 to 10 June 2018. UNOCHA (2018). Inter-sector Mid-Year Review Periodic Monitoring Report dataset, 1 January to 10 June 2018. 5.5 million Syrian refugees worldwide and over 6 million are internally displaced. Source: Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) 2018 - Syrian Arab Republic.
- 3 From 1 January to 30 June 2018. UNHCR (2018) Regional Durable Solutions Working Group Presentation on Preliminary Findings from Refugee Return Intention and Perception Survey, August 2018.
- 4 Refugees International (2018). Fragile Progress: Humanitarian Assistance and the Stabilisation of North-east Syria, June 2018.
- 5 From 1 January to 10 June 2018. Figures do not have breakdown between IDP and refugee status; nor by gender or age. UNOCHA (2018). Inter-sector Mid-Year Review Periodic Monitoring Report dataset, January 1st to June 10th 2018.
- 6 There were instances of promotion of returns by local authorities and camp administration through local information campaigns at the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018. While those have ceased, it must be acknowledged that they did occur. Source: KIs with NGOs, August 2018.
- 7 K. Khaddour (2018); Back to What Future? What Remains for Syria's Displaced People, Carnegie Middle East Center
- 8 Samuel Hall (2018). Syria Spontaneous Returns; REACH Initiative (2018). Humanitarian Situation Overview Hasakeh, April 2018; REACH Initiative (2018). Humanitarian Situation Overview Raqqa, April 2018.
- 9 Host communities (rather than camps) were selected as it was assumed that camps provide less opportunities for interaction between IDPs/returnees and the non-displaced. The purpose of the study was to explore the processes of IDP integration and returnee reintegration with the non-displaced.
- 10 The study also builds on previous studies such as "Syria's Spontaneous Returns" (Samuel Hall, 2018) which assessed 'return and reintegration' as a durable solution for returnees in Homs, Idlib and Aleppo governorates; and "Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons in Syria" (Middle East Consulting Solutions, 2018) which assessed local integration as a durable solution for IDPs in Hasakeh, Idlib and Latakia governorates.

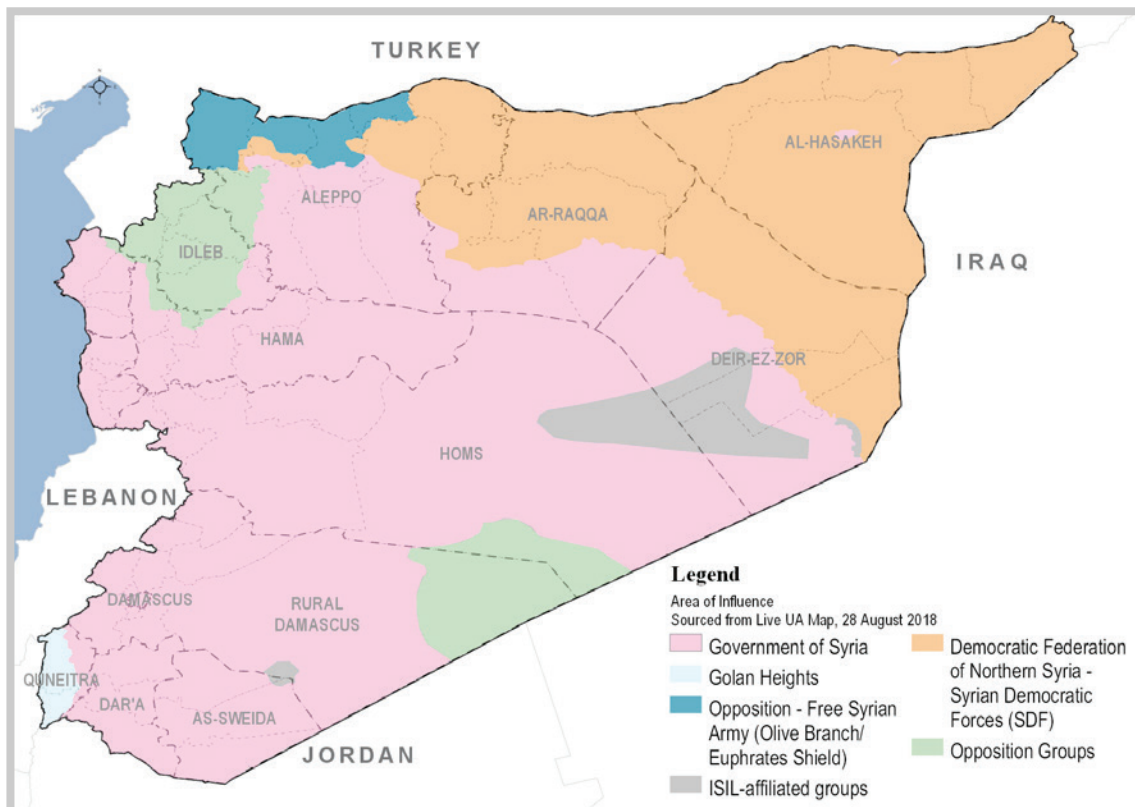
2. BACKGROUND

2.1. NORTH-EAST SYRIA

Due to Deir ez-Zor's strategic location on the eastern Syrian border with Iraq, it was the main entry point for ISIL to expand from Iraq to Syria.¹¹ ISIL engaged in battles on multiple fronts in Syria - and held territories in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates in NES; as well as territories in Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, Homs, Hama and rural Damascus governorates in the rest of Syria by July 2013.¹² ISIL claimed Raqqa city to be its de facto capital in 2014.¹³

Since 2014, various campaigns against ISIL shifted the geopolitical balance of NES. With support from the United States, a Kurdish organisation known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its allies gained a large majority of Syrian territories once held by ISIL east of the Euphrates river.¹⁴ As a result, the YPG holds nearly 30 percent of Syria,¹⁵ including borders with Turkey, Iraq and Arab-majority areas in Syria (Map 1).

Map 1: Syria Area of Influence (August 2018)¹⁶



11 Z. Awad (2018), Deir Al-Zor after Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime. European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

12 The Carter Centre (2014), Syria Countrywide Conflict Report No. 4, 11 September 2014.

13 Ibid.

14 Since 2015, YPG gains spurred Turkish military intervention, first against ISIL in border areas abutting YPG control, and in early 2018 against the YPG itself in the north-western enclave of Afrin. Meanwhile, the GoS, with strong backing from Russia and Iran, captured ISIL-held areas west of the Euphrates. Source: International Crisis Group (2018), Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East.

15 As of October 2018. Source: International Crisis Group (2018), Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East.

16 The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), formed in 2015, is militarily led by YPG to defend Syria's northeastern region from ISIL.

In NES, a loose system of local self-administration has emerged in Kurdish-majority areas and in areas regained from ISIL. These local authorities provide basic services for the populations despite having little or no formal experience.¹⁷ There are also a small but increasing number of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in the region, with at least 10 INGOs in Raqqa city out of approximately 25 INGOs operating in NES.¹⁸ However, there are still many operational challenges, including accessing areas closest to the front lines such as Deir ez-Zor.¹⁹

While YPG made the first official visit to Damascus to discuss the future of NES in July 2018, it remains unclear how the relationship between the Government of Syria (GoS) and the self-administration will develop.²⁰ It is anticipated that negotiations will continue at a slow pace in the coming months.²¹ Meanwhile, it is likely that the GoS will maintain but not increase its pressure on the self-administration, while the self-administration continues to develop its government system.²²

2.2. RAQQA, SYRIA

In 2011, the pre-conflict population for Raqqa governorate was estimated to be around 833,293.²³ During the conflict, Raqqa has been under the control of various parties and was of high strategic, military and economic value, partly due to the presence of the Euphrates dam and Al Habari oil and gas fields. Since the start of the crisis, Raqqa had periods with relatively low (e.g. until late 2012), and high (around ISIL's occupation) conflict and displacement intensity.²⁴ 454,363 of the 5.4 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East region originated from Raqqa.²⁵ As of June 2018, it was estimated that there were 131,683 IDPs in Raqqa governorate.²⁶ Most of the IDPs were from within the governorate, but it also hosted a considerable number of IDPs from Aleppo.²⁷ Following the cessation of conflict in and around Aleppo city in December 2016, thousands spontaneously returned to their communities in Raqqa.²⁸

Raqqa was the third highest governorate in terms of the numbers of returnees, in which 136,188 returnees were recorded from 1 January to 10 June 2018, after Aleppo (241,747 returnees) and Deir ez-Zor (169,330 returnees).²⁹ From October 2017 to August 2018, an estimated 152,360 individuals returned to Raqqa city although conditions remain un conducive for returns due to high levels of destruction and explosive hazard contamination.³⁰ Despite a gradual reduction in the average number of blast-related cases reported by health facilities, significant concerns persist around the safety and security of people returning to their homes in Raqqa city.³¹ The city remains the most insecure part of the governorate with ongoing attacks throughout the city, often claimed by ISIL.

Despite high security risks, civilians continue to return to the city, particularly to areas with relatively less damage and more services. Contamination, alongside severe shelter and infrastructure damage, was a barrier to more permanent restoration of a decent standard of living.³²

17 Refugees International (2018). *Fragile Progress: Humanitarian Assistance and the Stabilisation of North-east Syria*, June 2018.

18 NGO KI, September 2018.

19 Ibid.

20 International Crisis Group (2018), *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*. While YPG expressed willingness to engage in negotiations with GoS, YPG expressed that they will maintain the bottom line of constitutional revisions that would grant NES considerable autonomy, including responsibility for local security.

21 NGO KI, September 2018.

22 NGO KI, September 2018; S.M. Drwish (2018), *Kurds step up efforts to form self-government in northeast Syria*, Al-Monitor, 18 September 2018.

23 UNHCR (2018). *Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria*.

24 Needs and Population Monitoring (2017), *Household Survey - The History and Characteristics of Displacement - Syria 2011-2017 (November 2017)*; Needs and Population Monitoring (2017), *Ar-Raqqa - IDPs Household Survey: Demographic, Socio-Economic and Intentions (November 2017)*

25 UNHCR (2018), *Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria (February 2018)*

26 UNOCHA (2018). *Inter-sector Mid-Year Review Periodic Monitoring Report dataset, 1 January to 10 June 2018*.

27 Needs and Population Monitoring (2017), *Household Survey - The History and Characteristics Of Displacement - Syria 2011-2017 (November 2017)*.

28 REACH Initiative (2017). *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS) - Aleppo Governorate (December 2017)*

29 Number broken down by IDP and refugee status not available. UNOCHA (2018). *Inter-sector Mid-Year Review Periodic Monitoring Report dataset, 1 January to 10 June, 2018*.

30 OCHA (2018). *Ar-Raqqa City Strategic Response Plan - July 2018*

31 OCHA (2018). *Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria, Situation Report No. 27 (15 July 2018 – 31 August 2018)*.

32 REACH Initiative (2018). *Situation Overview: Area-Based Assessment of Ar-Raqqa City, March 2018*

2.3. HASAKEH, SYRIA

In 2011, the pre-conflict population in Hasakeh was estimated to be around 1,251,300.³³ 355,000 of the 5.4 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East region originated from Hasakeh governorate, where a majority fled from Hasakeh to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.³⁴

Hasakeh has also been a major centre of displacement since early 2013.³⁵ Bordering Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates, Hasakeh faced high numbers of IDP arrivals as a result of its geographic proximity to conflict-affected areas.³⁶ One recent IDP influx was from June through October 2017 when the offensives to expel ISIL from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor led to a rapid increase in IDPs moving to Hasakeh.³⁷ Of a total estimated population of 1,169,176 (as of June 2018), there were approximately 209,459 IDPs in Hasakeh governorate.³⁸

In contrast to displacement in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, however, there is reportedly limited displacement into host community areas in Hasakeh due to certain policies of the local administration. This includes sponsorship requirements that are rarely granted. A majority of displacements in Hasakeh are reportedly to IDP transit sites.³⁹

From 1 January to 10 June 2018, a total of 136,188 IDPs and refugees returned to areas in Hasakeh.⁴⁰ Returns monitoring from the camps/transit sites in Hasakeh governorate highlighted a number of other concerns around documentation, risks related to physical and legal safety, restrictions on freedom of movement as well as the lack of basic services upon return. A common concern was the restitution of documents by the authorities only *en route* (e.g. at the checkpoint of Busayrah for returnees from Al-Hol) or on arrival at their destination.⁴¹ Consequently, returning IDP families might not be aware that their documents are missing until after departure. In sites located in Hasakeh governorate in particular, IDPs reportedly resorted to paying considerable amounts of money to release their documents in IDP sites before the departure, if these documents were found. Protection actors continue to advocate for the cessation of the policy/practice of confiscating civil status documentation and revision and improvement of the procedures on the restitution of confiscated documentation.⁴²

The process of return was also very costly. Returnees from the Al-Hol Camp were required to pay for the cost of transport by car, including fees for the accompanying military and Asayish (self-administration's police and internal security force). IDPs who expressed disagreement were reportedly arrested.⁴³ Additionally, the logistics of the return were not always smooth. Recent reports indicate that returning IDPs were required to wait in cars in the heat for long periods of time, allegedly for extra security screening. This particularly affected the most vulnerable persons, including children and the elderly, who had no access to even minimal assistance for the waiting period and the journey. There was also a lack of proper advance notification and regular provision of mine risk education to the returning population.⁴⁴

33 Ibid

34 UNHCR (2018), Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria.

35 Needs and Population Monitoring (2017), Al Hasakeh-IDPs Household Survey: Demographic, Socio-Economic and Intentions (November 2017)

36 REACH Initiative (2017). Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS) - Al Hasakeh Governorate (December 2017)

37 NGO KI, September 2018.

38 UNHCR (2018). Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria.

39 NGO KI, September 2018.

40 Disaggregation by IDP or refugee status were not available. Source: UNOCHA (2018). Inter-sector Mid-Year Review Periodic Monitoring Report dataset, January 1st to June 10th 2018.

41 OCHA (2018), Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 26 (15 June 2018 – 15 July 2018).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research had the following objectives:

- To understand the returnee populations' push and pull factors in decisions to return, including conditions and triggers for return.
- To explore returnees' preparations for return; as well as risks faced along the journey of return.
- To assess returnees' progress towards reintegration according to the eight IASC criteria for durable solutions, and draw comparisons with IDPs and the non-displaced in Hasakeh and Raqqa to identify the extent to which returnees face displacement-specific vulnerabilities upon reintegration.

