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Understanding Syrian Migration in Syria Normalisation, Return and Reintegration: The Case of Internally Displaced People in Post-War Reconstruction in Homs

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ABSTRACT

Syria has once again become a full member of the League of Arab States within the framework of the de-escalation and normalization process in the wider Middle East. Syria still has the most significant number of refugees in the region: around seven million people live outside the country's borders and another nearly seven million are internally displaced. Syria has had a changed social structure as a result of the still unresolved conflict, which has been going on since 2011. The aim of this study is to analyse the possibility of Assisted Voluntary Return of Internally Displaced persons and the associated difficulties – carried out within the framework of international development cooperation. The research confirms the hypothesis that Internally Displaced Persons often wish to return home when conditions become suitable. It also highlights the problems known at macro level, which are related to the severe economic situation and the poor provision of public services.

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KEYWORDS Voluntary return; reintegration; internally displaced persons; Syria; normalization; Homs

Introduction: The limits of reintegration of Syria in the Arab world and beyond

The normalization process culminated at the May 2023 summit of the League of Arab States in Saudi Arabia. As a result of this Syria was reintegrated into the pan-Arab organization after having been excluded for more than 10

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years. The developments in Syria are part of a broader regional de-escalation and normalization process between 2020 and 2023. As part of this, the Abraham Accords were established in 2020 between Israel and four Arab countries, and in 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations with mediation from China. The Assad regime abandoning its isolationist policy was mainly thanks to initiatives by Syria's neighbour Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (Heydemann, 2023). The main reasons this came about was a desire on the part of the Arab states involved to suppress the illegal Captagon trade, their failure to squeeze Iranian interests out of Syria, and the fact that Syria was of Jordan's key trading partners (Kardas & Aras, 2023). The Russia – Ukraine war that broke out in February 2022, followed by the Gaza conflict on 7 October 2023, meant that a lot less attention was being paid to Syria on the part of international political players. One catastrophic event changed this for a short time, namely the earthquake in Turkey and northern Syria in February 2023, which brought the long-standing humanitarian crisis to the attention of the international community.

The Syrian civil war has not ended despite the seemingly positive reintegration process. The Assad regime controls 60 percent of Syria's territory, which accounts for about ten million inhabitants. The restoration of Syria's territorial unity is limited by Turkey in another part of the country, by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib, and the Kurdish autonomous region in the north-west (Kaddour & Tokmajyan, 2024). However, the Assad regime emphasizes consolidation and normalization in both its domestic and foreign policies, and the aim is to reintegrate the state economically and to start the flow of international financial assistance. Despite the sense of stabilization, the Assad regime faced a serious crisis of legitimacy in 2024, partly due to deteriorating living conditions in the country. The average wage of people employed in the public sector is 20–40 euros a month. Private sector employees earn roughly double this, although even this does not cover people's basic necessities. International financial resources have also dried up, Russia's is paying less attention to Syria as a result of its war in Ukraine, and although some humanitarian aid is coming from the Arab oil monarchies, it is not enough to cover the costs of reconstruction. President Assad signed a strategic partnership agreement with China in 2022 and visited Beijing in 2023, which constitutes an opportunity for the country (Seiwert, 2024).

The last decade of war has changed the structure of Syrian society, as seven million people have fled to other countries, while roughly seven million people have also been forced to leave their original place of residence within the country's borders (Operational Data Portal Data., 2024). These movements had a serious impact on the number and proportion of various communities living in Syria. The refugee literature has largely considered the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as secondary. The modus operandi for IDPs has treated the community as a homogenous group and

international organizations have focused on protection and improving socio-economic conditions, but have not offered a long-term solution. Recently, however, the literature has clearly confirmed that one of the preconditions for the success of a conflict is the resettlement of the IDP population in their place of origin. Azerbaijan is an interesting example of this, as the Azeri IDP population's 'Great Return' to Nagorno-Karabakh in the 2020s was carried out under a state-led policy (Guliyev, 2024.). The principle of resettlement to their original place of residence has reaffirmed by the Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons as well published in 2010 by UNHCR (2010).

Since the date of submission of this article, the sudden collapse of the Assad regime brought the topic of the resettlement of IDPs and refugees at the forefront of regional and global politics.¹ The UN Special Envoy for Syria stated that while the war situation persists, the matters of political transition and conflict resolution have gained prominence under the leadership of the former rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and its leader, who currently serves as the President of the country, Ahmad al-Sharaa. A recent survey conducted by UNHCR shows that around 1 million Syrian IDPs seek to return home in the next 12 months to come, around 600 000 in the next 6 months (UNHCR, 2025). Neighbouring countries as well as EU members states have been searching for a favourable geopolitical momentum to resettle the nearly 7 million Syrian refugees living abroad (Connor, 2018). The majority of regional and international stakeholders support the current Syrian political transition aimed at the settlement of the civil war which erupted as part of the Arab Uprisings in 2012. Lifting of international sanctions could be a key factor for stabilizing the transitional regime and providing further support to the IDP communities (Conrad, 2001).

The Hungary Helps Agency, the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta and the aid organization of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church's in Syria launched a three-year development programme to assist 200 IDP families in resettlement between 2019 and 2022. We do not aim to describe the project in detail as it would go beyond the scope of this study, and its preliminary results in connection with the development initiative have already been published (Solymári et al., 2023). This research was carried out with the families participating in the programme, and the confidential nature of the development project provided the opportunity to conduct this survey.²

This study contributes to the internal discourse on normalization and it primarily covers the issue of the possible resettlement of internally displaced persons. Previous research and reports primarily focused on the resettlement of refugees who cross borders, as well as on the opportunities and difficulties related with this. However, the international literature generally deals less with the repatriation of internal refugees to their place of residence. This work is related to the ongoing process involving Cheung et al. in the context of the 2006–2016 Gallup World Poll in 2020 (2020), Aarethun et al. in the PTSD study of Syrian refugees in 2021 (2021), Sahin-

Mencutek and Meininghaus in 2023 in connection with the return of Syrians living in the macro-region (2023) and Trovato et al. conducted in 2024 among Syrian refugees living in Lebanon (2024).

The aim of this research paper is to analyse consolidation and normalization through the repatriation of Syrian families who moved from the vicinity of Homs to other settlements in the country. It also highlights the opportunities and difficulties that Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration faces in the area controlled by the Assad regime. After a short conceptual and theoretical introduction, the study presents the methodological background to the empirical research in detail and then analyses its results. This study aims to address the relationship between development aid, the assisted repatriation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the internal normalization process in Syria. The research posits that a prerequisite for successful internal normalization involves addressing the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs), necessitating both security guarantees and the provision of basic living conditions. In the context of the conflict situation, external state actors and international institutions are pivotal in attaining the latter objective. The purpose of the investigation was not only to provide feedback to the development programme but also to be able to connect strict scientific tools to the current geopolitical discourse, which focuses on normalization and post-war recovery in Syria in the context of the return of internally displaced persons in Syria (D. Solymári & Gibárti, 2022).

This study is structured around the definition of IDPs as presented by UNHCR: Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border .(Handbook for the Protection . . .).

