



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



BEYOND RETURN:

Ensuring sustainable recovery & (re)-integration in Syria

May 2025

Executive Summary

In the wake of Syria's political transition following the fall of the former government in December 2024, the prospect of return for the millions of Syrians displaced inside and outside of the country has since become increasingly real. With more than 443,000 individuals reported to have returned and over a quarter of surveyed refugees in neighbouring countries expressing an intent to do so this year, a sharp increase in returns is anticipated. However, the conditions within Syria remain acutely fragile. Fourteen years of conflict have devastated infrastructure, degraded public services, fractured governance, and precipitated a severe economic collapse. In this context, clear and immediate support to ensure stability inside the country alongside strategic, sustained investments and principled policy shift, without which there is increased risk of overwhelming local systems and undermining early recovery gains made to date.

This report draws on over 4,300 interviews and surveys conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 across Syria, including perspectives from refugee returnees, internally displaced Syrians (IDP), as well as humanitarian staff. It identifies six critical barriers to sustainable return that include destroyed infrastructure and basic service gaps, disrupted education, economic collapse and livelihood insecurity, housing, land and property challenges; safety and social cohesion concerns. These challenges are deeply interlinked and compound one another, but they are not insurmountable.

The destruction of essential infrastructure—including homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and water and electricity systems—continues to render many areas uninhabitable. Conflict-related damage to strategic assets such as the Tishreen Dam and Alouk Water Station has left hundreds of thousands without reliable access to water or power. Education is similarly affected, with millions of children out of school and returnee students facing curriculum misalignment, trauma, and severe resource shortages. Many schools remain damaged or repurposed, while teachers work under precarious conditions with inadequate pay and materials. Sustained, coordinated investments to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of essential infrastructure – including schools in return areas are critically needed. Economically, the Syrian population remains overwhelmingly impoverished, with high unemployment, livelihoods decimated by conflict, inflation, and environmental degradation. Many returnees, especially in rural and agricultural areas, report lacking any realistic means of self-reliance. Informal labour dominates, and negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and early marriage are on the rise. Longer-term investments to livelihoods – particularly agriculture, vocational training, and small and medium-size enterprises – can support transitions to more sustainable job outcomes that might pave the way to self-reliance and open the possibility of larger scale, sustainable returns.

Housing, land, and property (HLP) challenges further impede reintegration. Over 40% of surveyed returnees report no access to adequate shelter, and many lack the legal documentation required to claim ownership or recover property. In areas like Aleppo and Rural Damascus, homes have been destroyed or are subject to duplicate ownership claims—compounding legal uncertainty and risking creating or deepening existing social tension. While some local restitution measures have emerged, they remain largely nascent and can be supported by strengthening restitution mechanisms, supporting documentation access and legal aid services to help adjudication processes accelerate progress.

Perceptions of safety vary significantly by geography and demographic profile. While some communities' express greater confidence post-transition, others - especially minority groups or those in conflict-affected areas - remain concerned about renewed violence, foreign military presence, or threats from explosive remnants of war (ERW). At the same time, early signs of social tensions

between returnees and host communities are emerging, particularly around perceived political affiliations and access to scarce resources and services.

Despite these conditions, and despite recovery planning lagging far behind the scale and severity of needs on the ground, the current transition offers a critical opportunity to resolve the protracted displacement Syrians have faced. **The 2025 Brussels Conference marked a notable and welcome shift in discourse toward commitments for long-term recovery and reconstruction for Syria. It was also marked by strong and welcome acknowledgement from many member state representatives that conditions inside Syria are not yet conducive for large-scale return.** Whether Syrians attempt to return or remain in displacement, they and their hosting communities, must be supported.¹ Safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or short-term support alone. It demands sustained, well-coordinated efforts that address material, legal, and social conditions across all areas of the country – especially those anticipated to see increased rates of return. Long-term recovery must be approached not only as physical reconstruction, but laying the foundations for rebuilding trust, restoring rights, and enabling Syrians to reclaim agency over their futures. Only through immediate and significant scale-up of integrated, durable programming that bridges across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts, will prospects for meaningful free and informed return and (re-)integration be made possible.

Introduction

As Syria enters a new political chapter, there is renewed hope that millions of displaced Syrians may eventually find viable pathways to return and rebuild their lives. However, the country and communities they left behind have been profoundly reshaped by fourteen years of conflict that have decimated Syria's infrastructure, collapsed public services, crippled the economy, and reduced entire cities to rubble. Millions remain without adequate housing, while essential systems such as water, electricity, and healthcare are severely damaged. The economy remains in freefall, with jobs and livelihoods hard to come by, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. Education systems are in disrepair with fractured curriculums, re-purposed schools, and millions of children and young people without access to formal education. Governance structures remain in transitional flux.

Some returns have begun, with over one million displaced people inside Syria understood to have returned to their areas of origin. UNHCR 2025 intentions surveying indicates that over a quarter of the approximate 2.5 million registered refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, intend to return to Syria in the next year.² Most indicated that they planned to consider return after Ramadan or following the end of the academic year- if realised, the pace of returns will significantly escalate through the rest of 2025, with hundreds of thousands potentially returning to face extremely challenging conditions, with little prospect of their improvement at least in the short term. Facilitating premature returns of displaced Syrians without adequate investments in infrastructure, services, livelihoods, and social cohesion, risks regressing on progress made to date and destabilizing the already precarious equilibrium throughout the country. The transition presents an unprecedented opportunity for humanitarian and recovery programming in Syria to be significantly scaled up, with aid modalities expanded to support longer-term, sustainable return prospects.