3.2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In decisions of return, conditions at the community of origin are often weighed against conditions at the place of displacement.⁴⁵ Therefore, the study seeks to understand decision-making by identifying push and pull factors at the place of displacement and community of origin that influence decisions to return. However, as the push-pull framework does not assign weights to different factors affecting migration decisions,⁴⁶ the study also analyses the dynamic interplay between different factors by exploring both 'emotional' and 'rational' factors, as well as long-term intentions, preconditions and triggers of return.

Decisions to return were analysed through the range and quality of alternatives individuals and families perceived to have.⁴⁷ Realising integration and migration (including return) requires social and financial capital, the study also explores inequalities across different households that impact the level of agency and capacity households have to integrate, return or move onward.⁴⁸

According to Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), a durable solution is achieved "when displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement".⁴⁹ To analyse progress towards durable solutions, the study adopts the IASC's criteria on durable solutions which includes:⁵⁰

- i. long-term safety, security and freedom of movement;
- ii. an adequate standard of living, including at a minimum access to adequate food, water, housing, health care and basic education;

45 N. Harild, A. Christensen and R. Zetter (2015). Sustainable refugee return: Triggers, constraints, and lessons on addressing the development challenges of forced displacement. Global Program on Forced Displacement, Cross Cutting Solutions Area on Fragility Conflict and Violence, World Bank Group.

46 D.S. Massey, J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, J. Edward Taylor (1993). Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal, Population and Development Review, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466

47 M.B. Erdal & C. Oeppen (2018). Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44:6, 981-998

48 H. de Haas (2011). The determinants of international migration: conceptualizing policy, origin and destination effects. Working Paper 32. International Migration Institute (IMI), Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford.

49 The Brookings Institution – University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement (2010), IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons.

50 The 2010 IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons broadly agreed-upon definition of durable solutions and lists eight criteria "to determine the extent to which a durable solution has been achieved." IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (2010). The Brookings Institution – University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement. IASC criteria vii on "participation in public affairs" and criteria viii on "effective remedies for displacement-related violations" was not covered in this study due to political sensitivities around data collection in the assessed locations.

- iii. access to employment and livelihoods;
- iv. access to effective mechanisms that restore their housing, land and property (HLP) or provide them with compensation;
- v. access to and replacement of personal and other documentation;
- vi. voluntary reunification with family members separated during displacement;
- vii. participation in public affairs at all levels on an equal basis with the resident population;
- viii. effective remedies for displacement-related violations, including access to justice, reparations and information about the causes of violations.

Return and reintegration are interlinked as the act of returning is not on its own a durable solution.⁵¹ In theory, all nationals, including IDPs and returnees, should enjoy the same rights in their country of origin. However, when displacement is caused by conflict, the State – who should bear the primary responsibility for providing solutions for its citizens – may be unable or unwilling to protect people’s rights. This is problematic in Syria where safety and security are not guaranteed and where most people cannot access their rights. Hence, returnees, particularly those who have recently arrived at their place of origin, are likely to still have vulnerabilities resulting from their previous displacement after their return.⁵²

IASC criteria vii on “participation in public affairs” and criteria viii on “effective remedies for displacement-related violations” were not covered in this study due to political sensitivities around data collection in the assessed locations.⁵³

3.3. DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

The study covered four population groups, as defined below. Although return categories do not capture the full range of returns (e.g. ‘go-and-see’ visits, refugees not returning to their community of origin), it nevertheless acts as a starting point to draw comparisons across different population groups.

- **Syrian refugee returnees:** Individuals who crossed an international border and were previously displaced outside of Syria in or after 2011 for more than one month, who returned to their community of origin. The definition adopted in this study did not include a specific criterion on the length of time since return.
- **Syrian IDP returnees:** Individuals who did not cross an international border but have previously been displaced to other communities, sub-districts or governorates in Syria in or after 2011 for more than one month, and have returned to their community of origin. The definition adopted in this study did not include a specific criterion on the length of time since return.
- **Syrian IDPs:** Individuals who did not cross an international border but were forced or obliged to leave their homes or habitual residence to another location inside Syria in or after 2011 for more than one month. They have *not* returned to their community of origin.
- **Non-displaced Syrians:** individuals who remained in their community of origin in Syria since 2011.

51 Reintegration is understood as “a process which involves the progressive establishment of conditions which enable returnees and their communities to exercise their social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights, and on that basis to enjoy peaceful, productive and dignified lives.” UNHCR (2008), Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy - UNHCR’s Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Populations.

52 Durable Solutions Platform (2017) Voluntary, Safe, and Dignified Syrian Returns: Applying International Returns Principles for Syrian Refugees and IDPs, Internal guidance note, October 2017.

53 All data collection tools were submitted to the authorities for approval prior to data collection. IMPACT was advised that questions related to the authorities would be flagged and referred to the Asayish for follow up, which would risk delays in data collection for this study among other ongoing IMPACT activities.

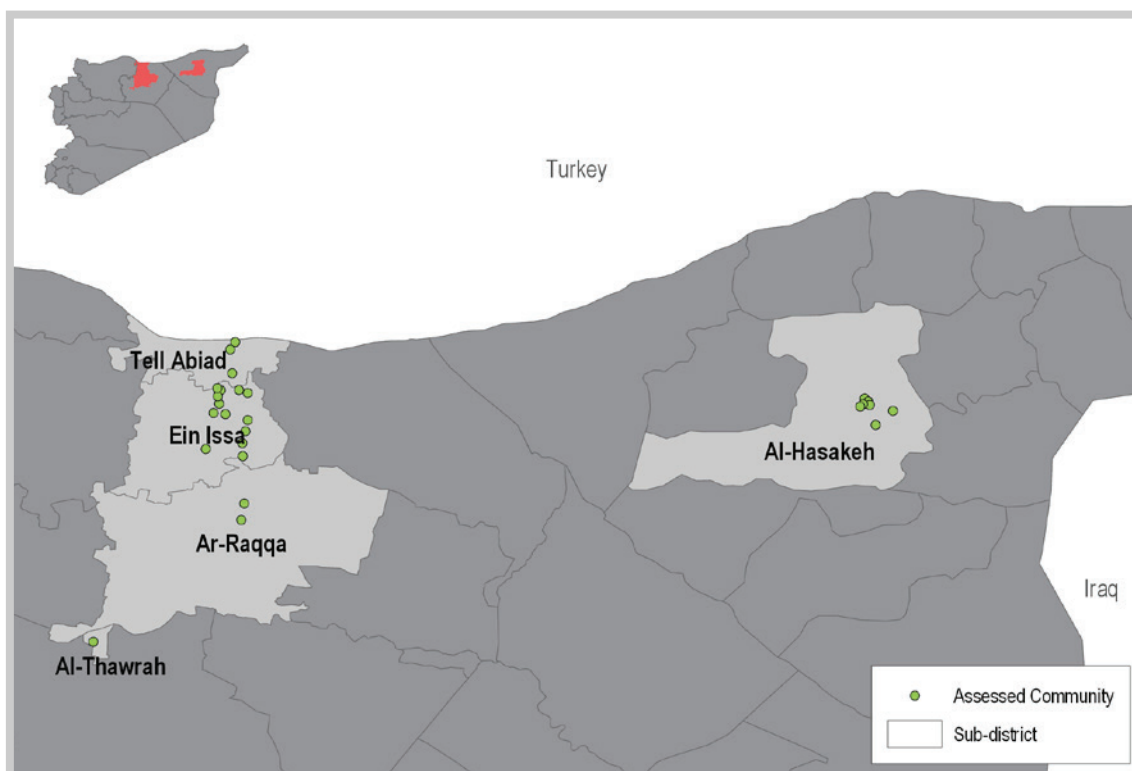
Data collection was conducted between 11-19 July, and on 4 August 2018. The study's geographical focus was on urban areas in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates in NES. As camp and non-camp IDPs/refugees have very different experiences in local integration and return, the study focused on returnees and IDPs living in host communities.⁵⁴ All data collection sites were areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Although the respective contexts in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates are distinct, this study focused on comparisons across population groups (rather than geographical area), though relevant differences in governorates were highlighted.⁵⁵

In Hasakeh governorate, data collection was conducted in Al-Hasakeh subdistrict only, covering the communities of: Al Gazal, Al Tala'e', Al-Hasakeh, Khashman, Salaliyeh, Salhiyeh, Talaah, Al Nashwa West and Al Nashwa Sharia. Locations and participants were selected by the local authorities, and data collection was held in the authority's Humanitarian Affairs Office (see 'Challenges and Limitations').

In Raqqa governorate, data collection was conducted in Ar-Raqqa, Ath-Thawrah and Tell Abiad subdistricts. Communities covered are Sukariyet Tal Elsamen, Tal Elsamen Dahham, Al-Thawrah and Tell Abiad (see Map 2). Locations were selected based on the level of security access numbers of IDPs and returnees.⁵⁶

In the study, assessed IDP returnees were returning from other communities within their governorate in Hasakeh and Raqqa. Refugee returnees were returning from neighbouring countries including Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. No refugees reported returning from Europe or other regions. The reported time period since assessed IDPs and refugees returned to their community of origin ranged from 4 - 25 months in focus group discussions (FGDs), and from 1 - 55 months in household surveys.

Map 2: Assessed locations



This study used a mixed methods approach, including key informant interviews (KIIs), household surveys, FGDs and life stories.

⁵⁴ The scope established was intended to increase the representativeness of the data to assessed population groups.

⁵⁵ Overall, ISIL has higher levels of violence and degree of influence in Raqqa governorate compared to Hasakeh governorate. The security situation in Raqqa governorate is generally worse than Hasakeh governorate. According to KIIs with NGOs, the humanitarian community places a larger focus on Raqqa compared to Hasakeh, as the latter was considered to be "more stable" and demographic profiles "less vulnerable". In Raqqa governorate, 85% of the 0.33 million people in need were in acute need (0.28 million). In Hasakeh governorate, 8% of the 0.66 million people in need were in acute need (0.05 million). However, it should be noted that there are large differences between areas within the governorates, and limitations in generalising across governorates. Source: UNOCHA (2017), Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018, November 2017.

⁵⁶ Population numbers per community were referenced from the Task Force for Population Movement, May 2018.

Table 1: Summary of NES data collection activities

	Population group	Number of HH surveys	Number of FGDs	Number of life stories	Number of KIIs
Hasakeh governorate	Refugee returnee	99	5	-	-
	IDP returnee	107	6	2	-
	IDP	95	7	-	-
	Remainee	86	-	-	3
Raqqa governorate	Refugee returnee	109	3	-	-
	IDP returnee	105	3	3	-
	IDP	113	7	-	1
	Non-displaced	99	-	-	1
Total		813	31	5	5

Key informant interviews (e.g. Deputy Manager of IDP committee) were used to understand broader trends and community concerns. Purposive sampling was used to select KIIs based on research questions. Local key informants were identified through local organisations and enumerator networks. Face-to-face KIIs were conducted in the Humanitarian Affairs Office (HAO) in Hasakeh, and in the KI's house in Raqqa. Enumerators took notes during and after KIIs, and the data was translated and coded.

Household surveys assessed multiple dimensions of the population groups' intentions, access to rights, and quality of life. For each criterion on durable solutions, household surveys were conducted across four population groups (refugee returnees, IDP returnees, IDPs and the non-displaced). The aim was to assess (i) households' progress towards each indicator and (ii) whether households perceived themselves to have equal access to goods, services and income-generating opportunities compared to others in their community.⁵⁷ Comparisons were made across population groups to evaluate the extent to which certain population groups faced displacement-specific vulnerabilities compared to the non-displaced.

A total of 813 household surveys were conducted. The survey interviewed an adult member of the household that was available at the time of data collection. Due to the lack of population data, purposive sampling based on population groups was used to select household survey respondents. Additionally, household survey participants in Hasakeh were selected by the local authorities (see 'Challenges and Limitations'). Therefore, household survey findings are not statistically significant across population groups nor across the assessed governorates, and should be treated as indicative of the population groups assessed.

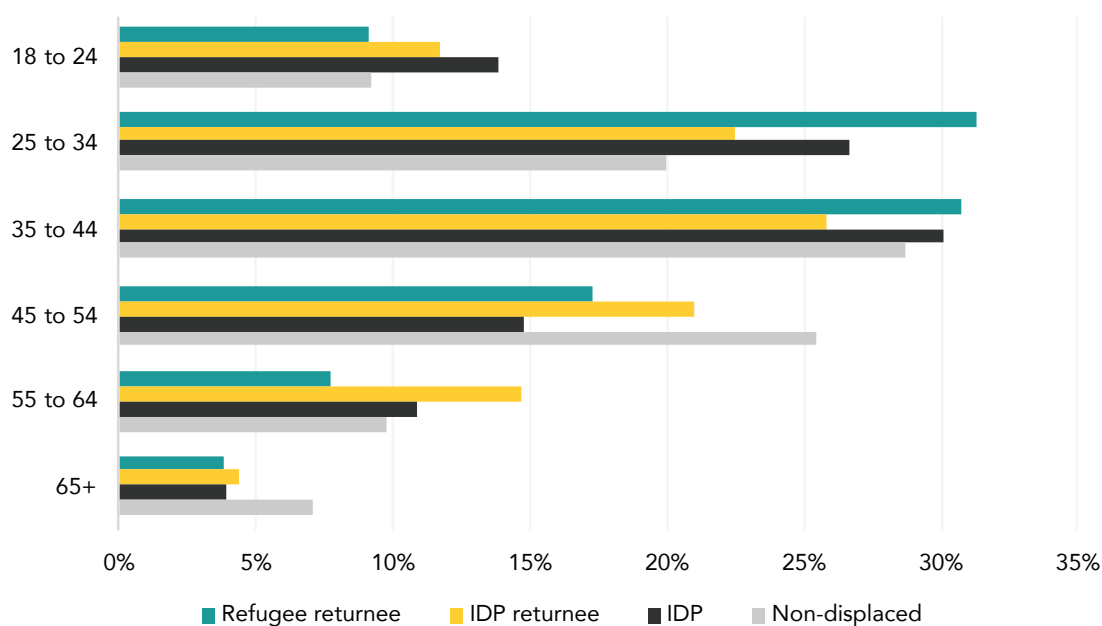
In total, 63% of respondents were the head of the household, including 20% female head of households. 51% of total survey respondents were female (Table 2). Quantitative data was analysed using Excel and SPSS. Although the contexts in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates are very different, this study focused on comparisons across population (rather than disaggregation by geographical area). However, differences between governorates were highlighted where relevant.

⁵⁷ Due to sensitivities around indicators on "participation in public affairs" and "effective remedies for displacement-related violations", they were not examined in NES.