Internally displaced people in Syria

Syria has the world's largest population of IDPs, or Internally displaced persons. According to the latest OPD report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in April 2024, the number of IDPs has been gradually increasing since 2011, and now exceeds 7 million people, which is almost half a million higher than the figures in 2021 and 2022 (Operational Data Portal Syrian Arab Republic, 2023). This has also been confirmed by the 2024 report of the Humanitarian Needs Overview. The data in this report also shows that the number of internally displaced people in Syria increased due to the Turkish-Syrian earthquake of 2023 (Syrian Arab Republic, 2024). As well as displaced people within Syria, there are almost 7 million more Syrian refugees, both registered and unregistered, in neighbouring Lebanon,

Jordan, Turkey and Iraq (Operational Data Portal Data, 2023–2024). Despite the publication of these numbers, the characterization of internally displaced persons, and empirical research into the circumstances of their becoming refugees and the chances of their return is underrepresented in scientific discourse. This is in stark contrast to refugees who have crossed the country's borders, who are frequently the subject of both political and general public discourse (Stel & van der Meijden, 2018). Research on IDPs is particularly important as their large number makes them the number-one group in terms of the normalization of the country (World Bank Group, 2024). This is because the IDPs reside within Syria's borders meaning there are no physical, economic, individual and political obstacles to their resettlement, unlike refugees living in other countries. However, research related to IDPs has been greatly hampered by the fact that the Syrian central government does not recognize the existence of internally displaced persons and their specific challenges in the country. This means detailed data and research reports are not, or only very rarely, available (Ferris & Kemal, 2016). Our study is focused on the chances of IDPs in Syria returning home as well as the opportunities of, and obstacles to reintegration of this specific group of refugees in the context of the country's normalization and settlement. The term Internally Displaced Persons and the acronym IDP are used interchangeably in this work.

A significant portion of the civilian population was internally displaced following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the wave of violence that swept through the country. In addition to Aleppo, Damascus and Idlib, the central government also used major military force against insurgent groups in Homs, the city that is the focus of this survey. The IDP population exceeded half a million in the first year of the war, and reached one and a half to two million people at national level (IDMC, 2012). Although the gradually increasing number of internally displaced persons slowed down between 2015 and 2016, it has now started to increase again (Syrian Arab Republic, 2023). The huge number of internally displaced persons in Syria make this population crucial for the political settlement of the conflict. However, they are only partially protected and provided with social support (Jazeera, 2022). The reason is that IDPs cannot count on the same local and international support as external refugees is that they do not receive legal protection. Their humanitarian support is incidental since they are legitimate citizens of a legitimate country residing within the country's borders (Gajkar, 2024).

The problem is made worse by the fact that nearly a third of Syria's current population of around 22 million are internally displaced and waiting to return home as soon as living conditions allow and local services resume. Therefore, in terms of aid, the option of voluntary repatriation can be one of the possible development policy tools in addition to creating basic and infrastructural services. Although repatriation can be used to implement situation-specific

and individual-centred aid and to provide an adequate response to one of the country's most significant humanitarian and social problems to date, however, for a number of reasons – as Sahin-Mencutek and Meininghaus argued – 'safe return remains unattainable because the Syrian regime and other military actors continue to pose severe threats to the lives and survival of Syrians including returnees' (Sahin-Mencutek & Meininghaus, 2023). It is important to underline, however, that very few international organizations are currently able to carry out field research or development work in Syria due to the political and financial restrictions and sanctions in place. Consequently, in the context of Syria, it is not possible to objectively assess how development organizations, which are otherwise successful and well resourced, could contribute to the issue of reintegration, as their access to the country is currently not guaranteed. This issue may also change with the new Syrian administration that will be formed after March 2025, but there are currently no guarantees.

Homs: Description and contextualisation of the research location

Homs is the third largest and one of the most populous cities in Syria. It is located at the commercial epicentre of the country. In the first years of the war, which started in 2011, Homs quickly became Syria's most significant source of crisis, receiving the moniker the 'capital of the revolution' (Barnard, 2014). Its significance is due to the fact that, along with Aleppo, Damascus and Raqqa, it saw the most severe destruction during the conflict, and it was from Homs that most people were forced to leave their homes. A significant number of the city's medical institutions were closed by the end of 2012 due to the fierce attacks, and the overcrowded and unheated centres for people fleeing the fighting became unfit for service (Wilkes, 2012). Although there was some respite at certain points the city was essentially bombed continuously, which often meant that the civilian population that had remained in the city became trapped. The old city and the city centre as well as the northern and western districts (Al-Waer, Al-Ghouta, Al-Mimas, Deir Baalba, Al-Khaldiyah) suffered serious damage, and several parts of them were completely destroyed (Harris, 2018). Infrastructure in nearly 60% of the city's territory had become inoperable by 2018: 21 out of 36 districts became unsuitable for everyday life; medical, educational, religious and government buildings were also destroyed in addition to residential buildings (UN HABITAT, 2014). The city was gradually reoccupied by the regime in 2017, with the help of Russia (Jazeera, 2017).

Abdelal et al. (2024) identify three major transformations in the history of Homs city after 2011. The first phase between 2011 and 2014 is the most intense phase of the civil war, with a significant proportion of buildings destroyed and daily life shifting to the suburbs and side streets as central spaces became

dangerous. The victims of the civil war were mainly men, and a whole new set of women's roles emerged. During the second phase (2014–2018), the regime retook the city, the reconstruction of the destroyed central buildings began and from 2018 the city was able to re-enter the bloodstream of the areas controlled by the regime. In the third phase (2019–2022), life in the central part of the city returned to normal and the areas of the city that had been gentrified during the years of civil war lost their importance.

Homs was at first one of the most significant cities from which internally displaced persons left but later many IDPs took refuge there, which, in addition to intense, long-lasting fighting, led to the gradual and complete termination of public services (BBC, 2015). As a result of the uprisings, armed clashes and the siege of the city, about 500,000 people were forced to leave their homes, seeking refuge in cities and towns near Homs, in the neighbouring governorates as well as in Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, in the northern part of Jordan (UN HABITAT, 2014). The aid programme, and thus the present research, focused on one of the most significant areas of the Syrian war and on its most important social problem that continues to this day. The families involved in the survey stayed in the governorates of Homs, Hama, Tartus and Latakia during the selection, and the interviews took place again at their original place of residence, in Homs.

The theoretical and practical connections of the development aid framework

The research presented in the study was carried out within the framework of the development programme targeting the resettlement of the IDP population. We emphasize that it is not our aim to give a detailed description of the programme, and the presentation of its theoretical framework would also go beyond the scope of this work to better understand the structure of Syrian society, the challenges of everyday life after the war and the challenges of Syrian society. Although presented in the context of a development programme, the paper aims to provide an accurate academic picture of the post-war normalization process. Nevertheless, the theoretical foundations of resettlement are closely related motivations for migration in the research, internal flight, and the external-internal conditions on returning home. Thus, it is essential to separately clarify the most important principles and concepts and to outline the research-related theoretical framework of resettlement. In this context, this article uses the term reintegration as the broadest definition of the concept, especially because it is the most widely accepted term in the scientific and development discourse.

Several approaches and methodological opportunities are known in connection with the resettlement of refugees. The one thing they have in common is that after or during migration the affected persons continue

their lives in their former home or in a new, different geographical location with external help, with the cooperation of a donor organization or donor country. There are both similarities and differences between the individual approaches. The basic similarity is that each initiative, if implemented correctly, focuses on the person and strives for a human-centred solution based on real needs. The main difference lies in the legal (status) and the psycho-social and integration (social and material) elements provided; or in other words, in the complexity of support and in the composition of the service map. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) distinguishes three long-term solutions for finding a permanent, safe home for people with a refugee background. These follow one another in the order of logic and the complexity of implementation: (1) the voluntary and independent return of persons with a refugee background to their country of origin, (2) their integration in the first safe host country and (3) their relocation to, and integration in a third host country (UNHCR, 2011). This triple division is also used by the European Commission and the humanitarian sector in general, based on the UNHCR principle that we should not consider a hierarchical order between the individual solutions used, and there should be no recommendation on which method should be preferred by the receiving country or organization. This is also an important circumstance in relation to the aid programme used in the context of the research, which (as a result of the community involvement of the beneficiaries in the planning process) was based on the principle that the IDP population must be relocated to their original residence or one meeting the same criteria (Burgers & Vranken, 2004). In other words, it needs to be internalized rather than externalized (Frelick et al., 2016). There is no consensus in current migration discussions on how different countries interpret migration or whether they prefer to address migration-related issues within their borders or beyond (Jaulin et al., 2020). However, as Fakhoury and Mencütek highlighted, important differences can be identified regarding the principles applied to the settlement of refugees (Fakhoury & Mencütek, 2023). The personal struggles of refugees also show that the three methods are more different than usually thought. The research carried out within the framework of the study also points out – mainly in the context of the motivations for migration and the challenges of reintegration – that there should be preferred and minimum elements regarding the supported change of residence of refugees. Also, it is important to create a policy framework for the internalization or externalization of refugees (Arnstein, 1969). We now cover the most important concepts that proved most relevant during the research and summarize the basic assumptions that set the framework for conducting the research study on the return of refugees residing within the country.