If left unaddressed, these conditions will pose threats to their ability to successfully (re-)integrate into communities, could impede their ability to successfully achieve a durable solution, and risk overwhelming systems throughout the country. Addressing these critical barriers in the short and medium-term will be critical to formulating an adequate response that ensures long-term recovery and re-integration for returning Syrians. As the broader humanitarian response globally is undergoing unprecedented cuts, integrated, longer-term programming modalities in Syria are needed, now more than ever, to remove aid dependency and facilitate prospects for Syrian returns.

NRC maintains that **people must be able to make free, informed, and voluntary decisions about if and when they return. Informed decisions must be grounded in realistic, accurate information about the conditions in those areas** which must include access to rights, services, infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, safety, including from conflict activity and from explosive remnants of war, and the many other broader factors that not only make return both possible and sustainable.

This report focuses on geographic areas where movement has either already been reported or is anticipated. It draws on the lived experiences of individuals who have sought to return, or of perceptions of those considering return, as well as from humanitarian staff in these communities and identifies key barriers to meaningful return that include, the lack of infrastructure and essential services; education gaps; economic challenges and limited access to livelihoods; shelter and housing, land and property rights; perceptions of safety; and emerging and dynamic social cohesion dynamics.

While these challenges are considerable, they also highlight clear entry points for action by donors and humanitarian actors. There is a critical opportunity for the humanitarian community to lay the groundwork for locally led, lasting change with **sustained investments in long-term, integrated programming, that can support rebuilding of schools, essential infrastructure, expand access to legal aid, restore documentation pathways, and enable families to reclaim homes and livelihoods.** Together, these can support paving the way toward meaningful solutions that move from rhetoric to action and that might foster increased community trust, reducing emerging tensions and begin to pave the way for returns and (re-)integration that is **genuinely informed, voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable.**

Research overview

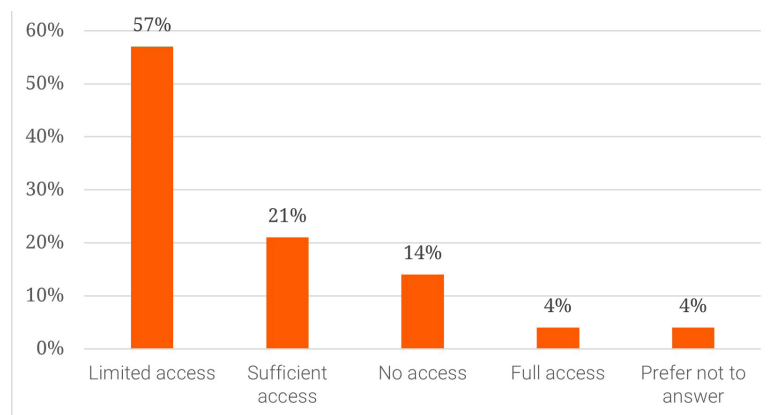
This report triangulates a number of sources of data collected variously between December 2024 and February 2025. They include key informant interviews (KIIs), surveys and commissioned research³ across all governorates in Syria. The total number of individuals engaged across the various phases of data collection exceeds 4,300, with interviews conducted in distinct segments over this period.⁴ This includes an NRC commissioned survey of 358 people on returns intentions and perceptions, including approximately 108 returnees; of whom 49 were refugee returnees from abroad and 57 IDP returnees who returned to areas of origin following the fall of the former government on 08 December 2024. This was complemented by extensive key informant interviews with NRC staff across Syria about conditions in areas of return and discussions with other humanitarian stakeholders.

Challenges to Return and (Re-)integration

NRC's conversations underscore preliminary findings indicating **barriers to return remain multifaceted and significant** and include widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, ongoing insecurity making personal safety guarantees difficult, and legal and bureaucratic hurdles such as lack of, or under-documentation complicating any prospect of return. Economic instability, with limited – if any – access to jobs, healthcare, education or other essential services adds to the difficulty of rebuilding life upon potential return and leaving millions facing an uncertain future.

Destroyed Infrastructure & Lack of Services

Throughout the country, the widespread lack of essential services and infrastructure, emerged as an acute barrier to return facing displaced Syrians. The destruction has left many parts of Syria in a state of disrepair, rendering many areas uninhabitable. Homes, agricultural lands, and key vital infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, sewage systems, and roads have been severely damaged or destroyed. In many regions, entire neighbourhoods have been effectively flattened, and entire communities continue to struggle with the absence of basic services. **The vast majority of surveyed individuals reported limited or no access to basic services,** a challenge particularly acute for those in and around Aleppo, Rural Damascus, Homs and Dara'a. Türkiye's continued attacks and airstrikes in the north-east throughout 2024 and early 2025 exacerbated these conditions, with the Tishreen Dam—vital for water and electricity supplies for nearly half a million people—remaining inoperable since early December 2024.⁵ Similarly, the Alouk Water Station remains nonfunctional, further restricting access to clean



Commissioned survey conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 covering approximately 358 conversations across north-east, north, south and central Syria. When disaggregated by region, 85% of those who answered "limited access" were from Aleppo governorate – a key area of intended return.

water for hundreds of thousands in Al-Hassakeh and surrounding towns. Hostilities in the area – especially the upticks throughout 2024, threaten the water supply and raise fears that damage to the dam could trigger severe flooding, potentially overwhelming more than 40 downstream villages.⁶ More broadly, water and sanitation systems across Syria have faced longstanding damage and degradation, including both the piped water network, agricultural water systems, and solid waste management. Many of Syria's critical dams in northern and southern Syria are heavily impacted by continued armed conflict, posing risks particularly to critical agricultural activities.