Table 2: Household survey respondents per population group, governorate and gender

	Hasakeh governorate				Raqqa governorate			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Refugee Returnee	49	22%	22	16%	50	26%	87	35%
IDP Returnee	53	24%	54	38%	43	23%	55	22%
IDP	71	33%	24	17%	53	28%	55	22%
Non-displaced	45	21%	41	29%	44	23%	55	22%
Total	218	100%	141	100%	190	100%	252	100%

Figure 1: Household survey respondents by age and population group



Focus group discussions with refugee returnees, IDP returnees and IDPs were used to fill knowledge gaps and to generate a more in-depth understanding of community perceptions on various aspects related to local integration and voluntary return. Purposive sampling was used to select FGD participants based on gender and population groups, and 55% of FGD participants were female. Similar to household surveys, FGD participants in Hasakeh were also selected by the local authorities. FGDs took place in the HAO office in Hasakeh, in FGD participants’ houses in Tel Abiad (Raqqa), and in the Civil Council in Tabqa (Raqqa).

In total, 31 FGDs were conducted with at least three FGDs per population group and governorate. Six to eight participants were in each FGD. FGDs were conducted by an enumerator, while a note taker was present to record the content of the discussion. Notes were translated and a thematic coding approach was adopted for analysis.

Table 3: Number of FGD participants, per population group and gender

		Number of FGDs				Total number of participants (aggregate of all FGDs)			
		Female	Male	Mixed	Total	Female	Male	Unrecorded	Total
Hasakeh governorate	Refugee returnee	2	2	1	5	12	12	6	36
	IDP returnee	3	2	1	6	16	13	6	35
	IDP	4	1	2	7	23	5	12	40
Raqqa governorate	Refugee returnee	1	1	1	3	6	6	6	18
	IDP returnee	0	1	2	3	0	7	12	19
	IDP	3	3	1	7	17	18	6	41
		13	10	8	31	74	61	48	189

Life stories with refugee returnees, IDP returnees and IDPs provided an in-depth insight into individuals' decision-making processes and experience in seeking durable solutions. Life stories were collected to chronologically trace an individual's multiple stages of displacements and respective decisions made at each stage, and the process of reintegration overtime. Informants for life stories were selected based on snowball sampling from FGD participants. A total of eight life stories were collected in Hasakeh and Raqqa combined. See Annex 2 for full transcription of life stories.

Table 4: Number of life stories

		Female	Male
Hasakeh	Refugee returnee	1	0
	IDP returnee	2	1
	IDP	1	0
Raqqa	IDP returnee	1	2
		5	3

3.4. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

In Hasakeh governorate, IMPACT faced challenges in gaining the local authorities' approval to conduct research, limiting the sampling approach and quality of data collected. Local authorities expressed concerns over assessment fatigue and the lack of programming support that resulted in previous assessments conducted by other humanitarian agencies. Authorities initially consented to inviting a total of 10 participants for the study and only later agreed to invite more participants after further negotiations.

It was likely that there were considerable levels of bias given all participants (in household surveys, FGD participants, KIs and life stories) in Hasakeh were selected by the local authorities; and data collection took place in the HAO as requested. During the first day of data collection, enumerators noted that participants answered questions in a different manner when authorities walked into the room and observed two of the FGDs. Although this bias was minimised when enumerators asked officers to not be present in the room for the rest of the 16 FGDs and during household surveys, it is likely that the data was nevertheless biased given the circumstances mentioned. This could impact information such as challenges faced in reintegration upon return.

To minimise challenges in obtaining research approval, sensitive topics were not covered in the study. The following two of the eight IASC criteria on durable solutions were not included: vii "participation in public affairs" and criteria viii on "access to justice".

In Raqqa governorate, enumerators were not able to access certain communities due to security restrictions during the data collection period. This included no access to Raqqa city despite it being an area of interest with high numbers of returnees.⁵⁸ Random sampling was not possible due to the lack of returnee/resident/IDP list to sample from, limiting the study's ability to draw statistically significant findings.⁵⁹ Enumerators reported some respondents lacked trust, limiting their willingness to share openly during FGDs.

The scope of the study did not include households residing in camps, which are likely to represent a very different experience (e.g. IDPs in Hasakeh need to be sponsored in order to live outside of camps and approvals are rarely granted).⁶⁰ FGDs with the non-displaced could add an additional perspective on possible community tension.

58 Since October 2017 and as of July 2018, it is estimated that 147,000 individuals have returned to Raqqa city. Source: OCHA (2018). Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 26 (15 June 2018 – 15 July 2018).

59 Purposive sampling was used in identifying specific population groups.

60 NGO KI, September 2018.

4. FINDINGS

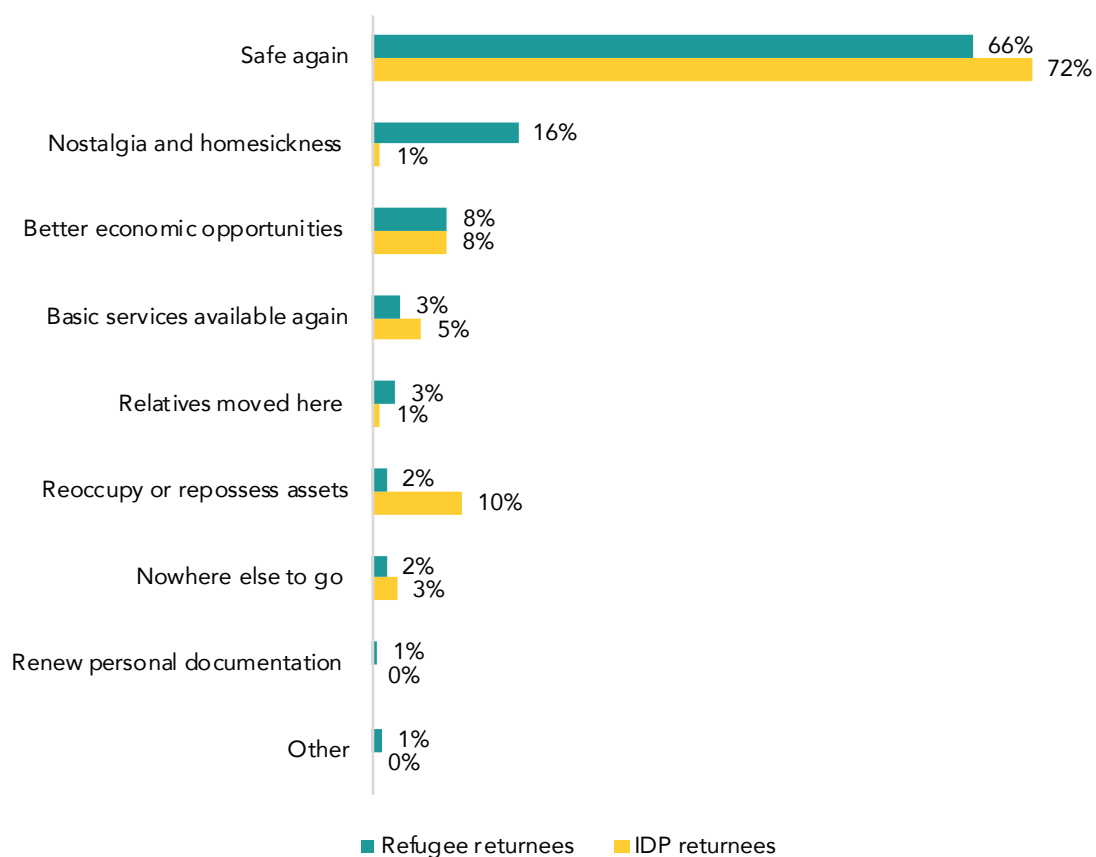
4.1. DECISION-MAKING ON RETURNS

Decisions to stay or return are informed by comparisons of conditions in the place of displacement against those in the community of origin. This section explores push and pull factors as perceived by refugees and IDPs – and the interaction between these factors – that led to their decisions to return. Although the report does not seek to provide a macro analysis of socio-economic and security conditions, developing a granular understanding of returnees' subjective assessment and decision-making is essential in understanding how information is received, interpreted and acted upon under different household circumstances.⁶¹

4.1.1. Pull factors on decisions to return

Similar to previous studies, a perceived improvement in the safety and security situation was considered the most significant pre-condition for return for IDP returnees (72%) and refugee returnees (66%) as shown in Figure 2.⁶² According to FGDs, some reported returning immediately – within a couple of weeks – after their community of origin was regained by SDF. 10% of IDP returnees' primary pull factor was to reoccupy or repossess their assets.

Figure 2: Primary pull factor for return (one option only)



61 B.S. Chimni (2004).

62 UNHCR (2018). Samuel Hall (2018). Syria Spontaneous Returns.

Whilst a majority of assessed returnees reported a relatively improved safety situation as the primary pull factor, as illustrated in Figure 2, this was a pre-condition that enabled return. Prior to their actual return, FGD findings suggest that many already had an underlying long-term desire to return due to **homesickness** and it was a question of when to return. Although more refugee returnees (16%) reported homesickness as their primary reason for return compared to IDP returnees (1%) in surveys, both refugee returnees and IDP returnees reported in FGDs a strong desire to be in a place in which they felt they belonged. The community of origin was perceived to be a place that they were able to receive family and community support. Return to their “homeland” was associated with their house, family, relatives and neighbours as well as a sense of rootedness as the place that they were born and raised in.

“

I was always requesting my husband that we return back to our original homeland; but his reply to me was always that it was not safe to be back there...but after we made sure that the security situation there was clear and after consulting friends and relatives living there, we returned back.⁶⁴

“

It’s our homeland where we were born and raised...our memories are here, our ancestors’ graves are here, everything we own [is] here.⁶⁵

For others, despite the intention to return, decisions were more calculated and involved evaluating different conditions. An IDP returnee who was wanted for military service mentioned that the idea of returning was in his mind, but he waited for the security situation to improve before returning. Another IDP reportedly went home to reassess economic opportunities available back home before deciding whether to return.

Box 1: Role of humanitarian assistance in influencing decisions to return

Although the lack of basic services (linked to the level of humanitarian assistance available) was a primary push factor for some households to return, it could be suggested that the level of humanitarian assistance was not a significant pull factor that influenced decisions to return. Across all FGDs with returnees, participants reported not being aware of the level of humanitarian assistance available prior to return; or considered it to be an unimportant factor that influenced their decision on whether to return. Others reported that humanitarian assistance did not influence their decision to return as it was insufficient, irregular, distributed to those with connections to the council, or only designated to a minority of the most vulnerable. Similarly, FGDs with IDPs (who had not returned) also suggest that humanitarian assistance was not an important factor that would influence their decision on whether to return.

However, returnees expressed the need for humanitarian and/or development assistance to support the early recovery and reconstruction of their community of origin upon return.

“

We didn’t know about any assistance as it was the last thing in our mind. What did matter the most for us was to find a safe place to stay in...but after returning to our own homes we started to ask about assistance.⁶⁵

This suggests that although humanitarian assistance might not have been a factor that influenced the decision of whether to return, assistance (e.g. health care, roads) from the self-administration or humanitarian actors was needed to improve the standard of living and quality of life upon return.

63 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

64 FGD: Refugee returnee, male, Hasakeh

65 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

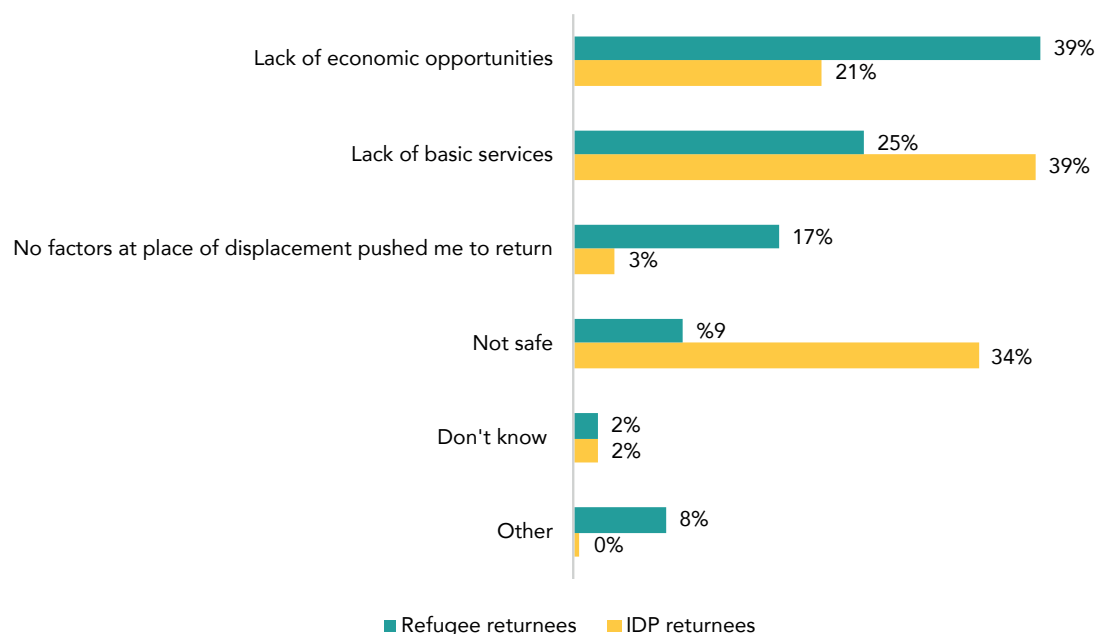
4.1.2. Push factors on decisions to return

In decisions to return, conditions at the community of origin are weighed against conditions at the place of displacement.⁶⁶ For assessed IDP returnees, the “lack of basic services” (39%) and “unsafe conditions” (34%) at the place of displacement were primary push factors for returns. In Raqqa, 54% of IDP returnee respondents returned due to unsafe conditions in the place of displacement, compared to 16% returning to Hasakeh due to unsafe conditions at the place of displacement.

For assessed refugee returnees, the “lack of economic opportunities” (39%) and “lack of basic services” (25%) were primary push factors for return. As refugees have no or limited right to work in certain neighbouring countries, coupled with deteriorating economic conditions in refugee-hosting countries, findings show that the lack of livelihood opportunities was a significant push factor that led refugees to return.⁶⁷

In household surveys, 3% of IDP returnees and 17% of refugee returnees indicated “no changes in conditions at place of displacement pushed me to return”. This implies more IDP returnee households (97%) compared to refugee returnee households (83%) reported having a push factor in their decisions to return, suggesting IDP returns are likely to be more vulnerable to return prematurely than refugee returns. Respondents selecting “other” cited specific reasons such as due to their work injury or the lack of health services available at the community of displacement.