One of the broadest and most comprehensive concepts related to the resettlement of refugees is *repatriation*, which is more characteristically called

resettlement in development aid, although the two concepts do not mean the same thing. The definition comes from the theoretical corpus of natural science. According to its original meaning, repatriation means care provided in an unfamiliar environment, not under the person's own conditions. Also, the beneficiary of this process is gradually returned to the original or a new place of residence as part of a process that promotes adaptation and socialization. This process was projected onto human society within the framework of the classical social Darwinist geopolitical school, primarily during the refugee programmes coordinated by the League of Nations after the First World War, then gradually reaching the field of development aid and people dealing with refugees. The terms *return* as well as *voluntary return* are concepts similar to repatriation. They mean returning home and are close in meaning to *resettlement*. An important element in this term is the use of the word 'voluntary', which is fundamentally different from the principle of *refoulement*, which means forcing a refugee or asylum seeker to return against their will. Voluntary return always happens with the consent, and sometimes even at the request, and with active participation of the person concerned. It is of fundamental importance that refugees should be protected by their country of origin again; that it should ensure their safe return and readmission, and ideally that it should provide social services, with content varying by country and programme. A frequently used resettlement term is *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR)*. In this case, the refugee is transferred from a place of transit or temporary residence to a place of safe residence. AVRR is usually applied to a new place of residence in a third country and not to the country of origin. However, the concept is used increasingly commonly – in terms of its content and methodology – in connection with any resettlement-related programmes that have predominantly supported/assisted and voluntary/consent-based characteristics.

AVRR is a process in which a group of refugees is identified and then relocated from their current place of residence to a new or former location that matches their original home, on a permanent, long-term basis. This process can be voluntary, or voluntary by force, which means that the movement may be caused by some kind of human or natural crisis. AVRR is based on thorough economic, social, environmental, technical, legal and financial planning, ideally embedded in a complex development plan. Its purpose may be simply to resettle people, but ideally also to raise the socio-economic status of those involved (IOM Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, 2010). The positive effects of resettlement programmes do not happen overnight, but they emerge when moving to the old or new place. Resettled people have to rebuild their relationships, settle into new jobs and socialize themselves again. According to the literature on the subject the length of process can vary significantly. Typically, it takes two to

three years for resettled people to successfully adapt to their changed circumstances (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). Key issues in resettlement are the involvement of the persons concerned, flexibility and a decentralized approach and accurate and transparent communication of services. Other key issues include provision of conditions during the integration period that are proportionate to the conditions maintained independently later and the proportionate placement of psychosocial and labour market integration elements in complex social work. For these reasons resettlement is always a significant and resource-intensive process. However, the practical implementation by Hungarian and Syrian organizations based on the above principles differs from most resettlement models in that it provides integration support as a result of which permanent settlement is expected from the programme participants. The essence of this can be summarized in three key elements: (1) the duration of the programme is longer than that of most supported integration programmes. It is at least 12 months, and for some families this can be extended to 18, or 24 months at most. (2) The model is based on close, personal accompaniment, which means that each family is supported by a social mentor every day, for at least six months. One of the cornerstones of this person-to-person work is that each beneficiary is placed in an individual apartment from the first day of the programme rather than having to rebuild their life in shared accommodation. (3) The service map of the programme is broad and contains general and other personalized elements that beneficiaries restart their lives based on each family's individual living situation. Its most important elements are: full, financed housing support (in this programme, renovation of the apartments, making them habitable and provision of overhead costs), workforce integration support, mentor consultant, health support, monthly food support and monthly spending money, as well as educational support to make up for the missed formal study period and help with mental health. In the last months of the integration programme families are prepared for the period without subsidies, by jointly calculating what expenses must be covered from their own incomes. The vast majority of the families that went through the programme became independent. And two-parent families had often managed to save up some money before the start. The change was more challenging for mothers raising their children alone, but most of them also moved on stronger after the programme ended.

However, describing this is not the purpose of this article, which is primarily aimed at better understanding the post-war structure of Syrian society. The brief presentation of the resettlement-related framework was significant for the research as it created a precise context for the research methodology. It also marked out and defined the applied

procedure which allows for the information revealed in the empirical research to be interpreted.

Methodology of the research and data collection

In this empirical field research, we examined the migration conditions of Syrian IDPs and the root causes of their fleeing, with special focus on their options for returning home and starting over, including their strengths and weaknesses. The research is closely related to the geopolitical discourse concerning normalization in Syria, for which the country's post-war recovery is in focus. At the same time, very little empirical data is available on Syrian IDPs, and field research in Syria is rare anyway. The research, which is based on a deductive principle with both an exploratory and an explanatory purpose, started from the local observation that Syrian IDPs still make up a significant part of the country's population, a large, well-defined portion of whom cannot or do not want to leave their country. For objective or personal reasons, they want to return to their original place of residence and participate in the reconstruction of the country as a recent report has underlined (Haj Kadour & Abdulrahim, 2024). This experience seems to contradict the general conception about Syrian migration, namely that the majority of Syrians want to flee the country and continue their lives abroad (Fleming, 2015). The research examined to what extent families wish and are able to contribute to the national reconciliation of the country, and what the characteristics based on which social and ultimately micro-level normalization can be defined are. The research collected empirical data that helps form an even more accurate picture of the focus of post-war social orientations and actions (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994).

When carrying out the survey we visited 50 internally displaced Syrian families, conducted qualitative focus research and quantitative questionnaire-based research in a complex phenomenological framework. We also recorded in-depth interviews (Johnson, 2000). The goal was to use these tools to get insights into the depth of Syrian migration at a personal level, people's motivation for migrating, how long refugee status lasts and the chances of returning home in personal and social terms. The most important results generated during the data analysis are presented separately and with a narrative reflection. Some relevant parts selected from the in-depth interviews are quoted verbatim. The purpose of this is to contextualize the empirical data and paint a picture that data alone could not. However, the publication of the full texts would go beyond the scope of the study.

Data collection methodology

The study examines the migration conditions of Syrian IDPs in a multidisciplinary approach, using primary data obtained during independent field research, synthesizing several theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The methodology for data collection was based on the family group interview model described by Eggenberger and Nelms in 2006 (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007). This complex method is widely used, so we will not present it in detail. Conducting family interviews is a technique based on focus group research, in which we address the family as a group of related members that make up a living community. The family interview technique is the data collection method most often used for sensitive communities or topics, and is ideal for combining mixed survey tools and processing multidisciplinary topics. While traditional quantitative group research focuses on individuals, the family interview focuses on the family as a whole (Seidman, 1998). In addition to providing quantitative and qualitative results, this technique is more than simple data collection: it creates a complex social encounter where the acquired knowledge appears as a result of family interaction (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Interviews with Syrian IDPs are difficult due to the difficulty of accessing the target group and the characteristics of sampling: internally displaced people are considered a hidden population in Syrian society, covering communities and social groups for which no direct sampling framework (i.e., an almost complete list of members of the given population) is available (it does not exist, or it exists but is not accessible). As a result of the social and religious specificity of Syria, we chose the family group interview model as the ideal methodological basis. We supplemented this with quantitative and qualitative techniques and in-depth interviews, forming a mixed research study (Mixed Methods Research Synthesis, abbreviated as MMRS). This is ideal for analysing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary phenomena involving several fields of study (Brusque et al., 2010). Family group interviews were also justified by the peculiarity of Syrian society, namely that families live together, forming a multi-generational community. Due to all these peculiarities, we use the term 'household' instead of 'family' in the study with a view to the fact that the interviewees spent the entire period of their refugee status together, meaning that they form an living community. However, their relationship is sometimes rather loose, exceeding the circle of the nuclear family (i.e., grandparents, uncles and aunts etc. are also included).