In the south, the presence of Israeli troops beginning in late 2024 and continuing to date, risk preventing the opening of dam gates to allow water to flow to agricultural lands in both Quneitra and Dara'a Governorates. At the time of surveying, most farmers indicated they were not directly affected, however many feared that water from dams would not be released on time to plant and subsequently harvest crops, including strategic grains that would threaten food supplies and insecurity.⁷

Access to electricity is another critical challenge reported by both returnees and host communities. In southern and central Syria, the main network remains the primary source of electricity for most people, but electricity generation and transmission have been heavily impacted by the conflict, with both direct damage and years of insufficient maintenance, repair and upgrades, significantly degrading the sector. Electricity access was a key factor in some families' decisions to leave back to Idleb after initial attempts to return to areas in the south. In Homs and Hama, some communities receive electricity for only 45-60 minutes every eight hours.⁸ Industrial and other urban livelihoods rely heavily on electricity, meaning that high generator costs and increased electricity expenses in industrial areas are passed onto consumers, ultimately driving up the prices of basic goods.

The lack of electricity is a considerable source of frustration and suffering and has severe consequences for basic living standards. When schools are not adequately heated, children are forced to attempt to learn in cold, dilapidated buildings, disrupting education outcomes in the short and long-term. In one instance, the significant limitations on electricity in the south led to one family NRC spoke to going back to Idleb after attempting to return, because electricity access is comparatively better in some parts of the north-west due to their connection with the Turkish power network. Industrial and other urban livelihoods rely heavily on electricity, meaning that high generator costs and increased electricity expenses in industrial areas are passed onto consumers, ultimately driving up the prices of basic goods. A substantial portion of participants expressed substantial doubts about their community's ability to absorb a larger influx of returnees due to inadequate infrastructure and overstretched services.

Premature return without sufficient investments to infrastructure and service provision risk exacerbating tensions, destabilizing fragile equilibrium amongst communities, and undermining the limited progress made toward recovery so far.

Education

The prolonged conflict has profoundly disrupted education, leaving millions of children out-of-school or at risk of dropping out. Over 2.45 million Syrian children remain out-of-school, with displacement and damaged infrastructure severely affecting educational access. The returnee student experience highlights critical unmet educational needs, including curriculum misalignment, language barriers, and integration difficulties, further exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, particularly among girls and children with disabilities. Returnees face substantial barriers upon return, including significant gaps in learning due to prolonged displacement or periods without formal education for many resulting in substantial education gaps that are difficult to bridge. Most children returning have never been enrolled in formal, national Syrian schools, leading to concerns about their ability to effectively integrate into classrooms.

School infrastructure across Syria remains critically insufficient for most communities as they are – let alone to accommodate additional numbers of potential returnee children. Up to half of schools in Syria are out of service, damaged, destroyed, or repurposed due to war-related destruction or lack of maintenance.⁹ Even operational schools no longer receive state funding for basic utilities like water, electricity, or heating in winter. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate sanitation facilities, and unsafe learning environments further discourage school attendance and increase dropout rates among returnee students. Classrooms have become increasingly overcrowded, with some organisations reporting up to 40-50 students per class. Strategic rehabilitation of educational infrastructure, including integrating adequate WASH facilities within them, is urgently required to meet the needs of returning students and provide safe, supportive learning environments.

In the south, NRC reports indicate many refugee returnee children are struggling to keep up with their appropriate grade level, while in Aleppo, those who received education in North-west are reportedly outpacing the formal curriculum.

Effective alignment, preparatory supports and curriculum streamlining are essential to ensure more effective transitions to formal curriculums for both existing and returning students. The transitory nature of some returns also risks meaningful education outcomes. Prior to the January 2024 semester break, one school in Rural Damascus had attendance rates fluctuate between



600-650 students. After the break, the numbers remained the same however, a significant portion of the students left to Idlib, while others had newly arrived. This constant turnover creates significant disruptions to integration and broader learning outcomes.

Teacher availability and capacity also constitute significant barriers to education for both existing students and enrolling returnee children. Teachers frequently remain unpaid or underpaid, leading to high turnover rates and compromised education quality. In many areas, teachers have reportedly gone upwards of three months without salaries. With an average monthly salary of \$70 many educators are already struggling to make ends meet. One school principal in Aleppo indicated that he was considering quitting as he could not afford the stationary needed for his seven children to attend school unless salaries were increased. Broader economic challenges and limited access to livelihoods act as barriers to regular participation. Even when children are enrolled, winter conditions are a constant barrier as many children lack adequate warm clothing and shoes, preventing them from attending school or meaningful learning.

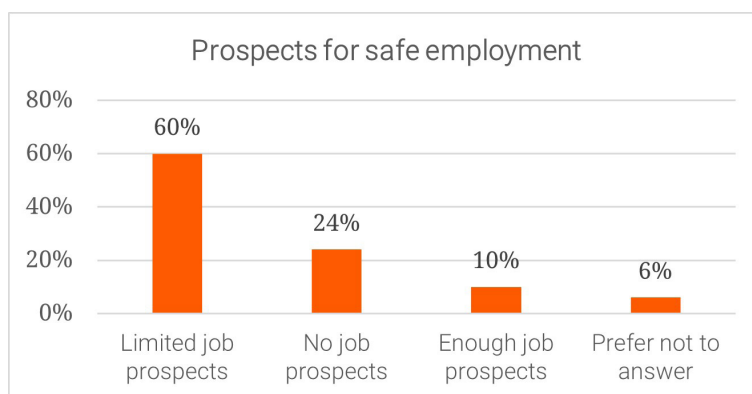
Throughout 2024, conflict escalation and airstrikes across north-eastern Syria saw tens of thousands of people displaced and almost 200 schools in Ar-Raqqa, Tabqa, Al-Hassakeh, and Qamishli being repurposed as emergency collective centres to accommodate those fleeing conflict.¹⁰ The psychological toll of conflict and displacement has compounded the educational crisis, with many returnee children experiencing trauma from conflict and displacement-related violence. This trauma significantly hinders their ability to engage in learning effectively. Integrated mental health and psychosocial services are lacking, essential for addressing the psychological needs of returnee children and facilitating their successful educational reintegration.¹¹