Figure 3: Primary push factor for return (one option only)



In FGDs, IDPs and refugees alike mentioned the difficult and/or deteriorating conditions at the place of displacement to be push factors to return. Poor living conditions at the place of displacement, including IDP and refugee camps, motivated their decision to return. This included the lack of freedom of movement, basic services, employment opportunities and poor security in camps.



...we were living in a camp in Turkey, and the situation there was much worse than here... [there was] less food, water and medication...⁶⁸

⁶⁶ N. Harild, A. Christensen and R. Zetter (2015). Sustainable refugee return: Triggers, constraints, and lessons on addressing the development challenges of forced displacement. Global Program on Forced Displacement, Cross Cutting Solutions Area on Fragility Conflict and Violence, World Bank Group.

⁶⁷ Although not explored through FGDs, there is a possibility that rumours of forced conscription also pushes people to return (NGO KI, September 2018).

⁶⁸ FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh



...in the [IDP] camp...we were not accustomed to such crowded places and the large number of displaced people. We could not move freely inside or outside the camp because of the security restrictions imposed by the authorities, and the difficulty of getting used to living outside our original home within a new society.⁶⁹

In FGDs, one IDP returnee mentioned that the influx of IDPs from Deir ez-Zor to Raqqa led to further resource constraints and a decline in aid provision, triggering her decision to return. In addition to macro-level conditions, FGDs found that decisions on when to return also depended on household-specific conditions, such as a few refugee returnees who decided to return to Syria when they had spent all their savings. Additionally, most refugee returnees and IDP returnees expressed a desire to be closer to their family and to return to their normal lives. They reported a psychological comfort in being back in their community of origin, especially compared to the isolation felt when living in camps.



Our home is better than camps. It would [also] be better for our psychological situation, at least we return to the land, houses and property that belong to us...⁷⁰



Whatever situation is bad in my country, [it] will be better than what I was suffering in the area of displacement.⁷¹

Further investigation could seek to explore whether – on the contrary – some might suffer from psychological harm due to the destruction of their homes and communities that prevented returns.

Box 2: Positive examples of IDP integration

Although some refugee returnees and IDP returnees mentioned alienation and fear at the place of displacement to be a push factor that led them to return, the extent of integration might vary across households and contexts. FGD findings suggest that there were also examples of IDPs who felt secure at the place of displacement. In particular, IDPs in Hasakeh require sponsorships to live in host communities (i.e. outside of camps and collective centres). This specific population was likely to have benefited from family connections that facilitated their integration compared to IDPs that were not able to get any sponsorships and remained in camps.



The Hasakeh community are very kind and have high level of hospitality that makes us feel accept and host all the IDPs, which makes the IDPs feel like home... having some friends and relatives that came with us or have been living here before also helped [us] a lot at the beginning when they arrived, since this supported us to get the minimum level of stability.⁷²



We are coping and adapting with our new place as it is safe and secure for my kids and family.⁷³

69 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

70 FGD: refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

71 FGD: refugee returnee, male, Raqqa

72 FGD: IDP, Hasakeh

73 FGD: IDP, female, Raqqa

The deteriorating security conditions at the place of displacement also led some to return. A few refugee returnees reportedly returned to Syria due to the perceived worsening security situation in Iraq. This suggests that when conditions at the place of displacement deteriorated, being close to family in their community of origin could be a strong pull factor, even when the basic services or other needs at their community of origin were not fully met.



The situation in the region [in Iraq] became the same as it was in Syria, so it would be better to be with our family than living away.⁷⁴

While some households' decisions were more calculative in weighing different push and pull factors, FGD findings suggest examples in which specific safety and security incidents triggered certain households to return.



...my son got caught by the opposition army [in Damascus governorate] and they accused him that he is a supporter of the regime, so they cut off his head in front of me...After this incident, we decided to return to our community of origin.⁷⁵

“We did not discuss the subject of returning [before], we just returned back because of the death of my son in an explosion...it was a fast decision and we did not think about it...all family members returned together seeking security which we missed for a while”.⁷⁶ In these instances, decisions might be more emotional, immediate, and less compounded by a combination of other factors.

4.2. PLANNING AND PREPARATION FOR RETURN ⁷⁷

FGD findings suggest that returnees mainly relied on information from family, relatives and friends who returned before them or were living in the community of origin, and on news updates from the media. A few returnees in Hasakeh also consulted the YPG who reportedly told them that it was safe to return. Some only discussed returning internally with household members without seeking external information.

To prepare for return, some FGD participants reported obtaining information from relatives regarding the route to return and obtaining sufficient money to return (e.g. savings, loans). Returnees reportedly ensured the general safety in their community of origin. A few IDP returnees in Hasakeh reported that the YPG provided them with protection advice related to mines and bombs prior to return.

According to a KI, the Asayish was responsible for informing the public on whether areas were cleared of mines or not, including informing IDPs which communities were not cleared of mines and hence unsafe for returns. Asayish reportedly disseminated information on whether it was safe to return through channels such as the TV, communes, camp managers and NGOs. There were reportedly no individual services for demining specific houses.

74 FGD: Refugee returnee, Hasakeh

75 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh. The IDP returnee (originally from Hasakeh) was displaced to Damascus governorate, where the family bought a small house to live in. After a while, there was reportedly a conflict between GoS and the opposition at the location of displacement that they were living in, which pushed them to move to another area. After the opposition took over the area, she and her son returned to check on the house that they bought in Damascus. However, her son got caught by the opposition army and accused him to be a support of GoS, cutting his head off in front of his mother. This event led the mother to decide to return to Hasakeh.

76 FGD: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

77 This section is based on qualitative findings only as related questions were not included in household surveys.



I needed to know information about the security situation in the city and the most important thing is that the house is mine-free and habitable because the information we received was saying that the city is completely destroyed and the houses and streets are mined. I got this information [that it was safe to return] from some relatives who have returned to the city.⁷⁸

A large majority of assessed returnees in FGDs reported that the father, husband or head of household made the decision to return, but mentioned that all household members agreed with the decision to return. For some returnee households, the father or head of household returned first to ensure the general safety and to restore the house before the rest of the family returned. Family members followed after a few days or weeks. One IDP returnee household reported that household members returned separately as they did not have the money for everyone to return at the same time.⁷⁹ Few households reported some family members who did not return as they have jobs at the location of displacement. For most returnee respondents in FGDs, however, all family members returned together.

4.3. JOURNEY OF RETURN ⁸⁰

Many returnees in FGDs expressed that the journey was safe, and a few mentioned that it was safer compared to the journey taken when they first fled their community of origin. In the absence of assisted return programmes, most refugees and IDPs chose to return together as a family as a strategy to maximise their level of safety.



We all agreed that we would return together and there was no intention to leave any of the family members behind, because we were afraid that we might not be able to gather again or we might need to be displaced to another area which might be more dangerous.⁸¹



Everyone returned together, we all met at Al Nasera neighbourhood point, we used any available means of transportation, like cars, bikes, animals and some went on foot because they couldn't afford cars or something else. Then we got in West Nashwa in batches with written permissions [from the Asayish office].⁸²

According to a local KI, returnees needed permission from the Asayish office in order to return to their community of origin in Hasakeh governorate. Returnees would stop by the nearest Asayish office and apply to return to their community of origin. The Asayish would take the names of returnees and verify the information to ensure that they were not cooperating with ISIL in order to grant approval for return, and to ensure that the neighbourhood has the capacity to accommodate the number of returnees and IDPs. The process reportedly took a few hours to a few days.

A few returnees reported during FGDs and while sharing their life stories that they faced severe protection risks during the journey. Despite obtaining advice (e.g. from friends, relatives) when planning the route, information could be inaccurate or the volatile situation meant that returnees faced ERW and other unexpected risks along the way, as illustrated in the examples below. Additionally, some returnees relied on smugglers that charged high costs, and/or had to pay a large sum of bribery costs, faced abuse, harassment or even kidnappings when passing through checkpoints.

78 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

79 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

80 This section is based on **qualitative findings only** as related questions were not included in household surveys.

81 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

82 Asayish is responsible for domestic security in the Kurdistan Region. FGD: IDP returnees, Hasakeh

Box 3: Journey of return**IDP returnee: 56-year-old, female, Hasakeh⁸³**

"After a security incident that led to my son's death, we decided to return to our home in Hasakeh. We followed a planned route that was advised by others. When we arrived in Deir ez-Zor [enroute to Hasakeh], however, ISIL took my two granddaughters and told us that these two will go with the jihadists [to be their wives]. Everyone in the family started to offer ISIL all that we owned, even the car. The mother of my two granddaughters tried to beg the army to leave her daughters alone, but they took the mother and put her in a solitary prison and gave her 100 lashes for speaking in a loud voice in front of men. After that they let us go. Although a friend offered to host us at his house in Deir ez-Zor, we didn't make it in the end because it was not safe. We decided to go to Hasakeh through Raqqa instead".

IDP returnee: 30-year-old, male, Raqqa⁸⁴

"The decision to go back and which route to take was almost a secret, because some people who wanted to return with us were not allowed to leave Raqqa. There was one time when we decided to leave, we were being shot at so we came back to Raqqa to save our families' lives. We consulted our relatives and didn't make a move until we found a safe route to take...We carried only the important things with us, the challenge was that the route was full of mines and we only came to know this when the mines exploded on some people that were with us...Although the route was full of mines we didn't have the courage to change the route and after a long journey, we reached our community of origin."

IDP returnee: 42-year-old, male, Raqqa⁸⁵

"After a few months of displacement, people used to return to my community of origin [Tel Abiad] easily, but now the route has become dangerous and more complicated. One day when we decided to leave Raqqa and return to my community of origin, the route was not safe...until we met somebody and he offered to direct us to the safest path in return for money. As we didn't have any, we borrowed money from a friend...In February 2016, we were told by this person who would guide us to the safest road to meet him at the night to take off to my community of origin. So I went with my family (my wife and kids) at 2 a.m., and we walked on foot for two and a half hours until we reached a point where I was told that I was now safe. Then he told us that he needed to leave before sunrise and that me and my family should continue this way but to be careful of mines. So I started walking in front and my family behind me... suddenly I heard an explosion, when I turned my face to see, my wife and kids were dead and their body parts were scattered all over the area."

⁸³ Life story: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

⁸⁴ Life story: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

⁸⁵ Life story: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

4.4. RETURNEES' REINTEGRATION AND PROGRESS TOWARDS DURABLE SOLUTION

It cannot be assumed that a durable solution is met once a refugee or IDP have returned to her/his community of origin as they may continue to face displacement-related vulnerabilities or be further displaced.⁸⁶ While many studies focused on intention and the push/pull factors for return, there is a knowledge gap on processes of reintegration upon return. Monitoring efforts tend to drop off once returnees are back home, in which conditions in the area where they return and the protection issues they continue to face as a result of their displacement can be overlooked.⁸⁷ Returnees face immediate as well as long term challenges in reintegration.⁸⁸



When I first came back, I felt that I was in a ghost town. This city was beautiful in the past, life was beating and markets were crowded with people from every corner of the city. There were only a few people who have returned. The markets were empty, only the sounds of mines that exploded every day were heard, and there were rotting bodies in the rubble. The beautiful city was almost completely destroyed!⁸⁹

FGDs suggest examples where IDP returnees and refugee returnees gave a positive narrative of their reintegration. For example, an IDP returnee commented on the early recovery of the city that facilitated his integration. He mentioned that “a good number of people came back to the community” that led the community to become “more stable”.⁹⁰ Improvements were seen in which “the electricity network was fixed, the schools were reopened, water became more available, more jobs were available in informal sector, and we started having access to humanitarian assistance...”⁹¹

In a life story, a respondent mentioned that his family first moved into a camp when they tried to return to their community of origin. After a few months, they were able to rent a place despite high rental costs.⁹² Some FGD participants reportedly relied on loans from relatives to meet basic needs before they found a job, and lived in their relatives’ house before their own house was rehabilitated.



In the early period, we relied on the money we borrowed from one of our relatives to provide the basic needs of the house, but soon the situation improved and people slowly returned until the neighbourhood began to be populated and the water was available. In the first three months, the situation was bad but it soon improved after most of the basic services [such as] drinking water and the work of ovens for the provision of bread. My daughter also found an income-generating job in the city...the situation is getting better every day.⁹³

However, returnees also reported a wide range of challenges and community needs, such as access to water, electricity, health care, food assistance, vocational training and improving roads. The lack of employment opportunities was a common concern.

86 Joint IDP Profiling Service (2018), Durable Solutions Analysis Guideline.

87 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2017), Internal displacement and the global compact on refugees: Are today's returning refugees tomorrow's IDPs?

88 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2017). Returnees in Syria Sustainable reintegration and durable solutions, or a return to displacement? November 2017

89 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

90 No further information on number and demographic of people that returned which reportedly made the community more stable.

91 FGD: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

92 No further information from FGD findings. Further investigation can seek to understand whether people who opted for renting was because they were also renting before displacement, or because they were not able to go back to their previous house (and if so, reasons why they were not able to return to their previous house). Additionally, as the study did not cover camps, returnees that were living in camps and were not able to return to the city were not captured in the study.

93 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

According to recent humanitarian assessments⁹⁴ and as elaborated in survey findings in the next section, there are still significant humanitarian needs for all population groups, including the non-displaced. Further investigation could seek to explore whether returnees knew where to access information on available services (e.g. referral mechanisms used, including communities passing information amongst themselves).