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were applied with special focus in the research. Some of the open questions were also aimed at collecting a lot of non-qualitative data, where – instead of listing the answer options – it proved to be a more practical questioning method if the respondents could

answer in their own words. With regard to some other open questions, it was not possible – due to the exploratory nature of the research – to determine in advance the categories that might be relevant to the respondents. This data was processed and categorized using reflective thematic content analysis. It can be analysed individually but it is also suitable for quantitative analysis. The quantitative and qualitative data was thematically linked in each block of the questionnaire. Some aspects of these blocks were surveyed only with open or only with closed questions, so we did not ask about the same topic with both types of questions, nor did we collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. Several closed and open questions were created for which the quantitative and qualitative information complemented each other with the answers.

Selection criteria

We conducted 10 trial interviews in Homs at the end of 2023 in order to develop the interviews. The final questionnaire was worked out as a result of this, leaving the respondents free to say more (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The finalized interviews took place at the beginning of 2024. The selection was made randomly in the following residential areas in the geographical area affected by the resettlement development programme: Wadi Al-Sayeh, Bustan Al-Diwan, Al-Sabeel and Karm Shamsham. These residential districts were defined on the map obtained from the OpenStreetMap database. We recorded POIs (Points of Interest) based on the residence of the beneficiaries of the programme, then created a Thiessen polygon network according to the location of these POIs and by comparing them we precisely determined the area of interest (AOI). We randomly selected 50 of the POIs that fell within the AOI. These were the interview locations. Another 10 reserve locations were also added. The interview locations were randomly allocated to 10 interviewers, and the final interviews took place in 2024.

Data analysis methods

For the questionnaire and the open questions, the original Arabic and English transcripts of the written responses were used for the analysis. We performed univariate SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) analyses in the questionnaire, so the distributions are presented without the missing respondents, and we did not apply any procedure for processing missing data. During the analyses we surveyed the distributions of the variables and the basic statistical indicators (mean, mode, median) for high measurement level variables. We present these based on element numbers instead of percentage distributions. Both open-ended and closed questions were included in the questionnaires. No data cleansing was necessary for the closed questions,

while texts with the same content were unified for the open-ended questions. The answers to open-ended questions were processed using reflective thematic content analysis, which means that we did not classify the answers into predefined categories but created the final categories by logical reduction based on the answers. The possibility of performing correlation tests between variables limited the possibilities of multivariate analyses due to the sampling method and the relative homogeneity of the base population in various respects. Therefore, the results of univariate analyses could not be directly generalized to the base population, although they provided important information and an insight into the context of the trends observed in the sample. In addition to all this, the information that can be retrieved from the database can contribute to further surveys using a larger sample as well as to the continuation of this research.

Results

General and demographic data of the respondents

The number of people living in the households covered by the research was between two and eight, so each answer to the questionnaire represents answers from more than one person. A total of 225 people participated in the interviewing process, resulting in answers characteristic of their household. The distribution by gender was balanced in the entire sample: 109 (48.8%) were men and 116 (51.6%) were women (Figure 1). There were only two households in which there were no men and women together. One such household had two women and the other had three men (Figure 2). The age

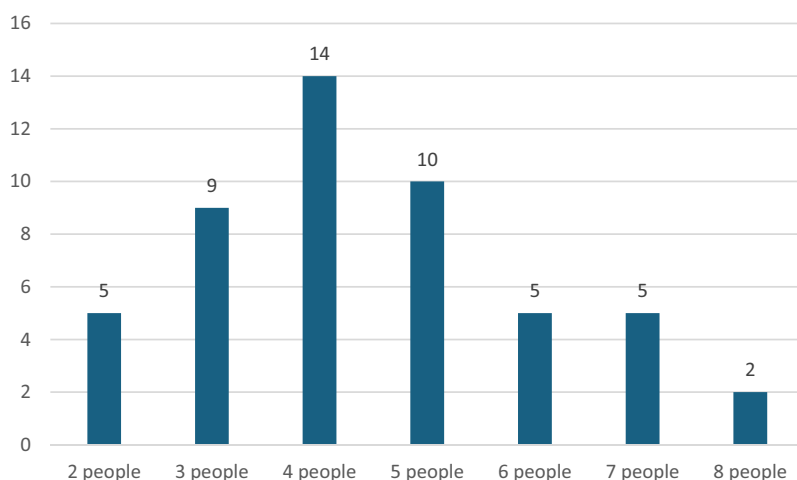


Figure 1. Composition of people living in a household (persons).

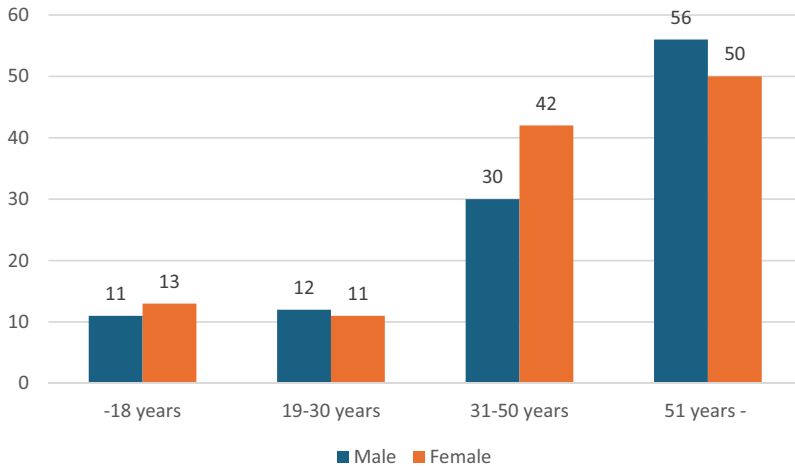


Figure 2. Sex and age distribution (persons).

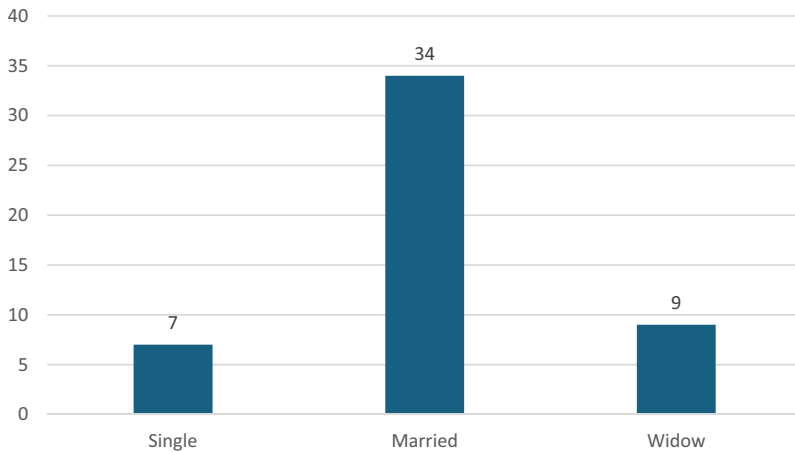


Figure 3. Marital status (households).

distribution was less balanced: 24 (10.7%) were younger than 18, 23 (10.2%) were aged between 19 and 30, 72 (32.0%) were aged between 31 and 50 and 106 (47.1%) were aged 51 and older (Figure 3).