Bridging these gaps requires targeted accelerated learning programs, catch-up classes, and remedial support that aligns with the Syrian curriculum. Without these interventions, many returnee children will be unable to successfully re-integrate into formal education, increasing the risk of school dropout and threatening longer-term marginalization from all aspects of social, political or economic life.

Employment opportunities and economic challenges

The provision of recovery support to essential infrastructure and services in Syria must be coupled with comprehensive support for the economic challenges acutely faced by displaced Syrians to ensure that returnees are able to access jobs or livelihoods and build their self-reliance. The conflict has ravaged Syria's economy, which has contracted by over 85% since 2011,¹² leaving over 90% of the population below the poverty line. With rising unemployment, rampant inflation, and lack of significant investment, an overwhelming majority of participants indicated having either limited or no job prospects. Unemployment had already reached 24% in 2024.¹³ Without improved access to financial resources,¹⁴ further job losses are anticipated, exacerbating economic stability and limiting meaningful opportunities for self-reliance. The collapse of the economy, coupled with widespread destruction of infrastructure, and years of underfunding toward longer-term recovery programming has made it nearly impossible for returnees to generate income or access affordable food. When asked about their top priorities for change, survey participants ranked employment opportunities as the second most important concern after basic service access. Job creation was a priority for over half of respondents, with returnee groups highlighting it much more acutely.

But, the collapse of the economy, coupled with widespread destruction of infrastructure, and years of underfunding toward longer-term recovery programming has made it nearly impossible for returnees to generate income or access affordable food. Many returnees told NRC that they did not expect there



Commissioned survey conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 covering approximately 358 conversations across north-east, north, south and central Syria. When disaggregated by region, 85% of those who answered "limited access" were from Aleppo governorate – a key area of intended return.

to be so few job opportunities available. In February 2025, NRC surveyed 50 households who returned to Syria after 8 December. None had formal education or any professional training qualifying them to access local labour markets. 76% were trying to find job opportunities or start income generation, but only 31% had been able to find temporary work, with the rest reliant on a range of support including from friends and family, communities, savings or remittances. None of the 50 families were able to meet their basic needs. Additionally, a separate market and employment assessment conducted amongst returnees, showed the vast majority of families are in debt, particularly in Aleppo, Daraa, and Rural Damascus.

Almost half of the people who expressed no intention or ability to return in the near future pointed to financial barriers as their biggest obstacle, with a lack of livelihood opportunities as a key reason. This was especially acute amongst respondents throughout camps NRC serves in north-west Syria, where many IDPs reported lacking the financial means to even consider return.

Access to livelihoods, markets, and essential goods are also constrained in rural areas where returnees rely heavily on agriculture and livestock for survival. Wheat production has been on a steady decline and has plummeted to 40% of Syria's pre-crisis levels, with further declines expected due to drought, power shortages, and conflict-related disruptions that include widespread Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) contamination affecting agricultural land. The biggest supply chain gaps are recorded in Idlib and Aleppo, with output levels falling constantly falling far shorter than what population needs.¹⁵ In the last two years, farmers in parts of Idlib and Hama reported increasingly lower wheat yields threatening bread availability, driving up already inaccessible food prices and worsening food insecurity.

In the immediate few months since the fall of the former government, the public sector as well as medium to small-sized businesses saw a decline in employment opportunities. Attempts to implement broader structural reforms in the public sector also saw the workforce shrink from 1.3 million to 900,000.¹⁶ More, small and medium-sized businesses have been unable to respond to or keep up with flooded imports in local markets, which have compelled many to simply cut staff to keep costs manageable.

With few formal job opportunities, most risk being forced into the informal economy, where low wages and job insecurity dominate. This also risks driving a sharp increase in already reported dangerous coping mechanisms like child labour or early marriage, as families struggle to meet basic needs. There was a notable portion of participants across the country who indicated witnessing either child marriage or child labour, underscoring the ongoing risks of an entire generation of children being



pushed out of school, into exploitative labour conditions de-railing recovery efforts, condemning even more to a life of aid-dependency.

Targeted initiatives aimed at supporting economic reintegration are critical. Interventions should focus on strengthening local supply chains and investments in agriculture and local industries, improving access to finance and income, creating an environment where entrepreneurship and businesses, particularly Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) can thrive, and facilitating the development of valuable skills.

Shelter, Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) Rights

Challenges accessing shelter as well as legal restitution measures for HLP were a prominent theme amongst most respondents. Over a decade of conflict, years of abandonment, neglect, or limited - if any - financial means to maintain property has taken a severe toll on housing infrastructure across Syria. In 2023, this was compounded by the deadly earthquakes that devastated much of northern Syria causing widespread structural damage. Surveys in Aleppo Governorate shortly after the earthquakes indicated more than 64,000 homes had been damaged or destroyed.⁴

Following the fall of the former government in 2024, some returnee families NRC spoke to reported finding their homes no longer standing or liveable, forcing them to set up tents amid the ruins nearby former homes. Additionally, out of those surveyed in early 2025 throughout Syria, 40% indicated either lack of housing or not having adequate ownership documents to prove deeds or claim property. Almost half **(43%) indicated their homes were either completely destroyed or in a state of such disrepair they were virtually uninhabitable** – with IDPs disproportionately represented. 70% of respondents from Rural Damascus indicated that their homes were destroyed beyond repair.