Box 4: Role of networks in supporting return and reintegration

As the international community deems conditions for refugees to return in safety and dignity are not yet in place in Syria and in the absence of assisted voluntary return programmes, FGD findings illustrated that community networks have been key in driving and determining the pattern of 'spontaneous' returns. Community networks and resources at the community of origin played an important role at multiple stages of return and reintegration, including:

1. **Motivation to return:** Knowing that others have already returned to their community of origin, it motivated some to return to reunite with their family and friends. For example, returnees mentioned that "our relatives' return to the city was a major reason for our decision to return. If they had not returned to the city, we would not have thought of returning" and "almost all the people that we know returned so it motivated us to go back".⁹⁵
2. **Information needed in decision to return:** Returnees primarily relied on information from, and consulted with, relatives and friends at the community of origin when deciding whether to return. Networks provided a crucial source of information, including information on the security situation and assurance that it was safe to return. For example, a refugee returnee mentioned: "I was afraid of mines for my kids' safety. Then I consulted some of my relatives and they encouraged me to return back".⁹⁶
3. **Reintegration support:** Community networks in the host community played a significant role in supporting returnees to reintegrate, such as providing support in rehabilitating homes and lending money for returnees to meet basic needs. The familiarity of their hometown also facilitated their ability to reintegrate. For example, a refugee returnee mentioned that "we could cope easily because it was our hometown and it is familiar to us...we all worked together to repair our homes"⁹⁷ and an IDP returnee mentioned that "[we] even [shared] the remaining furniture ... together".⁹⁸ Community support reportedly strengthened bonds between returnees and others in the community, such as a refugee returnee who mentioned that her neighbours "supported us in fixing our houses and gave us financial assistance, and we are now more than neighbours...we are brothers and sisters." Local community efforts in supporting the provision of basic services were crucial. For example, a refugee returnee mentioned that "[the] challenges are the same for everyone and we are supporting each other to face it. We're together in our happiness and sadness...we're working in a committee within the neighbourhood similar to the council and trying to provide the basic needs in the neighbourhood such as water, electricity and hygiene [support] in cooperation with Al Komeen and the local committee".⁹⁹ However, despite receiving community support in reintegration, returnees nevertheless faced challenges as elaborated in the next section.

94 According to a REACH study which assessed 88 of 823 communities in Hasakeh governorate in April 2018, 82 communities reported facing barriers to accessing healthcare services with 72 communities reporting no functioning medical facilities. Additionally, the majority of communities reported that residents faced difficulties in accessing sufficient amounts of food, the most common barriers being the high cost of some food items on markets and a lack of resources to buy food. In REACH's study which assessed 50 of 380 communities in Raqqqa governorate in April 2018, half of the assessed communities reported no health facilities available in the area and nearly half of the assessed communities reported that some children were unable to attend educational facilities. Half of the assessed communities reported using coping mechanisms to deal with the lack of income, including borrowing money, sending children to work or beg and reducing meal size. Source: REACH Initiative (2018). Humanitarian Situation Overview Hasakeh, April 2018; REACH Initiative (2018). Humanitarian Situation Overview Raqqqa, April 2018.

95 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Raqqqa; IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

96 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Raqqqa

97 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

98 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

99 FGD: Refugee returnee, male, Hasakeh. Al Komeen refers to a committee of volunteers that performs civic duties in the community.

4.4.1. Progress towards (re)integration according to IASC criteria for durable solutions








Reported levels of access: As shown in Table 5, IDPs had the lowest proportion of households that reported having access to an adequate standard of living, employment, compensation for damaged houses and documentation. There were no distinct patterns between refugee returnees, IDP returnees and the non-displaced; which suggests returnees and the non-displaced faced challenges alike. The largest difference in level of access between population groups is the level of humanitarian assistance, in which 45% of assessed IDPs reported access to humanitarian assistance compared to 20% of IDP returnees and 20% of the non-displaced.

When broken down by governorates, indicators on safety/security incidents and income-generating opportunities had the largest difference between respondents in Hasakeh compared to Raqqa. For safety/security incidences, 8% of respondents in Raqqa compared to 20% in Hasakeh reported themselves or their household to have been in a security incidence in the past three months prior to data collection. In Hasakeh: 18% of IDPs, 17% of IDP returnees, 22% of refugee returnees and 22% of residents reported having been a victim. In Raqqa: 4% of IDPs, 12% of IDP returnees, 10% of refugee returnees and 9% of residents reported having been a victim. For income-generating opportunities, similar proportions of IDPs in Hasakeh (63%) and Raqqa (70%) reported having access. However, more households in Raqqa compared to Hasakeh reported having access to income-generating opportunities for IDP returnees, refugee returnees and residents. In Hasakeh: 66% of IDP returnees, 65% of refugee returnees and 66% of residents reported having access to income-generating opportunities. In Raqqa: 87% of IDP returnees, 90% of refugee returnees and 91% of residents reported having access. Given vast differences in the situation within the governorate, a wider coverage is needed to draw any significant comparisons across the governorates

Perceptions on equal access: In line with findings that suggest the lowest proportion of IDP households reported access in assessed IASC indicators, IDPs were also most likely to believe that they fared worse compared to others in their community. A slightly higher proportion of refugee returnees than IDP returnees perceived equal access. Overall, access to income-generating opportunities and humanitarian assistance were indicators that had the lowest proportion of households perceiving equal access compared to other indicators. IDPs (47%) were less likely to perceive equal access to income-generating opportunities compared to the non-displaced (77%). Regarding humanitarian assistance, only 33% of non-displaced households perceived equal access to humanitarian assistance. This can possibly be explained by aid actors prioritising non-host groups or individuals that were seen to be most vulnerable, without adequately assessing the vulnerabilities of the non-displaced. Additional dimensions could include understanding specific vulnerabilities for population groups such as the elderly, persons with disabilities or unaccompanied minors.

For respondents (across all population groups) that perceived their household to have lower levels of access compared to others in their community, reasons provided included the lack of money to afford basic food, shelter and healthcare. Regarding employment, respondents reported the lack of suitable opportunities to match their skills, or no employment opportunities at all in the community as the main reason for lower levels of access; with only a few IDPs reporting preferences given to the non-displaced. This highlights how all population groups are facing challenges alike, in which barriers to access are not necessarily displacement-specific vulnerabilities. Although FGDs did not suggest any tension between returnees and the non-displaced, further resource constraints and uneven aid distribution could potentially lead to tensions. Further research is needed to investigate whether there is a statistically significant difference between population groups in progress towards these indicators.

Table 5: Households reported having access and percentage of households perceiving equal access, per indicator (higher percentage equates to better access)

	% of HHs reported having access				Largest gap	% of HHs perceiving equal access compared to others in community				Largest gap
	Refugee Returnee	IDP Returnee	IDP	Non-displaced		Refugee Returnee	IDP Returnee	IDP	Non-displaced	
 i. Safety and security	90%	92%	94%	90%	4%	98%	97%	96%	97%	2%
 ii. Access to basic goods and services	77%	77%	76%	80%	4%	87%	85%	83%	91%	8%
 iii. Access to income-generating opportunities	78%	76%	67%	76%	9%	75%	69%	47%	77%	30%
 iv. Access to effective mechanisms that restore HLP or provide them with compensation	7%	8%	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
 v. Access to legal documentation	89%	89%	88%	94%	6%	90%	88%	70%	91%	21%
 vi. Voluntary reunification with family members separated during displacement	75%	91%	91%	93%	18%	-	-	-	-	-
 Access to humanitarian assistance	25%	20%	45%	20%	25%	57%	41%	42%	33%	24%

NB. Red indicates population group with lowest proportion of households reporting access or perceived equal access, and yellow indicates the highest proportion of households compared to other population groups. See Annex 1 for sub-indicators used per criteria and methodological note on sample size. In indicator vi., reported percentages indicate households that reported no family separation resulting from displacement.

4.4.2. Safety and security

Although a majority (69%) of assessed returnees in household surveys reported safety as the primary pull factor for returning to their community of origin, findings suggest there was still a significant gap in achieving “long-term safety, security and freedom of movement”. In household surveys, a large majority of all population groups ranging from 97% for refugee returnees and the non-displaced to 99% for IDP returnees and IDPs reported feeling safe walking around their neighbourhood. However, 8% of respondents in Raqqa and 20% of respondents in Hasakeh across all population groups reported that they or a family member were a victim of a security incident in the last three months.

FGD participants expressed that land mines were a security concern. For example, a returnee mentioned that “there are fears and concerns of land mines, since this happened once in the past few days when a land mine exploded in a nearby landfill”.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, returnees mentioned fears of kidnappings, gun shootings and harassments from drug users and drunken men – in which women and children were perceived to be the most vulnerable. There were also reportedly “random gun shootings which scare the women and children, and many times injuries happened because of that”.¹⁰¹

100 FGD: IDP returnee, male, Hasakeh

101 FGD: IDP returnee, male, Hasakeh

A common theme mentioned by returnees in FGDs was the fear of renewed conflict that would force them to be displaced again. A refugee returnee mentioned: “We are afraid that war would come again and that the insecurity [would] return as rumours are spreading every day, but so far it is still safe”.¹⁰² As returnees faced poor experiences in displacement (including multiple displacements for some), a long-term and sustained peace was seen as a most important factor in enabling them to achieve long-term reintegration in their community of origin without the fear of having to be displaced again.¹⁰³ Overall, although a majority of FGD participants perceived their community to be safe upon return, the presence of conflict-related security threats impacts whether their return will be a sustainable and durable solution.

4.4.3. Access to basic goods and services

Household surveys examined access to basic food, drinking water, housing and healthcare. The non-displaced (92%) had the lowest proportion of households that reported having access to basic food. Refugee returnees had the lowest proportion of households who reported having access to sufficient drinking water (30%) and healthcare (86%); and IDPs (80%) the lowest proportion of households with reported access to basic housing.

Regarding perceptions, the non-displaced (86%) had the lowest proportion of households perceiving equal access to basic food. IDPs had the lowest proportion of households perceiving equal access to drinking water (67%) and basic housing (78%). Refugee returnees (85%) and IDP returnees (85%) had the lowest proportion of households perceiving equal access to basic healthcare.

Table 6: Households reported access and perception of equal access (breakdown of indicator ii per population group, higher percentage equates to better access)¹⁰⁴

		Refugee returnee	IDP returnee	IDP	Non-displaced	Largest gap
Basic food	Have access	95%	97%	100%	92%	8%
	Perceived equal access	89%	91%	97%	86%	11%
Drinking water	Have access	30%	33%	40%	39%	10%
	Perceived equal access	88%	84%	67%	91%	24%
Basic housing	Have access	95%	90%	80%	97%	17%
	Perceived equal access	89%	84%	78%	95%	17%
Basic healthcare	Have access	86%	91%	88%	97%	11%
	Perceived equal access	85%	85%	94%	94%	9%

102 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

103 FGD: IDP, female, Hasakeh

104 Sub-indicators on having access to drinking water was defined by the proportion of households reporting always having sufficient drinking water one month prior to data collection. Other indicators refer to those who reported having access three months prior to data collection or since time of arrival if less than three months.

Access to basic food: Across all population groups, a minimum of 92% of respondents across governorates reported having access to basic food three months prior to data collection. Regarding perception, a minimum of 86% of respondents in each population group across governorates perceived equal access to basic food. According to FGDs, respondents reported challenges in accessing food due to the lack of food assistance and increased food prices. The access to food was reportedly related to households' income level and whether they were able to afford food. One respondent reported:



The basic food is insufficient as we skip some meals during the day, and we mainly rely on the basket food and sometimes we sell items from this basket to cover other top needs.¹⁰⁵

Access to drinking water: Network and water trucking were the most frequently reported sources of drinking water for all population groups in both governorates. A minimum of 62% of households relied on the network and 12% relied on water trucking as their primary source of drinking water. Access to a water network as the primary source of drinking varied between refugee returnees (62%), IDPs (78%), IDP returnees (81%) and the non-displaced (85%).

According to FGDs, a few IDP returnees reported that their assets, including water tanks, were stolen. A few respondents mentioned having to purchase water tanks upon return. Respondents also reported high prices of drinking water and the lack of water storage facilities as challenges in accessing water. Recommendations included providing drinking water and distributing water tanks (according to household size).¹⁰⁶



At the beginning of the return, the main challenge we faced was to provide safe drinking water, so we brought a tank to store water. In the early period, we relied on the money we borrowed from one of our relatives to provide the basic needs of the house, but soon the situation improved and people slowly returned... and the water was available.¹⁰⁷



Drinking water is rarely available and also there is no water storage [methods] for spare water. There is a lack of running water through the network for four days in the week.¹⁰⁸

Access to basic housing: The group reporting the lowest level of access to basic housing were IDP households (80%), compared to IDP returnees (90%), refugee returnees (93%), and the non-displaced (97%). This is consistent with households' perceived level of access, in which IDPs were the population group least likely to perceive equal access to housing than others in their community.

According to FGDs, some returnees and IDPs reported challenges in renting a house due to high rental costs. For IDPs who were not able to afford the reported high rental cost of housing, they reportedly lived in collective centres with poorer living conditions, lower security and faced more tensions with the host community (e.g. overcrowding of schools when some school facilities were occupied as collective centres for IDPs). FGD participants reported that women living in collective centres were vulnerable to sexual harassments, but were unable to report on these harassments without facing eviction threats.

105 FGD: IDP, female, Raqqa

106 FGD: IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh

107 Life story: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

108 FGD: IDP, female, Hasakeh

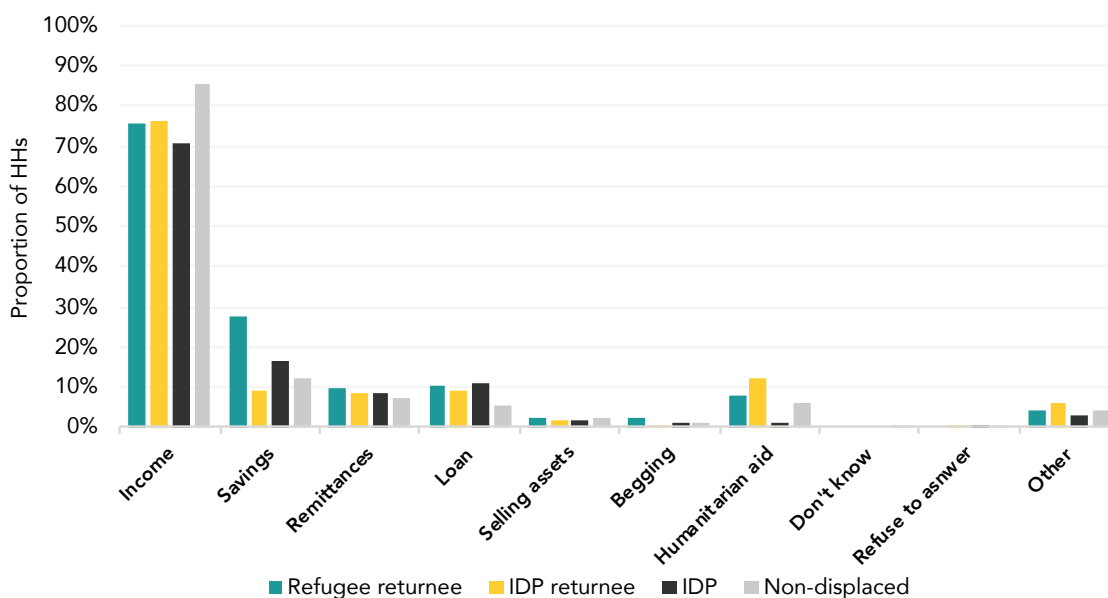
Access to basic healthcare:¹⁰⁹ The non-displaced (97%) were the population group with the highest proportion of households reporting access to healthcare compared to refugee returnees (86%) who reported the lowest level of access. Both IDPs (94%) and the non-displaced (94%) were more likely to perceive equal access, compared to refugee returnees (85%) and IDP returnees (85%). Some FGD participants reported limited healthcare centres and/or medical staff available.