Migration motivation and background

The discourse and literature on Syrian migration focuses mainly on the issue of Syrian refugees living in neighbouring countries and in the wider region. Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey together have

Number	Territory	Number of households	Ethnic, religious distribution
1.	Homs City Wadi Al Saeh	33	Mixed
2.	Homs City Al Hamidia	5	Christian
3.	Homs City Al Sabeel/Alsabil	2	Christian
4.	Homs City Bustan Aldiywan	2	Christian
5.	Homs Karm Shamsham	8	Mixed
	Total	50	

Figure 4. What was your original place of residence? (households).

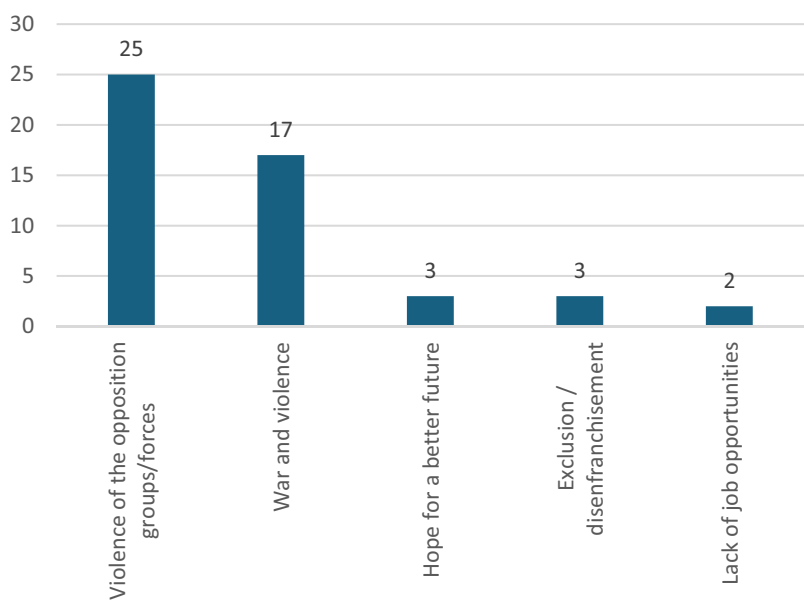


Figure 5. Reason for leaving the original place of residence (households).

19 million refugees, at least 7 million of whom come from Syria (UNDP, 2024). The key issue of the topic is the quality of care provided by the receiving countries, their return by the given state, and the problem of the refugees’ voluntary home return (Sahin-Mencutek & Meininghaus, 2023). However, little empirical data is available on the motivation for and the background of migration. Besides providing a precise geographic definition of the surveyed population, the purpose of the questions was to create a more authentic picture of the personal root causes for becoming refugees and the situation of the IDP population (Figure 4). Furthermore, the reflections on the questions also help to

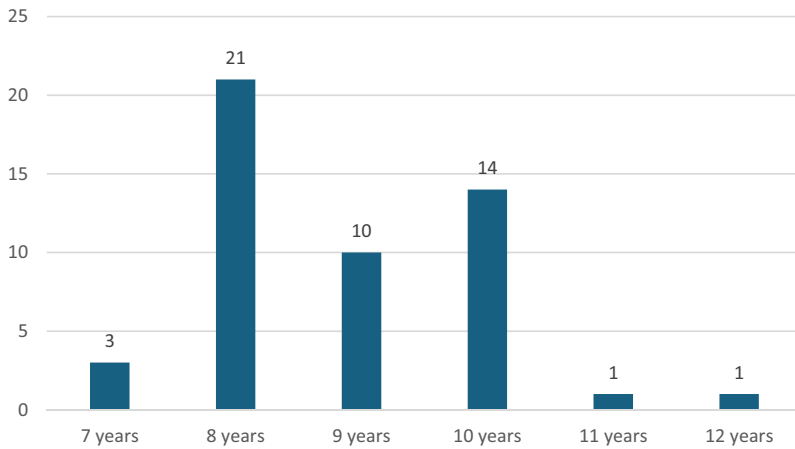


Figure 6. How long did you live as an internal displaced? (households).

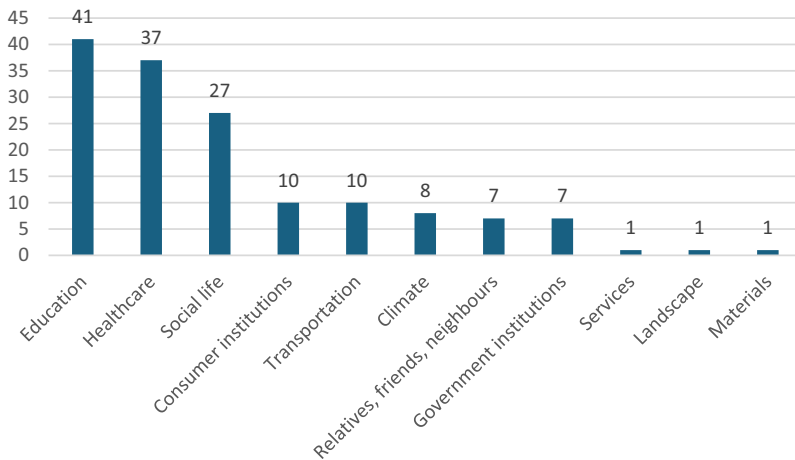


Figure 7. Name the three things you very much like about Syria (households).

contextualize the territorial course of conflict in Homs, narratives about which are still contradictory.

45 of the responding families stated that they had fled together with the entire family and five households escaped separately or split up. There were variations in the answers about the how long the households were IDPs for, namely between seven and twelve years (Figure 5 and Figure 6). The typical interval was 8–10 years, which is in line with the time Homs was occupied for up until its liberation.

There were large variations in the answers to the question of where the households lived during this time. The respondents lived in the governorates

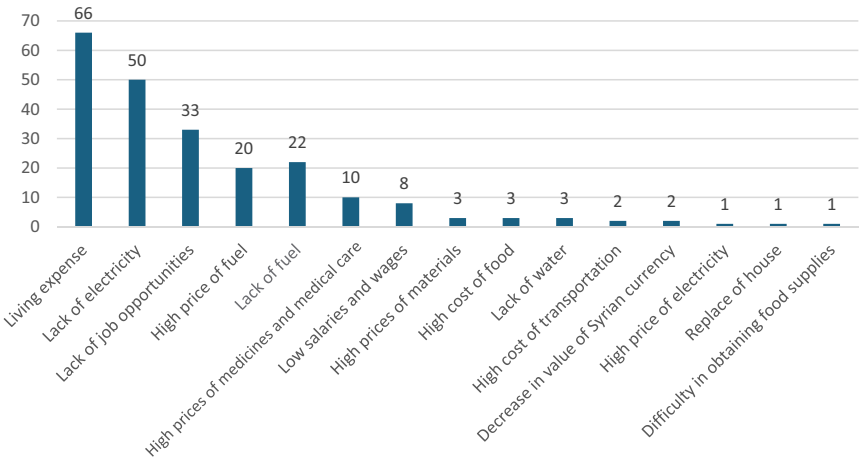


Figure 8. What causes the biggest challenge in Syria today? (persons).

Ingredients	Where do you get the ingredients from?	Households
Vegetable, fruit	From the market	7
	Vegetable from the market, never buying fruit	43
Meat	I never buy it	45
	From humanitarian aid / charities / churches	5
Water	Tap water from home	50

Figure 9. Food consumed and its procurement.

of Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Hama and Latakia. All of them constantly moved from one place to another. Numerous locations were mentioned in the answers and there is no logical or other connection between them, so this element will not be detailed.