Regional variations within Syria further highlight the extent of these challenges: A significant number of respondents in Al-Hassakeh reported their homes to be occupied, while in Aleppo, a notable number reported having no services in their communities. The vast majority of IDP project participants¹⁷ across displacement sites in north-west Syria who had conducted go-and-see visits to communities of origin between December 2024 and January 2025 indicated similar responses; Notably that their

homes were completely destroyed and uninhabitable or that property required extensive renovation and repairs to be rendered liveable again. **The majority of them indicated, that as a result, they had no intention to return home in the immediate future.**

Where homes or properties do exist, legal documentation remains a key barrier to access or engage with HLP processes and was reported amongst a significant number with higher disparities amongst IDPs vs. refugee or host communities.¹⁸ Several key informants expressed uncertainty about their ability to prove ownership, especially given the loss of legal documentation during years of conflict. Land ownership discrepancies not only impedes meaningful returns but poses broader challenges to stabilization in post-conflict landscape. Without access to housing, land, and property restitution mechanisms, the prospects for successful reintegration are effectively diminished, with increased risks of social tensions and conflict. This was highlighted amongst the significant proportion of those identifying with a minority group who expressed significant concerns about unclear legal restitution mechanisms.

Almost half of participants indicated that conditions within Syria currently lacked the capacity for re-integration of possible returnee groups – both IDPs and refugees. Among IDPs, this perception was even more pronounced, with an **overwhelming majority expressing concerns about current conditions throughout the country** and questions about its ability to absorb higher rates or a faster pace of return.

Across southern and central Syria, secondary occupation, seizure, and competing claims of ownership were widely reported alongside fear that the absence of legal mechanisms to facilitate property and housing claims would exacerbate insecurity, heighten social tensions, and undermine long-term stability. Participants in Homs and Dara'a governorates referenced their houses being deliberately destroyed either by the former government or by the local community during active conflict periods in 2017-2019 after many evacuated to Idlib as territory was captured by the former government; Whether this was done under duress from authorities or spontaneously remains unclear. Others are from areas that experienced widespread conflict destruction which has never been repaired. Much of the housing stock as well as basic services across wide swathes of the country, including eastern Aleppo city, Homs city, and much of Rural Damascus, remain in complete ruin.

In some governorates, reports indicate occupying families being given immediate notice to leave the property and some threats of violence for them to do so as quickly as possible. Others have been willing to give some limited notice to evacuate to current occupants, giving them time to try to find suitable and affordable alternative accommodation. In some instances, including in Aleppo there are competing claims of ownership, with reports that former authorities confiscated property and sold it to new owners, effectively leaving two “legal” owners in legal limbo.

In early February 2025, early signs of local-level restitution measures emerged with the Damascus governorate announcing measures¹⁹ to protect ownership rights and preserve private property. This stemmed from an increase in complaints related to illegal possession and encroachment of residential homes and properties. Early reports indicate both individuals and organizations have begun invoking the mechanism, while broader success remains to be seen.²⁰ While some families signalled a preference to resolve ownership disputes through community-established structures, these mechanisms are not consistently in place across all areas and will take time to (re)-formalize. This underscores the criticality of **ensuring considerations to integrate indigenous conflict resolution methods ahead of broader systemic reforms.**

Similar challenges affecting commercial properties were also noted. Reports indicate attempted evictions or notice to quit have been given to owners of some commercial properties, including for individuals running small shops, because original owners are intending to return and resume their own livelihoods. In Hama, four people whose shops had been rehabilitated by NRC programs have been evicted by returning owners since December 2024, despite having legal lease agreements in place (at the time of writing, it remains unclear if these are examples of dual ownership challenges or otherwise). Some local NGOs, particularly in Aleppo, have reported requests for increased rent from their own landlords, in anticipation of increased demand for commercial property, with knock-on impact onto their ability to deliver services at scale.

Facilitating any returns without the necessary investments in systemic legal reforms, legal identity documentation to access them, and infrastructure rehabilitation risk further destabilizing the already fragile equilibrium in Syria and threatening delivery of aid alongside any potential transitional justice processes planned or underway. Ensuring access to secure housing, restoring legal documentation processes, and addressing the destruction of property alongside property rehabilitation are essential for social cohesion in a critical time of transition, as well as for creating conditions necessary for safe, voluntary, and sustainable returns.

Safety & Social Cohesion

Safety and security also emerged as a critical determinant for the willingness of displaced Syrians to return. While a significant portion of respondents reported feeling either safe or somewhat safe, there were significant and notable regional and demographic disparities. Respondents from Damascus expressed a slightly lower sense of safety compared to the overall average, while those from Idleb reported higher feelings of safety. Among minority group respondents, perceptions of safety were more divided, suggesting that **safety is influenced not only by the broader security context but also by regional dynamics and socio-political factors**. While these are the reported perceptions, it is important to note that they may not fully reflect the actual reality on the ground, as perceptions can shift over time and may be influenced by limited or area and context-specific information. **Nonetheless, findings underscore that conflict sensitivity must underpin all aspects of programming and assistance moving forward.**²¹

“Job opportunities are extremely scarce. Even where they are available, income is hardly enough to meet basics.”

