



# INTO THE UNKNOWN: LISTENING TO SYRIA'S DISPLACED IN THE SEARCH FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

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Joint Agency NGO Report

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We live in the unknown and head towards  
the unknown

*Internally displaced man in northeast Syria*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over 12 million women, men and children have been forcibly displaced from their homes in Syria since 2011, fleeing conflict which has engulfed the country for the past nine years. Presented in a report signed by over 50 Syrian and international NGOs, research conducted to better understand the views and preferences of people displaced in and from Syria regarding their future found that very few see themselves as holding a viable prospect for a durable solution – safe return and sustainable reintegration, local integration or resettlement – to end their displacement in the coming years.

The interviews conducted with displaced Syrians demonstrate the impossibility for IDPs and refugees alike to make definite, informed decisions on return and reintegration, resettlement or local integration, when none of the options appear feasible to most and uncertainty overwhelmingly pervades their future.

As representatives of states, donors, international organisations and civil society groups come together at the end of June 2020 for the *Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region*, this is a key moment to commit to a holistic approach to durable solutions and focus on the changes required – in Syria and through responsibility-sharing by host and donor governments – to open up future choices for displaced women, men and children who have suffered over more than nine years of conflict.

This approach must be guided by the views and wishes of displaced people themselves. NGOs warn that an overemphasis on return without acknowledgement of the need to create options for other durable solutions risks forcing people into making decisions that they do not want or to continue life in stasis simply because they believe there are no other options. Any increase in pressure on refugees and IDPs to prematurely return or relocate carries a significant risk of creating 'unsafe returns', compounding suffering, precipitating cyclical displacement and discouraging others from returning.

## **CLEAR PREFERENCES, LIMITED OPTIONS**

A total of 63 qualitative interviews were conducted with internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria, refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and IDP and refugee returnees by NGOs in April and May 2020. Additional unpublished interviews with Syrian adolescents in Syria and host countries as well as further unpublished interviews with displaced women in Lebanon and Syria provided the primary data for the report. This was complemented with a desk review examining existing publications setting out the views of people displaced in and from Syria regarding the future.

The qualitative interviews showed a clear discrepancy between people's preferred plans for the future and the options they considered available to them in the next 5 to 10 years. Return to Syria and moving abroad beyond the immediate region were the primary future preferences identified by refugees, with two thirds of the refugee respondents split equally between these options. A smaller number of refugees, one quarter of the sample, indicated their intention to stay in their current location in the long term. IDPs, on the other hand, overwhelmingly indicated their intention to return to areas of origin, but only when specific conditions have been met.

While the preference to return or move abroad if certain conditions were met were made clear, almost no one considered these to be realistic options in the medium-term. As a result, the only option both IDPs and refugees widely considered available to them in the next 5 to 10 years was to stay where they are. Refugees noted that this option still presents challenges and concerns, as they require the legal ability and political will of the state to remain in that country. They are aware that a decision to stay is not exclusively theirs to make.

## **IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN AREAS OF RETURN, RELOCATION AND SETTLEMENT IN SYRIA**

For displacement to end *inside* Syria and for refugees to return to the country, conditions need to be made conducive for the sustainable reintegration of displaced people in the areas to which they return or choose to locally integrate or relocate to. According to both displaced and returnee interviewees, this includes addressing physical security threats, ensuring access to justice and the rule of law, supporting a restoration of essential services and people's ability to meet their basic needs including through sustainable livelihoods, and rebuilding damaged infrastructure. Interviewees pointed repeatedly to the need for safety guarantees, but in order for these to be trusted they need to be born out through *lived experience* and a political agreement that will not be flouted.