The soft question ‘what do you like about Syria?’ can also be classified under this block (Figure7). This question is directly related to the person’s vision of the future and the normalization of the country. These answers help form a complete picture of the country’s state functions and various living spaces. The reason is that there are many very different images in the international discourse on Syria with regard to everyday life, services and opportunities.

This question is related, somewhat as a contrast, to the most significant challenges in the country at the moment (Figure 8). There are threads that connect the answers, but the details are related to everyday life and indirectly to the country’s recovery after the war. As is clear from the interviewees’

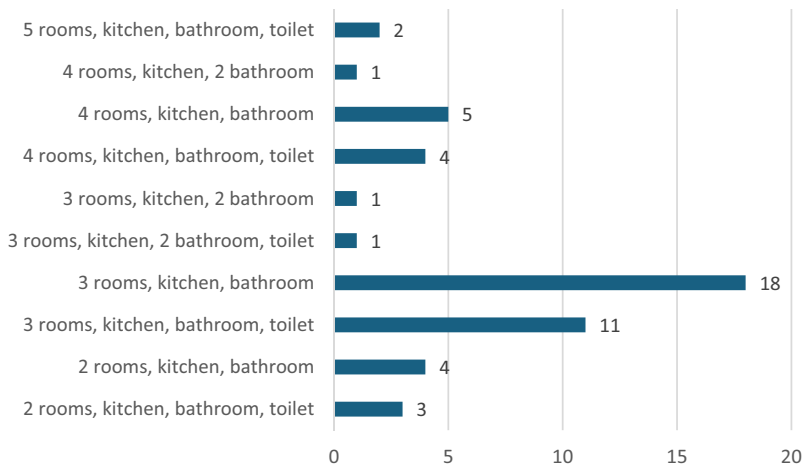


Figure 10. Size and structure of the apartments (households).

	Electricity	Tap water	Gas
Mean	32,200	6,220	24,180
Median	30,000	6,000	24,000
Mode	30,000	6,000	25,000

Figure 11. Weekly consumption costs.

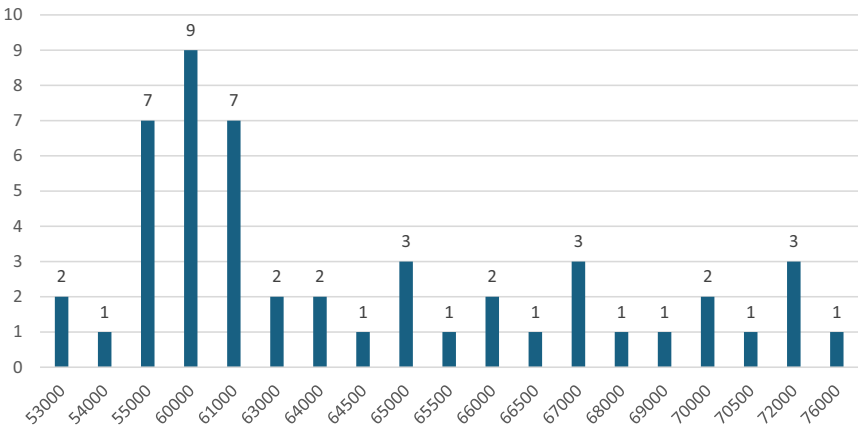


Figure 12. Total general costs per week (household).

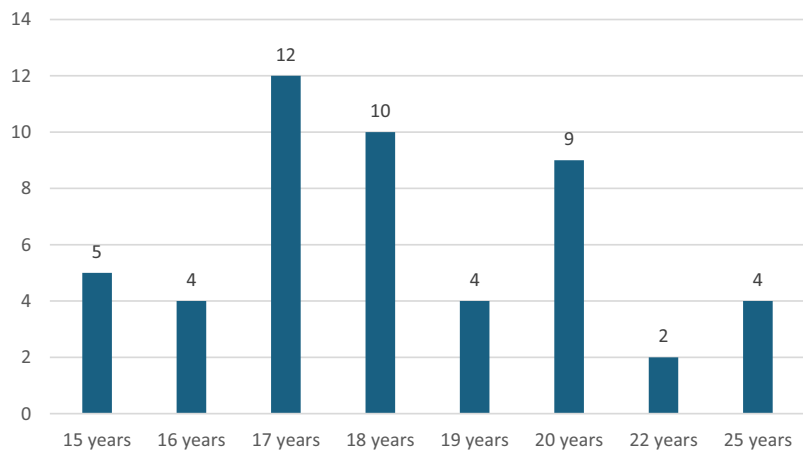


Figure 13. How long had you lived in this flat before the war broke out? (households).

Bread (a bag of Syrian bread)	1,000
Rice (1 kg)	18,000
Sugar (1 kg)	16,000
Fuel (1 litre)	13,000
Veal (1 kg)	175,000
Lamb (1 kg)	200,000

Figure 14. Examples for prices of essential state subsidised products in Syria (SYP).

responses, the biggest problem is housing and living conditions. The responses also confirmed that a number of minor but important aspects are also of secondary importance to them if they are to have safe and affordable housing.

Household data

Most of the destruction caused by the Syrian war, fought for the gradual acquisition of territory and then for military control, affected the country's large cities and infrastructure. The extent of damage to the housing stock in the fighting resulted in an extensive housing crisis, to which the central government has not yet provided a satisfactory response. Entire city districts are still in ruins besides a few state-run pilot projects (Wind & Ibrahim, 2020). This was further aggravated by the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in 2023.

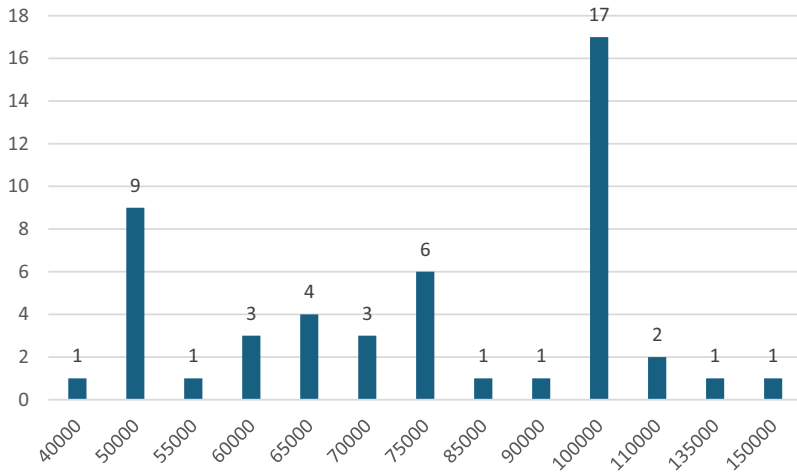


Figure 15. How much money do you spend on food per month? (median/households).

1.	Do you agree that a strong normalisation has started in Syria?	Yes
2.	Do they feel positive signs of normalisation?	Yes
3.	Do you agree with the processes have been started by the Syrian state?	Yes
4.	Do you feel safe now in Syria?	Yes
5.	Do you feel now any danger on a daily basis?	No

Figure 16. The sense of personal danger in Syria.