– Key Informant

The relationship between economic instability and perceptions of safety also emerged as a key theme with many respondents identifying economic hardship, uncertainty about the future, and lack of employment opportunities as top contributors to a heightened sense of insecurity. These perceptions were frequently intertwined with broader economic concerns, with many expressing that their sense of safety was undermined by the absence of above-mentioned factors like basic services, job opportunities, and financial stability.

Israel stepping up its attacks on Syria was cited as a major safety concern amongst a substantial portion of participants with others noting simply “foreign intervention” concerns undermining their feelings of safety. This was particularly pronounced among host communities. The fear of ERWs also emerged as a dominant concern amongst participants impacting broader feelings of safety. This emerged more acutely amongst responses from areas across north-west Syria as well as central and southern Syria; which can be attributed to the surge in fatalities or injuries from ERWs in the first two months of 2025.²² The significant and dramatic shifts in frontlines since the fall of the former government made areas formerly off-limits suddenly accessible and in the absence of broader country-wide mapping of war remnants, risks of injury or death remain significant and will continue to pose a threat to communities and hinder meaningful prospects for return.

In north-east Syria, eastern Aleppo Governorate and Quneitra Governorate, continued escalations in armed conflict throughout 2024 and into early 2025 posed acute protection risks for civilians that make conditions increasingly untenable for return. Across all governorates, there are reports of personal security fears, including thefts, harassment, kidnapping and revenge killings. Many people limit their movement after dark, as security concerns become heightened by limited street lighting or electricity, meaning it is exceptionally dark.

Emerging tensions between returnees and host communities have also begun to emerge. To date, this is largely centred around perceptions of political or religious loyalties. Many resident communities in former government-controlled areas report fears of religious extremism or of reprisals linked to assumptions about their perceived loyalties and vice-versa. Bullying between host community children and returnee children-linked to perceived political affiliation based on place of geographic displacement was also reported in some schools indicating the trickle-down effects on children and young people.

Foremost among key factors identified by participants that would contribute to a greater sense of safety were stable housing, family reunification, and freedom from persecution. For IDPs and refugee returnees, reuniting with loved ones played a particularly significant role in their overall sense of security, highlighting the critical importance of emotional and social stability in any recovery and re-integration efforts – in addition to physical security such as home or other form of shelter. While removing war remnants and restoring security are essential, these efforts must be accompanied by substantial investments in economic recovery. Without targeted and integrated initiatives across livelihoods, job creation, and local economic development, premature returns risk exacerbating insecurity and deepening social divisions. **Establishing conditions for safe, voluntary, and sustainable returns—through comprehensive integrated programs addressing both security and economic integration—is crucial for Syria’s long-term stability and recovery.**

Scaling Up Recovery

Recovery in Syria has been markedly slow, in part due to the prolonged focus on short-term emergency assistance and donor restrictions, tied to political red-lines, which limited longer-term, sustainable programming. For years, donors have prioritized life-saving interventions—such as needed but costly water trucking, food baskets, and temporary learning spaces—while under-investing in systems-level rehabilitation that would build self-reliance due to fears of overstepping red-lines.

Despite the years-long growing recognition of the need to shift toward early recovery in Syria, actual investments remained limited and insufficient. In 2024, a mere 11% of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for example, was allocated to early recovery and livelihoods. Relative to previous years, this represents a modest increase, yet one that has not matched the urgency on the ground, where millions remain without access to stable housing, functioning schools, or reliable water systems. Ultimately, recovery funding and modalities to date have failed to keep pace with the scope of needs on the ground and today, fall far behind the political momentum for change.

At the March 2025 Brussels Conference, many donor governments, including the EU and Germany, outlined **commitments to supporting recovery more robustly, with ministers calling for a transition from life-saving assistance to building self-reliance that lays the groundwork for durable solutions.** Others moved the dial farther by stating **future support would prioritize inclusive development**, with others hinging it on tangible commitments and progress by the transitional government to change that includes social cohesion, inclusion, and accountability. **The international consensus appears to be shifting – but the operational follow-through must accelerate to match it.**

The required support package, which includes temporary housing, home repairs, income assistance, and agricultural start-up or restart costs, is estimated, by some, to range from (USD) \$10,000 to \$20,000 per family. This means the total financial requirement for return and reintegration could range from²³ \$12 billion to \$24 billion—almost equivalent to Syria’s current annual GDP. **However, these costs can be reduced by proven investments to longer-term recovery that is proven to cost less and yield greater benefit; this especially critical as aid funding globally is being scaled back at unprecedented levels. Preparedness initiatives that go beyond emergency, life-saving assistance lead to cost savings and reduce response times.**²⁴ Humanitarian needs remain acute- and are increasingly harder to meet today due to stagnant recovery programming to date. This moment presents a critical – albeit narrow – window for scaling recovery meaningfully. Delays not only risk undermining the recent international consensus but risk eroding public trust in aid delivery and closing pathways to meaningful voluntary return and re-integration.

As sanctioning authorities explore avenues for easing sector-specific sanctions in response to tangible progress by the transitional government, these will be central to recovery efforts gaining both international backing and local legitimacy. If the commitments made in Brussels are to translate into real progress on the ground, early recovery must be scaled up urgently and strategically. This means shifting from rhetoric to resources, and from fragmented siloed response efforts and projects to coordinated, integrated recovery and reconstruction efforts that enable people to rebuild their lives and communities. Done right, recovery can reduce long-term costs, strengthen local capacity, and help lay the foundation for a more accountable, stable, and socially cohesive Syria.