4.4.4. Access to income-generating opportunities

Household surveys found that 78% of refugee returnees, 76% of IDP returnees, 67% of IDPs and 76% of the non-displaced reported having access to income-generating opportunities; as well as 70% of female-headed households reported having access to income-generating opportunities.¹¹⁰ Sectors included retail, manufacturing, construction and agriculture; with limited difference in the employment sectors between the non-displaced and other population groups.

Across governorates, the largest proportion of each population group relies on income as the primary source to pay for basic expenses, ranging from 85% of the non-displaced to 70% of IDPs. Additionally, 27% of refugee returnees reported relying on their savings as one of their primary income sources to pay for basic expenses.

Figure 4: Primary source of income to pay for basic expenses (up to two options only)



KIIs and FGDs illustrated examples of displacement-specific barriers that impact access to the quality of employment opportunities available. According to a KI, returnees spent a lot of money abroad including paying high smuggling costs to return, which result in returnees lacking the capital to start businesses and having to work as day labourers instead.¹¹¹ A refugee returnee mentioned that her household did not have a stable source of income as “my husband works on a bike as a delivery man, so if he gets paid that day we can eat, otherwise we won’t”.¹¹² A refugee returnee also mentioned that the employment opportunities are dependent upon connections with employers, implying possible disadvantage for IDPs or returnees who have less extensive community networks upon return.¹¹³

109 For access to healthcare, the survey for non-displaced households was phrased differently than for the other population groups. The non-displaced were only asked one question “Did you or the other family member who needed to see a doctor in the last 3 months go?” compared to the other survey that first asked “Have you or anyone in your household had the need to visit a doctor in the last 3 months” and then, “Did you or the other family member that needed to see a doctor in the past 3 months, visit a healthcare facility?”. For this population group, the percent reported for ‘access to healthcare’ are those who reported a family member needing to go and who went.
 110 Households with female head of households not disaggregated by population group due to limited sample size.
 111 KII: male, Hasakeh
 112 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh
 113 FGD: Refugee returnee, male, Raqqa

Returnees commented on the limited types of job opportunities available, in which some in Hasakeh mentioned that only opportunities for military jobs in the self-administration or self-employment were available. Another returnee mentioned that they used to work in agriculture but farming opportunities are now limited in the region, especially for cotton and vegetables. Another respondent mentioned that agriculture work was seasonal and he faced challenges in finding permanent work.¹¹⁴

IDPs were the ones with the lowest proportion of households (50%) perceiving equal access to income-generating opportunities than others in the community, compared to 83% of the non-displaced. According to FGDs, IDPs reported a wide range of challenges in accessing employment. Job opportunities were reportedly not available all the time, especially public sector or management-level jobs which were perceived to be unavailable for IDPs. According to a District Co-chairman KI, IDPs could rarely find jobs that suited their tradition and culture.

For women, it was reportedly also difficult to seek employment that suited their qualification, especially for educated women. A female refugee returnee also mentioned that women feared that their reputation would be damaged through working in a mixed gender workplace.¹¹⁵ One IDP reported concerns for women working at the displaced location:

“

I am a housewife and my family won't let me work here because it's not my community and I don't know anyone here.¹¹⁶

Some IDPs also reported having to take up jobs that were more irregular and/or with lower income, while some were unemployed. Reported challenges included being away from their land leaving them unable to cultivate it and having to sell off assets needed for income-generation:

“

I used to work as a driver, but here I am a day labourer in construction work so I work 15 days a month and I get paid 1500 SYP/day, and I can't work with the local authorities because they require a university degree and specific education qualification.¹¹⁷

“

Before I used to own farmlands and work in agriculture but now I am unemployed.¹¹⁸

“

I used to work in my car, but I had to sell it to cover other top needs, so now I don't work and I can't work because I have difficulties in seeing and this poses a challenge for me in getting a job.¹¹⁹

4.4.5. Access to legal documentation

As shown in Figure 5, most respondents reported that they still had possession of their marriage certificate, family booklets, and national ID cards. An average of 98% of respondents from all population groups were in possession of their national ID card, and an average of 92% were still in possession of their family booklet. In general, IDPs feel that they do not have the same level of access to documentation as others (69% compared to an average among the other groups of 89%).¹²⁰

114 FGD: IDP returnee, male, Raqqa

115 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Raqqa

116 FGD: IDP, female, Raqqa

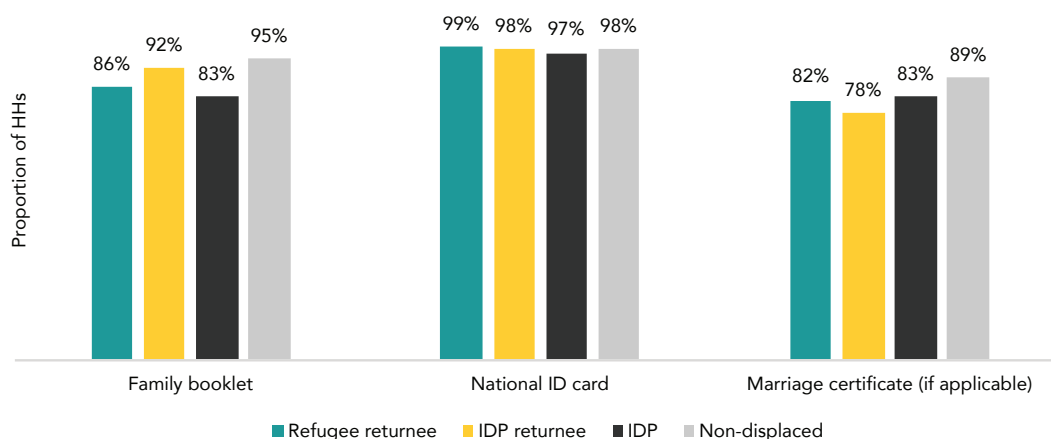
117 FGD: IDP, male, Raqqa

118 FGD: IDP, male, Raqqa

119 FGD: IDP, male, Raqqa

120 If the study was conducted with households living in camps in NES, percentages are expected to be lower given documents are confiscated. Due to freedom of movement restrictions, IDPs residing in camps cannot access civil registries (unlike out-of-camp households).

Figure 5: Households having access to documents, by population group



Although questions on documentation were not asked in FGDs due to sensitivities involved, one respondent mentioned that IDPs lost documents when they fled and it was unsafe to return to their homes to collect their documents. Additionally, one IDP mentioned that the lack of documentation had implications on his ability to seek employment.

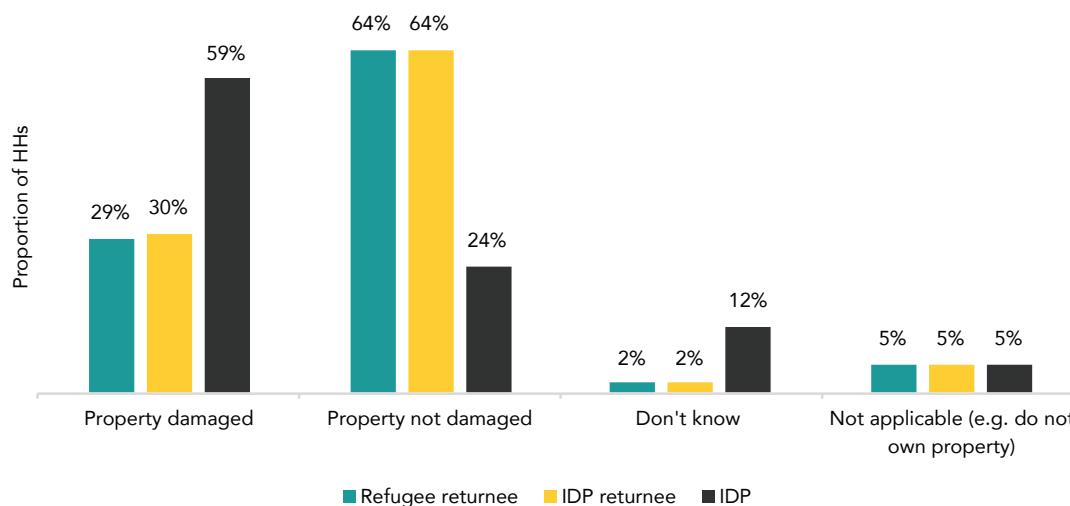
“ **I am unemployed and the main challenge is that I lost all my documents when a fire happened inside my house.**¹²¹

Further investigation is needed, both in relation to in-camp and out of camp communities, to explore issues on documentation such as whether legal documentation was taken or kept during movement, and whether IDPs were able to obtain birth, marriage and death registration away from home.

4.4.6. Access to effective mechanisms for restoring HLP or provided with compensation

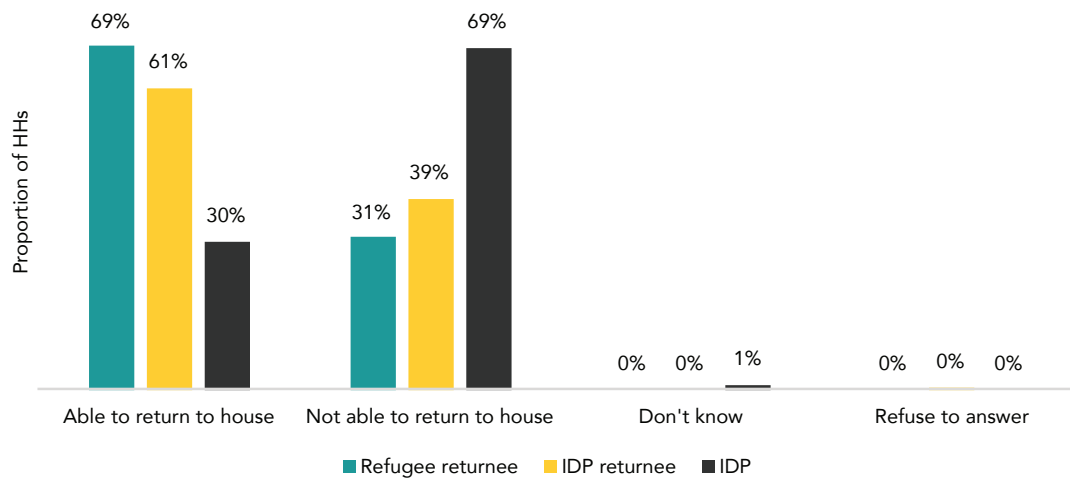
The study assessed property damage and access to compensation through household surveys. As shown in Figure 6, surveys found that a considerable proportion of IDPs (59%), IDP returnees (30%) and refugee returnees (29%) reported their property to be damaged. This aligns with the trend that some IDPs (69%), IDP returnees (39%) and refugee returnees (31%) reported not being able to return to their house.

Figure 6: Proportion of households reporting their property to be damaged



121 FGD: IDP, male, Raqqa

Figure 7: Proportion of households reporting able to return to their house (percentages expressed out of all respondents, not out of households reporting damage).



According to participants of FGDs, some IDP households might not be able to return due to their damaged property. However, participants also suggested that returnee households decided to return even though they knew that their houses were damaged. Further investigation is needed to explain why some households might not have been able to return to their house even if it was not damaged. This may have been caused by other people occupying the house or the damage severity.



[Although] we heard that our house was stolen...we did come back with everyone's decision and with the agreement of the elderly. We returned back after two weeks.¹²²

Few IDP returnees (8%) and refugee returnees (7%) received compensation for damage to their property. According to a local informant, there was a committee from GoS that goes to south-west neighbourhoods in Hasakeh city (SDF-held areas) with high levels of damage to assess damage costs and decide how much compensation would be paid. The compensation was reportedly provided by GoS in cash. The compensation was reportedly a small amount rather than the total cost to restore the damage.

Given the low rate of returnees receiving compensation, FGDs suggest that returnees largely relied on community support (e.g. neighbours, relatives and friends) in restoring their houses (see Box 4). Some respondents reported having to live with relatives as their house was destroyed, and respondents suggested the need for compensation packages for people who had their homes stolen or destroyed.



It's very difficult because my home got destroyed and there is no job for me.¹²³

¹²² FGD: refugee returnee, female, Raqqa

¹²³ FGD: Refugee returnee, male, Raqqa

4.4.7. Family separation and voluntary reunification

Households reported family separation due to displacement across all population groups including the non-displaced (7%), IDPs (9%), IDP returnees (9%) and refugee returnee (25%).¹²⁴ Immigration restrictions is a possible reason that led to higher rates of family separation for refugees compared to IDPs. A refugee returnee mentioned:

“ Because of immigration we were forced to tear apart the family, we travelled to Iraq, others to Turkey and Lebanon. When we learned that security was settled, we all decided to return [and reunite the family] without hesitation.”¹²⁵

Across all population groups, there were households that reported family separation to maximise work opportunities in separate locations - which illustrates how family separation was adopted by some as a household coping strategy in order to maximise opportunities available at different locations. Of the 10% (61 households) of all population groups that reported family separation, 83% gave reasons that involved some choice either due to a family member staying in their community of origin or displaced to another location for work or to look after property.¹²⁶ The remaining 17% reported some form of forced separation (recruited by armed forces, or forced displacement to another area).