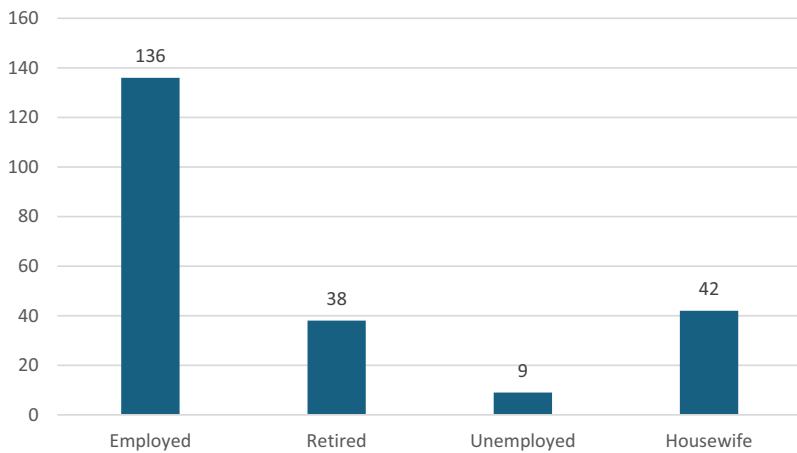


Figure 17. Employment data (households).

Job	Percent
Teacher	13.4%
Lawyer	8.2%
Engineer	7.7%
Painter	7.2%
Blacksmith	6.7%
Hairdresser	6.7%
Barber	6.2%
Carpenter	5.7%
Doctor	5.7%
Pharmacist	5.7%
Farmer	4.1%
Grocery	2.6%
Smith	2.1%

Figure 18. Distribution of the most common jobs (households).

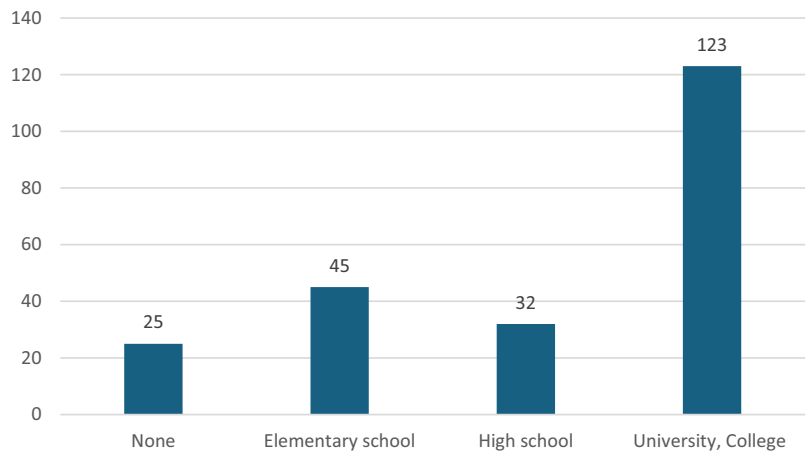


Figure 19. Education levels (persons).

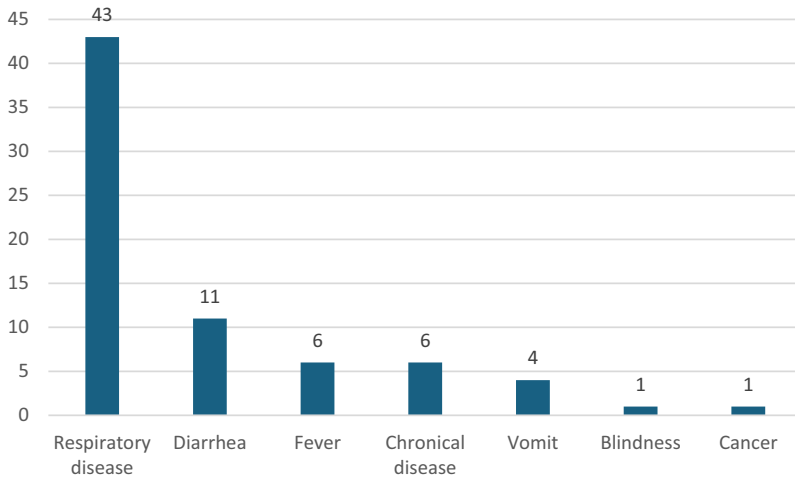


Figure 20. What are the 3 most common diseases one has to cope with? (households).

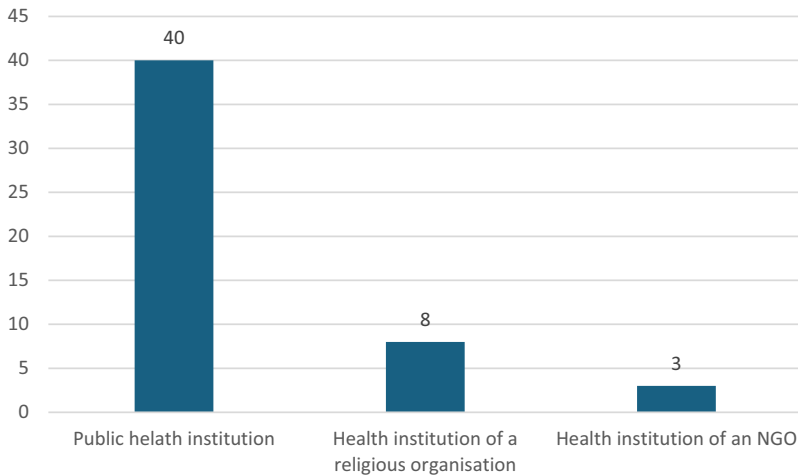


Figure 21. Where and who do you turn to in the event of a health need?

Therefore, the issue of housing for IDPs and for the general population who wish to return home is a crucial element of the normalization discourse. In connection with the previous aspects, the questions concerning households focused on the lifestyle and the subsistence of IDPs. We know from the respondents' accounts that getting food is an everyday challenge, so the questions started from here (Figure 9). Two types of responses were given to the question of how many times a week the interviewed families cook a hot meal: 18 households said they made a hot meal only twice a week, and 32 said three times a week, with the reason being that they do not have the

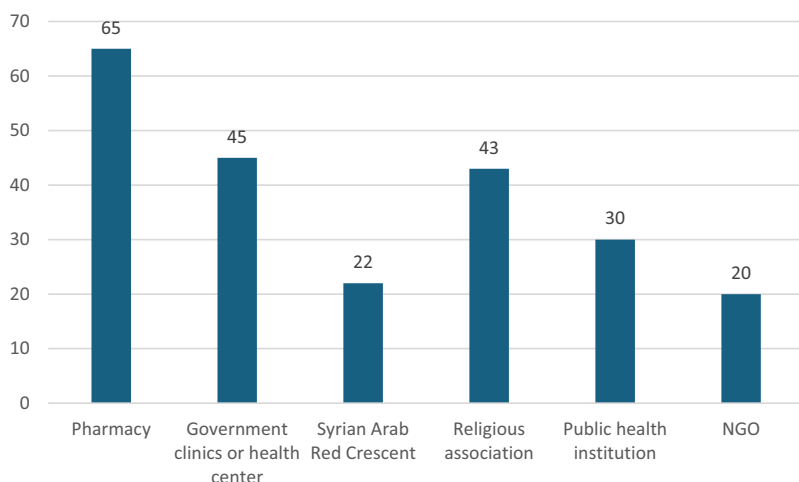


Figure 22. Where do you get your medicine from, when necessary? (persons).

financial means to cook more often. A particularly important element in the answers is that none of the 50 households can afford to buy meat: 45 of them ate no meat at all, while five families received some from donations. All of them use gas in cannisters. This was supplemented by the more detailed question of where the respondents get the food needed for their daily nutrition.

Different answers were given about the size of the apartments, but a common feature is the relative size (Figure 10). The average size of the apartments is 97 m² and the median size is 100 m². In terms of layout, the apartments have 4–8 rooms, are fully furnished and have a full complement of electrical equipment. The size of the apartments and the housing needs of the families can be considered high in the otherwise difficult recessionary situation. A partial explanation for this is that multiple generations of family members live together, with most family members having separate rooms.

Their weekly consumption costs in SYR are as follows. This is primarily important in the context of income and expenditure (Figure 11 and Figure 12).