Effective Coordination to Support Returns

In January 2025, UNHCR announced it would begin facilitation of voluntary returns for Syrians underscoring for many the importance of scaling up robust return programming. At the regional level, through the Regional Durable Solutions Working Group (RDSWG), UNHCR has initiated return planning through the Return Preparedness Task Force (RPTF). At the country level, Jordan had revamped the Durable Solutions Working Group and established an operation durable solution working groups with key partners working returns. While individual efforts at country-level are positive, there is an urgent need for increased coordination, collaboration and communication between these various efforts.

Currently, coordination between the return mechanisms in host countries and inside Syria remain limited, with efforts often operating in silos. The lack of communication between external coordination mechanisms in host countries and those inside Syria risks missed opportunities for collaboration and parallel discussions. Bridging this gap through more integrated coordination would ensure that efforts are more cohesive and impactful in supporting returnees. However, the process has yet to meaningfully incorporate the participation of both local and international lead implementing partner agencies tasked with providing the practical support to returnees upon arrival. Enhanced communication, collaboration, and alignment of efforts are essential to ensure they operate as a cohesive and unified response to support returnees effectively. **Any return support or programming outside Syria must be closely linked to broader recovery efforts inside Syria.** These efforts cannot exist in isolation.

Comprehensive support for return must be grounded in a coherent approach that aligns both with the prevailing conditions in areas of return within Syria and with broader recovery efforts underway inside country. In this context, it is essential that regional working groups engaged in return planning and preparedness are closely integrated with recovery and resilience initiatives inside Syria. At a time where broader coordination structures are undergoing significant transformation, it is critical to **ensure return-related activities do not unintentionally generate pressure or incentives for premature return, contrary to the principles of voluntariness, safety, and dignity that underpin humanitarian policy on durable solutions.**

Conclusion

Return as a durable solution requires a number of parameters to be met, including access to legal, physical and material safety to remove barriers to reintegration and ensure that they no longer face discrimination tied to their displacement status. What will be needed in the longer-term, is a shift from rhetoric to action from the broader international community to sustainably improve conditions inside Syria.

Responsible and sustainable returns can be made possible through strategic, well-coordinated efforts to improve conditions in areas of return and to adequately prepare people in making free and informed decisions. This includes coordination with new authorities, regional humanitarian and development actors, scaling up recovery initiatives, and sustained longer-term reconstruction efforts. Investments must be integrated with ongoing humanitarian assistance to ensure that all vulnerable populations benefit, regardless of demographic or displacement status. Additionally, strengthening access to accurate information on conditions in areas of return, governance mechanisms, and available

protections is critical to enabling displaced Syrians to make genuinely informed decisions regarding return or relocation; as are investments in stronger institutional, legal, and educational frameworks that will be instrumental to long-term stability and inclusion.

Syria's transition is coinciding with unprecedented cuts to global humanitarian aid, stress-testing resources that were already stretched thin to meet demands of record-high needs across the country.

Donor engagement and international support must seize this critical moment to commit to less siloed support and scaled up modalities focused on improving conditions and supporting effective (re-)integration and cohesive communities.

This report serves as a call to action for policymakers, donors, transitional authorities, and humanitarian actors to prioritize proactive engagement, ensuring that returns are genuinely safe, voluntary and informed and that people are provided preliminary pathways to durable solutions, become self-reliant, and recover from everything they have endured. This will be vital in contributing to—not undermining—Syria's recovery. By scaling up funding, integrating sustainable programming, and maintaining long-term commitments, **stakeholders can help create conditions that support voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, ultimately paving the way for meaningful and lasting solutions.**

Recommendations

To Donors

Capitalize on the unprecedented transition in Syria to act on and scale up recovery commitments:

Conditions throughout Syria remain un conducive for large-scale return given the widespread destruction, collapse of basic services, amongst other factors listed above. However, there is an opportunity for current and future donors to support recovery and reconstruction which will pave the way for increased resilience of communities including potential future returnees. Doing so alongside sustained humanitarian support for those choosing not to return, or taking a wait and see approach, will lay the groundwork for a possible future in which the full range of durable solutions become increasingly viable.

Take concrete steps to prevent further regional destabilization and protect civilians: The ongoing attacks, cross-border strikes and continued ground incursions by Israel that veer away from the 1974 Disengagement Agreement risk deepening regional instability, undermine prospects for recovery inside Syria, and create clear protection risks for civilians already reeling in precarious conditions or for those who may otherwise choose to return. These actions, particularly when framed as protective measures, risk further polarizing communities and undermining broader stability objectives. Diplomatic action is needed to ensure Israel ceases actions that risk further destabilizing an already fragile context, and to support authorities' efforts to create an inclusive Syria, taking a consistent approach to accountability.

Work with humanitarian partners to ensure service continuity to camps to avoid creating push factors or incentivizing premature or unsafe returns if services inside camps are scaled back. This ensures that communities choosing to not yet return or those taking a 'wait-and-see' approach can still access the essential services needed while they plan and make informed decisions.

Sustain support for refugees in host countries to prevent deteriorating conditions that could act as coercive push factors, forcing premature returns that destabilize already fragile conditions inside Syria.

Support inclusive and effective coordination structures between humanitarian and development actors inside Syria and in refugee hosting countries in the region, ensuring that this dialogue fosters collaboration to support displaced people to achieve the durable solution of their choice, including through improved information sharing, protection monitoring for any facilitated returns, joint planning and cross-regional programming to support host communities, returnees, and people seeking to remain in countries of displacement or seeking alternative durable solutions.