Over nine years into the conflict, there are no easy answers to ending displacement in Syria; political will is a prerequisite. The primary responsibility lies with the Syrian state authorities in order to bring about the changes required in Syria to enable people to realise their rights and live dignified lives, alongside responsibilities for other actors in control of territory and governance structures. In order to both influence change and support people in their search for solutions, there is need for multi-stakeholder cooperation incorporating action over time across the political, peace-building, human rights, humanitarian and development spheres. This is a long-term endeavour and goes well beyond the scope of any single existing process inside Syria or beyond its borders, but brings together elements of the agendas of the Geneva and Brussels conference processes.

The rehabilitation of vital services, including water systems, hospitals and schools, regeneration of local economic development and eventual reconstruction of Syria's war-torn infrastructure, establishment of good governance and the rule of law will be essential to the country's recovery and reconstruction. In preparing for engagement on reconstruction, alongside the broader efforts required to pursue a more peaceful, fair, accountable and just future for the country, most notably through a negotiated political settlement, donor governments should start work on

the development of a robust human rights due diligence policy for future reconstruction interventions (including a monitoring framework with specific indicators related to human rights standards), in close cooperation with Syrian civil society actors. Over time they should seek to influence participatory localised reconstruction planning processes inclusive of women, young people, returnees and the displaced.

## **RESPONSIBILITY SHARING AT THE HEART OF MEDIUM-TERM HOSTING AND SOLUTIONS OUTSIDE SYRIA**

Solutions *outside* Syria are also essential. Some refugees will never be able to return, maintaining a well-founded fear of persecution. Others have built lives in countries of asylum and contribute to the societies that host them. Over a million children of Syrian refugees and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) born in exile have never set foot in Syria, and many of those growing up in asylum express that they feel significantly different from their peers inside Syria.

Responsibility-sharing among states will be key, both in relation to providing a lifeline through resettlement to individuals and families likely never to be able to return to their homes, as well as support to host governments. At a time when donor countries' budget planning is in flux, given the unprecedented impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the world economy, it is a difficult time to discuss long-term development support for Syria and the countries that are hosting massive numbers of refugees in the region. Yet, with no sign of a political solution to the Syria conflict, countries in the region will continue to hold the responsibility to host millions of people still seeking their protection for years to come. Without substantial international donor support, the fallout appears stark: refugees and vulnerable host communities will be the victims of rising poverty and tensions in the region as economies falter. Development cooperation focused on supporting the inclusion and self-reliance of refugees alongside their hosts, fostering protection and social cohesion is essential to help protect the massive investment made by donor governments to meet the needs of refugees over the last 9 years.

Desperate conditions in displacement hinder peoples' planning for durable solutions, with an urgent need to address enduring protection threats and poverty among refugees. Strengthening the inclusion of displaced people in national and local systems, strategies and policy frameworks during displacement is also crucial. Governments and even operational actors often still do not appropriately communicate and consult displacement-affected communities on policies and developments aimed at realising their rights in displacement. Localised approaches to provide services to both refugees and host communities can play a role in ensuring that interventions are better tailored to their needs. Critically, the economic empowerment and social inclusion of women must remain a cornerstone of responses created to support increased self-reliance. As more women have entered the labour market during the crisis, the often-newfound freedoms are sometimes marred by regret over having to undertake undignified work. GBV risks, lack of decent work standards and the burden of domestic and caretaking chores should be urgently addressed.

## **PARTICIPATORY PLANNING FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS**

Beyond the humanitarian response, international actors should seek to support a dedicated dialogue track on durable solutions in Syria that prioritises the early engagement of IDPs, refugees and resident communities in areas of displacement, destination and settlement to identify what is required to support solutions over the next ten years. The process should inform a 'programme for action' by actors across the political, humanitarian, development and peace-building spheres, to develop appropriate and joined-up interventions contributing to common outcomes. Such a process should seek to draw learning from existing bottom-up approaches that support peace-building and community cohesion involving Syrian civil society actors and community representatives – for example neighbourhood committees, women's and youth groups. Through consolidating a set of women's, men's and youth priorities related to durable solutions, as well as learning related to successful localised approaches, such a dialogue process could contribute to identifying the foundations for future discussions between citizens, duty bearers and international actors.