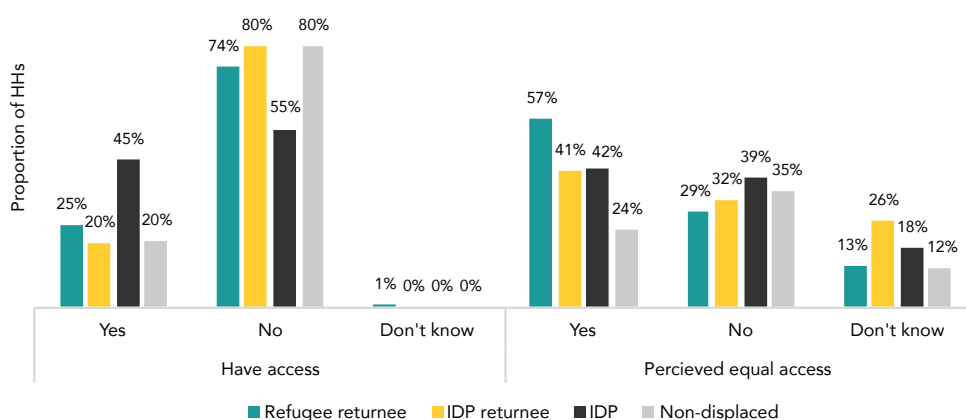
For households that reported family separation, 67% (41) of respondents were reunited with all family members that were separated during displacement, 26% (16) were reunited with some family members, and 7% (4) were not reunited with any of the separated members.

4.4.8. Access to humanitarian assistance

Although access to humanitarian assistance is not a criterion to assess progress towards durable solutions, it is nevertheless important to take this into account given the ongoing conflict and recurring and existing community needs.

As shown in Figure 8, household surveys found that 46% of IDPs reported having access to humanitarian assistance, compared to 23% of returnees and non-displaced combined. Compared to other indicators on perception outlined in Table 5, humanitarian assistance has the lowest proportion of households perceiving equal access across all population groups. The non-displaced (24%) were the lowest population group perceiving equal access, compared to refugee returnees (57%) as the highest population group. Reasons provided across population groups for perceived unequal access to humanitarian assistance included perceived discrimination, aid distribution criteria set by humanitarian organisations, missing the required documentation and preference given to IDPs.

Figure 8: Proportion of households having access to humanitarian assistance vs. perceiving equal access



124 This question had a smaller sample size - 111 IDP returnees (76 in Hasakeh and 35 in Raqqa) and 195 refugee returnees (95 in Hasakeh and 100 in Raqqa) were surveyed.

125 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

126 Sample size was too small to allow for comparison between population groups.

4.5. DIGNIFIED AND RIGHTS-BASED RETURNS

4.5.1. Decisions to return

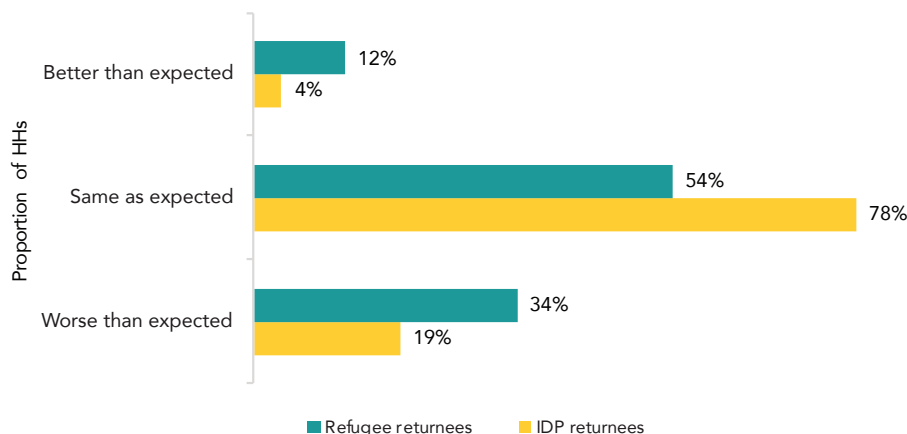
Spontaneous returns are not considered voluntary unless one is able to make an informed decision regarding whether or not their 'home' meets their threshold for return. As highlighted in section 3.3, although a majority of FGD participants perceived the route to return to be safe, findings revealed examples where returnees faced ERW risks on their return journey. In FGDs, a few returnees reported receiving false information on the availability of humanitarian assistance and housing restoration upon return. For example, a refugee returnee mentioned:



The people who told us about the humanitarian assistance lied to us, we didn't find anything, [there was] only food assistance, which wasn't enough for one family.¹²⁷

Upon return, household surveys found that 34% of refugee returnees and 19% of IDP households found the situation in their community of origin to be worse than they had expected. Compared to IDP returnees, refugee returnees reported a larger gap in expectations of their community of origin, with larger proportion of households believing their community of origin to be “better than expected” or “worse than expected”. This suggests that IDP returnees were better able to obtain accurate information and were more familiar with the situation of their home community and Syria compared to households that returned from other countries.

Figure 9: Expectations vs. realities of situation at community of origin upon return



In FGDs, some returnees did not regret their decision to return. However, findings also suggest that the returnees' threshold to return and expectations of the conditions at their community of origin were extremely low. As shown in examples below, this included not regretting their decision to return even when there was a lack of basic services, lack of employment opportunities and when the area was not fully cleared of mines at the community of origin. For households that decided to return, the emotional comforts of being home was especially important and being close to family was a strong pull factor that led IDPs and refugees to return.

127 FGD: Refugee returnee, female, Hasakeh

“

I do not regret the decision to return because I returned to my original home and I also returned to live near my relatives and to my original community with whom I lived and grew up...all of our memories are in this place. [My] only regret [is] that a mine exploded when my son returned to the house ... because of what happened to him it causes me a lot of pain and now he cannot move.¹²⁸

“

...we all considered return when we heard that the security situation was getting safer, despite the almost uninhabitable houses and the economic situation e.g. high living cost. We took this into our consideration and knew we would be responsible for this decision.¹²⁹

“

Despite all the difficulties and challenges that we are currently facing in accessing basic needs, the psychological and spiritual comfort of being close to relatives, friends and family are enough to make sure that we made the right decision [to return].¹³⁰

It should be acknowledged that voluntary and forced migration is a “continuum of experience” and “not a dichotomy”.¹³¹ The notion of ‘voluntariness’ should be analysed against the quality and range of alternatives available to potential returnees.¹³² With the lack of rights and dignity for IDPs and refugees at the place of displacement, assessed returnees had limited alternative options in their decision to return. Rather than being subject to encampment policies such as no or limited rights to freedom of movement and right to work in IDP camps and refugee-hosting countries, assessed returnees were exercising their agency (despite the limited options available) when deciding to return home with the hope of improving their life situation.

128 Life story: IDP returnee, female, Raqqa

129 FGD: Refugee returnees, female, Hasakeh

130 FGD: Refugee returnees, male, Raqqa

131 A. Richmond (1993). Reactive Migration: Sociological Perspectives on Refugee Movements,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6.1 (1993): 7-24.

132 M.B. Erdal & C. Oeppen (2018). Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44:6, 981-998

Box 5: IDP intentions: ‘voluntariness’ of immobility

Among IDP households (that have not returned to their community of origin), the majority of IDPs (89%) were planning to stay in their place of displacement in the next three months following data collection. The primary reasons included a lack of safety in their place of origin (38%), being near relatives (33%), and not having money to do so (25%). Out of the 8% (17) of IDPs who expressed a desire to move to another location soon, 82% (14) intend to return to their community of origin.¹³³

Figure 10: Conditions that caused IDPs to stay (one option only, out of all IDPs)



The notion of ‘voluntary’ return should be coupled with understanding IDPs’ ‘voluntariness’ to stay. Although FGD findings suggest that some IDPs had reportedly integrated in the host community, there were also a few IDPs who have no choice but to stay despite the lack of integration at the place of displacement. For example, an IDP mentioned that “whatever was the situation, I would like to go back since living in the local community that I belong to is way better than living with people I never lived with before and I don’t know them...but we don’t have the enough money to cover the expenses to return.”¹³⁴

IDPs might also lose aspects that made up their ‘home’ prior to the war (e.g. house, family) – depriving them of a ‘home’ that they feel they can return to in their community of origin as a durable solution. IDPs mentioned that “...I did not integrate here but I have no choice as my house has been totally destroyed”,¹³⁵ “there is no place to return back to...I have no relatives still alive except my daughter who joined me to this place”,¹³⁶ “I don’t think about going back at all because we lost everything”.¹³⁷ Some IDPs also had no intention of returning as they would have to do military service. The lack of appropriate options was also reflected by an IDP who expressed: “I don’t know where to go, and I don’t know what we will do...”¹³⁸

Findings also revealed an IDP household that attempted to return but faced security threats and rights violations that forced them to return to their place of displacement. An IDP (originally from Deir ez-Zor) now displaced in Hasakeh mentioned:

“

After the regime took control over from ISIL we returned to our community of origin [in Deir ez-Zor], but my husband got arrested there because [they thought] he didn’t do military service, so he has to join the army. But the truth is that my husband did military service 30 years ago, but because he lost all his documents he couldn’t prove that. So we went back to Al Hasakeh [after a few months]...We don’t think to go back [to Deir ez-Zor] again, because we have tried to go back once and it didn’t work well.¹³⁹

This suggests a form of ‘involuntary immobility’ when IDPs have limited alternatives but to stay at their place of displacement.¹⁴⁰ Rather than a desire to stay and integrate, they do not have the option to return even if conditions at the place of displacement continue to deteriorate. This has important implications in terms of continuing to ensure the rights and protection of IDPs are upheld at the location of displacement.

¹³³ For IDPs reporting intention to move in the next three months, 91.4% had already started making plans to move.

¹³⁴ FGD: IDP, Hasakeh

¹³⁵ FGD: IDP, female, Raqqa

¹³⁶ FGD: IDP, female, Hasakeh

¹³⁷ FGD: IDP, Raqqa

¹³⁸ FGD: IDP, female, Raqqa

¹³⁹ Life story: IDP, female, Hasakeh

¹⁴⁰ J. Carling (2002). Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28:1.

5. CONCLUSION

The study focused on the experience of returnees in urban areas of Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates currently under the self-administration. It sought to understand the push/pull factors and decision-making processes that led Syrian refugees and IDPs to return; as well as their progress towards reintegration. The study found that:

- **The main precondition or trigger for return for most refugee returnees (66%) and IDP returnees (72%) was when their community of origin was perceived to be safe again.** However, common among FGD participants was the fear of renewed conflict in their community of origin and fear of further displacement, which has implications on the extent to which returns are sustainable. Findings suggest that homesickness and nostalgia was also a significant pull factor that led displaced households to return, especially for refugee returnees. People's desire to return to their homes and being close to relatives and friends was a stark contrast to the alienation and sub-standard conditions faced at the location of displacement.
- **The lack of employment opportunities, lack of basic services and lack of safety/security at the location of displacement were primary push factors that led refugees and IDPs to return.** For refugee returnees, the lack of economic opportunities (39%) and lack of basic services (25%) were the most commonly reported primary push factors. For IDP returnees, it was the lack of basic services (39%) and the lack of safety (34%).¹⁴¹
- **Although 32% of households reported the lack of basic services as a primary push factor for return, FGDs suggest that the level of humanitarian assistance at the community of origin was not necessarily an important pull factor that motivated decisions to return.** Returnees were reportedly not aware of the level of humanitarian assistance available, nor was it considered an influencing factor. Others perceived that they would not qualify for aid, or reported aid to be insufficient, irregular or unfair. However, a large majority of returnees reported the need for humanitarian and development assistance to improve their standard of living upon return and reintegration.
- **A considerable proportion of refugee returnees (34%) and IDP returnees (19%) reported the situation at their community of origin to be worse than they had expected.** A few FGD participants also reported receiving false information (e.g. availability of shelter rehabilitation support) upon return, or facing ERW risks on the return journey or after return. Findings suggest that returnees' threshold for return was extremely low - in which some households were returning despite knowing their house to be damaged, as well as the lack of basic services and economic opportunities available.
- **All population groups were facing challenges alike, with significant gaps in the IASC criteria on Durable Solutions.** The study found that IDPs scored lowest in progress towards indicators outlined under IASC's criteria for durable solutions, compared with returnees and the non-displaced. This included gaps in employment opportunities available for IDPs and protection risks faced by IDPs living in collective centres. However, returnees and the non-displaced also reported challenges such as in accessing basic services and employment opportunities. There were no distinct patterns that suggested that IDP returnees/refugee returnees faced higher levels of vulnerability compared to the non-displaced.¹⁴² Higher proportion of assessed households reported having access to income-generating opportunities in Raqqa (72%) compared to Hasakeh (65%).

¹⁴¹ Respondents could select one option only.

¹⁴² However, conducting random sampling of the population group is needed in order to obtain more accurate assessments in determining whether there is a statistically significant difference between population groups.

- **Across all population groups, a significant proportion of households perceived unequal access to income-generating opportunities and humanitarian assistance.** According to household surveys, a considerable proportion of refugee returnees (25%), IDP returnees (31%), IDPs (53%) and the non-displaced (23%) perceived unequal access to employment opportunities. A high proportion of refugee returnees (43%), IDP returnees (59%), IDPs (58%) and the non-displaced (67%) perceived their household to have unequal access to humanitarian assistance. Given a considerable proportion of the population perceived unequal access, this could have implications on community tensions in the future especially if resource constraints tighten.
- **Community network and resources e.g. relatives, neighbours, friends from their community of origin played an important role in facilitating returns.** This included influencing returnees' (i) motivation to return to unite with them now that they have returned, (ii) provision of information and assurance that their community of origin was safe to return, (iii) provision of immediate needs and reintegration efforts (e.g. restoring the house, providing loans). Some returnees perceived that everyone in the community was returning. Beyond push and pull factors (e.g. safety, basic services) that drove returns, this suggests that social network patterns could be a large determinant in influencing return trends in which initial waves of return are likely to be followed by larger waves of return in the future. As illustrated in the study, information and support of those who have already returned influenced potential returnees' decision-making on returning as a family. Some returnees also reported a change over time in which when more people returned to the community, there was an increase in services available. This suggests that a larger number of returns might attract more basic services and employment opportunities in the community; encouraging others to return too.¹⁴³ Further investigation is needed to explore the quantity or demographic of returnees that might attract or increase government and/or humanitarian support in those areas of returns.
- **Although some IDPs reported being able to cope and feel accepted by the host community, there were also IDPs who had no choice but to stay despite their lack of integration at the place of displacement.** A significant proportion of IDPs considered conditions to be unsafe to return (38%) while others also reported not having the money to move (25%). This illustrates a form of 'involuntary immobility' in which some IDPs have limited alternatives but to stay at their place of displacement.¹⁴⁴ Rather than a desire to stay and integrate, they do not have the option to return or move elsewhere even if conditions at the place of displacement continue to deteriorate. In contrast, returnees were exercising their agency (despite the limited options available) when deciding to return home with the hope of improving their life situation.