When asked how long they had lived in the properties before the war, all respondents reported total ownership of more than 15 years (Figure 13). It also follows from this answer that the families have owned their homes over generations. This is a key reason why refugees want to return home, and it also confirms the previously formulated ethnic/religious connection.

Subsistence and economic situation

The question regarding the existential situation was based on personal or family property before fleeing. This helped confirm the housing situation mentioned above. All interviewees were independent owners of their apartments, which they all owned outright. The sources are very different regarding the average income of the Syrian population, and they do not provide an overview of the individual sectors (Figure 14 and Figure 15). They typically relate to people working in public administration and in the private sector. The average income is about 50,000–100,000 Syrian pounds (SYP), which is approx. 40 US dollars (1 US dollar = 13,000–15,000 SYP) (Haid, 2022; Jazeera, 2022; Mustafa, 2023). When asked about currently active wage-earners in households, 28 out of 50 families indicated one active wage-earner and 22 families mentioned two active wage-earners. Regarding income, we asked about the total weekly income of the entire households. As a result, the average value was SYP 131,500 and the median value was SYP 150,000 per week. When exchanged to dollars this comes to about 100 USD, but the pound fluctuates constantly due to unstable Syria inflation rates. When asked how this amount compared to the weekly income of people living in the respondents' neighbourhood, they reported that the amounts were the same.

With regard to main expenses, the amount spent on meals could only be estimated because it was very difficult for them to answer this question, so we created a monthly median value. This block was supplemented with the question of whether they took part in food exchange or took out loans, to which 16 households answered yes and 34 answered no. Another question was whether they store food in their home, to which all 50 families answered no.

We asked five yes or no questions about the everyday sense of danger of families and individuals and about the reorganization of the country (Figure 16). All 50 households gave the same answers to these five questions:

Current status of studies and jobs

The questions about jobs highlight the respondents' ability to reintegrate and the status of the resettled families. All adult, working-age members of the households covered by the research had previously participated in the work-force integration support that was part of the development programme. As a result, nearly 60% of people of working age have a job, 30% of the base population is at retirement age and the remaining members are typically stay at home mothers (Figure 17).

Most of the working people were able to get a job and stay in some part of the labour market within two years of moving back and after the end of the

programme in 2022. The most typical occupations of the respondents are summarized in the table below (Figure 18).

In terms of studies, almost half of the respondents claimed to have a degree (BA/BSc, MA/MSc), but the majority of the other half of respondents had high school diplomas (Figure 19). The majority of those with qualifications took their certificates with them after leaving their homes. However, those who did not have their degree or only had copies of them were soon able to get their original documents replaced.

Health status and circumstances

The post-war settlement of the country's healthcare system as well as the assessment and the satisfaction its human and technical needs is an important part of the discourse related to normalization in Syria (Kherallah et al., 2012). The sector is in a serious structural crisis. Millions of people in the country do not have access to adequate medical care and 70% of the healthcare network has been destroyed (Gajkar, 2024). The remaining institutions are not receiving the subsidies previously provided by the state, and the situation was further aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic (Alhaffar & Janos, 2021). Our research provides a snapshot of the system operating in the Homs governorate.

When asked about the last time they were so sick that they had to seek the help of a doctor or a specialist, every member of every household indicated that it had been within five days of the question being asked (Figure 20). As for the question of how often they are otherwise sick in the family 28 families mentioned once a week and 22 mentioned once a month.

When asked where and who they turn to in cases where they need professional help, 40 responding families said that they visit a public health institution (Figure 21). In response to the question of whether they pay in these cases, 42 households answered that care is free, and eight families said that they have to pay, although the fees are average, not high.

Access to medicine (Figure 22) has been a major problem for Syrians since the outbreak of the war, and the related discourse is still divisive, with many blaming Western sanctions on the country for the problems associated with the supply of medicines (Jazeera, 2023). Although the European Union has extended humanitarian exemptions, they are not complete and there are no unlimited exemptions (Council of the EU Syria, 2024). It is still possible to get medicine in Syria, although this is mainly true in cities and not rural areas, which are significantly isolated also today.

Conclusions and implications

Although the empirical survey carried out in the research provided a significant amount of data, it can be considered a relatively small (or at most medium-sized) sample despite the 225 respondents. The broad panorama of questions related to many aspects of post-war normalization also serves the secondary purpose of identifying the most important issues and challenges of recovery through the questions asked. The indirect aim of the study is for it to become a catalyst and a tool for further academic dialogue on Syrian normalization, and for the unique, concrete parts of this wide-ranging empirical research to be narrowed down and examined more deeply.

This research, based on an original measurement and methodological approach in all respects, was carried out among families participating in the development programme. However, the data collected and the theoretical framework were exclusively conducted within the framework of the research reported here. The development project was an inclusive framework only insofar as its confidential nature allowed the survey to be carried out. It should be stressed that this research is not a project report or a statistical report. The aim of the research and this article was to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of a specific segment of post-war Syrian society and, in particular in this, the IDPs. The main purpose of the study was to provide a better understanding of the situation and characteristics of a group that is otherwise underrepresented in the discourse on Syria through field-based empirical research. The aim of this article is to provide new, on-the-ground knowledge that can be used to form a more accurate picture of Syrian society as a whole and can serve as a further resource for researchers to refine and add new nuances to their own research. The aim of presenting the research is to contribute to the discourse on the experiences about the assisted voluntary return of internally displaced persons in the areas controlled by the Assad regime. The field research was based on the assumption that IDPs see their future in Syria, do not necessarily wish to cross the country's borders, and will eventually move back to their place of residence when suitable opportunity arises. The survey of 225 people in 50 households confirmed local problems that also exist at national level, such as the extremely poor economic situation and the poor quality of public services.

While there is no consensus between the global and regional state and non-state actors intervening in Syria on restoring the country's territorial integrity, the late Assad regime has suggested to the international community that the situation in Syria has stabilized. The results of the research, which was conducted among IDP families, can be generalized only partially. Syrian society has changed significantly

more than 10 years after the outbreak of the civil war, and the return of internally displaced persons must be interpreted in this changed social environment. At the same time, a significant proportion of the findings, such as high unemployment, low average wages and deficiencies in health care, have also been confirmed by way of macro-level analyses. The research indicates that local communities are essential in stabilizing the microenvironment, thereby influencing regime stability on a larger scale. The final years of the Assad regime in Syria however do not qualify as a post-conflict environment, as evidenced by the findings of the questionnaire survey and the subsequent rapid collapse of the regime. Additional research is required to investigate the influence of external stakeholders on the establishment of internal stability. The external assistance provided to Syria was insufficient to enhance regime stability. European actors offered restricted assistance to the Syrian population, primarily for humanitarian purposes.

The repatriation of internally displaced persons to their original residences is essential for resolving the refugee crisis. Syria is currently undergoing a transition, raising questions about the characterization of the situation as post-conflict. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, the initial wave of refugees from abroad has begun to return, as have internally displaced persons (IDPs). The issues identified in our research are critical for post-Assad Syria, specifically housing, employment, and national reconciliation, which are essential for restoring normalcy in the country.

Necessary ethics approvals

Based upon the relevant documents, including the detailed methodology, questionnaire and consent procedures submitted to our institution, approval of the survey named in the subject was granted by Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta and its CEO and the President of the Ethics Committee Mr. Lajos Györi-Dani, on the 1st of January, 2024 under the number HCSOM_E_2024_11.

Notes

1. Date of submission of this article was 29th of November 2024.
2. The research Solymári et al. (2023) was a preparatory study to this current in-depth empirical research, so there is no substantive identity between the two. The data in this study were recorded and analysed exclusively in the context of this research. The pilot research cited earlier was in preparation for this study.

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