Require conflict sensitivity assessments in all humanitarian and development assistance and programmes of support for Syria and ensure that support to returnees does not ignite or fuel localized tensions between them and host communities.

Support facilitating unhindered and principled humanitarian access to deliver assistance that is in-line with global standards, removes bureaucratic impediments that risk politicising aid, or delaying its delivery entirely.

UN Agencies

Inclusive and effective coordination structures that are fit for purpose and serve Syrians in need by ensuring that any humanitarian restructure in Syria is anchored in needs, accountability, and best practices and not merely by global operational downsizing or funding cuts. This must also be treated as an opportunity to more effectively ensure leadership of coordination architecture **reflects the full scope and diversity of response actors** – including local NGOs – aligning more effectively with IASC guidelines and best practices. This prevents further disruption to an already fragile and siloed response at a time of critical transition requiring even more alignment and meaningful coordination.

Support area-based coordination approaches to ensure a needs-based response Area-based coordination and needs mapping can be a vital tool in ensuring that communities benefit from the full scale and scope of integrated interventions and collectively recover from conflict.

Engage with regional and country-specific coordination mechanisms that integrate return assistance within broader support frameworks, to ensure coherent and enabled support through consistent, principled, cross-border planning and information sharing related to conditions upon return as well as programming, ensuring transportation and other return-related costs outside country are paired with sustained investments inside Syria and do not create pull-factors that inadvertently incentivize or misinform.

Scale-up protection monitoring and analysis activities across the country to ensure programming is informed by up-to-date risks and analysis - especially as return and other dynamics continue to remain fluid. This must embed monitoring of social tensions by investments in tailored social cohesion and peacebuilding initiatives.

Maintain support for refugees remaining in host countries and avoid conditions acting as push factors - without sustained humanitarian support and continued access to critical services, deteriorations in conditions in camps could coerce families to return to Syria.

Transitional Government of Syria

Facilitate unhindered and principled access including transparent and consistent processes in accordance with international principles and standards. Ensure that all administrative and access-related procedures, such as registration, programming approvals, movement or otherwise—are transparent, predictable, and aligned with global best practices to ensure effectiveness, prevent unnecessary delays and most importantly, signal strong commitments to principled engagement which facilitates greater international trust and confidence in government leadership. This directly supports national priorities by filling urgent service gaps that reduce strain on public systems in transition while facilitating enhanced coordination between humanitarian, development and the peacebuilding actors entering Syria.

Prioritize Social Cohesion and Accountability: Ensure social cohesion and accountability are central pillars of the transitional government's agenda. Demonstrating clear commitment to inclusive governance, transparent accountability mechanisms, and equitable redress processes will promote reconciliation, strengthen trust among communities, and build the necessary confidence for sustained donor support and effective aid delivery.

Strengthen protection and monitoring frameworks: which must include enhancing access to justice, restitution mechanisms such as housing, land, and property rights, as well as addressing past and ongoing violations through inclusive, transparent protection monitoring mechanisms – ensuring unhindered access to agencies willing to deliver critical protection activities. This will all be critical to rebuilding trust and long-term social cohesion efforts across all communities affected by displacement.

Endnotes

1. Council of the European Union. Brussels IX Conference on [“Standing with Syria: Meeting the Needs for a Successful Transition” Joint Press Statement by the Co-chairs](#). 18 Mar. 2025
2. UNHCR, [Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria](#). February 2025
3. NRC commissioned Upinion to conduct extensive survey conversations with over 400 people. A total of 358 people completed the full questionnaire.
4. Full methodology details on each survey or sample may be provided upon request.
5. North-east Syria Forum Update #12. [Humanitarian impact of recent developments in north-east Syria](#), 20 January 2025. Noting that as of early April, a ceasefire in the area has allowed preliminary repairs to begin.
6. UN OCHA. [Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1](#). 12 Feb 2025
7. As of 08 April 2025, the dams have re-opened however, without guarantee they will remain.
8. UN News. [Deadly attacks in eastern Aleppo highlight Syria’s vulnerability](#). 04 Feb 2025
9. UNDP. The impact of conflict in Syria. 2025
10. North-east Syria NGO Forum. [Impact of Escalations of Hostilities in Syria on displacement in north-east Syria](#). 09 Dec 2024
11. NRC provides PSS support as part of its broader education programming throughout Syria.
12. Reuters. [Syria’s economy: The devastating impact of war and sanctions](#). 06 January 2025
13. UNDP. The impact of conflict in Syria 2025
14. MercyCorps. Crisis analysis Syria. February 2025
15. Shafaq. [Syria’s Breadbasket Emptying: Food Crisis Looms](#). 22 February 2025
16. This was a broader reform reportedly aimed at removing “ghost names” or individuals who were reportedly receiving salaries without holding actual positions.
17. NRC spoke to over 400 project participants in December 2024 as part of a Rapid Needs Assessment and followed up with almost 4,000 in January 2025.
18. *It would be inaccurate to deduce that refugees from abroad are less affected, rather, those who have returned to date may have instead been more driven by access to their former housing land or property.*
19. Halab Today TV. [Announcement from Damascus Governorate](#). 12 Feb 2025
20. Syrians for Truth and Justice. [STJ Submits Report to Damascus Governorate on Cases of Home Seizures](#). 27 February 2025
21. Important to highlight these conversations took place prior to the violence in the coastal areas of Syria in February 2025.
22. INSO. ERW Snapshot. 05 March 2025
23. UNDP. [Syria Socio-economic Assessment](#). February 2025
24. Institute of Development Studies. [Cost-effectiveness in humanitarian work: preparedness, pre-financing and early action](#). December 2018