In the Syrian context, the macro-conditions of resolving the conflict and achieving a political settlement need to be a starting point for return to be a durable solution.¹⁴⁵ Despite the political uncertainty and lack of clarity on the future of NES, long-term thinking beyond humanitarian responses is required to tackle the protracted nature of displacement. Further exploration could investigate ways to identify opportunities for broader collaboration between humanitarian, development and stabilisation actors in post-conflict reconstruction. In the short term, humanitarian actors could further explore cross-sector collaboration such as incorporating resilience-building and early recovery components into current humanitarian interventions (e.g. return and protection monitoring, demining and risk education, sorting out housing land and property rights and civil status documentation). These could act as stepping stones in supporting households' progress towards durable solutions.

143 According to the network theory, acts of migration at one point in time systematically alter the context within which future migration decisions are made, increasing the likelihood that later decision-makers will choose to migrate. Connections and ties that form social capital and grows exponentially as more contacts are made, reducing the cost and risk of migration. As networks expand and the costs and risks of migration fall, the flow becomes less selective in socio-economic terms and more representative of the sending community or society. Source: Douglas S. Massey, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kououaci, Adela Pellegrino, J. Edward Taylor, *Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal*, Population and Development Review, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sep., 1993), pp. 431-466

144 J. Carling (2002). Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28:1.

145 M. Yahya, J. Kassir, and K. El-Hariri, (2018). *Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home*.

The study found significant protection concerns regarding the journey of return, as well as various needs (e.g. access to livelihood opportunities) for all population groups in assessed communities. Area-based profiling, as this is already taking place in Raqqa City, could improve understanding on context-specific challenges to return and reintegration in order to inform more localised responses and community-based programming. Given the high proportion of households perceiving unequal access to income generating opportunities (especially among IDPs) and humanitarian assistance (especially among host populations), further efforts should be put on identifying ways to strengthen the participation of beneficiaries and local communities in the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes. If done well, this would then lead to a better understanding among people in supported communities about who receives what type of assistance and for what reason while at the same time reducing the risk of community tension on perceptions of unequal access.

The research has also shown that assistance should be provided based on the needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of people and not on their status. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there are issues that are or may be inherent to people's status and require a specific approach, especially when addressing the needs of the displaced and non-displaced population groups (e.g. loss of documentation and rental costs), the displaced in camps and non-camps (e.g. restitution of confiscated documents and freedom of movement), but also those who have and have not returned but want to (e.g. area of origin and information on the safety of return routes, risk education on mining, logistical preparations, transportation costs, and accessing mechanisms that restore housing land and property rights).¹⁴⁶

Finally, a rights-based approach to achieving durable solutions requires that displaced Syrians have the right to make a real and dignified choice. People's decision making should be analysed against the quality and range of alternatives available to potential returnees. Conditions for refugees and IDPs in areas of displacement should be improved to allow for finding local solutions and mitigating premature movements and returns. Expanding the rights of IDPs and refugees at their location of displacement, and through third country solutions, are therefore important in increasing the level of 'agency', 'voluntariness', 'rights' and 'dignity' of any return decision and movement. The rights of all displaced persons should be upheld regardless of whether they stay, return or move elsewhere.

146 See also OCHA (2018), Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 26 (15 June 2018 – 15 July 2018).

6. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: BREAKDOWN OF IASC CRITERIA OF DURABLE SOLUTIONS ASSESSED PER SUB-INDICATOR

When assessing the population groups' progress towards IASC criteria for durable solutions, shown in Table 3, the following sub-indicators were used for criteria i, ii and v. Sub-indicators were averaged to produce the final percentages.

Table 7: Percentage of HHs reporting having access and percentage of HHs perceiving equal access, per sub-indicator (higher percentage equates to better access)

Refugee Returnee		% of HHs				Largest gap
		IDP Returnee	IDP	Remainee		
i. Long-term safety, security and freedom of movement	% reporting safe movement around neighbourhood	97%	99%	99%	97%	2%
	% reporting not being a victim of safety/security incident in past three months	84%	85%	90%	83%	7%
	Aggregate of sub-indicators	90%	92%	94%	90%	4%
	% perceiving equal safety/security compared to others in community	98%	97%	96%	97%	2%
ii. Adequate standard of living, including at a minimum access to adequate food, water, housing, healthcare, and basic education	% reporting access to basic food	95%	97%	100%	92%	8%
	% reporting always having sufficient drinking water in the past one month	30%	33%	40%	39%	7%
	% reporting access to basic housing	95%	90%	80%	97%	17%
	% reporting visiting a health facility (out of those reporting needing to see a doctor in the past 3 months)	86%	91%	88%	97%	11%
	Aggregate of sub-indicators	77%	77%	76%	80%	4%
	% perceiving equal access compared to others in community	87%	85%	83%	91%	8%
iii. Access to employment and livelihoods	% reporting access to income-generating opportunities	78%	76%	67%	76%	9%
	% perceiving equal access compared to others in community	75%	69%	47%	77%	30%
iv. Access to effective mechanisms that restore their housing, land and property or provide them with compensation	% reporting receiving compensation for damaged house (out of HHs reporting damaged house)	7%	8%	1%	-	7%

v. Access to and replacement of personal and other documentation	% reporting having family booklet	86%	92%	83%	95%	12%
	% reporting having national ID card	99%	98%	97%	98%	2%
	% reporting having marriage certificate (if applicable)	82%	78%	83%	89%	11%
	Aggregate of sub-indicators	89%	89%	88%	94%	6%
	% perceiving equal access compared to others in community	90%	88%	70%	91%	21%
vi. Voluntary reunification with family members separated during displacement	% reporting no family separation	75%	91%	91%	93%	18%
Access to humanitarian assistance	% reporting access to humanitarian assistance	25%	20%	45%	20%	26%
	% perceiving equal access compared to others in community	57%	41%	42%	33%	24%

Table 8: Sample size limitations

Sub-indicators in table 8 are percentages expressed from all household surveys, with the exception of survey questions listed below which have a smaller sample size.

Survey question	Refugee returnee	IDP returnee	IDP	Remainee	Comment
Do you and your household have the same level of access to health care compared to other people in this community?	195	111	33	139	Question added later
Does your household have access to education?	194	186	181	160	Percentage are expressed out of respondents that had school-aged children in their household.
Do you and your household have the same level of access to education compared to other people in the community?	194	186	181	160	Percentage are expressed out of respondents that had school-aged children in their household.
Do you and your household have access to humanitarian assistance?	195	111	33	139	Question added later
Do you and your household have the same level of access to humanitarian assistance compared to other people in the community?	195	111	33	139	Question added later
Did you receive compensation for your damaged house?	60	61	119	-	Percentage of households are expressed out of the number of households that reported their house to have been damaged.

ANNEX 2: LIFE STORIES

Box 6: 45-year-old IDP returnee, female, Raqqa governorate

The war that took place in our city forced us to leave the city. We first moved to the Rafikah and then to Ein Issa camp. When we left the city to the camp, life was difficult because the number of displaced people was very large. Camps were overcrowded, as there were not enough tents to cover the number of displaced people. We were in a group camp with several families in the same place. There were no basic services available. There was little water and bread; and we suffered from the harsh rain and the cold. Food was not sufficient because we had no income, so we were forced to eat by cooking in the camp which did not comply with health standards. We also relied on assistance provided by some organisations. Livelihood opportunities were not available and jobs were scarce. One of my daughters was employed in the camp but with low wages because there were limited jobs available and a high number of people applying for jobs.

The most important challenge we faced in the camp was housing because we were not accustomed to living in such crowded places with a large number of displaced people. We could not move freely within or outside the camp due to the security restrictions imposed by the authorities and difficulties with living outside our original home in a new community.

I started to think about returning ever since our city was liberated because we suffered from living in camps during displacement, and I was nostalgic of my house where I spent the best days of my life with my family. [I also suffered from] the lack of basic services in the camps, which became unavailable after a significant number of displaced people arrived to the camp from Deir ez-Zor. This led to a decline in the level of aid and basic services available.

The most important factor [in deciding whether to return] was security because we heard that the situation in the city was still unstable and dangerous. Return would be difficult because our house was damaged and hence unsafe. I also had to ensure [that the city] was free of mines and explosives for the sake of my family and my children's safety. The situation in the city was not stable at first, in which the security situation in the camp was better than the city.

I needed to know about the security situation in the city. The most important thing is that the house was mine-free and habitable, as we received information from some relatives who have returned that the city was completely destroyed, and that the houses and streets were mined. They lost their homes.

Some of my relatives' return to the city was a major reason for my decision to return. If they had not returned, we would not have thought of returning. We borrowed money from one of our relatives to help us return. We decided to first visit the house and make sure it was safe and free of mines. Some friends advised us not to return yet because mines were very widespread in the area and most of the homes are mined, and partially or fully destroyed.

My son first returned to the city. After we restored the house (including restoring a tank for drinking water) and that it was safe, we all returned. When I first came back, it felt like I was in a ghost town. This city was beautiful in the past, life was beating and markets were crowded. People from every corner of the city were devastated. There were few people who returned. The markets were empty, we only heard the sounds of mines exploding every day. There were rotting bodies in the rubble. The beautiful city today was almost completely destroyed!

At first, I could not live in the house because we were renovating it. We lived in one of our relatives' house who had previously returned to the city. When our house was repaired, we returned to live in it, but the furniture was either destroyed or stolen and only a small amount of it was left. The main challenge was to access safe drinking water, so we bought a tank to store water. We relied on the money we borrowed from one of our relatives to provide basic needs, but soon the situation improved and people slowly returned until the neighbourhood began to be populated and water was available.

In the first three months the situation was bad but it soon improved when most of the basic services, drinking water and ovens were functioning to make bread. My daughter also found a job in the city and the situation is getting better every day.

I do not regret the decision to return because I returned to my original home and also returned to live near my relatives and to my original community with whom I lived and grew up with. All of our memories are in this place. My only regret is what happened to my child. When he returned to the house, a mine exploded and now he cannot move. What happened to him causes me a lot of pain.

I plan to stay here in the coming period because it is my original home and I cannot live outside it. [I also plan to stay because of] the job opportunity for my daughter, the availability of some basic services, the return of drinking water, the provision of humanitarian assistance by some organisations, and as I have restored my house which is more habitable now than before.

Box 7: 42-year-old IDP returnee, male, Raqqa governorate

I never lost sight of the idea of returning to my community of origin. I kept saying that I would return one day when it became safe and when there were basic services. Whenever we met someone from my community of origin, they told me to not go back because there is nothing there but death and war, there is no safety and no basic services available. After a few months of displacement, people used to return to my community of origin easily, but the route has now become dangerous and more complicated. One day we decided to leave Raqqa and return to my community of origin but the route was not safe. We met somebody and he offered to direct us to the safest path in return of money. As we didn't have any money, we borrowed some from a friend.

In February 2016, the person who would guide us to the safest route told us to meet him at night to take off to my community of origin. So I went with family (my wife and kids) at 2 am. We walked on foot for two and a half hours, until we reached a place where I was told that we were now safe by reaching this point. He then told us that he needed to leave before sunrise, and told me and my family to continue this way but to be careful of mines. So I started walking in front and my family behind me. Suddenly I heard an explosion right behind me, and when I turned my face to see, I saw that my wife and kids were dead and their body parts were scattered all over the area.

When I first arrived at my community of origin, I found everything just as I [had] left [it] before displacement. There was access to basic services. The main challenge was finding housing and I found one. Furnishing it was another challenge but with the help of my sister I could overcome this challenge. The other challenge was to find a job, but after a while I found a job as a barber and life became as it was before displacement and even better.

I have been living here for a year and half since displacement. I found no difficulties in reintegration because I know everyone and everyone knows me. Most of them are my relatives. As long as the situation stays at it is now, I won't think of leaving this place as I have my home, my job and a new wife here in this area.

Box 8: 56-year-old IDP returnee, female, Hasakeh governorate

I live with my husband, my son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. When I left Hasakah because of the war I had three daughters and three sons back then. We left Hasakeh to Damascus where it was safer. All of us worked at factories and we bought a small house where we can all live. After a while there was a conflict between GoS and the opposition, so we had to move to another area. After the opposition took over, my 24-year old son and I went back to check on our house (in Damascus), but my son got caught by the opposition army and they accused him of being a GoS supporter so they cut off his head in front of me.

After this incident, we decided to return to our community of origin [in Hasakeh], and we took a route that others told us was safe. [But] when we arrived in Deir ez-Zor [en route to Hasakeh], ISIL took our two daughters and told them that these two will go with the jihadists. Everyone in the family started to offer ISIL all that we owned, even the car. The mother of my two granddaughters tried to beg ISIL to leave her daughters alone, but they took the mother and put her in a solitary prison and gave her 100 lashes for speaking loudly in front of men. After that they let us go. Although a friend offered to host us at his house in Deir ez-Zor, we didn't make it in the end because it was not safe. We decided to go to Hasakeh through Raqqa instead. When we arrived in Al Hasakeh it was safe and stable. We first lived in camps inside Khushamn, and then rented a house with very high cost. My son volunteered with the self-administration and he got killed too.

Box 9: 42-year-old IDP, female, Hasakeh governorate

I have a family with six members, including my husband, three daughters and my son. When ISIL took over Deir ez-Zor, my husband was displaced to Al Hasakeh, and I stayed with the rest of my family in Deir ez-Zor. I used to work at the cosmetics store, my eldest girl worked in the medical lab, and my middle daughter in one of the hospitals. My daughters started to get harassed from ISIL soldiers at their workplaces. One day, my 12 year-old daughter got arrested to one of the ISIL spots and they started to interrogate her about the location of her father (my husband). If we didn't tell them, they told me they will marry all my daughters. But the community leader let her loose.

After that, we escaped to Al Hasakeh with the help of some smugglers. The cost of smuggling was very high but we paid anyway. After GoS regained Deir ez-Zor from ISIL we returned to our community of origin, but my husband got arrested there because they said he didn't do military service and has to join the army. But the truth is that my husband did military services 30 years ago, but because he lost all his documents he couldn't prove it. So we went back to Al Hasakeh and we don't think we will go back to Deir ez-Zor anytime soon.

Box 10: 50-year-old IDP returnee, male, Hasakeh

I am a father of seven boys. We left our area (Ghwairan) in 2015 when ISIL took over, so people started to leave their houses without taking anything with them, even [fleeing] barefoot. So we left all our documents in our house. My son volunteered to go back to the house to collect our documents but he never came back. We took a van to Tal Hamis. After 10 days, my son went to the house to check on his brother (who didn't come back). He found his body at the house, so he decided to take revenge on his brother's death, but before he did, he got killed by an ISIL sniper.

